



GLOBAL
DESTINATION
SUSTAINABILITY
INDEX

Waves of Transformation

2024 GDS-INDEX REPORT



CITY
DESTINATIONS
ALLIANCE



IMEX



Foreword

We are living through waves of transformation. The climate crisis, social inequalities, and the ongoing challenges of unsustainable tourism are reshaping how we interact with the world. Yet, the speed of these changes is outpacing individual destinations' and our collective response. The urgency is greater than ever. Decisive action is essential.

This 2024 GDS-Index report stands as a powerful testament to the potential of collaboration, innovation, and commitment to shaping a sustainable future for the tourism and events sectors.

Within these pages, you will discover how destinations are navigating these transformative waves with bold leadership, creative solutions, and regenerative practices. From Helsinki's ambitious climate strategy to Copenhagen's pioneering CopenPay initiative and Kumamoto's circular economy and biodiversity efforts, cities worldwide are rethinking the role of tourism in their economies, environments, and communities. These destinations are not just mitigating their impacts - they are regenerating ecosystems, promoting inclusion, and empowering interested parties.

However, the pace of positive change must match the escalating speed of the climate and biodiversity crises. The decarbonisation of energy, the electrification of transport, and the rise of artificial intelligence are reshaping the landscape at an exponential rate. From AI-optimised travel routes to cleaner energy solutions, these advancements are driving a more responsible, efficient, and sustainable visitor economy.

In its ninth year, the GDS-Index has become more than just a benchmarking tool. It is a movement - a rallying call for destinations to pursue excellence in social, economic, and environmental responsibility. Year by year, as cities and destination management organisations embrace sustainability and set clear goals, the gap between ambition and action narrows. The ripple effect of these local efforts is felt globally, but the momentum must be built even faster.

This year, we celebrate not only the progress of top-ranking destinations, but also the rise of new cities across the globe stepping up to the challenge. The world needs destinations that put sustainability at the heart of their strategies, recognising that the future of tourism lies in the well-being of its people, natural spaces, and cultural heritage.

The 2024 GDS-Index is an invitation to be inspired. It is an ongoing performance improvement programme that calls destinations to take bold steps toward a more regenerative future, where the visitor economy becomes a force for better, driving more positive social and environmental impact.

“
Let these waves of transformation
guide us on our shared journey
toward lasting, positive change.

”
Guy Bigwood
CEO, 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 2024. It identifies key insights and showcases the winners of GDS-Movement Leadership, Most Improved, and Innovation awards, as well as the Impact award in collaboration with #MEET4IMPACT.

In 2025, we will release a more comprehensive insights report featuring in-depth, qualitative analysis, case studies, and emerging trends.

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The continual refinement and latest results of the GDS-Index show that participating destinations and regions are riding waves of economic, social, and environmental transformation through their visitor economies. Together, we have the opportunity to harness tourism and events more strategically to foster this positive change. The tide is turning, and we commend the dedicated cities that are actively benchmarking to better manage what they measure. With this report, I invite you to be inspired by the progress and successes achieved on the path towards more regenerative destination management with us.

”

Guy Bigwood
CEO, GDS-Movement™

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 more than 100 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 offer 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 effectively communicate their sustainability achievements and initiatives, 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.

“

The GDS-Index has been invaluable in identifying our gaps and areas for improvement as well as demonstrating where our destination is performing well. The report and sessions with the GDS-Movement team provides a robust analysis of our performance and gave us ideas and feedback on how to move forward for the next year.

”

