Kraków Strengthens Its Position in the GDS-Index

2026-09-30

Kraków has once again improved its performance in the prestigious Global Destination Sustainability Index (GDS-Index), one of the world's leading benchmarking tools for assessing the sustainability of tourism and business destinations. In the 2026 edition, the capital of the Małopolska region increased its score from 62.16 to 65.18 points, confirming its continued progress in sustainable tourism and event management.

Polish Cities Continue to Advance

This year's results demonstrate that Polish cities are increasingly using benchmarking as an effective tool for improving urban policies, strengthening cooperation with industry stakeholders, and implementing initiatives that address global environmental and social challenges. At the same time, the achievements of Europe's leading destinations show that joining the world's top-performing destinations is becoming an increasingly realistic goal for Poland.

Kraków Continues Its Upward Trajectory

In the latest edition of the index, Kraków achieved 65.18 points, compared to 62.16 points a year earlier. The increase of more than three points reflects the city's systematic efforts to promote sustainable tourism, collaborate with local stakeholders, and implement measures aligned with GDS-Index criteria.

Notably, Kraków was also recognized among the destinations showing the greatest improvement in the Social category. The city recorded a 9.9 percentage point increase, placing it among the ten destinations worldwide with the strongest performance gains in this area.

This achievement is particularly significant because the Social category evaluates factors such as accessibility, resident engagement, inclusivity, and the management of tourism's impact on local communities. According to the GDS-Index report, these elements are becoming increasingly important for the long-term development of cities and for maintaining a balance between residents' needs and tourism growth.

Poland's Growing Presence

The results achieved by all Polish participants in the index indicate a clear acceleration of progress:

Kraków: 62.16 → 65.18 points

Gdańsk: 53.44 → 60.94 points

Szczecin: 34.17 → 47.29 points

Wrocław: 43.81 → 43.29 points

Gdańsk ranked among the top ten destinations with the greatest improvement in the Destination Management category. Additionally, the Gdańsk Tourism Organization received the Innovation Award for its accessibility project developed according to the principle "Nothing About Us Without Us."

Wrocław was recognized among global leaders in environmental performance growth, while Szczecin achieved a 35.8 percentage point increase in Destination Management, the third-best result worldwide.

Turning Potential into Success

Although no Polish city has yet entered the GDS-Index Top 40, the performance of this year's leaders demonstrates that the gap is not impossible to close. In 2025, Madrid and Valencia achieved scores of 63.1 and 61.2 points respectively. One year later, both cities advanced into the global top tier, reaching 21st and 29th place in the ranking.

The experience of these Spanish destinations shows that carefully planned strategies, cooperation between local governments, tourism organizations and the meetings industry, combined with the consistent implementation of GDS-Index recommendations, can deliver remarkable results within just a few years.

Global Leaders Set the Benchmark

This year's GDS-Index ranking confirmed the dominance of Nordic destinations in sustainability performance.

The top positions were occupied by:

Helsinki – 92.94 points

Gothenburg – 91.29 points

Copenhagen – 90.35 points

The top ten also included **Aarhus, Aalborg, Glasgow, Sydney, Belfast, Montreal, and Reykjavik.**

Several noteworthy developments emerged within specific categories. Montreal became the highest-ranked destination worldwide in Destination Management, achieving a record score of 97.95%. Meanwhile, Helsinki obtained the highest Supplier category score at 98.72%.

These results demonstrate that global leaders are not only maintaining high standards but are continually raising expectations for the entire industry.

Another noteworthy example is Bremen, which recorded one of the largest improvements in the Destination Management category, increasing its score by 39.7 percentage points. This illustrates that significant progress is possible even for destinations outside the highest overall rankings when they focus on specific areas of sustainable management.

Benchmarking as a Development Tool

The report emphasizes that the GDS-Index is more than a ranking. It is a development programme designed to support destinations in measuring and improving sustainability performance.

Since 2016, 167 destinations from 38 countries have participated in the index, collectively completing 705 benchmarking assessments. During this period, the average performance of participating destinations increased by 45.5%, while 89% of destinations assessed in both 2025 and 2026 improved their results.

For Kraków and other Polish cities, participation provides access to a proven framework for measuring progress, identifying areas requiring improvement, and comparing performance with the world's leading destinations. The growing scores demonstrate that Polish cities are making increasingly effective use of this opportunity.

This year's results are encouraging. If the current pace of progress continues, the appearance of a Polish destination in the GDS-Index Global Top 40 within the coming years appears to be an ambitious yet entirely achievable objective.

Trends and Challenges: From Strategy to Implementation

One of the key conclusions of the 2026 GDS-Index Report is that the global tourism industry is moving from the phase of developing sustainability strategies to the phase of effectively implementing them.

According to the report's authors, more than 90% of participating cities already have climate action strategies, biodiversity protection plans, and greenhouse gas reduction commitments in place.

The greater challenge now is translating these commitments into measurable outcomes and transparent reporting. The report highlights an "implementation gap" between adopted strategies and real-world results. Only a limited number of destinations are currently achieving climate targets in line with their ambitions, while many environmental indicators, including municipal waste generation and air quality, still require considerable improvement.

A second major trend is the growing importance of certification. Destinations in this year's top ten have achieved certification for all conference and convention venues assessed through the index, while 82% of hotels within those destinations are also certified.

As the report notes, certification is no longer merely an aspiration but has become a standard and one of the clearest indicators of destination maturity.

The report also highlights new European regulations linked to **the Empowering Consumers for the Green Transition (EmpCo) Directive**, which aims to reduce greenwashing practices. In practical terms, this means environmental claims must increasingly be supported by measurable data, verified outcomes, and independent certifications. For cities and tourism organizations, this will result in greater emphasis on transparency and evidence-based reporting.

Another area expected to gain importance is destination resilience. Following experiences related to extreme weather events, wildfires, floods, and geopolitical disruptions, the GDS-Index has begun assessing how well destination management organizations are prepared to respond to crises.

Finally, the report underscores the growing role of residents in shaping tourism policies. While many cities now monitor public opinion and engage local communities in discussions about tourism development, far fewer provide residents with meaningful influence over decision-making processes or tourism-related budgets. According to the report, stronger resident participation will become one of the defining characteristics of responsible tourism in the coming years.

For Kraków, this means that future advancement in the ranking will depend not only on developing new strategies and plans, but also on effectively implementing them, expanding certification throughout the tourism value chain, strengthening the city's resilience to crises, and continuing to engage residents in shaping the future of tourism development.

Full Report