Are travel companies burying their heads in the sand when it comes to user experience and accessibility?

An investigation into the user experience of 10 top travel websites.

Executive summary

- The UK spends £31 billion on international tourism a year, the fourth highest in the world after China, Germany, and the USA – according to the World Tourism Organisation.

- The leading association of travel agents and tour operators, the ABTA (Association of British Travel Agents), found that between 2014 and 2015, 89% of UK holidaymakers booked a holiday online.

- The previous ABTA Consumer Holiday Trends Report, released in 2014, found that 68% of people took at least one UK holiday in 2014 and 53% took at least one holiday abroad.

- Clearly, consumers are booking more holidays than ever and are increasingly moving online to do so.

- In this report, 10 top travel websites were scored out of a possible 35 points for their usability, accessibility, and ease of use across devices. The websites included: Booking.com, Co-operative Travel, Airbnb, Expedia, Skyscanner, Laterooms.com, Lastminute.com, British Airways, On the Beach, and Virgin Atlantic. Skyscanner came out on top with 28, while Co-operative Travel came bottom, scoring 17. The average score across the sites was 23.

- Out of the 10 sites, Booking.com and Laterooms.com scored the highest for their booking processes.

Foreword from RNIB

Foreword from Terry Hawkins, head of business to business solutions at leading sight loss charity, Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB).

"There are around two million people in the UK living with sight loss – equating to one person in every 30. It's predicted that by 2020 this number will rise to over 2.25 million, and by 2050, almost double to nearly four million. An aging population contributes heavily to these figures, with one in five people in the UK aged 75 or over living with sight loss.

"Sigma's report reveals some potentially concerning findings about how little some companies are considering the needs of those living with sight loss. It pays massively for travel companies in particular to consider the needs of blind and partially sighted people, particularly when you look at the monetary aspect of what these companies could be missing out on by ignoring millions of users.

"Considering the user experience of a website is great, but not when accessibility doesn't come into it. Accessibility is now something which should be a necessity when designing user friendly websites, not just an option. Total digital inclusion is now required to ensure all members of society have the same experiences and are able to access the same services online. If companies fail to do this they risk their brand, reputation, and often, financial remunerations."

Introduction

It's no secret that digital is the future. We are seeing more and more aspects of our lives touched by it and as a result, having good experiences when using technology is more important than ever. The emotions, behaviours, and experiences that users have when interacting with a website or mobile app are often the deciding factor as to whether they make a purchase through the site, or visit it again in the future. It's crucial, therefore, that businesses ensure their websites and apps provide the best user experience possible.

As statistics show that more consumers than ever are booking holidays online, the travel sector is one which needs to pay particular attention to its digital offering. Currently, the majority of travel companies have their own websites; yet, in a world where we're trying to appeal to both tech-natives and those newly connected or less familiar with the digital sphere, care needs to be taken when designing these websites to ensure they offer a smooth user journey for everyone. Further to this, as two million people live with sight loss in the UK according to RNIB – a figure estimated to rise to nearly four million by 2050 – we need to consider and design for these users too.

In our research, we explored the user experience of 10 top travel websites. We looked at their usability, whether they were easy to navigate on different devices, how good the booking process was, and whether they were accessible. We wanted to answer a number of questions, namely:

- Are the websites fit for purpose?
- Are they easy to understand?
- Can users find what they are looking for with ease?
- Are they accessible and inclusive to all users?
- Do they work on different devices?

We hope you enjoy reading the results of our research, and take something useful away from the findings.

Hilary Stephenson, managing director at Sigma

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What is user experience and why is it so important in the travel sector?

User experience (UX) is the term that refers to an individual's experience with a product, system or service, including their perceptions, emotions, and behaviours. In recent years, UX design for websites and other digital solutions has increased in popularity, as businesses recognise that taking a more user-centric approach can better facilitate the growing need for consumers to access products, services, and information easily on the web.

For travel companies in particular, a website is an important tool - not only in terms of generating sales, but also in providing a trusted source of information for consumers doing research ahead of booking a trip. As statistics show that the majority of holidaymakers are booking holidays online, it's more important than ever for these companies to ensure their websites are user-friendly and fully accessible to all.

If a website is designed badly, or there isn't enough focus on UX and too much emphasis on conversion rate optimisation (CRO) i.e. getting them to the checkout process as quickly as possible, users could abandon a site out of frustration. With so many travel websites available at a user's fingertips, having a bad experience may lead to a consumer leaving the site in favour of another that is simpler to use. It's also worth remembering that in the most part, users of travel websites are parting with a lot of money – often hundreds or thousands of pounds. It is therefore important for these websites to offer a secure, positive, and robust experience for users.

Our testing: methodology

To offer a comprehensive overview of the user experience of travel websites, we chose 10 of the top sites at random and heuristically tested them with a sample of users in May 2016.

Each website was ranked on a number of factors, with a maximum score of 35 points. Ratings were split in the following categories - **usability, ease of use on different devices and accessibility.** Several elements were assessed in each category – these are outlined fully in the table of results on page 21 of this report. **The average score across the sites was 23.**

Finally, we worked with independent consultant Molly Watt to undertake more in-depth accessibility testing, to see how well the websites worked for those with sight and hearing impairments. Molly has Usher Syndrome, which means she was born deaf and now has partial sight.

Usability / device / accessibility league table

Skyscanner	Expedia	Virgin Atlantic	Booking.com	On the beach	Laterooms	Last Minute	Air bnb	British Airways	Co-operative Travel
28	26	26	24	24	24	22	21	19	17
1st	2nd	2nd	3rd	3rd	3rd	4th	5th	6th	7th

We also assessed the **booking process** of 9 out of the 10 websites separately. As Skyscanner doesn't provide its own booking process (instead, it sends users directly to the hotel or airline website for completing the transaction), it was left out of this part of the research. The remaining websites were scored out of a possible 10 points for ease of booking – **the average score was 7.**

Booking.com	Laterooms	On the beach	British Airways	Virgin Atlantic	Co-operative Travel	Air bnb	Expedia	Last Minute
9	9	8	8	8	7	7	6	5
1st	1st	2nd	2nd	2nd	3rd	3rd	4th	5th

1. General usability findings

The usability of a website is one of the most important factors for its success; it doesn't just have an impact on sales, but on how a user perceives a brand too. Usability centres around how easy a website is to use, including how information is presented, how easy it is to understand, where certain features are placed on a site, and how easy it is to navigate for users with differing skills and abilities.

