



GDS-Index and Kraków's role in the development of sustainable tourism

2026-05-26

Kraków became the first city in Poland to join the Global Destination Sustainability Index (GDS-Index) in 2022—an international benchmarking initiative run by the Global Destination Sustainability Movement, which evaluates tourist destinations in terms of sustainable development. In subsequent years, other Polish cities joined the program, including Gdańsk and, in 2025, Wrocław and Szczecin.

The GDS-Index compares cities based on more than 70 criteria, analyzing their activities in areas such as environmental protection, social responsibility, destination management, and the sustainability practices of service providers such as hotels, restaurants, and airports. The GDS initiative brings together pioneers of sustainability from both business and leisure tourism sectors.

What is the GDS-Index?

The GDS-Index is based on four main categories that assess and report on the activities of cities and their entire tourism ecosystems. Each category covers a different aspect of how a city functions and is evaluated using standardized criteria.

The first category concerns environmental actions, including climate, air quality, CO₂ emissions levels, transport, and access to green spaces. The second focuses on social aspects, such as access to information, the safety of residents and visitors, and inclusivity. The third category evaluates the activities of tourism and business service providers—including hotels, restaurants, airports, conference centers, and universities—which also report their practices and are assessed in terms of sustainability. The fourth category relates to destination management, including city strategies, public policies, certification systems, as well as research and data reporting practices.

Participation in the GDS-Index allows cities to conduct a detailed assessment of their baseline situation and identify directions for further development. At the same time, it enables the implementation of international standards and best practices, strengthening a destination's competitiveness and global recognition.

Kraków's Role in the Initiative

Kraków's participation in the GDS-Index is of strategic importance for the city's development and international position. These efforts are aligned with the "Sustainable Tourism Policy of Kraków for 2021-2028", and the city's participation in the index is coordinated by the Tourism Department.

The city also uses its involvement in the benchmarking process in promotional activities by using the GDS-Index logo, reinforcing its image as a responsible and environmentally conscious destination.

2025 Results and City Development

In the report published in 2025 (covering activities in 2024), Kraków recorded significant progress in



the GDS-Index, achieving a score of 62.2%, an increase of 12.9 percentage points compared to the previous year. This allowed the city to move up 19 positions, from 72nd to 53rd place in the ranking. A particular distinction was receiving 2nd place in the “Most Improved Destinations” category, awarded to cities that have shown the greatest improvement in their results.

The most notable progress was observed in cooperation with the tourism industry, including an increase in the number of certified hotels and MICE-sector companies, as well as growing awareness of circular economy principles and waste management. Significant improvement was also seen in the social area, particularly in accessibility, resident engagement, and approaches to short-term rentals. Environmental actions were also highly rated, reflecting better alignment between city policies and pro-environmental initiatives.

A key remaining challenge is increasing the number of entities holding sustainability certifications—across hotels, conference venues, PCO/DMC agencies, and transport infrastructure. Despite visible progress, this remains an area with substantial potential for further development.

2026 Report and Future Actions

Kraków has completed the process of collecting data for 2025, which is currently undergoing verification and analysis in preparation for the next edition of the GDS-Index report. The data will be included in the report scheduled for publication in October 2026. This report will form the basis for further evaluation of the city’s progress and for defining future directions in sustainable development.

GDS Forum in Szczecin

An important event for the global tourism industry will be the GDS Forum, which will take place in Szczecin in June 2026. This annual international meeting of leaders in sustainable tourism and the MICE sector will be held in Poland for the first time. It is a significant distinction for the country and confirms its growing role in the global discussion on the future of responsible tourism.

The program will include numerous expert sessions, workshops, and presentations of best practices from around the world, focusing on innovative solutions in sustainable tourism and the meetings industry. One of the key program highlights will be a session prepared by the Polish Tourism Organisation – Poland Convention Bureau in cooperation with GDS-Index member cities: Kraków, Gdańsk, Wrocław, and Szczecin. During the session “FUTURE IS NOW — Focus on the Participant”, Polish cities will present their projects and initiatives in sustainable tourism, sharing experiences and developed solutions.

This article is part of a series of publications by the Municipality of Kraków on the state of tourism in the city. The series aims to systematize key concepts and phenomena and analyze the strengths and weaknesses of Kraków’s tourism based on data. It also encourages active participation in social dialogue between residents, entrepreneurs, and local authorities.