



# SHIFTING TIDES

2025 GDS-INDEX REPORT



# FOREWORD

As the tides of change rise around the world, so too do the collective ambitions of the GDS-Movement. The 2025 GDS-Index marks a decade of destination sustainability benchmarking - ten years of catalysing positive transformation, empowering destination leaders, and deepening our commitment to making places thrive through the measurement and management of more regenerative tourism and events.

Since our beginning in 2016, the GDS-Index has supported 621 assessments across 155 cities. This year, 81 destinations participated in the programme.

This year's theme, Shifting Tides, feels more relevant than ever. Political recalibrations across Europe and North America, DMO leadership restructuring, shifting funding priorities, and a changing international regulations landscape have all played a part. In the wake of these changes, we've welcomed new benchmarking participants and say a deep and heartfelt "thank you!" to the visionary partners, destinations and professionals who have anchored the movement till this point over the years.

As a movement, we continue to adapt and expand. In 2025, we've forged new partnerships with Murmuration and BeCause for enhanced data integration, with the University of Exeter to map how the Index creates systems change, and consolidated research collaboration with the University of Surrey. Most recently, we've begun working on a pathway to accelerate and simplify how destinations can achieve GSTC accredited certification. These collaborations strengthen our ability to serve, support, and inspire destination teams no matter where they are on their sustainability journey.

The GDS-Index is also constantly evolving, and we're proud to introduce a new inclusive performance accelerator programme that enables any destination to measure progress and advance their sustainability plans. Alongside continued optimisation of the GDS-Index benchmarking process, we are launching the GDS-Lite plan for those just beginning, and expanded solutions for advanced destinations pursuing third-party certification, climate action, and regenerative strategies.

In this sea of change, what remains constant is this community's courage to lead, and the need for us to do so in the present. From shifting seasonality to governance reform, funding gaps to regulatory change to designing net zero pathways, members of the movement meet each wave with intention, creativity, and a fierce resolve to do better, faster, together.

As we reflect on a decade of progress and look forward to the pivotal one ahead, we invite you to embrace these shifting tides as opportunities: to innovate, reconnect and co-create with purpose, and to steer with even greater clarity and action.



“

It's not just about riding the wave,  
it's about learning how to read it,  
shape it, and make it count.

”

*Guy Bigwood*

Chief Changemaker,  
GDS-Movement

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## WHAT IS IN THIS REPORT?

This report outlines the results, improvements, and achievements of the committed destinations that used the GDS-Index to benchmark and drive their sustainability efforts in 2025. It identifies key insights and showcases the top Leadership and Most Improved destinations. It will be followed by an insights report in 2026, featuring in-depth qualitative analysis, case studies, and emerging trends, based on this year's benchmarking data set.

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The GDS-Index provides destinations with the framework and data they need to continually enhance their sustainability performance while learning from the successes of others. Beyond the benchmarking, the GDS-Movement fosters an inspiring community of like-minded destinations, all committed to advancing tourism and events in ways that benefit both people and the planet.

”

# WHAT IS THE GDS-INDEX?

The GDS-Index is a trusted performance improvement programme to assess and accelerate the progress of a destination's regenerative journey. It measures, benchmarks, and enhances the sustainability strategies, action plans, and initiatives of destination management organisations, municipal authorities, and their tourism supply chains.

## HOW WAS THE GDS-INDEX CREATED?

Co-founded in 2016 by the International Congress and Convention Association (ICCA), City Destinations Alliance (CityDNA), IMEX Group, and MCI, the GDS-Index offers an unparalleled resource for visitors, DMOs, municipalities, associations, and event planners looking for destinations that provide the best in sustainability performance.

## HOW DOES THE GDS-INDEX ACCELERATE POSITIVE CHANGE?

- **Benchmarks performance to drive better decision-making:** Enables destinations to compare their sustainability performance against their peers', guiding more informed and effective decision-making.
- **Drives performance with strategic insights and prioritised recommendations:** Provides targeted insights and actionable recommendations, helping destinations focus on areas of highest impact.
- **Catalyses collaboration and innovation:** Encourages partnerships and fosters innovation by connecting stakeholders around shared sustainability goals.
- **Builds brand through leadership, recognition, and global visibility:** Demonstrates leadership in sustainability, enhancing the destination's reputation with opportunities for recognition and increased global visibility.
- **Promotes the destination's sustainability story:** Helps destinations more effectively communicate their sustainability achievements and initiatives and remain compliant with anti-greenwashing regulations, reinforcing their brand and appeal to conscious travellers.
- **Saves time and money with access to best practices and co-created resources:** Provides a wealth of shared resources and proven practices, allowing destinations to streamline efforts, reduce costs, and avoid duplication.

## X FACTOR EXAMPLES FROM AROUND THE WORLD

While these better practices fall outside of the GDS-Index criteria and ranking, they offer powerful support in the journey to greater regenerative destination management, which is an ongoing, iterative, and strategic process.

- 1 SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA – HERITAGE GOES GREEN.** The iconic [Sydney Opera House](#) has elevated its sustainability legacy, earning a 6-Star Green Star Performance rating as a World Heritage site, proving that even historic landmarks can achieve world-leading environmental standards.
- 2 WAVES IN BUSINESS EVENTS.** [Les Grands Remous](#) is North America's largest sustainable tourism event, uniting 450+ participants to accelerate innovative practices together.
- 3 SINGAPORE – FLOATING SOLAR.** [The Sembcorp Tengeh Floating Solar Farm](#) spans 45 hectares with 122,000 solar panels, making it one of the world's largest inland floating solar systems.

# 10 YEARS OF THE GDS-INDEX

# 151

destinations have completed a benchmarking submission since 2016

# 20

# 626

benchmarking assessments completed since 2016

# 35

countries have been represented on the GDS-Index since 2016

# 738

users have logged into the Omni platform since 2016

# 56

destinations have completed five or more benchmarking submissions since 2016

— **231 MILLION\***

residents have been affected by destination sustainability contributions since 2016

— **2-3 BILLION\*\***

visitors have been affected by participating destinations' tourism and events' sustainability efforts since 2016

\* Calculations were supported by AI-assisted modelling, using publicly-available data and conservative assumptions. The margin of error is approximately ±10-20%.

\*\*This is a low- to medium-conservative estimate of annual visitors, calculated for each of the 151 destinations, using city size or available public data, and multiplied by the number of years they have participated in the GDS-Index. Estimates are based on modelling and available data.