Lisa Owen

Head of Business Tourism,
Marketing Liverpool

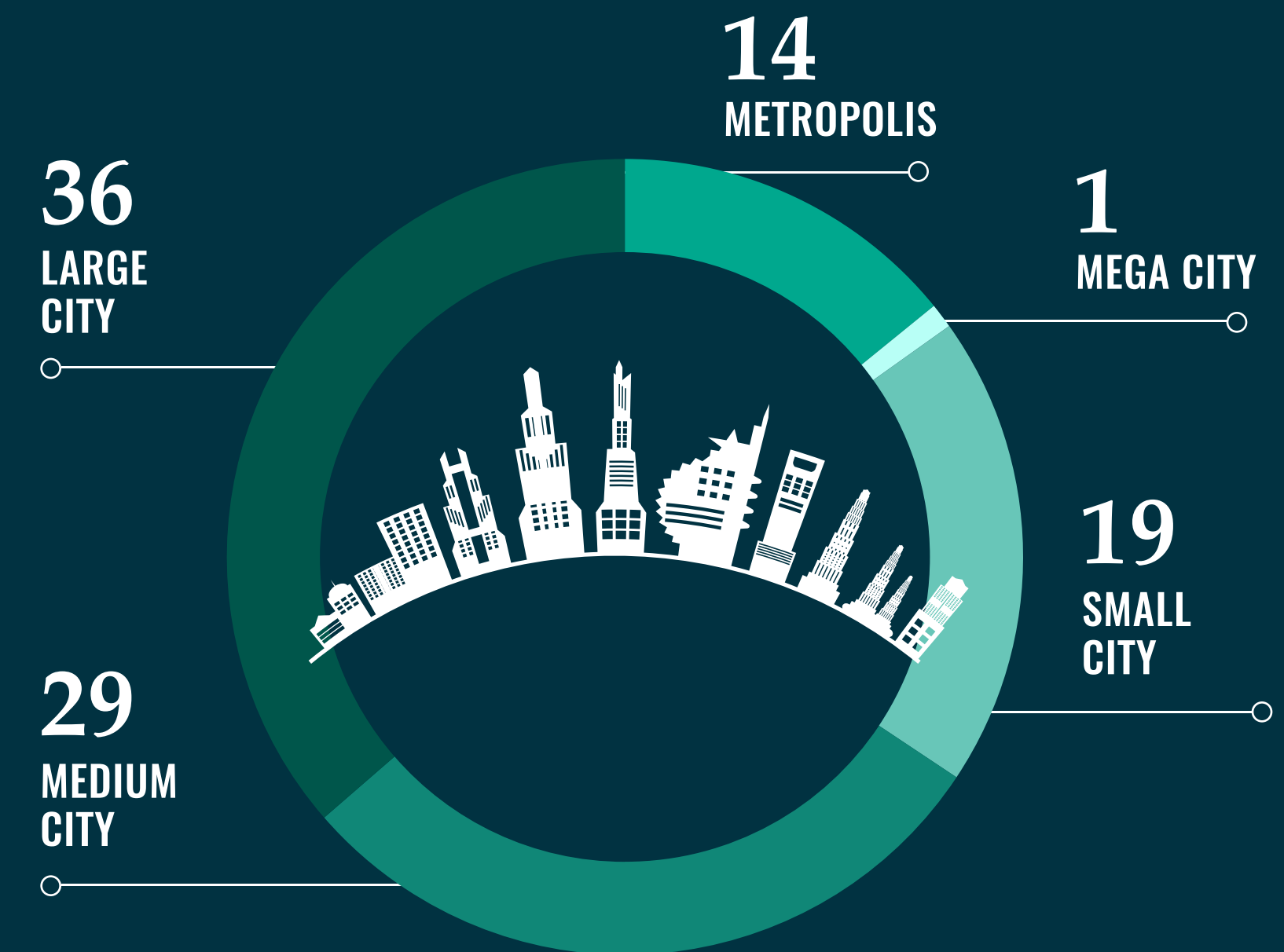
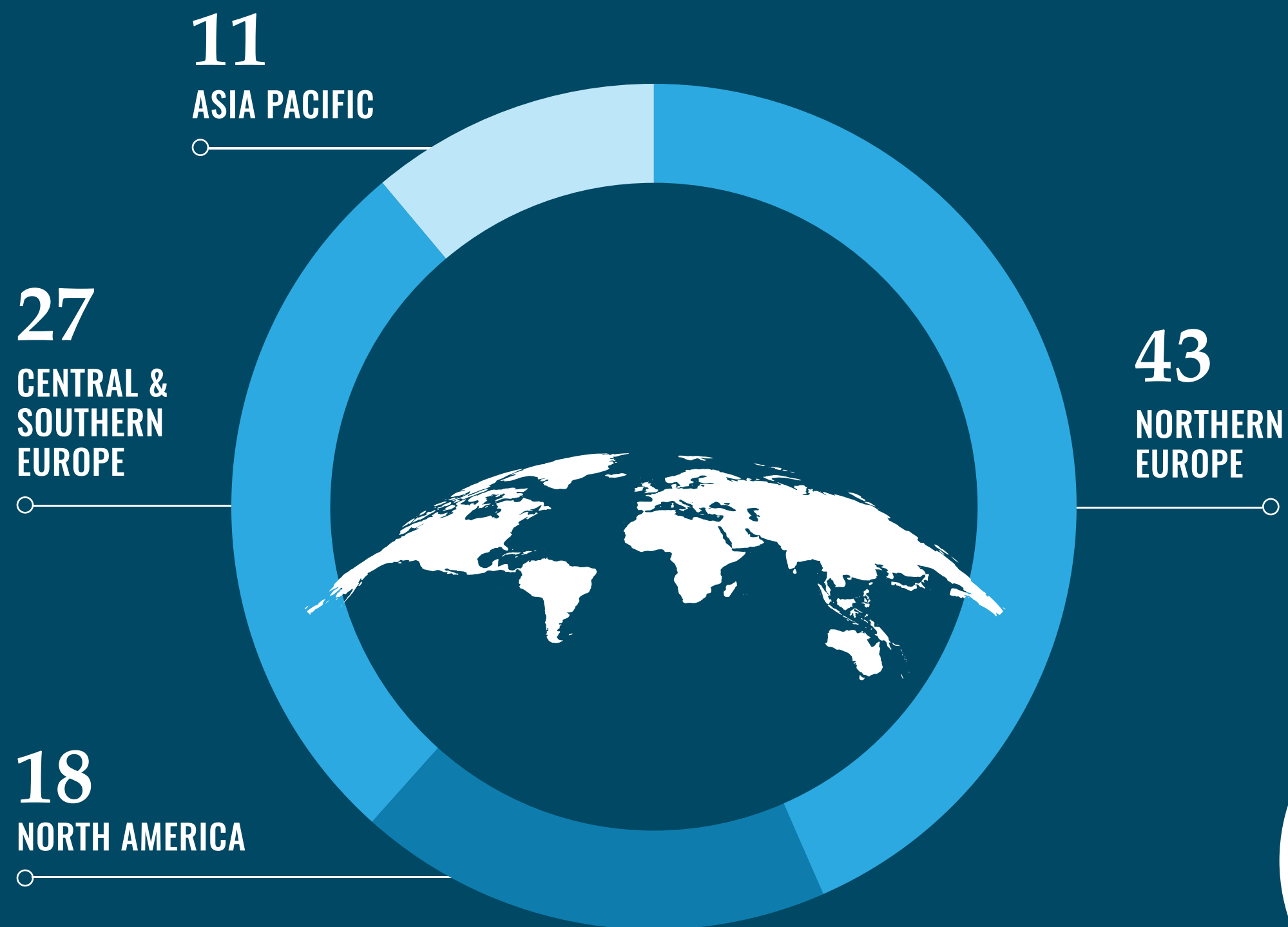
Which Destinations are in the GDS-Index?

