

Exploring Accessibility at Museums

Nicole and Tasha went to the Anne Frank House and Van Gogh Museum. Here they share their experiences and review of the accessibility options available for those who are hard of hearing.

Nicole Leung, Tasha Cox. CHHA BC YPSP. 2018.

We heard you two just came back from Europe this summer. Tell us about your visit to the museums!

Nicole: That's right! We went to two amazing museums. Both were located in the Netherlands. We went to the Anne Frank (AF) House and the Van Gogh (VG) Museum.



Tasha Cox at the Anne Frank House, Netherlands 2018

The first museum we went to was the Anne Frank House. It was the actual home where Anne's family and friends hid from the Nazi persecutions during the Holocaust. The exhibit had a pre-recorded audio tour throughout the house, which really taught visitors so much about her life.

Tasha: Yea, it was fascinating to learn how the father, Otto, brought Anne's story to the world and shared how he felt about Anne through her diary. And how people were secretly helping the families against the German oppression.

How about the Van Gogh Museum?

T: It was a very impressive museum!

They had a lot of his paintings, and described his life in such detail! The exhibit shared about his struggles with mental illness, and that during his illness he was still able to find his inspiration to paint by looking into the gardens. The best part was the detail and depth of information provided in the audio descriptions.

Did both museums have audio tours? Aren't audio devices stressful for hard of hearing individuals?

T: Personally, I felt like one would not get a complete experience without the audio tour, which cost an extra 5 euros at the VG museum. Well worth it in my opinion.

N: It was free at the AF museum!

T: *nodding* AF audio tour automatically synced once you tapped into to each room throughout the house.

How did you ask for accessibility at the museums?

N: Good question. Tasha and I actually travelled to the Netherlands with a group of friends. One of us had the idea of taking turns asking about accessibility options, so that's what we did.

So, you had no idea if the museums had any accessibility services?

T: No, we didn't look into it at all. We just sort of asked when we arrived.

N: While we were waiting in line to have our e-ticket scanned at the AF house, I volunteered to inquire [about available accessibility options].

Basically, I looked for a staff person. I let them know we were a hard of hearing visitors and wanted to know if there were any accessibility services like textual descriptions, or closed captioning.

T: And, while in line for the VG, one of our hard of hearing friends asked if there were any accessibility services for people who were deaf and hard of hearing.



Tasha Cox at the Van Gogh Museum, Netherlands 2018

N: I found out afterwards that there is a sign language tour available for a fee at the VG. One can reserve this in advance. However, some of us in our group—including Tasha and I— who are not super fluent in sign language wouldn't have found this service useful.

How did asking for accessibility go?

N: The AF exhibit went well. It was a positive experience.

T: VG was so-so. They said they only had audio, and couldn't provide a transcript.

N: Although VG did give us a booklet, it was intended for the visually impaired.

How did you connect to the audio devices?

T: Headphones for VG Museum, but it was not very comfortable.

N: All of us held the AF device to our hearing aids and cochlear implants. But I didn't purchase the VG audio tour because I thought that the booklet was the transcript.

How was the quality of sound?

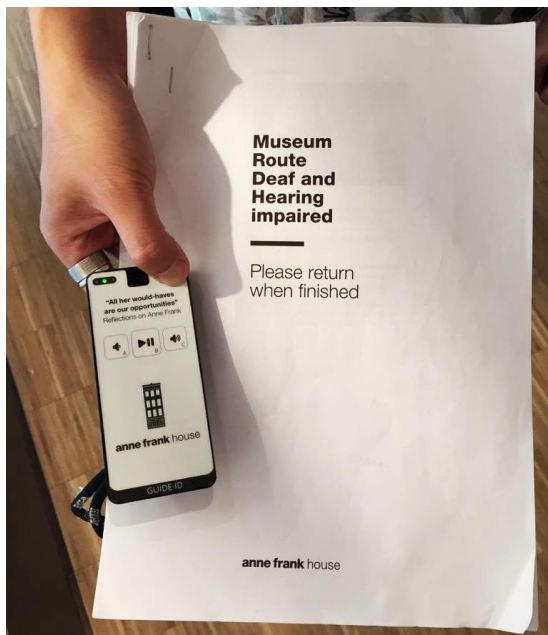
T & N: The sound quality at AF was okay.