# WHICH DESTINATIONS ARE IN THE GDS-INDEX?

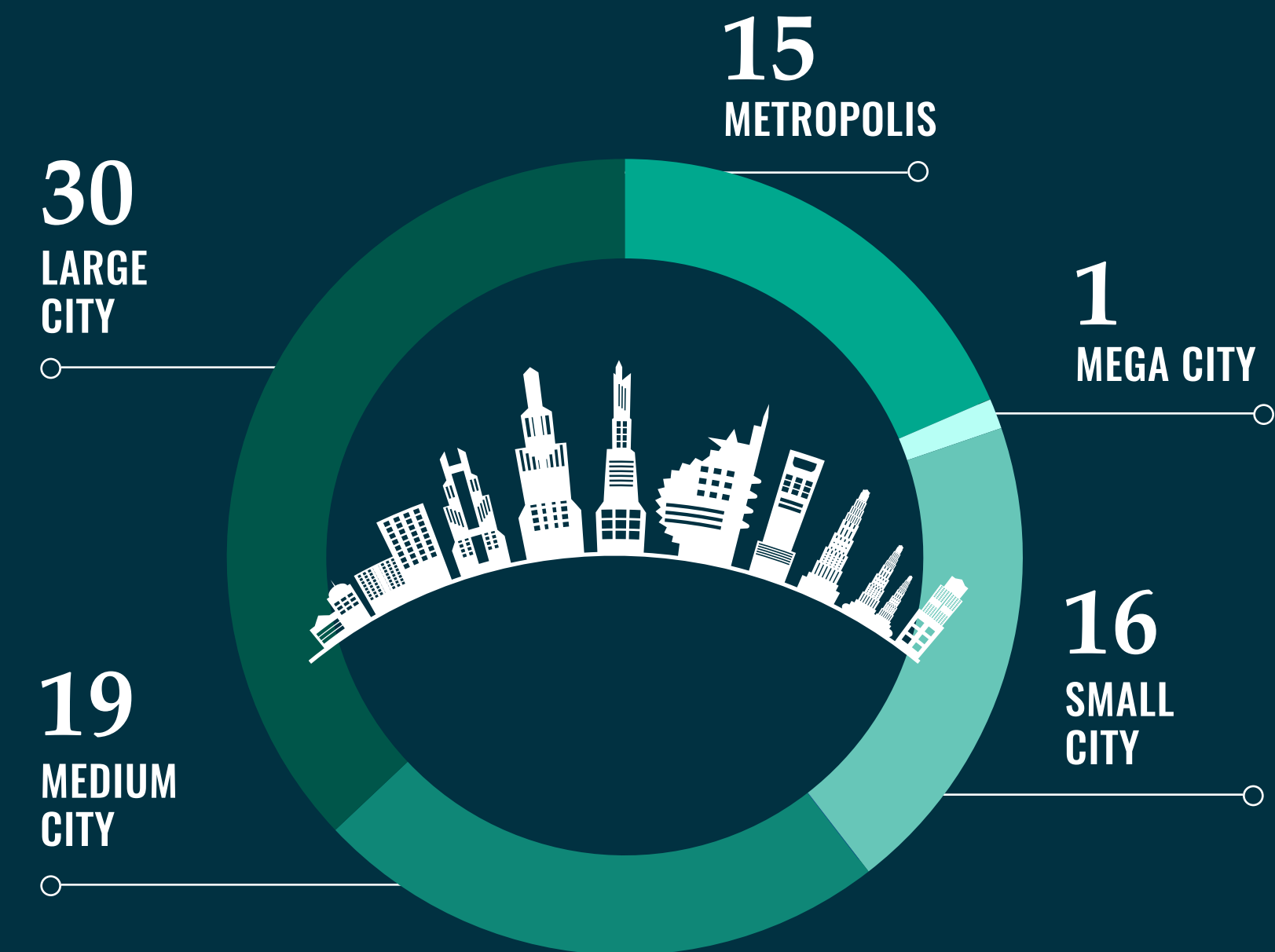
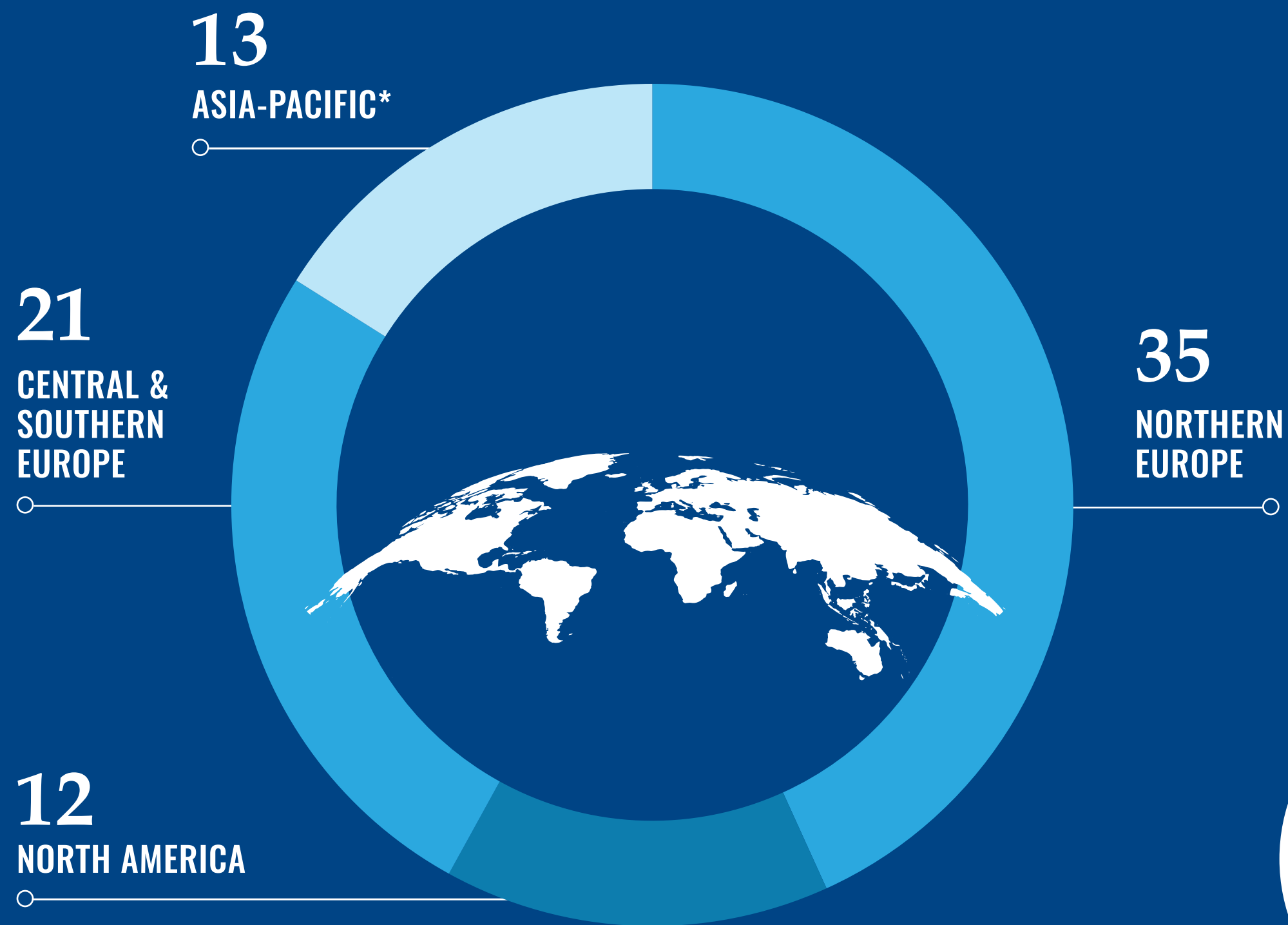
The GDS-Index has 81 cities committed to continually improving the social, economic, and environmental well-being of their destinations through tourism and events benchmarking. They are spread across the earth that sustains us and are co-creating the global journey towards regeneration through measurement and management.

## REGIONAL BREAKDOWN

## CITY SIZE BREAKDOWN

**81**  
DESTINATIONS

**9**  
NEW  
DESTINATIONS



\*Two cities from Middle East have been included into the Asia-Pacific group

# WHAT DOES THE DATA REVEAL?

## TIMES OF TRANSITION CALLS FOR ACTION

Over the past ten years, we've observed a 30.8% increase in average performance across all participating destinations, with a remarkable 46.0% rise in the Top 10.

In a year still shaped by economic uncertainty and budget cuts, destinations have had to demonstrate resilience and accountability to maintain momentum in their sustainability efforts and advantage in their target markets.

Refinements to the criteria were minimal this year, in contrast to the significant overhaul of 2024. The only substantial adjustment was in the Social category, with updates to three criteria under the 'Inclusiveness' section.

This change resulted in a modest average decrease of 0.9 percentage points in the category. By contrast, the Environmental category rose by 3.4 percentage points, the Supplier category by 4.7 percentage points.

The Destination Management category showed the most growth with an impressive 6.8 percentage points increase.

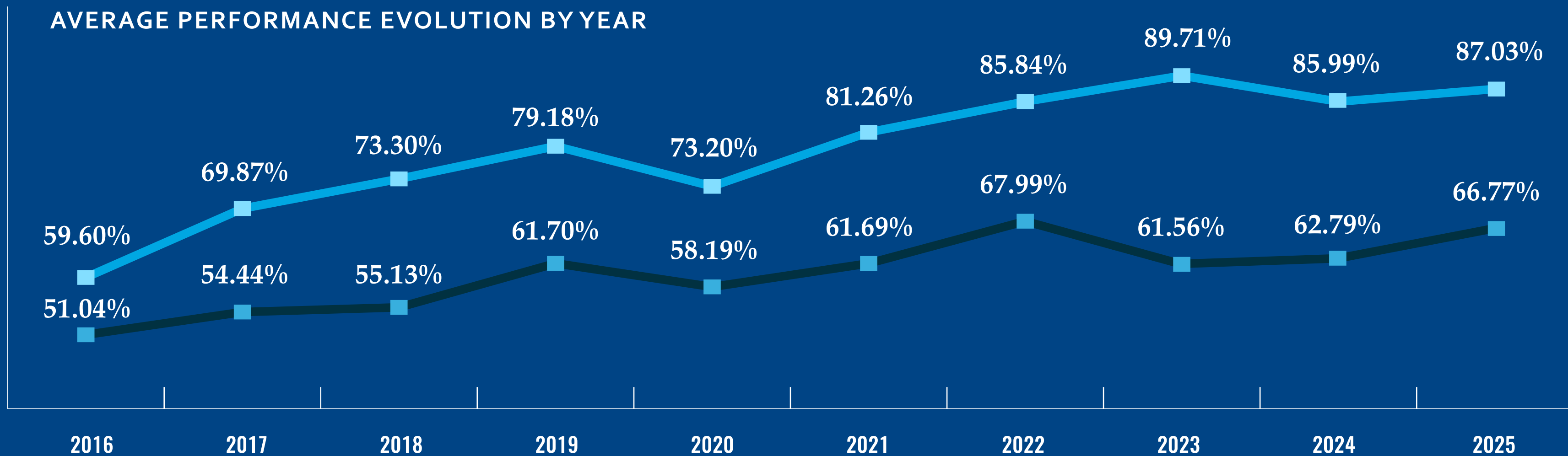
Notably, too, the Top 10 destinations made their biggest gains in the Supplier category with a 4.6 percentage points increase, an area finally enjoying much-deserved investment, whereas the Top 40 destinations focused their efforts on Destination Management with a 2.4 percentage points gain, demonstrating a global shift towards a more integral and holistic execution of sustainable tourism.

## THE GAP CONTINUES TO NARROW

Following a significant divergence in 2023, we've seen further convergence in 2025, with the gap between the Top 10 and the GDS-Index average decreasing from 23.2 to 20.3 percentage points, suggesting an encouraging rise in overall performance.

From 2024 to 2025 the GDS-Index average climbed by a healthy 6.3%, and the Top 10 rebounded from last year's 4.1% dip with a 1.2% improvement.

AVERAGE PERFORMANCE EVOLUTION BY YEAR



### PERCENTAGES VS PERCENTAGE POINTS

The data in this report often refers to changes in scores or performance. To interpret these shifts correctly, it's important to distinguish between percentage growth and a percentage-point increase.