In this report, we looked at the general usability of the 10 travel sites for a user that has landed on the homepage (before they start searching for a holiday). We then looked at the usability of the website's searching process, which we delve into in the next section. It's important to remember that while usability in general does encompass aspects of accessibility – as we'll see throughout this section - we've dedicated section five of this report solely to accessibility, to encourage a focus on an inclusive user experience.

To test the general usability of these websites, we looked at aspects such as:

- Is it clear what the website has to offer as soon as a user lands on the homepage?
- Is the experience consistent? E.g. headers, footers, and navigation elements remain similar across pages, meaning users don't have to learn anything new
- Are icons large enough and is their meaning clear to users?
- Do buttons and links have hover states?
- Can users with different abilities use the website easily?
- Are forms easy to complete and are error messages clear?

Who does it well?

There were a number of elements that the majority, or all, of the travel websites got absolutely right in terms of general usability. For example, on all of the websites it was clear from the homepage what users needed to do next, and the majority (8 of the 10) of sites were very clear about their offering – making it straightforward for users to know how to start their search once they landed on the websites.

One of the best websites for general usability was Virgin Atlantic.
This was because:

- The service offering is clearly defined on the homepage
- The headings are used correctly to convey document structure and hierarchy
- When using keyboard navigation, the site clearly highlights which area of the page is in focus;
- Images contain descriptive alternative text
- Iconography is clear
- Areas of interaction give the impression that they are clickable
- The interface is consistent throughout
- Buttons and links have hover states
- It is clear when users land on the site what the website has to offer
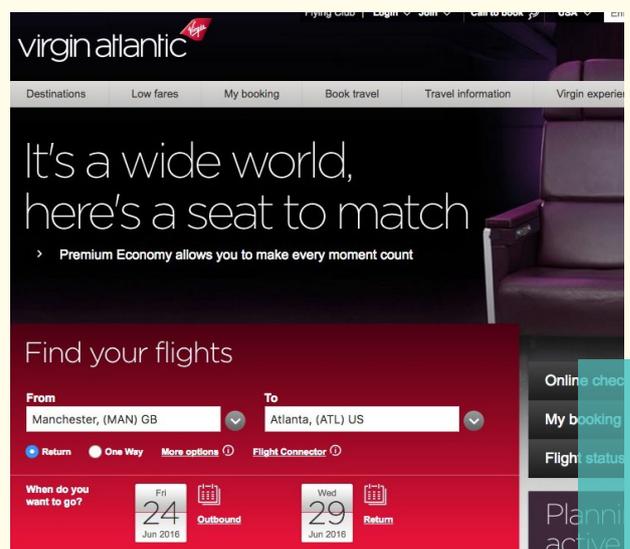
Who needs improvement?

Although the majority of the websites we tested had clearly considered usability throughout the design process, some scored poorly in places. Expedia and British Airways fell at the first hurdle, with neither having interfaces that were consistent, which was particularly noticeable throughout the searching process. Consistency is key to good usability, as it means that users don't have to learn anything new as they move around the site. So for example, when a user is going through the flight process on the Expedia site, the design is different than it is during the searching process, which can be confusing for users.

British Airways was one of the lowest-scoring websites for its usability in general, this was because:

- The busy page designs make it difficult for a user to know where they should be focussing on as they move around the site
- Complex page structure and lack of consideration for keyboard navigation make the website unusable for users using screen readers. For example, the website has a 'skip to content' link, but this doesn't stop the screen reader from reading the entire page, including the navigation
- The interface of the site isn't consistent throughout

2. Usability when searching

The usability of the searching process on a travel website is a crucial aspect to the user experience of it. If it's difficult to filter search results, drop down menus aren't easy to understand, or add-ons are confusing, a user could abandon a website in favour of another.

To assess the usability of the searching processes across these sites, we looked at a number of aspects, including the following:

- Is there an option for users to filter results? And is it easy to do so?
- Does the site remember your most recent search when you return to the site?
- Is it easy to select and modify travel dates?
- Are customer ratings available for users?

Who does it well?

The travel sites got mixed scores when it came to the usability of their searching process. However, every website scored well for graphical user interface (GUI) components, e.g. labels, text fields, buttons and tick boxes, which means that users will be able to search for their holiday easily. The best performing website overall in this category was Skyscanner. Some of the reasons for this are:

- The website has a consistent interface throughout, i.e. core navigation and features (buttons and sidebars) don't move around or change position throughout the user journey, making it easy to find your way through the site
- Buttons and calls to action were displayed clearly throughout the searching process, making it easy for users to see where to interact
- There were distinct options to sort the results in order to whittle down options, e.g. sorting by price. This made the searching process much quicker than on other sites that didn't provide this option, as users can easily find what they are looking for
- The labels for forms fields are clearly described, making it easy for users to understand and fill in the relevant information first time, without error
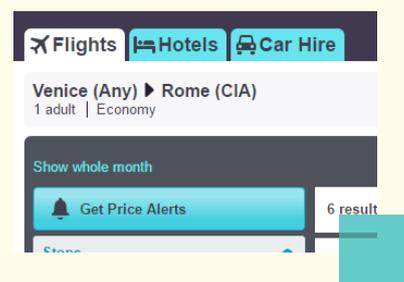
Primary calls to action are clear: The green button is obvious and the term 'search flights' gives users an indication of what will appear on the next page.

Aeroplane, bed, car, person and bell are all shown next to relevant labels to make it clear to users what each icon represents and minimise errors.
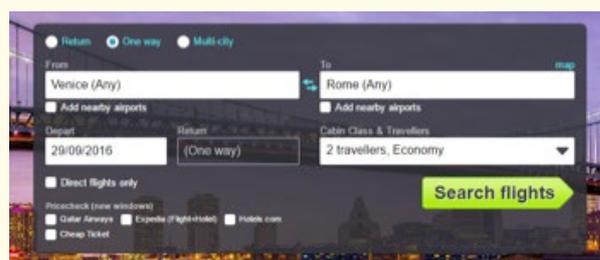
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Who needs improvement?

In general, the searching processes of all the websites were fairly well thought-through. However, only seven out of the 10 sites allowed the user to search for flexible dates – an important consideration for all travel sites.