The GDS-Index has 100 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

100
DESTINATIONS



10
NEW
DESTINATIONS

What Does the Data Reveal?

DESTINATION SUSTAINABILITY CONTINUES TO EVOLVE

The data reveals waves of transformation in a climate ripe for change. Can this year's GDS-Index data inspire and delight?

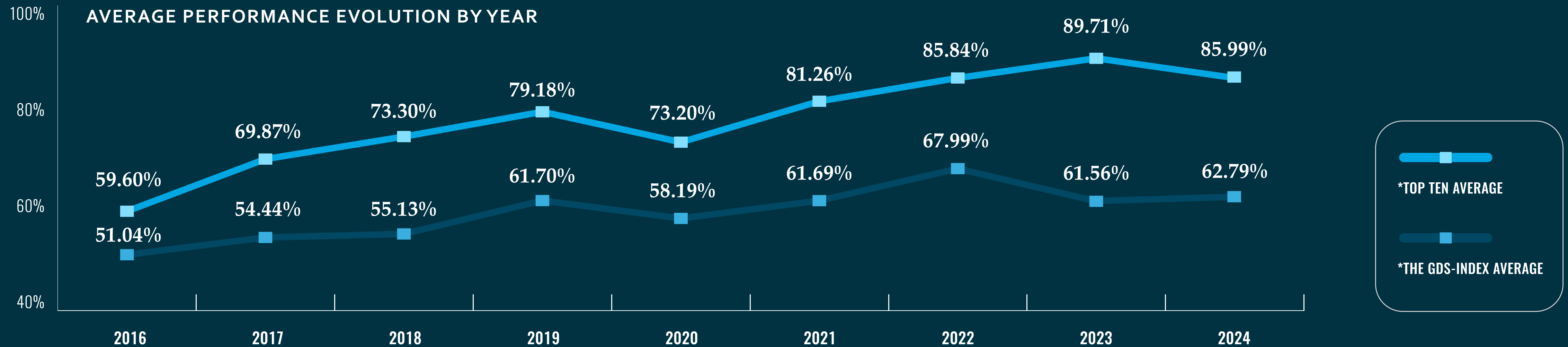
Over the past nine years, we've observed a 23% increase in average performance across all participating destinations, with a remarkable 44% rise in the Top 10.

Major criteria changes and updates were introduced in all four categories this year, with the most improvements in the Environmental and Social categories, which saw a resultant average score drop of 3.4% and 4%, respectively. The Supplier category increased by 2.2% but the Destination Management category made leap 6.5%.

In the Top 10, the new nuances have a greater impact, evident in a drop across all four categories from 1.7% in Destination Management to 6.9% on the Supplier category.

AVERAGE PERFORMANCE IMPROVES

In 2023, we emphasised the need to challenge cities outside the Top 10, as the gap between its average score and the overall GDS-Index average had reached a record high of 28.8%. This year that gap has narrowed to 23.2%. While the Top 10 average score has dropped by 4.15%, the benchmarking average has risen by 2.0%, largely due to many destinations participating for a second consecutive year, which resulted in an average score increase of 2.8%.



The 2024 Top Destinations

WHICH DESTINATIONS ARE IN THE 2024 GDS-INDEX TOP 40?

A blend of newcomers and larger cities making notable efforts

This year's Top 40 welcomes several new entrants, including Limerick, Victoria, Quebec City, Dublin, and Horsens, while Reykjavik returns after a brief absence.

While there is a balance in terms of population size across the Top 40, cities with larger populations continue to dominate the top twenty. The overall scores reflect the challenges introduced by an enhanced methodology, which added 12 new criteria, eliminated 5, and refined 28 others to keep the GDS-Index aligned with growing global sustainability demands and needs. This updated framework proved rigorous, resulting in score declines for 26 of the Top 40 destinations, despite their considerable efforts.

WHAT MAKES A TOP 10 DESTINATION?

They regularly revise, improve, and report to scale their positive impact

It is not only action that characterises the top performers in the GDS-Index. Measurement and active management are fundamental to their high-ranking positions. Every destination in the Top 10 scored the maximum possible points for a DMO strategy for socially-, environmentally-, and economically-positive outcomes. They have each recently revised their visitor economy's strategy, and they also engage their citizens in their strategy's measurement and reporting.

What's more, leading destinations bring their stakeholders together to co-create a shared vision and develop goals and plans with communities. They form governance bodies and expert task forces to refine, endorse, and drive forward their initiatives.

42% of participating destinations also report and measure these efforts for tourism specifically, and 40% for business events. The Top 10 scores full marks for both. Destinations are talking about it, too, in an "official framework to improve disclosure on sustainable destination strategy and performance". This means every other destination has work to do here!

THE BUSINESS OF GETTING BETTER

Major congress cities feature in related rankings

Every year, ICCA releases its list of the most popular congress cities around the world. 22 of the GDS-Index destinations appear in that ranking. These popular destinations are performing 17% above the GDS-Index average even though their individual scores may differ dramatically. They do especially well in the Supplier and Destination Management categories, being 22% and 26% above the GDS-Index average, respectively.