If a score rises from 40% to 60%, that's a 20 percentage points increase, but it's actually 50% growth.

# STEPPING UP: A NEW TOP 40 FOR THE 2025 GDS-INDEX

## 2025 WELCOMES A DYNAMIC NEW GDS-INDEX TOP 40

The line-up has shifted, with some destinations exiting and new ones entering the spotlight. These changes reflect how destinations across the entire Index recalibrated their efforts in response to the major 2024 criteria overhaul, as well as their continuous progress on core sustainability themes.

To secure a position in the Top 40 in 2025, destinations needed to achieve a score of 69.72%. While this is slightly lower than the 72.87% threshold of 2024, it should not be mistaken for a drop in quality. Instead, it reflects the entrance of newer destinations and the ongoing evolution of criteria.

## SCORES TIGHTEN IN THE TOP 40

In 2024, the Top 40 saw a decrease of 0.80 percentage points in average score change, but sees great across-the-board improvements in 2025. The 2025 average improvement was 3.65 percentage points, with only six destination scores dropping slightly. The gap between the number 1 and number 40 positions decreased from 30.6 in 2024 to 23.8 percentage points in 2025. This trend signals a tightening leaderboard, with more destinations closing in on the high standards set by the frontrunners.

This is clearly illustrated by eight cities reaching almost identical scores, with rankings, in some cases, determined down to the fourth decimal point. This is so in the Top 10, where cities, Lyon and Belfast, are separated by minimal differences in total score, despite variations of up to 7.9 percentage points across the four assessment categories.

## TOP 40 NEWCOMERS

In total, the GDS-Index welcomed nine new destinations into the Top 40 this year, showing a little more movement compared to six new in 2024. Marseille returned after a brief, one-year absence.

The nine destinations making their way into the Top 40 this year include Basel as the highest ranked in 22nd place with an impressive 8.2 percentage points increase in score compared to 2024. Is it followed by Luzern, Marseille, Kumamoto, Milan, Manchester, Osternund, Strasbourg, Limerick, Ljubljana and Amsterdam. The average improvement of these nine Top 40 newcomers was an increase in score of 7.0 with a score improvement from 2024 ranging from 2.9 to 11.1 percentage points.

## WHAT MAKES A TOP 10 DESTINATION?

In 2024, positions six through ten were tightly contested, with all five destinations scoring exactly 83%, only to be decided by marginal differences. Fourth and fifth place had a two-point difference, as did third and sixth. This kind of clustering is no longer the case in 2025. While the entry level to the Top 10 still begins at 83%, the scores are now more spread out, and the gap between the top three is narrowing. While they may not lead in every individual category, the Top 10 destinations consistently deliver strong, well-rounded performance across all four.

### Could 2026 be the year we see new contenders emerge among the dominant Nordic trio?

The battle of the Nordic titans continues between Helsinki (93.52%), Gothenburg (91.51%) and Copenhagen (88.76%). Copenhagen outperformed its neighbours by dominating the Destination Management category but still has room for improvement in the Supplier category, where Gothenburg made notable gains. Helsinki saw its most significant improvement in the Environmental category.

# STEPPING UP: A NEW TOP 40 FOR THE 2025 GDS-INDEX

(CONTINUED)

## A NEW TOP 10

### New Era, New Entrants: The Changing Face of the GDS-Index Top 10

- Aalborg has rejoined the Top 10 after years of focused work and is one of the serious contenders for the 2026 Top 3 with its fourth place position.
- It is closely followed by Glasgow in fifth place, which is the only destination in the Top 10 to improve across all 4 categories.
- Tampere, in sixth position, makes the greatest leap both in score and ranking, with major improvements in the Supplier and Destinations Management categories. Overall, it looks like the team buckled down with good results and improved performance in 23 criteria.
- In seventh place, we find Aarhus, which moved down two spots compared to last year. It maintains a Top 10 position thanks to continued focus and gains in certification-related criteria.
- Lyon has been on the cusp of a Top 10 place for several years, and, with big jumps in both its Social and Supplier score, it finally secured eighth place, with an almost identical score to Belfast, separated only by decimal points.
- We find Belfast in ninth place with improvements in the Environmental and Destination Management categories, presenting an incredible example of transformation and innovation, considering they were last but one in their first assessment in 2020.
- Finally, in tenth position, we have another newcomer, Reykjavik, which slipped out of Top 10 in 2022, but has now regained top ten status, with improvement in Environmental and Destination Management categories.

While new contenders enter the spotlight, three former frontrunners, Bergen, Bordeaux, and Oslo have exited the Index this year.

# THE GDS-INDEX 2025 TOP 40

	2025	2024
<b>Helsinki*</b> 1	<b>93.52</b>	92.43
<b>Gothenburg</b> 2	<b>91.51</b>	90.83
<b>Copenhagen*</b> 3	<b>88.76</b>	88.19
Aalborg 4	<b>87.06</b>	82.98
Glasgow 5	<b>86.00</b>	81.88
Tampere 6	<b>85.76</b>	76.96
Aarhus 7	<b>85.15</b>	85.68
Lyon 8	<b>84.40</b>	80.16
Belfast 9	<b>84.40</b>	83.14
Reykjavik* 10	<b>83.72</b>	78.28

	2025	2024
Melbourne 11	<b>83.03</b>	76.61
Kerry 12	<b>82.80</b>	77.65
Singapore* 13	<b>82.34</b>	83.37
Barcelona 14	<b>81.88</b>	75.57
Goyang 15	<b>81.65</b>	78.90
Brisbane 16	<b>81.19</b>	75.23
Berlin* 17	<b>80.50</b>	75.92
Cork 18	<b>80.08</b>	77.18
Dublin* 19	<b>80.05</b>	75.69
Montreal 20	<b>79.82</b>	74.77

	2025	2024
Bilbao 21	<b>79.82</b>	80.27
Basel 22	<b>79.59</b>	71.40
Quebec 23	<b>79.13</b>	73.74
Stockholm* 24	<b>79.13</b>	75.57
Sydney 25	<b>78.56</b>	83.13
Clare 26	<b>77.24</b>	75.77
Victoria 27	<b>77.06</b>	77.17
Songkhla 28	<b>76.84</b>	74.89
Galway 29	<b>76.84</b>	76.06
Faroe Islands 30	<b>75.92</b>	74.88

	2025	2024
Luzern 31	<b>75.69</b>	72.82
Marseille 32	<b>75.00</b>	
Kumamoto 33	<b>74.54</b>	63.42
Milan 34	<b>74.31</b>	70.18
Manchester 35	<b>73.79</b>	63.27
Ostersund 36	<b>72.71</b>	65.71
Strasbourg 37	<b>71.79</b>	66.97
Limerick 38	<b>71.34</b>	73.51
Ljubljana* 39	<b>70.76</b>	64.16
Amsterdam* 40	<b>69.72</b>	61.81

\*Capital Cities

# LEADERS BY CATEGORY



## Environmental

1	Helsinki	91.04
2	Tampere	88.06
3	Gothenburg	87.31
3	Copenhagen	87.31
4	Stockholm	85.82



## Social

1	Helsinki	92.11
1	Gothenburg	92.11
1	Reykjavik	92.11
1	Singapore	92.11



## Supplier

1	Helsinki	94.87
2	Gothenburg	92.31
3	Tampere	91.03
3	Glasgow	91.03
4	Reykjavik	88.46



## Destination Management

1	Copenhagen	95.95
2	Helsinki	95.77
3	Gothenburg	94.59
3	Basel	94.59
4	Goyang	93.24

# LEADERS BY REGION

## Asia-Pacific

1	Melbourne	83.03
2	Singapore	82.34
3	Goyang	81.65
4	Brisbane	81.19
5	Sydney	78.56

## Central & Southern Europe

1	Lyon	84.40
2	Barcelona	81.88
3	Berlin	80.50
4	Bilbao	79.82
5	Basel	79.59

## North America

1	Montreal	79.82
2	Quebec	79.13
3	Victoria	77.06
4	Edmonton	64.22
5	Washington DC	57.34

## Northern Europe

1	Helsinki	93.52
2	Gothenburg	91.51
3	Copenhagen	88.76
4	Aalborg	87.06
5	Glasgow	86.01

# LEADERS BY CITY SIZE

## Small City

1	Kerry	82.80
2	Clare	77.24
3	Victoria	77.06
4	Galway	76.84
5	Faroe Islands	76.15

Population size: 0-199.999

## Large City

1	Helsinki	93.52
2	Gothenburg	91.51
3	Copenhagen	88.76
4	Glasgow	86.01
5	Lyon	84.40

Population size: 500.000-1.499.999

## Medium City

1	Aalborg	87.06
2	Tampere	85.76
3	Aarhus	85.15
4	Belfast	84.40
5	Reykjavik	83.72

Population size: 200.000-499.999

## Metropolis & Mega City

1	Melbourne	83.03
2	Singapore	82.34
3	Barcelona	81.88
4	Berlin	80.50
5	Dublin	80.05

Population size: 1.500.000-25.000.000

# MOST IMPROVED LEADERS

We celebrate the destinations that have improved the most across the four categories. Everyone on the GDS-Index is on a journey of transformative, positive change, and it takes a team effort from the DMO, City, and stakeholders, to submit an assessment. We know every participating destination is making efforts to move forward; for this group that step was a little bigger.