Our testing showed that the usability of the searching process on the British Airways website could be improved considerably. Resolving the following points would make for a better user experience:

- Selecting flights on the BA site is particularly challenging. The poor interaction design and lack of system feedback during the flight selection process forces the user to scroll past a long table after each choice in order to work out what they need to do next
- Form labels on this website were poor. By making these more descriptive, users will be clear about the information that they need to provide when completing a form, and will be able to get it right first time. For example, the first field is 'country of departure', and then it says 'from' – this inconsistency can be confusing for some users
- There aren't any customer ratings available on the site, which is a function that is valuable to a lot of users that want to make sure they are getting a good deal, or choosing the holiday that is right for them

BA's busy page design means users have to scroll down a long table to get to the returning flights section, and then down again to get to the 'continue' button.
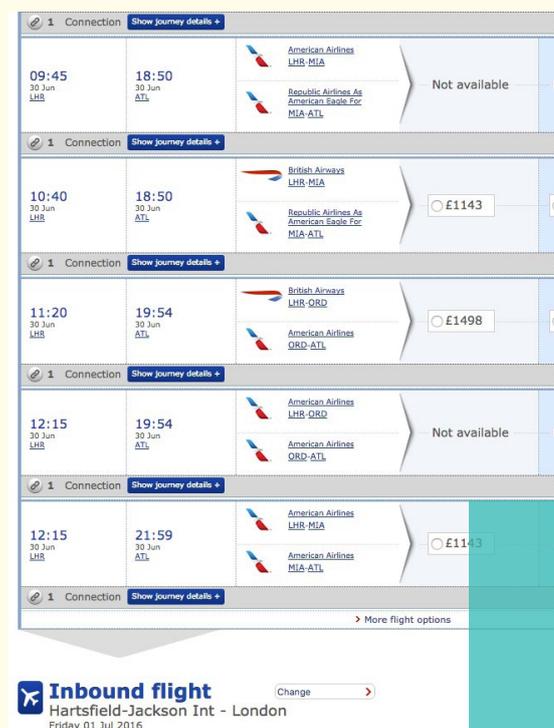
3. Multi device experience

Having a website that works effectively across various devices is more important than ever, as consumers increasingly want to be able to access information or make purchases on the web whilst they are on the move - by smartphone, tablet, or wearable technology such as the Apple Watch.

For travel websites, mobile is becoming more and more important. According to research by ABTA, there has been a large increase in the use of mobiles and tablets to book holidays online in the UK. In fact, the use of mobile for booking holidays rose from 13% in 2013 to 17% in 2014, and the stats increase even further when it comes to tablets, rising from 10% in 2013 to 18% in 2014.

To test the performance of these websites across devices, we looked at the following functions:

- Did the websites have an adaptive or responsive layout, so that they modify according to the screen size they are opened on - whether that be a mobile or tablet?
- Did the business have a dedicated mobile app?

In our testing, just one of the 10 websites we looked at scored full marks for its performance on different devices. However, all of the sites were either adaptive or responsive, and most had developed a mobile app, demonstrating that they had made strides to improve performance across devices.

Who does it well?

The best performing website in this section was Lastminute.com, due to a number of factors:

- The website is both responsive and adaptive
- It is both mobile and tablet friendly, so users can access it on any device that they want
- On top of this, Lastminute.com has its own mobile app, which shows its commitment to being available across platforms for users

The Lastminute.com website is responsive and adaptive, and works well on tablets and mobiles
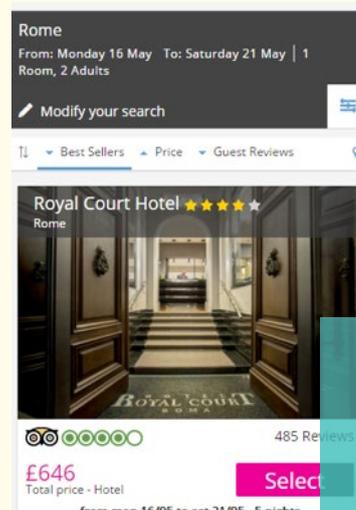
Who needs improvement?

The website that fell particularly short when it came to the user experience across different devices, was Co-operative Travel, scoring just one out of a possible five points. While the website was responsive, it didn't have its own mobile app, and wasn't particularly usable on mobile or tablet devices – making it difficult to navigate on any device other than a desktop.

On the Co-operative Travel website, there is no calendar picker for the return date. Instead, there is just a dropdown menu that contains numbers for nights, which be confusing if the user is expecting to clarify their return date. This format also doesn't fit effectively in to the two column layout and is difficult to use on tablet and mobile devices.

There is no calendar picker for the return date

4. The booking process

It goes without saying that the most important part of many travel websites is the booking process. If it's difficult to navigate, information is unclear, or if it doesn't work well on different devices, then a travel business could lose out on sales. Putting time and effort into improving usability is important, but it is pointless if the website fails at the last hurdle.

To test how user-friendly the booking processes were, we looked at elements such as the following:

- Whether the websites had a progress bar, so that users can see how far along they are in the booking process and the steps they have yet to complete?
- Were add-ons to trips clear? e.g. adding a car hire onto a holiday was straightforward
- Were the prices clear?
- Whether the forms were clear, and the sections that are required to be filled in are marked clearly?
- Did the booking process feel secure?

For the booking process, we scored the websites out of a possible ten points. The majority scored six or above, so it was obvious that care had been taken regarding the design of this process, but there is still room for improvement.

N.B - as previously mentioned, SkyScanner doesn't have its own booking process, so this website was left out of this section of testing.

Who does it well?

On all of the nine eligible websites, the price was clear to the user throughout the booking process – meaning that hidden costs can't surprise users at a later date. Across every website we tested, the booking process also felt secure – probably the most important element in our testing, as security is key to users feeling comfortable parting with their money.

One of the best websites for its booking process was On the Beach, due to the below reasons:

- On the site, the 'optional extras' were clear, which meant that a user could easily add or remove options such as hold baggage, for example
- It is also clear where a user is up to in the booking process, as it's highlighted by a progress bar
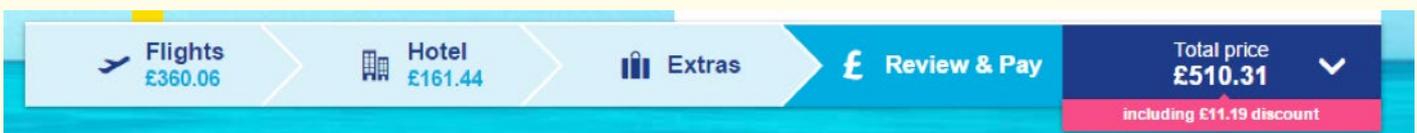
The website has a clear progress bar, so that users can understand how far they have gone in the booking process, and also see how much more they have yet to complete.

Who needs improvement?