The hardest step in the journey towards more regenerative destination management begins with a commitment. This foundational step sets the tone for the organisation's shift towards a future where the visitor economy serves the community and its environment. The Top 10 destinations demonstrate this commitment at all levels of their organisation.

“

Take the first step in faith. You don't have to see the whole staircase, just take the first step.

”

Martin Luther King Jr

The 2024 Top Destinations

	2024	2023
Helsinki* 1	92.43	90.49
Gothenburg 2	90.83	94.64
Copenhagen* 3	88.19	91.73
Bergen 4	86.49	90.15
Aarhus 5	85.68	88.64
Bordeaux 6	83.37	87.10
Singapore* 7	83.37	81.83
Oslo* 8	83.26	92.46
Belfast* 9	83.14	86.40
Sydney 10	83.13	77.21

	2024	2023
Aalborg 11	82.98	87.70
Glasgow 12	81.88	87.47
Zurich 13	81.08	84.35
Bilbao 14	80.27	78.83
Lyon 15	80.16	82.85
Goyang 16	78.90	82.66
Reykjavik* 17	78.28	
Middelfart 18	77.80	82.16
Kerry 19	77.65	80.61
Paris* 20	77.24	80.12

	2024	2023
Cork 21	77.18	77.86
Victoria 22	77.17	66.15
Tampere 23	76.96	78.33
Melbourne 24	76.61	77.53
Galway 25	76.06	71.85
Berlin* 26	75.92	76.69
Tirol 27	75.80	82.53
Clare 28	75.77	72.01
Dublin* 29	75.69	63.89
Stockholm* 30	75.57	86.74

	2024	2023
Barcelona 31	75.57	74.52
Svendborg 32	75.52	77.06
Brisbane 33	75.23	73.07
Songkhla 34	74.89	79.56
Faroe Islands 35	74.88	77.31
Montreal 36	74.54	75.12
Quebec City 37	73.74	64.43
Limerick 38	73.51	71.39
Horsens 39	73.06	62.03
Odense 40	72.87	79.94

*Capital Cities

The 2024 Top Destinations

SUSTAINABILITY OPPORTUNITIES: A PATHWAY TO IMPROVEMENT THROUGH ENVIRONMENTAL AND SOCIAL MANAGEMENT

In the Environmental category, we had several changes to scoring and, out of the 10 best cities, only one improved its score.

A common denominator for the Top 40 is that all the cities have a mitigation and adaptation strategy. In fact, 96% of all cities on the GDS-Index entire have a mitigation strategy and 88% have an adaptation strategy.

Where the Top 40 differs is that 83% have the city's commitment which "explicitly indicates actions for tourism" and 73% also have actions for events. If we look at all the cities on the GDS-Index, only 57% indicate tourism, and 42% indicate actions around events in the city's climate change mitigation and adaptation strategy. This is on par with 2023.

93% of cities on GDS-Index have "signed up to an international declaration to measure and reduce GHG emissions in line with the Paris agreement", compared with 100% in the Top 40.

This is a clear indication that the Top 40 DMOs have aligned their environmental efforts with their local government agenda.

By contrast, the Social category saw a different trend, with only one Top 40 destination decreasing its score. This was predominantly due to the influence of external factors like national scores.

Despite the increased resistance in headlines and regulations across the world to mismanaged tourism, the Top 40 did consistently well on short-term rentals' management that ensures "housing accessibility for residents". A mere seven cities did not score maximum points for this criterion.

External factors significantly influence these two categories gauging the state of destination management and the political efforts in a city.

DMOs can influence many of these decisions but hold little power to change anything related to waste and water management, air quality, corruption, safety, and wellness.

This is why GDS-Movement encourages transparency, co-creation, and accountability – working together, we can better (and sooner) solve these challenges at scale.

MAKING WAVES IN A CLIMATE OF CHANGE THROUGH DESTINATION AND SUPPLIER MANAGEMENT

The two remaining categories of Supplier and Destination Management focus on improvements and are home to the biggest leap in scores. Where the Social and Environmental categories' performance decreased on average from last year, these two increased for all destinations on the index. Here, again, as in the previous two categories, the Top 40 performance decreased due to necessary criteria refinements.

The Supplier category is predominately focused on certification and how a destination supports its interested parties and supply chain with training, capacity building, incentives, and communication. The 40 most-improved destinations in this category had an average increase of 10.33%. The Top 40 destinations, however, decreased their score by 1.25%. The destinations that typically improved their scores in this category are the ones in their second or third years of benchmarking.

The Destination Management category assesses strategies with clear action plans, indicators, and reporting to support a destination's journey towards regeneration through its tourism and events sector.

This brings the DMO and its actions under scrutiny as an agent of positive changemaking and empowerment.

All Top 40 cities prioritised their strategic efforts and 23 destinations scored the maximum possible points for this 17-point section, with the lowest score in the Top 40 being 13.5. Ten destinations improved these scores from 2023 and only four saw a points' reduction, due to the strengthening of the criteria. GDS-Index cities are strong on strategy!

When assessing these changemakers, it is crucial to remember that no score is inherently negative; rather, it reflects a specific moment in time, and a point in the destination's continual journey towards regeneration.

To ensure the validity of the data, destinations must provide documentation that is no more than three years old, with long-term strategies subject to regular updates and reviews, and we encourage and reward the use of objectives, indicators, and targets.