N: The sound was a little quiet and unclear at times.

T: VG was clear.

What did you do you do about the quality of sound?

N: One of us thought that maybe we should ask for a transcript after we found we couldn't hear too well. AF had one readily available.



Audio devices and the accompanying transcript, Anne Frank House, 2018.

T: But we had to share some of the transcripts; AF didn't have enough to go around.

N: It would have been nice to connect directly to our hearing devices instead of having to hold it over our hearing aids amongst all the background noise.

T: On the other hand, AF was pretty quiet!

N: Yea, it was as if you were walking through the house as if you were sneaking about and layout was set up so that everyone walked in a single file line, which was nice.

Were there any challenges you needed to problem-solve?

N: I think having access to quality sound and transcripts were the biggest challenges. Tasha and I had trouble finding our place on the AF transcript when we listened along to the audio guides. We had to listen to the entire recording a few times until we got it right.

T: Still, it was nice that we did that together.

N: Agreed –that’s something I liked about travelling to Europe with my hard of hearing friends; you get better at problem-solving together. And as a result, it helped the group bond and we got to enjoy those experiences together once we finally figured it out.

Another thing about travelling together is you learn from others and you start to feel more confident with self-advocacy. One of our friends fixed the sound quality issue by connecting his cochlear implant directly to the VG device with an audio cord. He seemed to walk around the museum pretty comfortably. He said it was loud, clear, and had little background interference.

T: I didn’t like that the VG museum didn’t tell you which order the audio guide started. You have to be patient and use your listening skills to figure it out, which I did eventually. As it got more crowded at the museum, I had to walk around everyone in order to read the tiny print for name of the paintings that corresponded to the audio clips. And not all paintings had an audio clip... Even then, I had a great time! And VG was a little more high tech —their devices had a touch screen that allowed you to click on paintings for additional information.

N: Even though both exhibits had their issues, I think having a positive attitude always helps.

That must be nice —having a support network of friends.

N: Yea, totally. I’m so appreciative that I’m surrounded by an inspiring group of hard of hearing individuals.

We had the opportunity at both museums to give constructive feedback upon returning their audio devices. I think the AF staff were happy to hear from and observe hard of hearing young people giving tips on how they could improve their services.

But I found giving feedback to VG to be a little frustrating, which can happen anywhere with anyone. You have to be understanding that some people lack the knowledge and might need a little education. Nonetheless, it was really great to have my hard of hearing friends there for support.

What would you recommend for museums and what would you improve?

- Be open-minded
- Provide accurate, word for word, transcripts
- Create visual instructions
- Program audio recordings to start from the beginning rather than in the middle
- Add an option to turn on video [captioning](#)
- Consider installing inexpensive [induction hearing loops](#), standard audio output jacks, and/or bluetooth options for compatible.



Top to bottom: Roderick, Bowen, Clovis, Nicole, Tasha, and Janno. Van Gogh Museum, 2018.

- Have access to sign language interpreters, speech interpreters, and or [palantypists](#), who can help provide communication support for audio tours and guided tours.
- Facilitate communication training for staff persons. This can be offered at local organizations like [CHHA](#)
- Display the universal hearing accessibility [symbol](#) if you would like to let others know your business is accessibility friendly.
- Set up easily accessible suggestion boxes.
- Encourage hearing health by decreasing noise levels and unnecessary noise stress.
- Consult [non-profit hard of hearing associations](#) for more information if needed.

Do you have any tips for hard of hearing individuals that you would like to share ?

- Email ahead of time to inquire about any accessibility services and admission discounts.
- Plan to arrive at museums earlier in the day before they get busy because it gets crowded and harder to hear amongst background noise.
- Bring proof your permanent disability to qualify for admission discounts or accessibility services.
- Bring your hearing aid or cochlear implant accessories, which can really improve your audio experience.
- If you feel comfortable, share your experience and ideas with the staff for improvement.

Thanks so much for sharing your experience and ideas with us!

Nicole Leung and Tasha Cox explored Netherlands and attended the [Dutch summer camp for hard of hearing young people](#) in partnership with the [International Federation of Hard of Hearing Young People](#). If you are interested in more about accessibility or have thoughts and/or questions to share, connect with us on [Facebook](#) or [email](#)!



Nicole & Tasha at a beautiful beach near Zandvoort, 2018.