Lastminute.com was the lowest scoring website for its booking process; it scored just five out of nine. This is particularly surprising since it scored highly for usability. Here is why it didn't score particularly well:

- The form labels aren't descriptive enough, meaning it's difficult for users to complete; this could lead to users abandoning the website before they finish booking. For example, one field has 'name', and then the next is 'surname'. For clarity, it should say 'first name'
- There isn't an obvious differentiation between optional and required fields to complete on the forms
- Although there is a small progress bar in the booking process, it appears more like a breadcrumb. A breadcrumb shows a user where they have been previously in their journey but a progress bar shows exactly this, as well as the steps that are yet to be completed. This makes it a confusing process for users. On this website, it should say 'availability', then 'payment', and finally 'confirm', so that users always know where they are in the payment journey

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It isn't clear where the user is in the process

5. Accessibility

A website with good accessibility helps all users navigate a website easily, including people with a range of abilities - it is the practice of removing barriers that prevent interaction with, or access to, websites.

Molly Watt is an IT and accessibility consultant, public speaker, and also runs her own charity, the Molly Watt Trust. She lives with Usher Syndrome, which means she was born deaf and is registered blind. Molly joined us to do some accessibility testing on the travel sites for this report. Through doing scenario-based testing, whereby we set her a task to complete a booking for a holiday on each site, we were able to uncover the experience that some that who is registered blind, like Molly, would have with these websites.

Who does it well?

During the testing, it was obvious that the majority of the websites had thought about partially-sighted users in the design process. In particular, six of the 10 sites had good colour contrasts, and the size of the texts and the bold lettering had been carefully considered. If text is small and not bold, it can be difficult for blind and partially sighted people to decipher, so this is crucial to get right for businesses who want as many users as possible to be able to use their websites.

The site that scored the highest in accessibility testing was Expedia, because:

- Users are able to zoom in on the website, which allows them to enlarge it when necessary
- Headings are clearly presented and the font is easy to read
- Overall, the layouts are simple and information is presented in a two column layout, which makes it easy to scan the page when searching for a holiday
- Users aren't confused by add-ons, such as car hire or insurance, when going through the searching or booking process
- Calendars are easy to follow and have a good colour contrast
- Users are able to make special requests through the website, and easily. For example, an open text field allows the user to enter additional information that might be required for a hotel stay of a flight, such as a guide dog.

Calendars on the Expedia site are easy to follow, and strong colour contrast makes it simple to understand date options.

The Expedia site has two columns, making it easy to follow whilst searching.
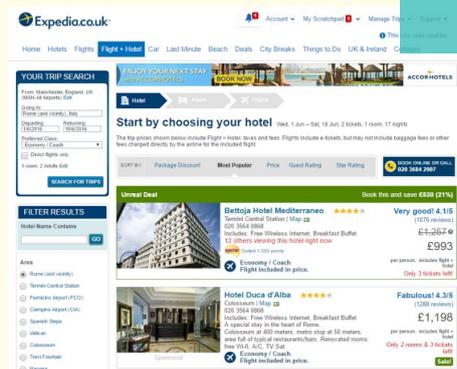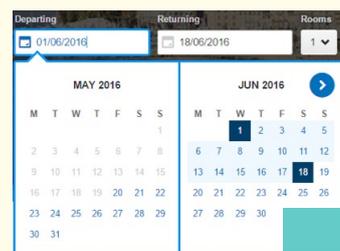
Who needs improvement?

The website that scored the lowest for accessibility, was Co-operative Travel. The website scored low due to some of the following reasons:

- The colour contrast of the site makes it difficult to read text
- When it comes to searching for a holiday the drop down menu on the site makes it difficult for users to find destinations, and choose the number of nights for the holiday. This is because it doesn't fit properly on the screen, meaning that some of the wording isn't visible
- The layout of the site is busy, and this teamed with the bad colour contrast makes it difficult for partially sighted users to follow
- The inconsistent user interface across different pages makes it a struggle to keep up when searching for a holiday, and means that some people will need to learn new layouts as they make their way through the site. This will prolong the searching process and could leave some users frustrated, forcing them to abandon the site

The drop down menus on the site are difficult for partially sighted users to follow
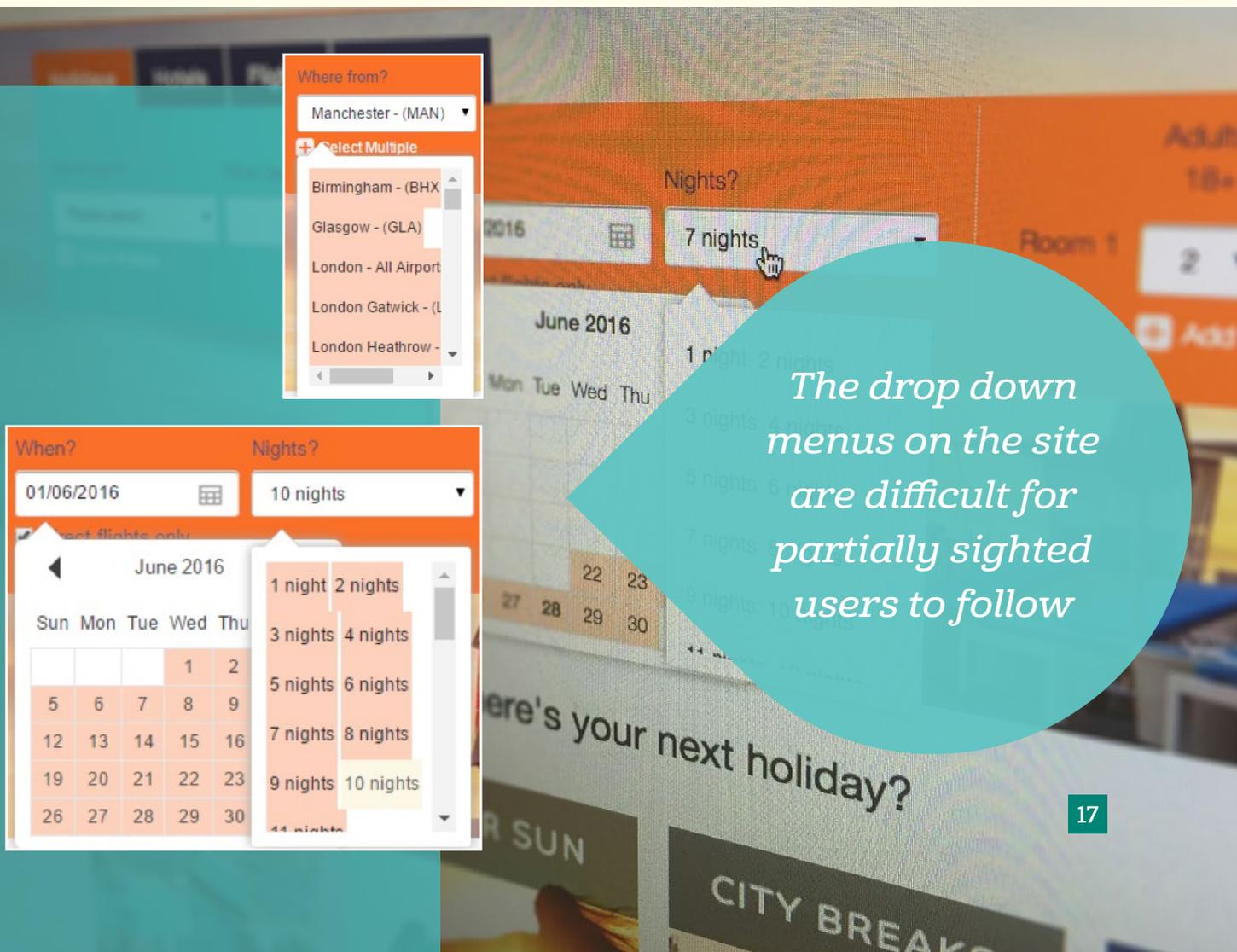
5.1. Screenreader test