Naturally, globally sourced data from cities of different sizes in regions across the world introduces a range of variables that makes comparison challenging, yet each destination on the GDS-Index is embracing change over stagnation - a commitment that deserves to be celebrated!

Leaders by Category



Environmental

1	Helsinki	88.06
2	Copenhagen	85.82
2	Gothenburg	85.82
3	Aarhus	83.58
3	Tampere	83.58



Social

1	Aarhus	96.88
1	Aalborg	96.88
1	Copenhagen	96.88
2	Gothenburg	93.75
2	Helsinki	93.75



Supplier

1	Helsinki	93.24
1	Oslo	93.24
2	Glasgow	87.84
2	Gothenburg	87.84
2	Reykjavik	87.84



Destination Management

1	Gothenburg	95.27
1	Helsinki	95.27
2	Lyon	93.92
3	Bordeaux	92.57
3	Copenhagen	92.57
3	Goyang	92.57

Leaders by Region

Asia-Pacific

1	Singapore	83.37
2	Sydney	83.13
3	Goyang	78.90
4	Melbourne	76.61
5	Brisbane	75.23

Central & Southern Europe

1	Bordeaux	83.37
2	Zurich	81.08
3	Bilbao	80.27
4	Lyon	80.16
5	Paris	77.24

North America

1	Victoria	77.17
2	Montreal	74.54
3	Quebec City	73.74
4	Edmonton	64.54
5	Ottawa	55.98

Northern Europe

1	Helsinki	92.43
2	Gothenburg	90.83
3	Copenhagen	88.19
4	Bergen	86.49
5	Aarhus	85.68

Leaders by City Size



Small City

1	Middelfart	77.80
2	Kerry	77.65
3	Victoria	77.17
4	Galway	76.06
5	Clare	75.77

Population size: 0-199.999



Large City

1	Helsinki	92.43
2	Gothenburg	90.83
3	Copenhagen	88.19
4	Bordeaux	83.37
5	Oslo	83.26

Population size: 500.000-1.499.999



Medium City

1	Bergen	86.49
2	Aarhus	85.68
3	Belfast	83.14
4	Aalborg	82.98
5	Zurich	81.08

Population size: 200.000-499.999



Metropolis & Mega City

1	Singapore	83.37
2	Sydney	83.13
3	Paris	77.24
4	Melbourne	76.61
5	Berlin	75.92

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 city is making efforts to move forward; for this group that step was a little bigger.



Environmental

- | | |
|------------|--------------|
| 1 Solihull | 6 Sydney |
| 2 Tucson | 7 Edmonton |
| 3 Dublin | 8 Galway |
| 4 Bristol | 9 Gdansk |
| 5 Kumamoto | 10 Takamatsu |



Supplier

- | | |
|-----------------|-------------|
| 1 Quebec City | 6 Singapore |
| 2 Durham | 7 Sydney |
| 3 Kumamoto | 8 Goyang |
| 4 Washington DC | 9 Melbourne |
| 5 Liverpool | 10 Brisbane |



Social

- | | |
|------------------------|-------------|
| 1 Victoria | 6 Basel |
| 2 Bangkok | 7 Singapore |
| 3 Canmore & Kananaskis | 8 Clare |
| 4 Halifax | 9 Kerry |
| 5 Montreal | 10 Ottawa |



Destination Management

- | | |
|-------------|--------------|
| 1 Gdansk | 6 Bristol |
| 2 Kumamoto | 7 Calgary |
| 3 Takamatsu | 8 Krakow |
| 4 Dublin | 9 Solihull |
| 5 Horsens | 10 Newcastle |

Insights

Change has positive and negative implications, but it's the pace of change that deserves our attention in 2024.

1. When it Rains, it Pours
2. Certified Change
3. Residents' Rights in a Sea of Visitors
4. Bold, Truthful, and Transparent Storytelling
5. Data-accelerated Decision Making

1. WHEN IT RAINS, IT POURS

The average 2030 **carbon** emissions' reduction target for destinations is 60%. 30 destinations' target is from 75 to 100% by 2030; 44 have a target from 50 to 74%; 20 from 25 to 49% and five are below 24%. With the majority below 75% and the average progress of how much a destination has reduced its emissions so far against its 2030 target at 40%, there is a real need for improvement.

In last year's report, we predicted a hotter summer. It broke all records when it came. We expected another season of wildfires, evacuations, and a potential heatwave at the Summer Olympics in Paris. We got what we expected, but what we were less prepared for were the storms and excess rainfall during both opening and closing ceremonies at the Olympics and Paralympics. Climate crisis is increasingly common and can strike at any time, but fewer than half of all participating destinations have a **crisis management** plan that includes tourism and events, which is very similar to last year's performance. Half of the destinations on the GDS-Index are large or metropolis cities (1.5 million or more) and 44% of those do not have a crisis management plan in place for either tourism or events, and only 26% have for both.

2. CERTIFIED CHANGE

CSR! CSDDD? GCD!?! We aren't swearing. There are new acronyms on their way to the European Union, and many organisations are bracing for the associated updates to **legislation** and **regulation** around sustainability practice and communication. At least one other country has already acted on this, and we anticipate more countries and cities will follow suit in time. What we do know is that certifications are implicated, so the GDS-Index is preparing. Certifiers and accreditors are staking their claim in the marketplace, and the technology sector is ready to capitalise on market opportunities, so change is coming, and fast.

