

JOINT GUIDE FOR SUSTAINABLE AND RESPONSIBLE TOURISM

Towards greener, more resilient and responsible tourism in the Bulgaria–Türkiye
Cross-Border Area



WHY SUSTAINABLE AND RESPONSIBLE TOURISM?

Tourism is an opportunity — but also a responsibility

Tourism creates jobs, supports local businesses, preserves cultural heritage and generates income for destinations. At the same time, tourism depends heavily on energy, water, food, land, transport and other natural resources.

Hotels and other accommodation facilities consume energy for heating, cooling, hot water, lighting, refrigeration and kitchen equipment. They also generate wastewater, food waste, packaging waste and greenhouse gas emissions.

Climate change is increasing these pressures. Heatwaves, drought, water scarcity, wildfires, coastal risks and extreme weather events can directly affect tourism destinations, infrastructure, visitor comfort and operating costs.

The environmental pressure of tourism is not limited to carbon emissions. UNEP has warned that, under a business-as-usual scenario, tourism could generate by 2050 a 154% increase in energy consumption, 131% increase in greenhouse gas emissions, 152% increase in water consumption and 251% increase in solid waste disposal compared with 2010 levels.

Tourism and climate change: a two-way relationship

Tourism contributes to climate change through:

- Transport and mobility
- Energy consumption in accommodation
- Food production and consumption
- Heating and cooling
- Construction and infrastructure
- Waste generation
- Water pumping and treatment

Tourism is also vulnerable to climate change through:

- Extreme heat and heatwaves
- Drought and water scarcity
- Forest and wildfires
- Coastal erosion
- Flooding and extreme rainfall
- Biodiversity loss
- Changing tourism seasons

The challenge

Tourism must reduce its environmental footprint while becoming more resilient to climate and economic risks. Sustainable tourism is therefore not simply about protecting nature. It is about creating destinations and businesses that are:

GREENER • MORE RESILIENT • MORE COMPETITIVE • MORE RESPONSIBLE

Why does it matter?

Protecting resources today means protecting tourism tomorrow.

Sustainable tourism therefore means reducing tourism's environmental footprint while increasing the resilience of tourism businesses and destinations.



FROM SUSTAINABLE TOURISM TO RESPONSIBLE TOURISM

What is Sustainable Tourism?

Sustainable tourism means managing tourism in a way that balances:

Environmental protection + Economic viability + Social and cultural benefits
for both present and future generations.

A sustainable tourism business aims to:

USE FEWER RESOURCES → GENERATE LESS WASTE → EMIT LESS CARBON → PROTECT NATURE → SUPPORT LOCAL COMMUNITIES → REMAIN ECONOMICALLY VIABLE

The Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) framework groups sustainable tourism around four main areas:

1. Sustainable Management
2. Socio-economic Impacts
3. Cultural Impacts
4. Environmental Impacts

Türkiye's Sustainable Tourism Programme follows these principles and addresses sustainable management, cultural, socio-economic and environmental sustainability.

What is Responsible Tourism?

Responsible tourism means taking responsibility for the impacts of tourism.

While sustainable tourism describes the desired long-term condition of tourism, responsible tourism focuses on the actions and behaviour of tourism businesses, visitors, local communities and public authorities.

A responsible tourism operator asks:

- How can we reduce the resources consumed by our business?
- How can we prevent and reduce waste?
- How can we protect local nature and cultural heritage?
- How can we support local suppliers and employment?
- How can we involve visitors?
- How can we measure and improve our environmental performance?

Sustainability is not one investment. It is a continuous management process.

A responsible tourism operator in practice:

- buy local and seasonal products;
- reduce food waste;
- eliminate unnecessary single-use items;
- separate recyclable waste;
- monitor water and energy consumption;
- use energy-efficient equipment;
- inform guests about responsible behaviour;
- employ and train local people;
- respect local culture and communities;
- protect biodiversity;
- measure greenhouse gas emissions;
- establish sustainability targets.



ENERGY, WATER & WASTE

What can hotels do?

1. SAVE ENERGY

Energy is often one of the largest sources of environmental impact in hotels.

A 2025 study of hotel operations in Northern Greece found that electricity/energy consumption accounted for up to 81% of operational greenhouse-gas emissions per guest-night in the studied hotel. The study also found that solar energy scenarios could significantly reduce emissions.