Molly is registered blind but regards herself as visual, so doesn't need to use assistive technology, other than configuring her own iPad settings. Others may prefer, or have the necessity, to use screenreader technology to browse websites or use web applications. Here, access needs go beyond ranging visual and auditory impairments, to include motor skills, attention related conditions, reading abilities and so on. So, we conducted a brief review of the sites to give some insight into how they might work for people who rely on the keyboard or screenreader to browse. Through this testing, we uncovered three common themes, which travel sites would be wise to take note of:

Predictable keyboard navigation

Keyboard navigation is extremely important for web accessibility – users with motor impairments may rely on a keyboard to navigate and users with visual impairments may also rely on a keyboard or a screen reader. Therefore, it's important that the way keyboards and screen readers navigate web pages is predictable and logical. Examples of predictable keyboard navigation include correct and logical tabbing order and being able to access everything on the page.

On most of the travel websites tested, not all elements on the page are accessible. On the Co-operative Travel website, if you use the keyboard or screen reader using the tab key to navigate the site, users must go through at least 100 links in the mega menu (e.g. in Holidays and Destinations) which are not shown until roll over to the user, making it unclear where you are within the page layout. Furthermore, the drop downs are inaccessible using the keyboard because they don't have a focus area and don't allow users to make a selection. This makes the page unusable for users using this method as a way of navigation.
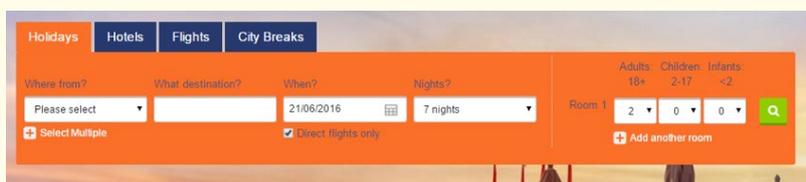
Similarly to the drop down fields on Co-operative Travel, when tabbing around the search form on Booking.com, the focus area goes from 'Destination' straight to 'Travelling as', skipping out the 'check in' and 'check out' date fields. This again, makes the form inaccessible for users using a keyboard or screen reader. A similar problem exists within British Airways, where keyboard and screen reader skips the radio button choices so the user is unable to change the default choice.

Image shows the Booking.com search form, where the keyboard navigation and screen reader and keyboard skips 'Check-in' and 'Check-out' fields

Image shows the British Airways search form, where the screen reader and keyboard skips the radio buttons e.g. hotels, cars and experiences
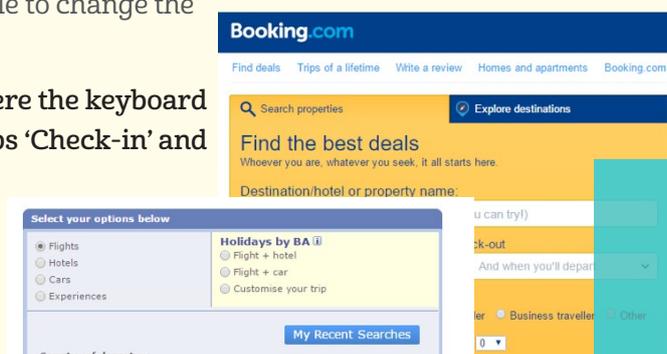
Use of Skip links and ARIA-Roles

When navigating a site using a keyboard, the user doesn't want to have to tab through all the navigation links in a page before they get to the meaningful content. The introduction of skip links, such as 'skip to content' allows users to bypass links, such as the navigation, to easily access the content.

Accessible Rich Internet Applications Suite (ARIA) roles are very similar, allowing users to skip to particular sections of a web page based on how they have been built. The roles describe the structure of a web page, e.g. the headings, tables and menus.

Out of the 10 websites tested, only four contain ARIA roles (Booking.com, Airbnb, Expedia and a few on Virgin Atlantic) and four contain skip links (Airbnb, Expedia, British Airways and Virgin Atlantic).