The GDS-Index has eight criteria related to third-party certification and two to international **climate** commitments or declarations. We are seeing improvements here! The percentage of certified hotels is up by 10%, of venues, up by 13%, of airports, up by 3%, of professional congress organisers (PCOs), up by 6.5%, and of destination certification, up by 8% of those "in process".

Insights

3.

RESIDENTS' RIGHTS IN A SEA OF VISITORS

Overtourism has become a dirty word, and the growing need for better visitor management has inspired new criteria measuring a wave of positive change from short-term tourism to cultural- and natural-site protection, and more.

For the “**visitor management**” criteria, we measure six indicators. Four of these focus on beneficial initiatives, with a score of 84% already measuring visitor flows. By contrast, for the criteria that asks if the destination “conducts a social carrying-capacity study or environmental”, only 13% have a carrying capacity study, and 14% have an environmental one, revealing a need for greater awareness of this vital practice.

For the criteria on “short-term tourism **rentals**”, most of the destinations have taken several measures, and most of the destinations (besides the lowest-ranked ones) gained points on the GDS-Index for their efforts in this area.

The upper half of the GDS-Index scores an average of 2.44 points out of the possible four in the criteria compared to the lower half scoring 1.14 on the criteria for “destination-wide initiatives or programmes in place that specifically target culturally- and naturally-sensitive sites to increase positive visitor impact”, demonstrating a stark contrast in the destination approaches to these important sites, and a chance to change for the better through it. Out of its four indicators, the highest is 52% of destinations claiming points for this topic, and the lowest is 38%, showing a universal need for more cohesive action in all destinations.

4.

BOLD, TRUTHFUL, AND TRANSPARENT STORYTELLING

DMOs navigate and serve a complex web of interested parties. When politics comes into play, it can mean stormy seas. We address the courage it takes to be open and accountable in a few ways.

First, by rewarding evidence of a “**formal commitment to DEI**” (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) within an organisation (reflected on its website), which 75% have. 54% ensure “DEI communication to visitors”. We also explore their actions to make sure the destination offers “decent work/quality work” in the visitor economy and information about modern slavery mitigation. 62% encourage suppliers to provide quality jobs in tourism but only 20% encourage, educate, and support suppliers to act against modern slavery, while 29% of destinations answered “none” in this criterion.

Secondly, we have several criteria in the Destination Management section that explore **willingness to communicate** sustainability efforts and performance. 30% do not share anything (“greenhushing”), down 10% from 40% last year. The majority of destinations, 62%, include their sustainability performance in a report. 45% also get points for all 6 indicators for providing “information about the destination’s sustainable events and tourism strategy and initiatives”. The highest of these indicators’ performance has 80% of destinations sharing “sustainability information about key suppliers”, and the lowest has 61% sharing “sustainable events strategy”. 67% always share information on “sustainability strategy and performance in RFP responses and sales information”.

5.

DATA-ACCELERATED DECISION MAKING

To encourage the use of SMART goals and data in the destinations’ strategies, we track how DMOs utilise them and set objectives, indicators, and targets for **environmentally-, socially-, and economically-**positive outcomes.

There is an increase in the percentage of destinations measuring any objectives from 80% to 85% percent across the three areas. This is alongside a notable increase in destinations that have started measuring. On the five social indicators we track, there is an increase from average of 58% to 72% with only 14% not measuring any. Environmentally, the average increase is 57% to 67% with 28% not measuring. Lastly, economically, the average increased from an of 62% to 74% and where we only have 12% not measuring any indicators, targets or objectives.

We have consistently aimed to push destinations to utilise data to help professionalise the DMO and its efforts. If we look back to 2020, 53% did not measure social outcomes, 49% did not measure environmental outcomes and 30% did not measure their economic outcomes or their impact. In 2024, the economically-positive outcomes were the only criteria where more than 50% had objectives or performance indicators. Goal setting has certainly been on their agenda to ride the wave of transformation it enables.

As cities and tourism industries across the world struggle to keep up with or harness the opportunities change brings, innovation, happening faster than ever, becomes a bellwether of optimism.

2024 GDS-Movement Awards' Finalists and Winners

RECOGNISING EXCELLENCE AND EVOLUTION

Each year, we celebrate the sustainability achievements of destinations through the GDS-Awards, presented during a prestigious ceremony at the GDS-Forum. This event serves as a distinguished platform to recognise and honour the remarkable efforts and innovations of the winners, highlighting their leadership in driving sustainable change in tourism.

In its 9th edition, GDS-Awards showcase outstanding contributions and innovation practices through the:

 LEADERSHIP **AWARD**

 MOST IMPROVED DESTINATION **AWARD**

 INNOVATION **AWARD**

 IMPACT **AWARD** with #MEET4IMPACT

The Leadership and Most Improved Destination Awards are determined by year-on-year GDS-Index benchmarking results, recognising consistent progress in sustainability.

The Impact and Innovation Awards are selected through a two-step judging process which includes evaluation by an independent panel of industry experts, ensuring that the most impactful and innovative destination initiatives are honoured.

INNOVATION AWARD JUDGING PANEL

The Innovation Award submissions were carefully reviewed and evaluated by a panel of sustainability thought leaders and industry experts who collaboratively selected the winner. We also had the privilege of including the previous year's Innovation Award winner on the judging panel to bring an additional layer of insight and experience to the decision-making process.

