SUSTAINABLE TOURISM STANDARDS

Session 3:

Supporting Sustainability in the Private Sector

Applying the four pillars of the GSTC Industry Standard for hotels and tour operators

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Session Agenda

0–10	Opening
10–20	Discussion 1: Impact areas
20–30	Group report-back
30–40	The four GSTC pillars
40–50	Case studies: Türkiye, Singapore, Aseer
50–65	Discussion 2: Action planning
65–80	Group presentations
80–90	Takeaways

Presentation (35 min)

Group work (55 min)

Yellow Track: Sustainable Standards

Session 1

Introduction to Sustainable Standards and Guidelines

Introduction to key concepts and applications of standards

Session 2

Applying Standards to Sustainable Tourism Programs and Policies

Deeper dive into standards-based national programs and policies

Session 3

Promoting Sustainability in the Private Sector through Hotel and Tour Operator Standards

Explores how governments can promote private sector sustainability

Session 4

Promoting Sustainable Destination Management through Standards

Covers how destinations use standards to enhance tourism sustainability

Recap: What is sustainable tourism?

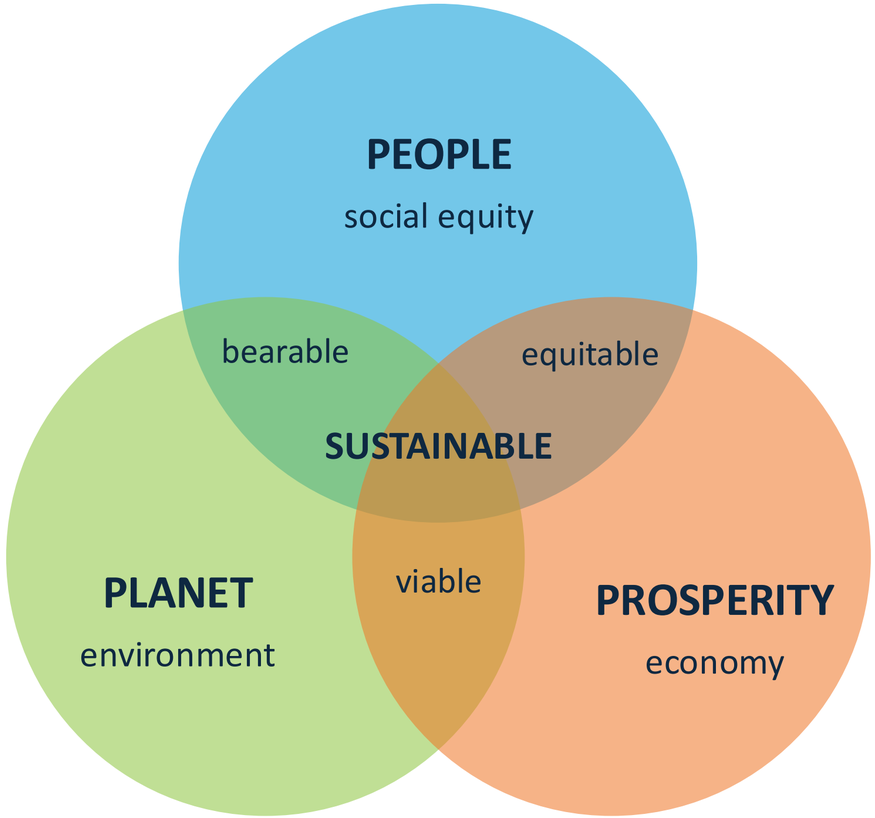
*"Tourism that takes full account of its current and future **economic**, **social** and **environmental** impacts, addressing the needs of **visitors**, **the industry**, **the environment** and **host communities**"*

— UN Tourism (formerly UNWTO)

"Sustainable Tourism" does not refer to a specific type of tourism.

"Sustainable Tourism" is an aspiration for the impacts of all forms of tourism.

People, Planet and Prosperity



About the GSTC

Global Sustainable Tourism Council: the leading global authority in setting and managing standards for sustainable travel and tourism

2007 **founded**

Founding organizations

- United Nations Foundation
- UNWTO (now UN Tourism)
- UNEP
- A coalition of 32 partners

600+ Members | 80+ Destination Members | 100+ Countries Represented

GSTC standards (year of each version)

Hotel Standard
2008, 2012, 2016, 2025

Tour Operator Standard
2008, 2012, 2016, 2025

Destination Standard
2013, 2019

MICE Standard
2024

Attractions Standard
2024

Food & beverage providers
In development

provides international accreditation for sustainable tourism Certification Bodies

Why it matters for businesses

Hotels and tour operators shape much of the visitor experience and a large share of tourism's footprint. Yet many lack the knowledge, skills or resources to operate sustainably, especially micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs).

Common barriers businesses face

Few incentives

Little policy or market reward for good practice

Upfront costs

Limited access to finance for upgrades

Little performance data

Energy, water and waste rarely measured

Weak supply chains

Few local, sustainable suppliers

Skills gaps

Few staff trained in sustainable operations

Discussion 1: Impact areas

Group work

10 minutes discussion

Groups of 5–6

In your group, discuss hotels and tour operators in your countries:

1. **What are their main sustainability impacts, positive and negative?**
2. **How do these impacts differ for large businesses and MSMEs?**

Think about, for example:

- Energy and emissions
- Water use
- Waste and plastics
- Supply chains
- Jobs and communities
- Culture and nature

Report-back (10 min): each group shares its top 3 impact areas and how they differ by business size

The GSTC Hotel & Tour Operator Standards

4 pillars

40 hotel criteria
35 TO

205 hotel performance indicators
176 TO

How businesses and governments use it:

1
Self-assessment
Benchmark the business and find gaps

2
Policy & programs
Basis for national schemes, incentives and support

3
Market access
Credibility with buyers, online agencies and travellers

4
Certification
Independent audit by GSTC-accredited certification bodies

The four pillars of the Standard

A
Sustainable management

- Management and communication
- Stakeholder engagement
- Buildings and responsible procurement

B
Socio-economic impacts

- Benefits to the community
- Human resources and ethics

C
Cultural heritage

- Cultural interactions and protection
- Presenting heritage and artifacts

D
Environmental impacts

- Conserving resources
- Reducing pollution
- Conserving biodiversity, ecosystems and landscapes

40 criteria: A (14), B (9), C (4), D (13). Pillar A underpins the other three.