## Environmental

- |                     |             |
|---------------------|-------------|
| 1 Banff             | 6 Krakow    |
| 2 Stratford-on-Avon | 7 Tallinn   |
| 3 Quebec            | 8 Adelaide  |
| 4 Gdansk            | 9 Amsterdam |
| 5 Reykjavik         | 10 Coventry |

## Supplier

- |             |             |
|-------------|-------------|
| 1 Solihull  | 6 Tampere   |
| 2 Krakow    | 7 Newcastle |
| 3 Sandwell  | 8 Luzern    |
| 4 Lugano    | 9 Adelaide  |
| 5 Melbourne | 10 Leeds    |

## Social

- |                 |                |
|-----------------|----------------|
| 1 Krakow        | 6 The Malverns |
| 2 Leeds         | 7 Songkhla     |
| 3 Washington DC | 8 Montreal     |
| 4 Kumamoto      | 9 Ljubljana    |
| 5 Lyon          | 10 Glasgow     |

## Destination Management

- |                |              |
|----------------|--------------|
| 1 Manchester   | 6 Basel      |
| 2 The Malverns | 7 Amsterdam  |
| 3 Adelaide     | 8 Birmingham |
| 4 Kumamoto     | 9 Sandwell   |
| 5 Newcastle    | 10 Brisbane  |

## INSIGHTS:

# TURNING THE TIDE

## FROM AMBITION TO DESTINATION CLIMATE ACTION

*By Janie Neumann, Destination Climate Action Expert and Relationship Manager (UK, Ireland, Germany, Austria)*

The global tourism and events sector is entering a decisive moment. Growing climate instability, including extreme weather events and rising costs from climate impacts, is already reshaping how and where people travel. Current climate trajectories still point towards a global temperature rise of more than 3 degrees Celsius, bringing profound socio-economic instability and risks that will make it increasingly difficult for travel to continue in its present form (as highlighted in the work of Stefan Gössling and others).

Tourism is already feeling the effects of a changing climate: the Maui wildfires and recent floods in Spain are not isolated incidents but part of a pattern where hotter temperatures and heavier rains, driven by climate change, are amplifying the damage and uncertainty facing destinations. Its implications go far beyond economics as it is already disrupting communities, threatening livelihoods, and eroding the natural and cultural assets that underpin destination appeal. As a sector that both impacts and depends on these resources, tourism has a clear (if not existential) responsibility to take decisive action and contribute to the global effort.

How quickly and decisively can destinations build resilience, cut emissions, and support the communities and ecosystems on which they depend? The GDS-Index, with its strengthened climate action criteria, helps answer these and other vital questions.

### REFINING CLIMATE CRITERIA IN THE GDS-INDEX

Climate criteria have long been part of the GDS-Index. In 2024, three new measures to sharpen the focus on tourism and events sector's role in accelerating progress were introduced:

- Climate Action at Sector Level
- Climate Action Support for Suppliers
- Climate Action at DMO level

These criteria, aligned with the UN Tourism's [Glasgow Declaration on Climate Action in Tourism](#) and the [Net Zero Carbon Events](#) pledge, were designed to move destinations beyond reliance on climate action by municipal governments or major corporations, and to underline the responsibility of DMOs and the tourism and events sector.

# TURNING THE TIDE

## FROM AMBITION TO DESTINATION CLIMATE ACTION (CONTINUED)

### PROGRESS IN 2025: IN ACTION IS A RECEDING TIDE

A comparison of year-on-year results, 2024 – 2025, show encouraging signs of momentum\*. Across all three areas, the share of destinations taking action increased significantly:

- The share of destinations reporting climate action at a sector level increased from 54% to 77%
- Climate Action Support for Suppliers: destinations taking action increased from 79% to 90%.
- Climate Action at DMO level: taking action increased from 84% to 96%

This shift confirms that for most destinations, action is now the norm.

\* Analysis is based on destinations participating in both the 2024 and 2025 GDS-Index, allowing like-for-like comparison over two years.

**Sector-level climate action:** An increasing number of destinations in the 2025 GDS-Index are demonstrating their commitment to climate action, with more than one in five (22%) now signed up to the "[Glasgow Declaration on Climate Action in Tourism](#)", a significant rise from last year (10%). More destinations are signing up to other international commitments, publishing climate action plans (20% → 39%), and conducting risk studies (20% → 34%). This shows early progress in assessing how climate change will affect tourism. Yet only a third (34%) currently measure the sector's carbon emissions, an essential step for effective planning and accountability.

**Support to supply chains:** Destinations are increasingly equipping businesses with tools (73%), incentives (69%), and promotional support (74%). Training is improving, with 71% of destinations now providing it, though further investment is needed to help translate ambition into action.

**DMOs leading by example:** Organisational action has accelerated. Net zero commitments (64%), climate action plans (54%), and footprint measurement (63%) are now widespread. Communication is the strongest area, with 70% engaging visitors and 74% engaging event organisers. New indicators show that 43% are now publishing annual updates. Training for DMO staff is improving (59%) but still limited, making it harder to fully embed climate action across the organisation.

### ADAPTATION: THE MISSING PIECE

While mitigation efforts are gaining pace, adaptation remains a weak spot. Only one-third of destinations have assessed the risks of climate change to tourism and events. Risk assessment and adaptation planning need to move from the margins to the mainstream of destination strategies for destinations to find themselves [better prepared for crises to come](#).

### CREDIBLE COMMUNICATION

The GDS-Index results also show a marked improvement in how destinations are communicating climate action. However, communication without verification risks (unintentional) greenwashing. To be credible and compliant, destinations must ensure that storytelling is backed by measurable action that is clear, truthful, and verifiable.

### LOOKING AHEAD: FROM AMBITION TO CAPABILITY

The past year's results demonstrate that climate ambition is becoming increasingly embedded in the global community participating in the GDS-Index. This is a remarkable shift in a short time. The next frontier is about building the capabilities - skills, systems, and resources - that can turn plans into outcomes.

Capacity-building, staff and supply chain training, and systematic measurement are still the weakest links. These must become priorities and destinations must make climate mitigation and adaptation a core/integral part of destination management if they are to avoid the growing costs and disruptions highlighted by Gössling and others.

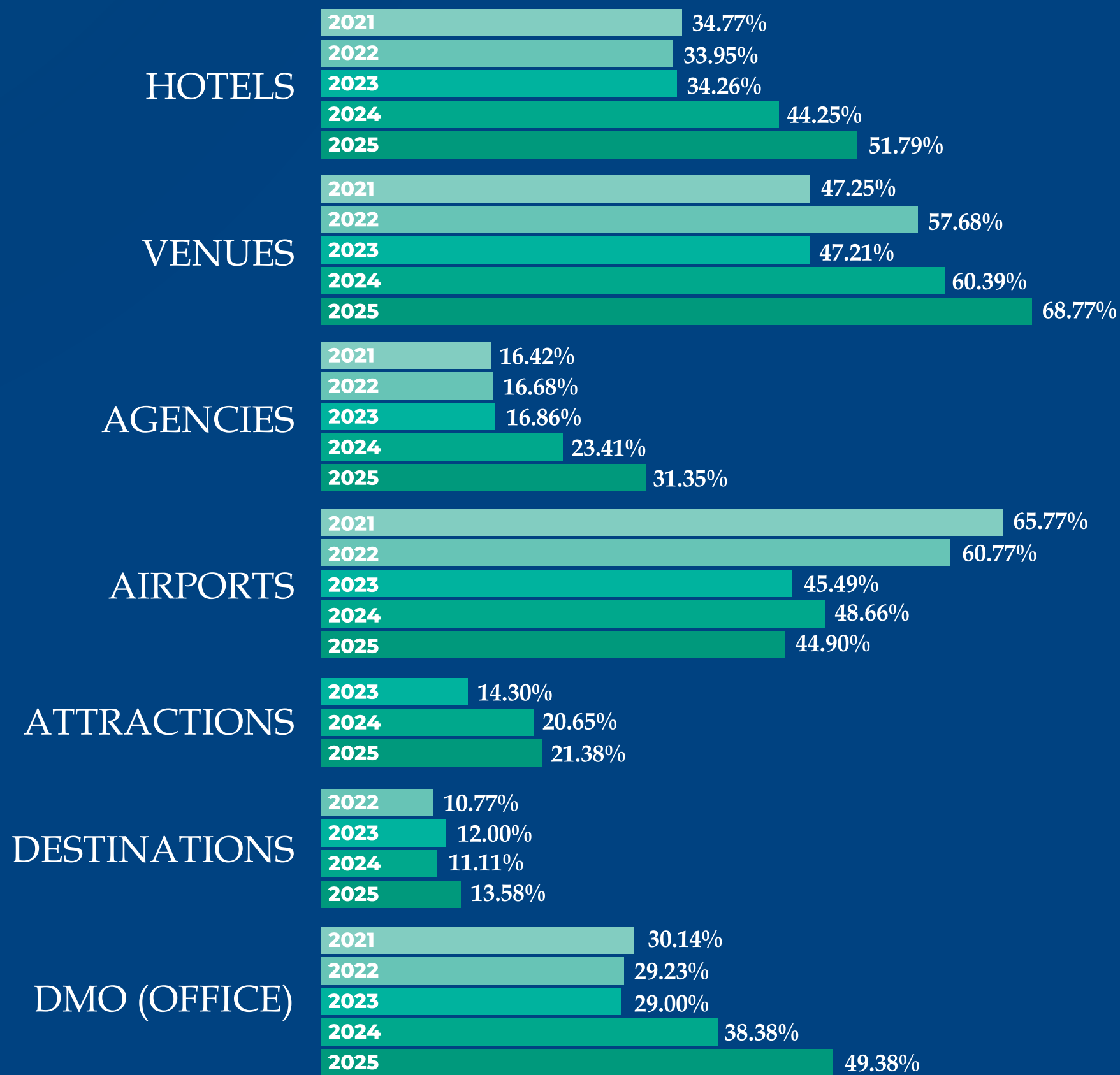
### TAKE ACTION WITH SUPPORT FROM THE GDS-MOVEMENT

The GDS-Movement will continue to strengthen the GDS-Index in line with evolving climate criteria. Beyond benchmarking, we are working with destinations to:

- Build capacity through our [climate action masterclass](#) for DMOs and industry partners
- Support authentic storytelling through our [sustainability storytelling masterclass](#)
- Embed climate action in strategy development projects, such as the [North East England Regenerative Visitor Economy Framework](#) from Destination North East England
- Provide end-to-end support through our destination climate action package: measuring emissions, co-creating decarbonisation strategies, building capacity, communicating and engaging stakeholders, regenerating natural and cultural assets, and strengthening resilience

INSIGHTS:

# SUSTAINABILITY CERTIFICATION: GROWTH, GAPS, AND OPPORTUNITIES



## DATA DIVE: CERTIFICATION

- **Hotels:** New high of 52% average for 2025.
- **Hotels:** The average increase for certified hotels across 2025 destinations was 8.3 percentage points.
- **Hotels:** Top performers: Helsinki is now at 99% certified hotels, followed by Gothenburg with 96%, Skelleftea at 91% and Copenhagen at 90%\*.
- **Venues:** 25% of destinations saw an increase in their venue certification, 44% maintained theirs, 6% decreased, and 11% are at 0%.
- **Agencies:** 41% of this year's destinations increased their agency certification, while 11% decreased it.
- **Airports:** The airport sustainability certification numbers have decreased slightly with the increase in destinations over time, and we expect this certification to increase, despite the process being time-consuming.
- **Attractions:** This is the new challenge for many destinations. We increased the number of attractions from the top 10 most-visited to the top 15. Despite this and it being a relatively new area of certification, many destinations and attractions are showing interest and effort, and being supported by the new GSTC Attractions Standard.
- **DMO:** Almost 50% of DMOs have received a DMO certification for their organisation's own practices, with 10% improving their efforts and reaching third-party certification.
- **DMO:** 11% of the group have formally applied for own-organisation sustainability certification.
- **Destinations:** 7% of destinations went from "In progress" to "Obtained" for third-party certification.
- **Destinations:** 4% of destinations are still "In progress" (of achieving certification) and 4% have maintained last year's results.

Disclaimer: The GDS-Index certified hotels data (criterion SU-1) reflects only those properties above a minimum room threshold (>25, >50, or >75 rooms relative to the size of the destination). As a result, the reported percentages do not represent a city's entire hotel population, but rather a filtered subset. Download our 2025 Certification Guide on [gds.earth/reports](https://gds.earth/reports)

INSIGHTS:

# OVERVIEW OF GLOBAL TRENDS AND REGULATIONS

Over the past decade, and especially in the last five years, there has been an increase in global efforts to address greenwashing. As emphasised elsewhere in this report, it takes place as environmental claims have become central to how companies brand and market themselves.

Legislators around the world are now trying to ban or limit the use of green claims that lack scientific evidence, or are vague or generic. To this end, countries have responded in different ways: some have introduced formal legislation while others use detailed guidelines that, if ignored, can result in fines or reputational damage. Many jurisdictions continue to use existing consumer protection or advertising laws as the legal foundation, and have augmented these laws with a clear focus on environmental messaging. There is now broad, global agreement that misleading green claims are a form of deception, and regulators are increasingly taking action to hold businesses accountable to their consumers.



Key Regulatory Developments Country/Jurisdiction	Regulation / Guideline	Key Features	Legal Status / Enforcement
<b>EUROPEAN UNION</b>	Directive 2024/825 on empowering consumers for the green transition through better protection against unfair practices and through better information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Back environmental claims with evidence.</li> <li>Ban vague or generic claims.</li> <li>Prohibit unverified sustainability labels.</li> <li>Use recognised certifications only.</li> <li>Require independent monitoring &amp; standards.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Adopted March 2024 and will be enforceable from 27 September 2026.</li> <li>Member states have until March 2026 to transpose this Directive.</li> </ul>
	Directive 2023/0085 on Green Claims (proposal)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Minimum standards for claims.</li> <li>Clear and specific claims.</li> <li>Avoid overstated claims.</li> <li>Fines for non-compliance.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>First reading adopted in March 2024.</li> <li>Proposal Stage.</li> <li>Pending final decision, negotiations at a standstill.</li> </ul>
<b>UK</b>	Green Claims Code	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Comply with consumer protection.</li> <li>Support genuine green products.</li> <li>Provide clear consumer information.</li> <li>Six principles for claims.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Introduced in 2021.</li> <li>Guidelines are enforceable via existing consumer laws.</li> </ul>
<b>NETHERLANDS</b>	Sustainability Claims Guidelines	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Claims must be truthful, clear, and evidence-based.</li> <li>Comparisons must be fair, specific, and realistic.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Introduced in 2023.</li> <li>Supervised by the Netherlands Authority for Consumers and Markets.</li> <li>Greenwashing can result in fines.</li> </ul>

# OVERVIEW OF GLOBAL TRENDS AND REGULATIONS

(CONTINUED)



Key Regulatory Developments Country/Jurisdiction	Regulation / Guideline	Key Features	Legal Status / Enforcement
<b>FRANCE</b>	Anti-greenwashing guidelines, part of Climate and Resilience Law	Bans vague terms like “eco-friendly” or “non-toxic”. “Carbon neutral” claims require annual full lifecycle GHG proof. Fossil fuel ads banned unless promoting renewables.	2021 Climate and Resilience Law; Anti greenwashing Guidelines updated in 2024. Legally enforceable.
<b>USA</b>	Federal Trade Commission (FTC)’s Green Guides	Provides guidelines to avoid deceptive claims. Avoid vague terms like “eco-friendly” . Specific claims must be evidence-based.	Introduced in 2012. Currently under revision. While the Guides, themselves, are not law, violations can lead to FTC enforcement.
<b>CHINA</b>	Ad Language Enforcement Guidelines	No dedicated greenwashing laws but regulated via Advertising, Anti-Unfair Competition, and Product-Quality Laws. Guidelines introduce strict limits on “absolutist language” in ads (e.g. “the best”). Applies to environmental and other claims.	2023. Binding guidelines. Clear enforcement instructions for regulators.
<b>SOUTH KOREA</b>	Amendment to Environmental Technology and Industry Support Act	Introduces a green grade system for evaluating the sustainability of business activities. Direct penalties for misleading green claims including fines of up to 3 million <i>won</i> .	Introduced in 2021, the system was updated in 2023 to provide clearer and more comprehensive guidelines.
<b>AUSTRALIA</b>	Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC)’s Environmental Claims Guidance	Developed 8 principles: truthful, evidence-based, clear, complete, specific, and transparent on conditions and transition. Breaches can be fined up to AUD 50M.	2023 Guidance under Australian Consumer Law. Enforceable via ACCC.

## INSIGHTS:

# DROWNING IN DATA OR SURFING WITH IT?

The debate around sustainability certification in tourism is intensifying. Certification is increasingly becoming not just a market differentiator, but a compliance requirement, raising critical questions about equity, access, and who gets left behind.

In the recent research, *Inequitable Access to Sustainability Certification* (Font, Gallego & Mellinas, 2024), the authors underscore the challenge that only 9.3% of European hotels are certified, with uptake concentrated in large, high-end, chain-affiliated properties, while small and independent hotels face significant barriers such as high costs, limited resources, and lack of support. This uneven distribution of certification raises concerns under new, stricter regulations on greenwashing, like the Empowering Consumers Directive and the proposed Green Claims Directive, which risk exacerbating inequities unless financial and technical support mechanisms for SMEs are put in place.

The GDS-Index approaches certification from a different angle. Our benchmarking measures the uptake of certification across multiple stakeholder groups, not only hotels, but also attractions, event venues, and DMOs. By capturing this data annually, the GDS-Index provides destinations with a holistic picture of certification coverage, highlights gaps relative to peers, and supports destinations in moving from measurement to action.

The GDS-Index and GDS-Movement address certification from complementary perspectives, building on the action plan proposed by Font, Gallego & Mellinas (2024).

## WHAT THE GDS-INDEX MEASURES THROUGH CRITERIA

- **Advocate for financial and technical support for suppliers, including SMEs**  
Linked to DM-19, recognising how destinations provide incentives, funding schemes, or technical assistance to enable suppliers to improve their performance. For example, some destinations provide financial incentives for hotels to apply for certification.
- **Support certification uptake by building collaborative pathways across the supply chain**  
Linked to SU-1 (Hotels with sustainability certification), SU-13 (Venues with sustainability certification), SU-8 (Attractions with sustainability certification), and DM-13 (Destination certification). These criteria measure certification coverage across suppliers and the DMO, providing tangible indicators of progress and uptake.