"Out of the 10 websites tested, only four contain ARIA roles"
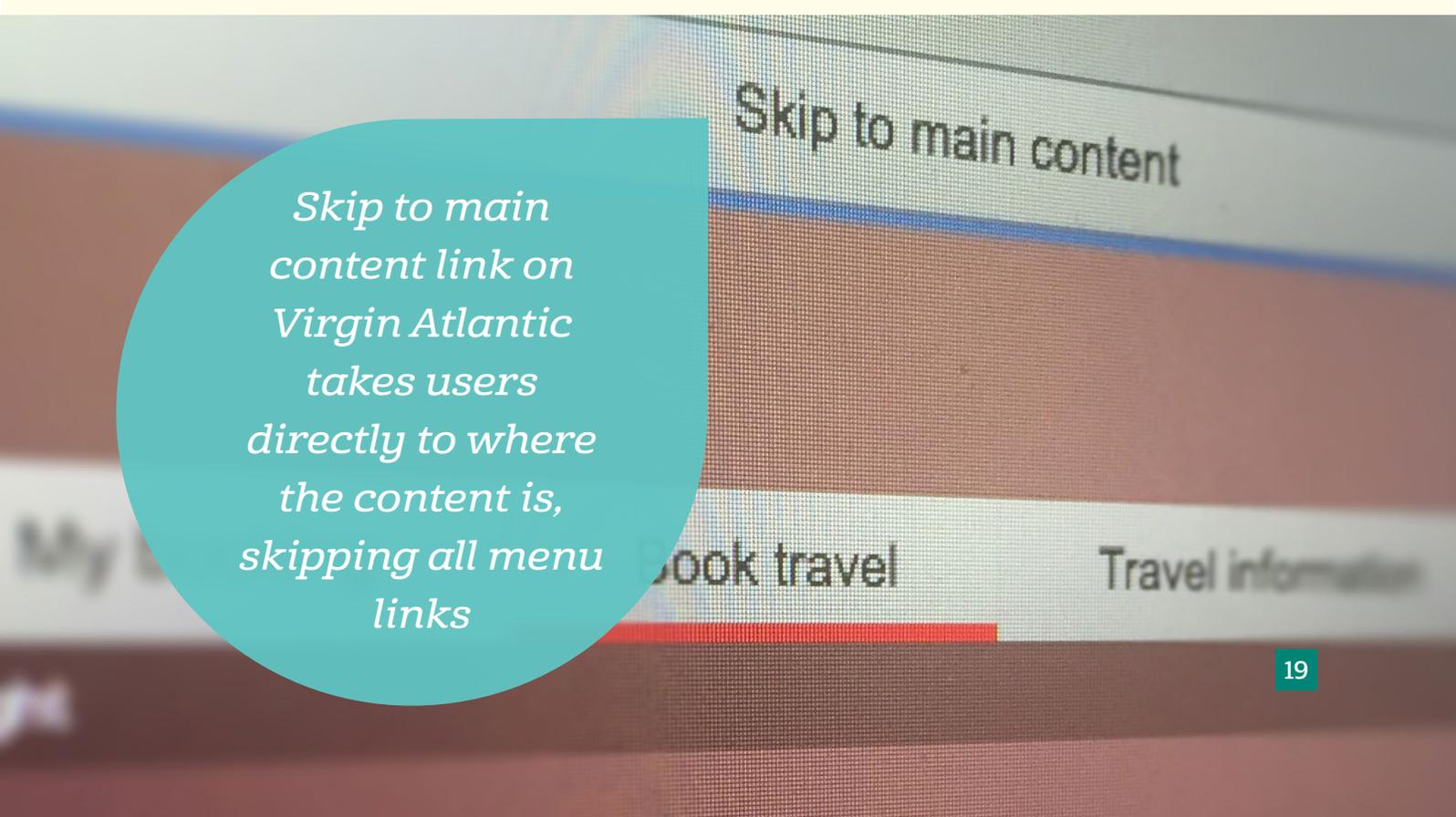
Skip to main content link on Virgin Atlantic takes users directly to where the content is, skipping all menu links

Poor use of alt text for screen readers

Within many of the sites, the alternative image text is the same as the related text heading, which results in the screen reader 'stuttering' as it reads out the name of the image alt text and then the heading, e.g. "The Ainscow hotel and spa. The Ainscow hotel and spa". The correct implementation in this case is to have a description of the image or a blank alt text instead.
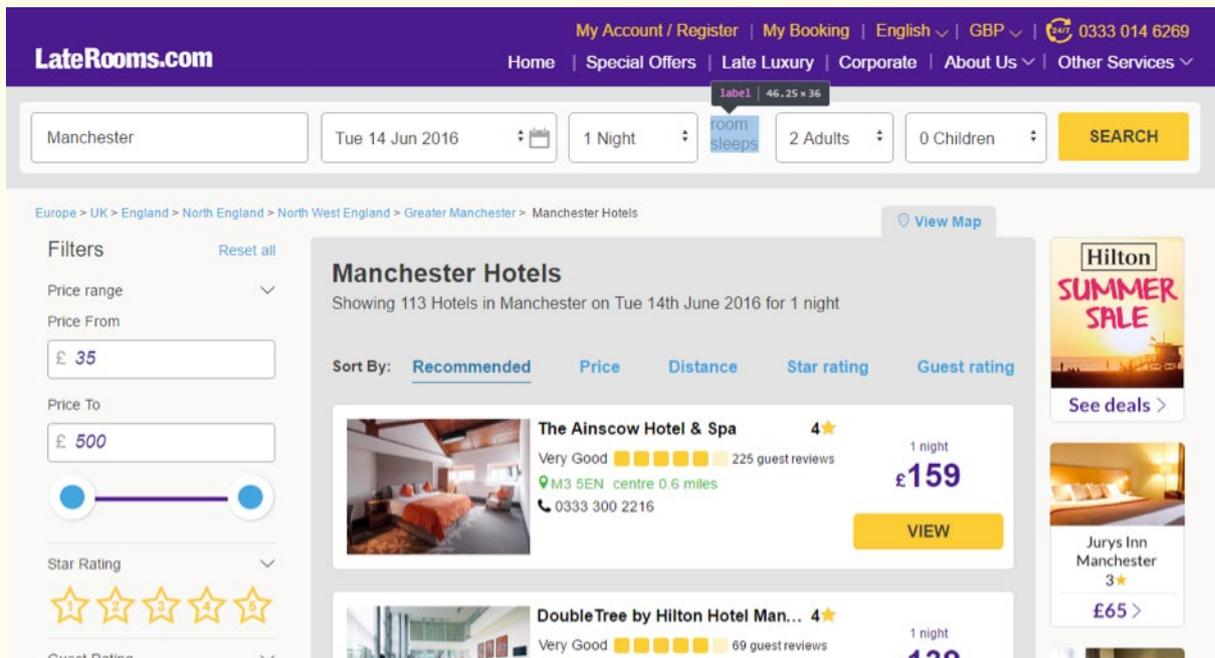
Image of the LateRooms.com search results, showing the hotel name with a corresponding image, where the alt text is the same as the hotel name causing it to stutter

And it isn't only images that require detailed alternative text. Anything on a webpage that requires an action also needs a description of what will be carried out. An example where this isn't implemented is on Virgin Atlantic, the screen reader (we used NVDA) reads out the 'Next step' button as "Next step disabled" which is giving the user incorrect information.