Pillar A: sustainable management

1. **Sustainability management system**
   Policy, plan, targets and risks, proportional to size (A1)
2. **Legal compliance and welfare**
   Legal register; guest and staff health and safety (A2–A3)
3. **Reporting and promotion**
   Annual report; accurate, verifiable claims (A4–A5)
4. **Information sharing**
   Guidance on local nature, culture and behaviour (A6)
5. **Staff and guest engagement**
   Training, roles, feedback and corrective action (A7–A8)
6. **Collaboration with stakeholders**
   Work with DMOs, NGOs and community leaders (A9)
7. **Land, sites and buildings**
   Rights, consent, site planning and construction (A10–A12)
8. **Responsible procurement**
   Fair, local, sustainable supplies and food (A13–A14)

Pillars B–D: key criteria at a glance

B Socio-economic

- Community support and services (B1, B4)
- Local jobs and entrepreneurs (B2–B3)
- Access for all (B5)
- Code of conduct; no exploitation (B6–B7)
- Inclusion, equality and decent work (B8–B9)

C Cultural

- Cultural interactions (C1)
- Protecting cultural heritage (C2)
- Presenting culture and heritage (C3)
- Responsible handling of artifacts (C4)

D Environmental

- Energy and water conservation (D1–D2)
- Emissions and transport (D3–D4)
- Wastewater and solid waste (D5–D6)
- Harmful substances and pollution (D7–D8)
- Biodiversity and invasive species (D9–D10)
- Animals, welfare and wildlife trade (D11–D13)

National hotel program: Türkiye

Making certification a national requirement

- Run by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism and the Türkiye Tourism Promotion and Development Agency (TGA)
- Cooperation agreement with GSTC signed in 2022
- Accommodation progresses through three stages, ending with GSTC certification
- Certification to become mandatory for all accommodation by 2030



Lesson: a phased, mandatory program can bring every business on board, whatever its size.

2030 deadline for all accommodation to be certified

22K accommodation facilities to be covered

2,500+ hotels qualified for GSTC accredited certification (Mid 2026)

National hotel program: Singapore

An industry roadmap with clear targets

- Hotel Sustainability Roadmap launched in 2022 by the Singapore Tourism Board and Singapore Hotel Association
- Certification through GSTC-accredited certification bodies
- Hotels to cut emissions by 2030 and reach net zero by 2050
- Certified hotels can join GSTC's Market Access Program with online travel partners

Lesson: a roadmap agreed by government and industry turns the Standard into shared targets.

Target

60%

of hotel room stock targeted for certification by 2025

Achieved

70%

of hotel room stock certified or pursuing certification (Mid 2026)

108

hotels with GSTC accredited certifications (Mid 2026)

Incentive program: Aseer, Saudi Arabia

Rewarding certification with market access

- Aseer Development Authority joined GSTC as a member in 2025
- Workshops with government leaders on adopting and applying the GSTC standards
- Led to a GSTC-based certification incentive program

3 types of business covered: **hotels, tour operators** and **attractions**

Free exhibiting at up to three international trade shows a year for certified businesses

Lesson: linking certification to market access gives businesses a clear commercial reason to certify.

Coming soon: GSTC for small businesses

GSTC is adapting certification to the scale of micro and small enterprises (MSEs). Hotel Standard v4 adds guidance for smaller hotels; the R4MSEC roundtable is preparing MSE-specific requirements.

What the roundtable is doing

Review the standards

Find criteria that need MSE-specific requirements

Lower barriers

Address cost and capacity limits on certification

Study participation

Analyse how many MSEs certify, and why not

Bring partners together

Certification bodies, experts and industry

Guide interpretation

Help apply GSTC standards at small scale

Discussion 2: Action planning



Group work

15 minutes planning

Groups of 5–6

Your group is assigned one pillar. Choose a destination and use that pillar's criteria to answer:

1. **Where do hotels and tour operators fall short?**
2. **What barriers stop them from improving (cost, skills, data, suppliers, policy)?**
3. **What could a government program or a tourism project do to help?**

Prepare a 3-minute pitch covering:

- Your destination
- Top 2 gaps
- Proposed actions
- Who leads

How governments can help

Policy and regulation

Standards, requirements and recognition in law

Incentives and finance

Grants, green loans and tax incentives

Training and technical support

Practical guidance and certification readiness

Data and benchmarking

Simple tools to track energy, water and waste

Partnerships

Industry associations and local supplier links

Infrastructure and technology

Waste, water, clean energy and digital tools

Certification and market access

Cover audit, training and consultancy costs and promote certified businesses

Key takeaways

Sustainable tourism projects can strengthen wider sustainable development programs

Broader than the environment

It covers management, people, culture and nature: all four pillars

Climate action

Energy efficiency, renewables and climate-risk planning cut emissions and build resilience

Gender equality and inclusion

Fair employment, skills training and women-led suppliers advance inclusive growth

Culture and heritage

Businesses that respect and invest in local culture keep destinations distinctive

Biodiversity and community resilience

Responsible use of nature and local hiring keep income in communities

Matching support to need

Programs work best when tailored to industry needs, especially for MSMEs

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Thank you!

GSTC
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