## WHAT THE GDS-MOVEMENT CONTRIBUTES AT SYSTEM LEVEL

Beyond benchmarking, GDS-Movement acts to create an enabling environment for destinations and suppliers by:

- **Developing the [White Paper](#) on EU Legislation and Green Claims**  
Providing destinations with clear guidance on how directives such as the Empowering Consumers Directive and the proposed Green Claims Directive will affect their supply chains. This will be updated in 2026. Find FAQs [here](#).
- **Facilitating multi-stakeholder dialogues**  
Convening DMOs, certification bodies, policymakers, and industry associations to co-design responses that address inequities and strengthen access to certification.

## HOW THEY WORK TOGETHER

Together, the Index and the movement form a loop: the Index highlights gaps through benchmarking, while the movement provides tools and context to address them. Destinations can then apply this learning to improve their performance against GDS-Index criteria, ensuring that certification uptake is both measurable and inclusive.

INSIGHTS:

# FROM INTENTION TO ACTION: 5 YEARS OF LEGACY-BUILDING PROGRESS

Overall, destinations are showing strong progress in their impact and legacy contributions. In 2025, 32% of destinations improved these scores, while 10% saw a decrease. From 2021 to 2024, those with no programme averaged 35%, but this dropped significantly to 23% in 2025, indicating a growing commitment to impact-driven initiatives.

## EMPOWERING CLIENTS: A RISE IN TOOLS AND TRAINING

From 2021 to 2025, the proportion of destinations providing event frameworks and tools to association and event planners increased from 28.8% to 50.6%, demonstrating significant progress in offering structured resources. Training for clients has also shown a steady rise, growing from 23.3% in 2021 to 38.3% in 2025.

## INCENTIVISING ACTION AND BUILDING LOCAL IMPACT PARTNERSHIPS

Internally, there have been no major changes in the provision of DMO staff training, which has averaged 47.8% over the last five years. However, incentives to clients have more than doubled in the same period, rising from 27.4% in 2021 to 54.3% in 2025, despite notable annual fluctuations.

The highest score in 2025 is found in efforts to facilitate partnerships between event clients and local impact organisations, which reached a peak of 65.4%, highlighting strong momentum in collaborative legacy initiatives.

Does the DMO have a social impact and legacy programme for events?	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
None	35.62%	30.77%	48.00%	31.31%	23.46%
We provide an impact or legacy framework and tools to event clients	28.77%	47.69%	33.00%	30.30%	50.62%
We provide event clients with training on impact and legacy management	23.29%	36.92%	31.00%	37.37%	38.27%
We train our DMO team on impact and legacy management for events	54.79%	49.23%	44.00%	40.40%	50.62%
We provide incentives to clients to help increase the positive social, environmental, and economic impact of events in the destination.	27.40%	43.08%	33.00%	28.28%	54.32%
We facilitate formal, non-industry partnerships to help clients to generate a long-term, positive impact and legacy in the destination.	47.95%	56.92%	45.00%	49.49%	65.43%

# FROM INTENTION TO ACTION: 5 YEARS OF LEGACY-BUILDING PROGRESS

CONTINUED

## REDEFINING VALUE THROUGH FUNDING INNOVATIONS: WHAT ASSOCIATIONS REALLY WANT FROM SUBVENTION

In a first-of-its-kind collaboration, Conferli, #MEET4IMPACT, and the GDS-Movement surveyed 115 destinations and 55 associations through global surveys, in-depth interviews, and live workshops. This upcoming report offers a dual perspective, exploring how destinations structure, prioritise, and deliver subvention, and how associations perceive, access, and use it.

The findings expose both alignment and disconnect in subvention practices, and identify where innovation, co-creation, and system-level transformation are urgently needed.

### KEY FINDINGS AT A GLANCE:

- 1 Subvention use remains high, but its role is evolving
- 2 There's a clear mismatch between what destinations offer and what associations need
- 3 Reporting and measurement are fragmented, but widely acknowledged as a priority
- 4 Multi-tier subvention models are emerging
- 5 Subvention as a driver of change: it is building momentum, but is not yet mainstream
- 6 Key barriers include funding, complexity, and a lack of shared language
- 7 We have a new set of expectations for the future

This report will be released 25 September 2025, offering actionable insights to help destinations and associations redefine subvention as a strategic lever for impact, legacy, and sustainable growth in the business events industry.

SOURCE: Upcoming Report: An Insider's Perspective – Subvention as a Catalyst for Sustainable and Impactful Transformation in the Business Events Industry

INSIGHTS:

# READING THE TIDES, SHAPING THE WAVE: A SYSTEMIC GUIDE TO IMPACT



University of Exeter

To deepen our understanding of what drives sustainable destination performance, GDS-Movement has partnered with the University of Exeter on a pioneering research project, "Unlocking Systems Thinking for Destination Sustainability Performance".

The project aims to move beyond a static view of sustainability performance by revealing the GDS-Index's underlying structure as an interconnected system. The full findings will be detailed in an upcoming white paper.

### THE GDS-INDEX SYSTEM MAP: A TOOL FOR CONNECTING PERFORMANCE TO PURPOSE

The GDS-Index System Map is a visual model of the GDS-Index criteria and the causal connections between them, developed through a rigorous process of analysis, and validated in workshops with GDS-Index assessors and destination managers. Early insights show that focusing on key "leverage points", such as Climate Action at Sector Level, Circular Economy, and Community Engagement, can create a domino effect of positive change across a destination's entire sustainability ecosystem.

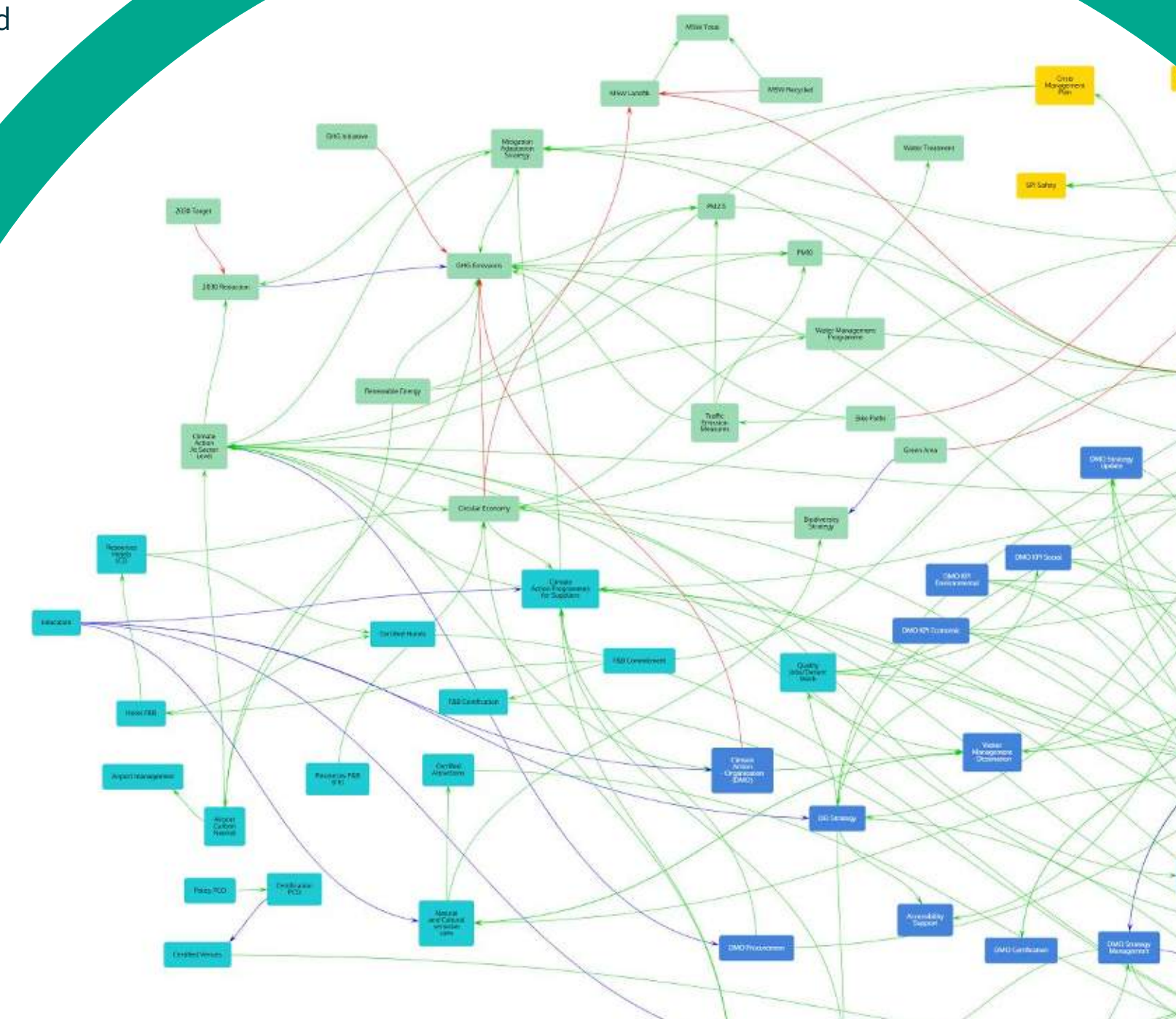
### FOR DESTINATION MANAGEMENT ORGANISATIONS (DMOS):

The GDS-Index System Map is a strategic programme that transforms the performance measurement of the GDS-Index into a dynamic roadmap for transformation. It unveils the related benefits and risks of specific sustainability actions, enabling destinations to build compelling business cases to engage stakeholders, invest in sustainability across the value chain, ideate sustainability innovations, and tell an evidence-based story of their impact.