Guidelines exist for the development of accessible websites, including detailed advice on how to build for screen reader technology but also be flexible to accommodate a wide range or needs. Given these sites are seeking to attract the general public and offer a smooth booking experience, they could improve their approach to inclusive design.
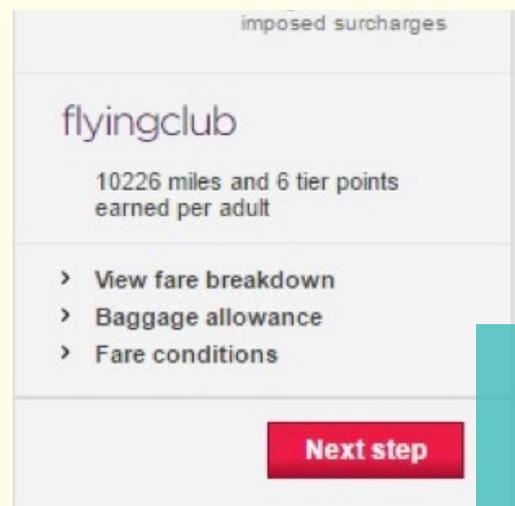
General usability results

Checklist	Booking.com	Co-operative Travel	Air bnb	Expedia	Skyscanner	Laterooms	Last Minute	British Airways	On the beach	Virgin Atlantic
It is clear what the website has to offer	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y
By just looking at the homepage users know what to do	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Iconography is clear	N	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Areas of interaction give the impression that they are clickable	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y	Y	-	Y	Y
The interface looks consistent throughout	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y
Primary calls to action are clear	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	N
Buttons and links have hover states	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	N	N	Y
Total (out of 7)	5	7	5	4	7	5	6	3	6	6

Searching results

Checklist	Booking.com	Co-operative Travel	Air bnb	Expedia	Skyscanner	Laterooms	Last Minute	British Airways	On the beach	Virgin Atlantic
The datepicker is easy to use	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y
The datepicker is finger friendly	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y
GUI components (like radio buttons and check boxes) are used appropriately	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Form labels are descriptive	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y
There is the option to sort the results	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N
Filtering results is clear	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N
Information on the search results is clear (e.g. price)	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	N
There is a recently searched option	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y
Users can search with flexible dates	Y	Y	N	N	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y
Users can compare results	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	Y	N	Y
There are customer recommendations/ratings	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	N	N	Y	N
Buttons are contextual	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	N	N	Y	Y
Total (out of 12)	**10**	**8**	**9**	**9**	**10**	**8**	**9**	**6**	**11**	**8**

Device results

Checklist	Booking.com	Co-operative Travel	Air bnb	Expedia	Skyscanner	Laterooms	Last Minute	British Airways	On the beach	Virgin Atlantic
The site is responsive	N	Y	Y	Y - new templates only	Y	Y	Y	N	N	N
The site is adaptive	Y	N	N	N	N	N	Y	Y	Y	Y
There is a mobile app	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
The website is tablet friendly	N	N	Y	N - new templates only	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y
The website is mobile friendly	N	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Total (out of 5)	2	1	4	3	4	4	5	3	3	4

Accessibility results

Checklist	Booking.com	Co-operative Travel	Air bnb	Expedia	Skyscanner	Laterooms	Last Minute	British Airways	On the beach	Virgin Atlantic
The headings are logical and go down in size	Y	N	N	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	N	Y
There is the ability to tab around the site	Y	N	N	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	N
The website clearly shows the focus area when tabbing around the site	N	N	N	Y	Y	N	N	N	N	Y
Images contain descriptive alternative text	Y	N	Y	N	Y	Y	N	Y	N	Y
The site is screen reader friendly	N	N	N	Y	N	N	N	N	N	Y
Forms are accessible (e.g. form labels associated with form entry fields)	Y	N	N	Y	Y	N	N	Y	N	Y
There is sufficient colour contrast	N	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	N
There is the ability to zoom in and out successfully (on iPad)	Y	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	Y	Y
Sliders are avoided as they require users to focus on two areas at once	Y	N	N	Y	N	N	N	Y	N	Y
Text is large enough and uses bold when necessary	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y
The layout is clear e.g. 2 columns	N	N	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	N
Total (out of 11)	7	1	3	10	7	7	2	7	4	8

Results totals

Checklist	Booking.com	Co-operative Travel	Air bnb	Expedia	Skyscanner	Laterooms	Last Minute	British Airways	On the beach	Virgin Atlantic
Total for all websites (out of 35)	24	17	21	26	28	24	22	19	24	26
Position	4th/5th/6th	10th	8th	2nd/3rd	1st	4th/5th/6th	7th	9th	4th/5th/6th	2nd/3rd

Booking results

Checklist	Booking.com	Co-operative Travel	Air bnb	Expedia	Skyscanner	Laterooms	Last Minute	British Airways	On the beach	Virgin Atlantic
It is clear what step in the process the user is in (e.g. progress bar)	Y	Y	Y	N		N	N	N	Y	Y
Optional extras are clear	Y	Y	N/A	N		Y	Y	N	Y	N
Forms are accessible (e.g. form labels associated with form entry fields)	N	N	N	N		Y	N	Y	N	Y
The price is clear	Y	Y	Y	Y		Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Form labels are descriptive	Y	Y	Y	Y		Y	N	Y	Y	Y
Required/optional fields are clear	Y	N	N	Y		Y	Y	Y	N	Y
Error feedback messages are clear and explain which fields need to be changed	Y	Y	Y	Y		Y	N	Y	Y	N
GUI components (e.g. radio buttons and check boxes) are used appropriately	Y	Y	Y	Y		Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
The booking process feels secure	Y	Y	Y	Y		Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
There is the ability to ask for any special requests (e.g. guide dogs)	Y	N	Y	N		Y	N	Y	Y	Y
Total (out of 10)	9	7	7	6	N/A	9	5	8	8	8

Results overview

"In first place was Skyscanner, scoring 28/35 points."

In first place for usability / accessibility / ease of use across different devices was Skyscanner, scoring 28/35 points. In bottom position was Co-operative Travel, scoring just 17/35 points across these categories. The average score across the 10 websites was 23/35.

When we assessed the booking process of the sites (excluding SkyScanner due to its different booking method), most scored well, with an average of 7/10 points across the sites. However, Lastminute.com scored particularly badly for this with 5/10 – surprising considering it had a good general usability.

While all ten websites had some good and bad user experience factors, the key, common factors we found across all ten sites we reviewed are as follows:

Positive:
- In general, the websites had a good usability
- All but one had a mobile app
- All had a responsive or adaptive mobile site
- Booking processes across all the sites felt secure
- Graphical user interface elements were used appropriately across all sites

Negative:
- Only two of the sites were screen reader friendly, which means those living with sight loss may struggle to digest the content on them
- Many of the forms used on the sites weren't accessible to blind or partially sighted users
- A number of the websites had switched off the zoom function, which is a crucial tool for users with visual impairments
- Many images didn't have alt text, which is particularly bad for accessibility
- When navigating the sites often the area of focus wasn't clearly presented to users tabbing around the sites
- A lot of the sites have white backgrounds on booking forms, this causes glare, which makes it difficult for some users to read
- Buttons aren't contextualised across the board, for example some buttons say 'search', rather than being specific about what the user is searching. It would be more useful to have 'search flights', for example

Where should travel businesses go from here?

It's important to note that there are a lot of elements required to build a user-friendly website and we have seen throughout this research that each of these travel websites has taken some steps to do this. But for travel businesses wanting to further the success of their websites, it's important to properly consider user-experience, as it could be a game-changer if improved.