Flavie de Bueil, Chief Operating Officer, City Destination Alliance

James Lancaster, Editorial Director, Northstar Travel Group – United Kingdom

Roger Lehner, Senior Operations and Sustainability Executive, IMEX Group

Shelby Luzzi, Senior Manager Sustainability, Washington DC (2023 Innovation Award Winner)

Dermot Ryan, Head of Association Engagement, ICCA

IMPACT AWARD JUDGING PANEL

The Impact Award submissions were carefully reviewed and evaluated by a panel of sustainability thought leaders and industry experts who collaboratively selected the winner.

Jane Cunningham, Director of European Engagement, Destinations International

Ben Hainsworth, Executive Director, EASL - European Association for the Study of the Liver

Vicky Koffa, Deputy Director, Boardroom Magazine

Ioannis Pallas, Managing Director, ESAE - European Society of Association Executives



- 1 Helsinki, Finland
- 2 Gothenburg, Sweden
- 3 Copenhagen, Denmark
- 4 Bergen, Norway
- 5 Aarhus, Denmark

*In Order of Ranking



- 1 Kumamoto, Japan
- 2 Gdansk, Poland
- 3 Takamatsu, Japan
- 4 Tucson, USA
- 5 Solihull, United Kingdom

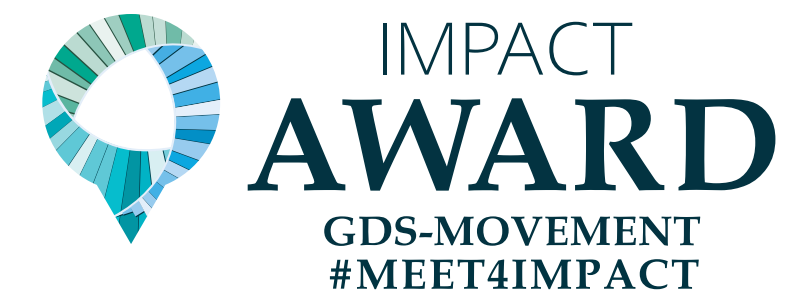
*In Order of Ranking

Award Finalists



- Copenhagen, Denmark
- Oslo, Norway
- Toronto, Canada
- Vancouver, Canada
- Victoria, Canada

*In Alphabetical Order



- Copenhagen, Denmark
- Flanders, Belgium
- Gothenburg, Sweden

*In Alphabetical Order



The 2024 GDS-Index Award Winners

This year's winners demonstrate commitment, excellence, and supreme effort in regenerative contributions. We salute their inspiring achievements, from Helsinki's sustainability certification to Kumamoto's clear sustainability goals and Copenhagen's behaviour-change pilot and social impact incubator. We encourage all destinations to adopt and adapt these ideas and practices to serve visitor economies at scale.

“

We are incredibly proud of winning this Impact Award for our Copenhagen Legacy Lab. We strongly believe that international congresses and events are catalysts for long-term, positive impacts that go far beyond the immediate economic gains. And that we, as an industry, are obliged to collaborate and invest in redeeming these potentials for the benefit of the destinations in which they are held, the international associations that have purpose as their core mission, and society at large.

”

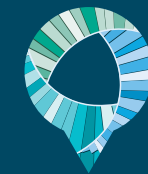
Mikkel Hansen
CEO, Wonderful Copenhagen



Congratulations to the 2024 GDS-Index Award Winners



LEADERSHIP
AWARD
GDS-MOVEMENT



MOST IMPROVED
DESTINATION
AWARD
GDS-MOVEMENT



INNOVATION
AWARD
GDS-MOVEMENT



IMPACT
AWARD
GDS-MOVEMENT
#MEET4IMPACT



GDS-INDEX
LEADERSHIP AWARD

Helsinki

With an impressive score of 92.43%, Helsinki, represented by City of Helsinki, claimed the top spot for the first time. Its outstanding performance was particularly evident in the Destination Management category, and the high venue sustainability certification scores further highlight an exceptional commitment to regeneration.

GDS-INDEX
MOST IMPROVED AWARD

Kumamoto

Kumamoto International Convention and Tourism Bureau demonstrated remarkable progress driven by its improved ability to set clear sustainability objectives and indicators. The promotion of a circular economy to suppliers and the implementation of its Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) training programme have also significantly contributed to this progress.

GDS-MOVEMENT
INNOVATION AWARD

Copenhagen

With its "CopenPay" initiative, Wonderful Copenhagen encourages visitors to adopt more sustainable behaviours during their stay by offering rewards for more climate-responsible actions. By opting for eco-friendlier transport, participating in litter collection and other responsible activities, tourists can earn incentives such as complimentary guided museum tours, free kayak rentals, and vegetarian lunches on the house. This innovative programme aims to inspire more conscious travel choices while enhancing the Copenhagen visitor experience.

GDS-MOVEMENT AND
#MEET4IMPACT IMPACT AWARD

Copenhagen

With the programme, "Copenhagen Legacy Lab", Copenhagen Convention Bureau created long-term beneficial impact from visiting congresses and events. The framework is built on extensive research, a theory of change, and the European Union Commission's "Social Impact Measurement" guidelines. All research and tools are open-source to support a legacy- and impact-driven movement.



Helsinki, Finland

Represented by City of Helsinki

Helsinki's commitment to sustainability is evident in its top position in the GDS-Index, with a score of 92.43%.

Helsinki leads in destination management and venue certification, reflecting a dedication to sustainability. Notably, Helsinki collaborates with Tampere through the Urban Climate Leaders in Tourism group, bringing key stakeholders together to tackle climate challenges at scale.

Helsinki also implemented a biodiversity strategy aligned with international and local needs, which includes community-led initiatives, habitat mapping, and the empowerment of residents in green space conservation. The Helsinki City Strategy (2021 - 2025) further enhances environmental protection, creating new, protected areas and focusing on reducing maritime emissions.