### FOR THE GDS-MOVEMENT:

The map provides a new analytical lens to enhance performance reports, offering destinations richer, more strategic, and evidence-based recommendations. Furthermore, the insights gathered, such as the need for a clear distinction between areas a DMO can control versus those it can only influence, the lack of understanding of isolated criteria, and the perceived imbalance between environmental and social criteria, provide a robust evidence base for the continued methodological evolution of the GDS-Index.

The White Paper will be available on [www.gds.earth/reports](http://www.gds.earth/reports) in October 2025.



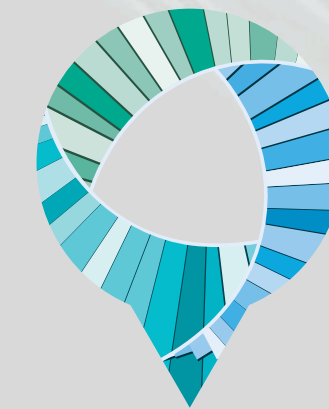
The project is led by Dr. Jose Melenez Roman, Lecturer in Sustainable Tourism, and Christopher Kwesi Appiah, Graduate Research Assistant, University of Exeter.

# RECOGNISING EXCELLENCE AND EVOLUTION

## RECOGNISING EXCELLENCE AND EVOLUTION

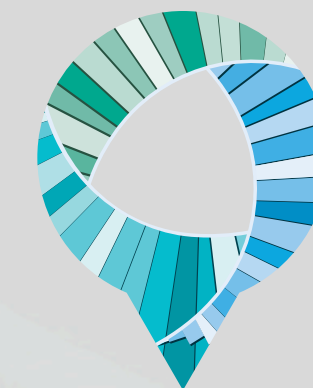
Each year, we celebrate destinations for continuously contributing to greater sustainability in tourism and events. This year, we've segmented these recognitions for clarity and relevance.

The GDS-Index remains the home of the Leadership and the Most Improved destinations, while GDS-Awards, to be hosted during the prestigious [GDS-Forum](#) taking place in Szczecin in June, 2026, houses the Innovation and Impact (in collaboration with #MEET4IMPACT) Awards.



## MOST IMPROVED DESTINATION AWARD GDS-MOVEMENT

The Most Improved Destination is recognised for the greatest year-on-year increase in sustainability contributions, based on GDS-Index's benchmark.



## LEADERSHIP AWARD GDS-MOVEMENT

The Leadership Destination is recognised for making the greatest overall contributions to social, environmental, and economic well-being, based on our independently validated data set.

# MOMENTUM SHIFT: THE TOP 3 MOST IMPROVED DESTINATIONS IN 2025

## ADELAIDE, AUSTRALIA

Adelaide achieved the greatest improvement with a 14.1 percentage points gain, rising from 47.4% to 61.5% and jumping 23 places in its second year of participation.

### HIGHLIGHTS

**Environmental Score:** Adelaide sees a significant increase in performance to a score of 76.9% (+9.7 percentage points), ranking 12th globally, with improvements across six criteria.

**Supplier Score:** The southern Australian city sees a 13.4 percentage points boost thanks to notable increases in its tourism and events' circular economy initiatives and food waste reduction in hotels and restaurants, and improvements in hotel certification status along with Adelaide Airport achieving carbon neutrality for direct emissions (excluding flights), the first in Australia to achieve this.

**Destination Management Score:** The popular coastal enclave doubled its previous score this year (+26.1 percentage points) to reach 52.1%, demonstrating Adelaide's strategic leap in governance, reporting, and marketing communications in the wake of the launch of the destination's first sustainability strategy.



## KRAKOW, POLAND

Krakow climbed by +12.9 percentage points, from 49.3% to 62.2%, gaining 19 rank positions, with the biggest gain happening in the Supplier Category in its fourth year of participation.

### HIGHLIGHTS

**Environmental Score:** This second-largest Polish city increased its performance to 67.1%, showing major strides in city-environment alignment, strong commitment and leadership from the City of Krakow, with improvements on seven criteria.

**Social Score:** Up by 22.0 percentage points, the famed southern Polish city is the most improved destination overall, with progress made in accessibility, resident engagement, as well as strong contributions towards more sustainable management of short-term rentals.

**Supplier Score:** With a 24.8 percentage points improvement, this category contributed the most to Krakow's improved results, showing increased hotel and venue certification, along with increased circular economy awareness, and reductions in hotel and restaurant food waste.



## THE MALVERNS, UNITED KINGDOM

The Malverns rose 12.6 percentage points, moving from 47.5% to 60.1% and jumping a striking 20 rank positions in their second year of participation thanks to a significant strategic focus.

### HIGHLIGHTS

**Destination Management Score:** The standout leap was 29.7 percentage points, only surpassed by Manchester. This dramatic improvement is the result of major action around strategic planning, impact reporting, and internal DMO transformation as a result of their new regenerative tourism strategy.

**Social Score:** Gained 9.5 percentage points due to focus on crisis management, accessibility, and resident engagement.



## WHAT CHANGED FOR THESE DESTINATIONS BETWEEN 2024 AND 2025?

- **Criteria Evolution:** Stricter 2025 criteria impacted Environmental and Social scores throughout, but these three destinations bucked the trend, showing resilience and adaptability, particularly supported by the strong ties to their city governments.
- **Most Dramatic Gains:** All three made their most significant jumps in the Destination Management and Supplier categories, a sign of newly-developed strategies, clearer KPIs, and deeper cross-sector collaboration.
- **New Entrants, New Mindsets:** Each is in only its second or fourth year of benchmarking assessment, demonstrating that quick transformation is possible with dedicated leadership and cross-stakeholder alignment.

WINNER - MOST IMPROVED

# ADELAIDE

Adelaide has demonstrated strong upward momentum in its 2025 GDS-Index submission

**Notable improvements in governance, supplier engagement, and sector-specific sustainability have seen Adelaide achieve the Most Improved Destination recognition in 2025. As the Southern Hemisphere's first National Park City, Adelaide has already demonstrated a clear commitment to nature, while providing residents with a rich and flourishing urban environment.**

When Business Events Adelaide joined the GDS-Index in 2024, it set out to establish its visitor economy sustainability baseline, with a goal of making incremental improvements in its year-on-year performance. It is evident that Adelaide and its sustainability partners have leveraged the GDS-Index to look beyond the urban environment and seek to understand and address the impact of sustainability on tourism and events.

The newly-launched South Australia Tourism Commission's Sustainability Roadmap, aligned the city's development agenda, has provided a state-wide approach to sustainability.

The roadmap aims to support local communities to prosper, protect the unique natural environment of the region, and inspire positive impact. This has demonstrated a considerable improvement for the state and city, outlining clear objectives, actions, and measuring social, environmental, and cultural outcomes that reflect a broader shift to more inclusive destination management.

Adelaide showed clear evidence that sustainability is being instituted internally with strong progress. Supporting Adelaide's efforts are key suppliers including Adelaide Convention Centre, the first convention centre in the world to achieve EarthCheck's Master Certification and demonstrating exceptional commitment to sustainability over 15 years.

Adelaide integrated its Climate Strategy and sector-level actions for tourism and events more closely in 2025. There were strong improvements in waste management, circular economy, and liveability infrastructure like green and blue spaces, urban design, and mobility.



MOST IMPROVED  
DESTINATION  
**AWARD**  
GDS-MOVEMENT

 **Business  
Events  
Adelaide**

# RIDING THE CREST: COMPARING THE 2025 TOP 3 DESTINATIONS OVERALL

The 2025 GDS-Index enjoys a fierce but friendly contest for top spots, with three Northern European powerhouses, Helsinki, Gothenburg, and Copenhagen, maintaining their positions as global leaders in more sustainable and regenerative urban destination management. Their progress is driven by stronger climate action, new destination certifications, and a sharper focus on visitor management, governance, and social impact, signalling fresh ambition and competitive drive.

## OVERALL SCORE COMPARISON

CITY	2024 TOTAL	2025 TOTAL	CHANGE
Helsinki	92.43%	93.52%	▲ +1.09
Gothenburg	90.83%	91.51%	▲ +0.68
Copenhagen	88.19%	88.76%	▲ +0.57

Helsinki extended its lead with a modest but solid gain, affirming its strong strategic alignment across the City's environmental performance, Supplier, and Destination Management categories. Gothenburg stayed close behind, demonstrating excellence in its supply chain's third-party-certification chain, destination management, and climate action. Copenhagen's performance was boosted by strengthened, sector-level climate action and its new destination certification.