In order to be **usable**, travel sites should enhance a user's experience when navigating and reading information on the site, and do the following:

• Offer an option for users to filter the results by cost and star rating;

• Allow users to compare results, so that they can find the best option for them more easily.

In order to be **accessible**, travel sites should be easy to understand and use by all readers, including those who may have a disability or visual impairment, and do the following:

• Amend colour contrasts to avoid all-white pages, especially where forms are concerned, as users will need to clearly see the parts they need to complete. Making boxes that users need to complete a different colour would be a good move

• Enable the 'zoom' function so people living with sight-loss can view the site without using assistive technology

• Use a simple and uncluttered layout

• Make all elements on the page accessible for users using a keyboard or screen reader and introduce skip links to allow users to access the content quickly and easily

For travel sites to improve their websites across devices, they should:

• Have either an adaptive or a responsive layout, so that it scales and adjusts to the device it is being viewed on. This means that users won't be restricted to using a desktop to book their holiday

• If possible, provide users with a mobile app, to make sure the experience they have on mobile is optimised properly for this platform

For travel sites to improve the booking process of their websites, they should:

• Provide a progress bar, so that users can see how far along they are in the booking process, and estimate how much longer it will take them to complete it

• Make the parts of a form that are required to be completed, and those that are optional, clear

• Make it obvious for users when they have made an error in a form which items need to be amended

• If offering add-ons to users, ensure that they aren't in the form of consistent pop-ups that can be confusing or off putting. This can be done by having the extras on one individual page towards the end of the booking process

Key takeaways

- 1. **Most travel sites do recognise the importance of usability**
  Throughout our testing we could see that the majority of websites have been designed with usability in mind, as most of the websites were easy to use, navigate, and understand. The companies have clearly realised the impact good usability can have on both sales and brand perception. As more and more holidays are booked online, investing in a good usability should continue to be a priority for these businesses.

- 2. **Accessibility is key, but some travel sites still aren't prioritising it**
  Our testing with Molly Watt uncovered a number of accessibility issues that travel companies need to address urgently. As the number of people living with sight-loss and disabilities continues to grow, the importance of all users being able to use a website cannot be stressed enough. There are a number of elements for businesses to consider when making a website accessible, but a good start would be to ensure colour contrasts, particularly on forms, are good, as well as ensuring websites aren't too busy or cluttered, and layouts are simple and easy for screen readers to use. If companies continue to ignore accessibility, they could be isolating millions of users, risking reputation, customer loyalty, and profits.

- 3. **Travel companies clearly recognise the importance of a multi-device offering**
  The growing use of different devices and the importance of creating websites that work across these devices is apparent in the findings of the research. All but one of the travel companies we looked at had its own mobile app and all of the sites we tested had either an adaptive or responsive site. While businesses are clearly investing in mobile and tablet, what is also clear is that many are still having teething issues. Those that recognise these and perfect their multi-device offering will be the ones that are the true winners in the long term. In addition to this, even if the website is responsive, it's also important that it is finger friendly, and has large touch points. Many of the sites in our testing did not, making it an area that requires attention.

- 4. **Don't forget the importance of aftercare**
  Although we haven't looked specifically at aftercare in the report, it's important that we raise importance of this in a user's experience. While usability, accessibility, device optimisation, and robust booking processes are all crucial design considerations for travel websites looking to provide a good user experience, it's really important that companies don't forget about users once they finish the booking process. How a user is looked after following the completion of their booking is a hugely important part of user experience. Email or SMS confirmations, the ability to check in online, and reminding users about others things like remembering their passport, are all important to get right.

Report response from Molly Watt

"Booking holidays is meant to be fun but it's actually just stressful"

"When I'm trying to book a holiday on a travel site, I quite often feel like I'm going in the wrong direction. I often ask whoever I'm with to check and make sure I'm on the right lines, which takes away my independence somewhat. But when it's often hundreds of pounds that I can be spending on these sites, I need to make sure I'm doing it properly.

Travel sites with bad accessibility have stopped me from making purchases in the past and hampered my experiences – for example, I once booked an excursion for the wrong dates and when I called to change it they were really unhelpful, even though they knew I had a visual impairment. These types of experience knock my confidence when it comes to booking anything and make me think I'll just end up getting things wrong.

Some of the biggest issues I come across on sites are: colours and fonts being too garish, making it hard for me to adjust to them; often zooming features are disabled, which makes it impossible for me to read things without assistive technology; the content is often cluttered and laid out badly, meaning it's hard to know where to focus my eyes; and anything with more than one column means I can easily get lost in the content. I also sometimes struggle with design-based trends, such as text over images, or moving images.

I do think in general accessibility is starting to be talked about more, but in the grand scheme of things there's still lots of websites that are totally inaccessible – even ones I use for everyday browsing. I think businesses are guilty of not considering accessibility from the beginning of the design process, and almost trying to incorporate accessibility features as an afterthought – which shouldn't be the case."

Are travel companies burying their heads in the sand when it comes to user experience and accessibility? | July 2016

Glossary of key terms

User experience (UX) – The term user experience encompasses all aspects of the end-user's interaction with a company, its services, its website, and its products. Throughout this report, we refer to the user experience of a website as its 'user experience' or 'UX'.

Usability - Usability is the term used to measure the quality of a person's experience in interacting with content or services. In this report, the term refers to the look-and-feel, navigation, interface design, and information architecture of a website.

Accessibility – Website accessibility means that all digital content can be used by everyone, regardless of their abilities, connection speeds or technology. Delving further, the term is used to explain that all users, regardless of their abilities, can perceive, understand, navigate, and interact with the Web, and that they can contribute to the Web. Accessibility can also encompasses people with temporary impairments or older people with changing needs due to aging. Accessibility also addresses all physical, cognitive and neurological conditions that affect access to the Web and seeks to make the Web as inclusive as possible.

Adaptive - The term adaptive design is the term used for the website layout that detects the device it's on and other features, and then provides the appropriate layout based on a predefined set of viewport sizes and other characteristics.

Responsive – The term responsive design describes a website layout that is based on flexibility; the layout creates a single fluid website that scales for any device or screen size. Responsive websites use media queries, flexible grids, and responsive images to create a user experience that flexes and changes based on a multitude of factors.

Breadcrumb trail – The term used for a series of links that represent the hierarchy or structure of a website. The breadcrumb trail allow users to reach a higher-level or related page quickly, improving the "findability" of website sections and pages. They offer an effective visual aid that indicates the user's location within the website's hierarchy, making it a great source of contextual information for landing pages.

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