The city is committed to achieving net-zero greenhouse gas emissions for tourism and events by 2040, with a firm target in place to also achieve carbon-neutral status by the same year. Helsinki's climate action plan involves the active monitoring of carbon emissions, water usage, and resident sentiment to ensure continuous progress towards its sustainability goals.

Through the Tourism and Events Programme (2022 - 2026), Helsinki involves residents in decision making, using participatory budgeting and events to shape its tourism strategy. It supports its supply chains with financial aid for environmental certifications and sustainability training.

Helsinki's integrated approach to sustainability across tourism and governance highlights how urban destinations can lead on climate action while delivering benefits for residents and visitors.





MOST IMPROVED
DESTINATION
AWARD
GDS-MOVEMENT



Kumamoto, Japan

Represented by Kumamoto International
Convention and Tourism Bureau

Kumamoto made impressive strides in 2024,
with a 42.39% increase in its GDS-Index score
by 18.88 compared to last year.

Kumamoto's growth is attributed to clearer sustainability objectives, a stronger focus on circular economy practices among suppliers, and the successful implementation of their Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) training programme.

Kumamoto's holistic sustainability approach includes a comprehensive water management programme, which monitors both water usage and quality, and provides guidance to reduce commercial water consumption. The city has also developed a biodiversity strategy aligned with international standards and designed to reverse biodiversity loss. The strategy encourages community participation and defines specific actions to protect critical habitats affected by tourism.

Kumamoto has a forward-looking mobility plan aimed at reducing pollution and congestion while improving citizen health. The plan tracks progress in sustainable mobility and promotes investment in low-carbon public transport, pedestrianisation, and cycling infrastructure.

The city's circular economy strategy is advanced, focusing on reducing waste, increasing material reuse, and regenerating natural systems. Tourism and events are integrated into this strategy with clear actions and performance reporting.

Kumamoto actively promotes climate action among tourism and events businesses by providing tools to measure carbon emissions and offering funding to support low-carbon products and experiences. The city also has specific regulations for short-term rentals to prevent over-saturation and promote more affordable housing for residents.

Through its sustainability vision and multi-year strategy, along with an alignment with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Kumamoto continues to drive positive environmental, social, and economic impacts in tourism and events.





INNOVATION
AWARD
GDS-MOVEMENT

wonderful
copenhagen

Copenhagen, Denmark

Represented by Wonderful Copenhagen

“CopenPay” is a pioneering initiative from Wonderful Copenhagen aimed at promoting climate-conscious tourism in the city.

By offering incentives and providing clear information on sustainable attractions, transport options, and experiences, the programme empowers visitors to make more responsible choices during their stay. Bringing together interested parties across multiple sectors, CopenPay creates a holistic approach that not only aims to reduce tourism’s carbon footprint, it also serves to raise public awareness of sustainable practices.

What sets CopenPay apart is its innovative combination of tourism and sustainability. Unlike typical initiatives that focus on reducing negative environmental impact only, CopenPay actively encourages visitors to engage in more climate-responsible actions. By offering rewards and clear guidance on sustainable choices throughout the city, the programme empowers tourists to become sustainability activists during their visit, transforming their journey into a more purposeful experience.

A key strength of CopenPay is its emphasis on transparency and the ability to track and measure its impact. This ensures that the programme is continuously evolving and remains relevant to locals and international visitors. Its success in inspiring behaviour change has positioned CopenPay as a leader in sustainable tourism, with demonstrable achievements fostering more responsible travel habits.

What makes CopenPay particularly distinctive is its potential for replication in cities worldwide, offering an adaptable, scalable model for sustainable tourism. Its strategic use of storytelling and stakeholder engagement amplifies its impact, creating a compelling narrative that aligns with broader global sustainability efforts. By showing how tourism can serve as a catalyst for positive environmental change, CopenPay offers a blueprint for integrating more climate-responsible objectives into the travel experience.





IMPACT
AWARD

GDS-MOVEMENT
#MEET4IMPACT

**copenhagen
convention bureau**

Copenhagen, Denmark

Copenhagen Convention Bureau

Copenhagen Convention Bureau's "Copenhagen Legacy Lab" (CLL) is a forward-thinking initiative designed to create long-term positive impact from visiting congresses and events.



Built on extensive research, the framework incorporates a theory of change and the European Union Commission's "Social Impact Measurement" guidelines. Importantly, all tools and research are open-source, supporting a global movement focused on legacy- and impact-driven outcomes.

The CLL stands out for enabling event organisers to extract lasting value from their activities beyond immediate economic benefits. It encourages strategic collaborations between interested parties to ensure that congresses and events leave a positive legacy, contributing to local development in areas like sustainability, healthcare, and innovation. Additionally, the programme's transparent impact measurement enables continuous improvement and ensures that it remains relevant to the city and participants.

With its open-source approach and replicability, CLL offers a model to cities worldwide looking to maximise the long-term value of their events.

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 Technical Advisory Committee (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 could result in the loss of points. Only after this assessment can the benchmarking results be released to the destination and 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 destinations's strategy and implementation 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 percentages 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 the 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 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.

CONTRIBUTORS

This report was written and edited by Jess Henson, Anja Spice, Anne Seeberg, Guy Bigwood with graphic design by Steve Hanzic.

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DISCLAIMER

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

**CITY
DESTINATIONS
ALLIANCE**



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