## ENVIRONMENTAL PERFORMANCE

CITY	2024 EN Score	2025 EN Score	CHANGE
Helsinki	88.06%	91.04%	▲ +2.98
Gothenburg	85.82%	87.31%	▲ +1.49
Copenhagen	85.82%	87.31%	▲ +1.49

All three cities improved their environmental performance, but Helsinki saw the largest increase, solidifying its alignment with city-wide climate strategies and climate adaptation roadmaps. Both Helsinki and Gothenburg advanced toward their 2030 carbon neutrality targets and improved city waste management, while Copenhagen strengthened sector-level climate action to address the impact of tourism and events, calculating CO2 emissions for tourism and events and making climate action one of the key goals of its new tourism strategy.

wonderful  
copenhagen

gothenburg

Helsinki

# RIDING THE CREST: COMPARING THE 2025 TOP 3 DESTINATIONS OVERALL

CONTINUED

## SOCIAL AND SUPPLIER COMPARISON

CITY	2025 SO SCORE	2025 SU SCORE
Helsinki	92.11%	94.87%
Gothenburg	92.11%	92.31%
Copenhagen	89.47%	76.92%

Helsinki and Gothenburg score very similarly for social equity, accessibility, and resident engagement. Copenhagen and Gothenburg could boost sustainability certification among top attractions, while Copenhagen also lags in initiatives for managing sensitive sites and climate action across the tourism supply chain. Gothenburg leads in supporting quality jobs, whereas Helsinki and Copenhagen have opportunities to strengthen supplier engagement, particularly on combating modern slavery.

## DESTINATION MANAGEMENT

Copenhagen made the biggest leap in this category, jumping from 92.57% to 95.95% (+3.4 percentage points) to overtake its rivals and claim the leading position in the Destination Management category in 2025. Both Copenhagen and Helsinki also secured destination certification since the 2024 benchmarking.

All three cities scored the maximum points possible for sustainability strategy, organisational-level climate action, organisational governance, sustainability communication, the promotion of soft mobility, and social impact and legacy programmes for events.

Helsinki led in visitor management with full marks, while Copenhagen and Gothenburg saw slight declines. On Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, Copenhagen has an opportunity to catch up by strengthening its supply chain support, measurement and reporting, and regular staff training.

CITY	2024 DM Score	2025 DM Score	CHANGE
Copenhagen	92.57%	95.95%	▲ +3.38
Gothenburg	95.27%	95.77%	▲ +0.50
Helsinki	95.27%	94.59%	▼ -0.68



WINNER - LEADERSHIP

# HELSINKI

Helsinki goes from strength to strength, retaining the top spot in the GDS-Index for the second consecutive year

**Helsinki has increased its score to 93.52%, achieving maximum points in all but 11 criteria. The city ranked first in Environment, Social, and Supplier categories, and scored an impressive 95.77% points in Destination Management, narrowly missing the top spot. Helsinki's leadership is particularly visible in certification, climate action, and destination management.**

A global pioneer, Helsinki became the first big city in the world (with over half a million residents) to be Green Destinations certified in March 2025. It is one of only four Platinum Destinations, the highest distinction in the Green Destinations' Award & Certification Programme. Impressively, 99% of its hotel rooms (in properties with more than 50 rooms), 100% of its convention centres, and 80% of its top attractions hold third-party-sustainability certifications.

Helsinki is accelerating climate action through its Climate Action Plan for Tourism, carbon measurement, and climate risks studies. In partnership with Tampere, it published [The Impacts of Climate Change on Tourism: Preparation and Adaptation](#) in 2025, providing scenarios and strategies for resilient, low-emission urban tourism. The city is also one of eight partners in the [Interreg Climate Neutral Destinations](#) project, collaborating with Baltic Sea-region destinations to scale up climate solutions.

Helsinki is the only Top 10 destination in the GDS-Index to achieve full points for "Visitor Management – Destination". Its first social carrying capacity study, completed in 2025, helps balance visitor numbers with quality of life and experience. Resident engagement in tourism is a core priority, supported by regular surveys, public hearings, and transparent reporting.



LEADERSHIP  
AWARD  
GDS-MOVEMENT

Helsinki

# BENCHMARKING FRAMEWORK

## GOVERNANCE AND CRITERIA DEVELOPMENT

The criteria are reviewed annually. A draft is developed by the GDS-Index team following consultation and input from participating destinations. These draft criteria undergo an in-depth revision by the GDS-Index Technical Advisory Committee (TAC). After three brainstorming and revision meetings with the TAC, the GDS-Index product team integrates all changes, and shares the draft with destinations and interested parties for feedback. Final changes are made, and the completed draft is reviewed and signed off by the TAC.

## AN ALIGNED, REFINED METHODOLOGY

In 2024, the GDS-Index underwent a comprehensive update to deliver a more accurate assessment of both current performance and future-proof strategies. This evolution was guided by the TAC and driven by the growing need for sustainability benchmarking to keep pace with global trends and rising environmental challenges. Emphasising regeneration and positive impact, the update expanded climate action measurements and refined the scoring system. The changes align with the ISEAL Code of Good Practice, ensuring adherence to a globally-recognised framework for credible sustainability systems.

## ALIGNMENT WITH INTERNATIONAL STANDARDS

To ensure the continued quality and relevance of the GDS-Index, we work to align the criteria with the following internationally-recognised standards and initiatives:

- **UN SDGs:** The GDS-Index is committed to the United Nations (UN) 2030 Agenda, and we strive to mainstream the integration of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into the management of destinations, globally.
- **GSTC Destination Criteria:** We use the GSTC-D v2 criteria to inform the development of the GDS-Index criteria, ensuring that we remain relevant to business and leisure tourism.
- **UN Tourism:** We are an official partner of the UN One Planet Sustainable Tourism Programme and integrate key components of the One Planet Vision into the criteria.

## THE TECHNICAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE (TAC)

The TAC is a team of experts in sustainable destination management, from diverse sectors and areas of City, tourism, events, and not-for-profit organisations. Its role is to provide constructive criticism and new ideas on the development of the GDS-Index benchmarking criteria, reporting indicators, research, the GDS-Academy, and technical platform development. This committee consists of a minimum of 15 members with a three-year term. New members need to apply.



Climate, Energy and Emissions  
Circularity and Waste  
Water  
Air Quality  
Transportation  
Biodiversity  
Alignment with Tourism



SDGs Alignment  
Corruption  
Personal Safety  
Diversity, Inclusion, and Equity  
Health, Safety, and Wellness  
Accessibility  
Resident Engagement  
Funding Mechanisms



Hotels  
Airport  
Agencies (PCOs & DMCs)  
Restaurants  
Venues  
Attractions  
Academia  
Tourism and Event Businesses



Destination Strategy  
Governance and Reporting  
Policy and Certification  
Capacity Building  
Impact Measurement  
Marketing and Communications  
Diversity, Equity & Inclusion  
Mobility  
Climate Action





# DATA PROCESSING

## DATA COLLECTION AND VERIFICATION

Once signed up as a member of the GDS-Index, the municipality or Destination Management Organisation gathers data from interested parties and completes an online questionnaire using our Omni data portal. It answers the questions using locally-available data alongside supporting evidence. Consultants from the GDS-Index then evaluate the submission, looking for errors in the data, before verifying it. Valid evidence must be submitted to qualify each criterion's answer. Failure to provide relevant evidence can result in a loss of points. Only after this assessment can the benchmarking results be released to the destination and, for those in the Top 40, made available to the public.

There is an in-depth, quality-assurance programme to ensure that the accuracy and consistency of evaluation are the same across the GDS-Index benchmark, irrespective of the assessor conducting the evaluation.

After benchmarking, each destination receives a Performance Improvement Report (PIR). This report details the destination's GDS-Index score and ranking, benchmarks it against averages and other destinations, provides recommendations to improve the destination's strategy and implementation and performance, and offers relevant best practices from other destinations.

## DATA SOURCES

The GDS-Index criteria evaluate quantitative data points such as recycling/landfill rates, or percentage of third-party-certified hotel rooms, and qualitative concepts such as the destination's commitment to sustainability, the existence of a destination sustainability strategy, or the maturity of its reporting practices.

The quantitative data submitted by destinations should originate from official sources, such as the city or the country's statistics office, or from publicly-available data from credible sources such as Transparency International. Where there is no comparable city-level data, a regional or national value is taken. As for qualitative indicators, information is usually collected by the Destination Management Organisation, convention bureau, or City, with the help of partners (City departments, hotel associations, etc.).

## SCORING

Each performance indicator is assigned a maximum number of points, and based on how well the destination fulfils each indicator, it can obtain some of these points, no points, or all points (a full score). The points for each category are then aggregated to arrive at the category score. This is explained in detail in the [Methodology](#).

Destinations are then ranked by performance and the Top 40 data is made public to reflect their ranking.

# OUR PARTNERS

We'd like to thank the following organisations, without whom the dream of launching a destination sustainability index would not have been possible. Through our collaborative partnerships with these founding partners, we've been able to co-create informative and exciting workshops, research papers, and events that unite the global tourism and events industry behind a common cause to transform the places we live, travel, and do business in.

This includes new partners, [BeCause](#) and [Murmuration](#).

## CONTRIBUTORS

This report was written and edited by Anne Seeberg and Jess Henson, with contributions from Anja Spice, Guy Bigwood, Janie Neumann, Marta Mills, and Antonia Alomar, and with graphic design by Steve Hanzic.

We would like to thank all contributors, GDS-Index partners, and our participating destinations for their feedback and contributions.

## DISCLAIMER

While every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of the material in this document, neither the GDS-Movement™ nor any of the partners of the GDS-Index will be liable for any loss or damages incurred through the use of the report.



CONTACT  
info@gds.earth  
www.gds.earth