Heating & Cooling

- Use programmable thermostats.
- Establish standard temperature settings.
- Avoid heating or cooling unoccupied rooms.
- Maintain air-conditioning and heating systems.
- Use smart room controls where feasible.

Lighting

- Replace conventional lamps with LEDs.
- Use motion or occupancy sensors.
- Maximise the use of daylight.
- Switch off unnecessary lighting.

Equipment

- Purchase high-efficiency appliances.
- Maintain refrigerators and freezers properly.
- Avoid unnecessary standby consumption.
- Monitor electricity consumption by department.

Renewable Energy

Where technically and economically appropriate:

- Consider photovoltaic solar systems.
- Consider solar thermal systems for hot water.
- Evaluate heat pumps.

2. SAVE WATER

Hotels can reduce water consumption without reducing guest comfort.

Practical actions

- Install low-flow taps and showerheads.
- Repair leaks immediately.
- Install dual-flush toilets.
- Monitor water use per guest/night.
- Use efficient washing machines and dishwashers.
- Introduce towel and linen reuse programmes.
- Optimise swimming-pool management.
- Use drought-resistant plants.
- Irrigate landscaping at appropriate times.
- Collect rainwater where legally and technically feasible.
- Assess local water risks.

A simple indicator

Litres of water / guest / night

What gets measured can be managed and improved.

3. PREVENT WASTE

The first question should always be:

CAN WE AVOID GENERATING THE WASTE IN THE FIRST PLACE?

Follow the waste hierarchy:

PREVENT → REDUCE → REUSE → REPAIR → RECYCLE → RECOVER → DISPOSE AS A LAST RESORT

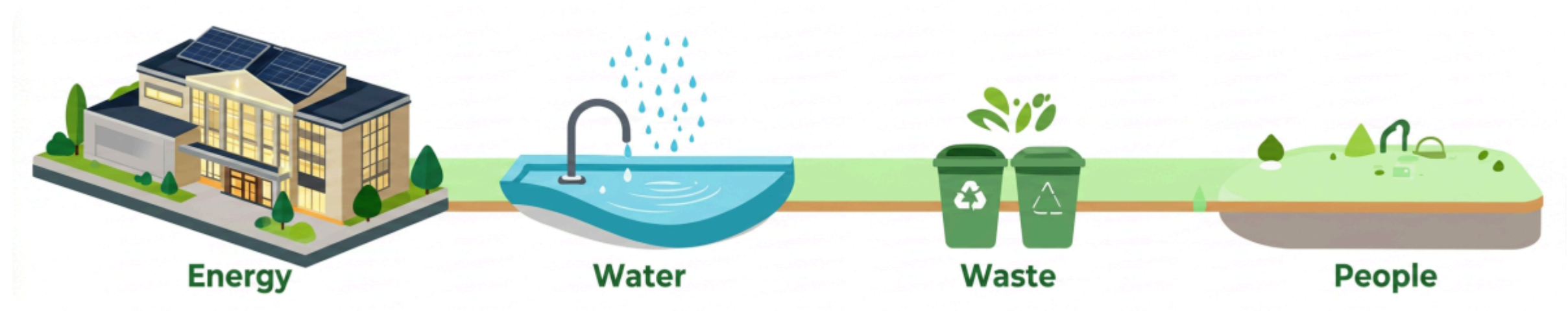
Priority areas include:

- Food waste
- Plastic packaging
- Glass
- Paper and cardboard
- Used cooking oil
- Textiles
- Electronic waste
- Cleaning-product containers

Food waste matters

Food loss and waste is responsible for a significant share of global greenhouse-gas emissions. Preventing food waste saves resources, money and emissions at the same time.

The European tourism transition pathway promotes energy efficiency, renewable energy, reduced emissions and greater resource efficiency as part of the sector's green transition.



GREEN, DIGITAL & CLIMATE-RESILIENT TOURISM

The tourism transition is already underway

The European tourism transition pathway promotes a tourism sector that is:

GREENER • MORE DIGITAL • MORE RESILIENT

The transition is not only about new technology. It also requires changes in how tourism businesses use energy, water, materials, transport and local resources.

GREEN TRANSITION

Tourism businesses can:

- Reduce energy and water consumption.
- Increase renewable energy use.
- Reduce waste and unnecessary plastics.
- Improve circularity.
- Reduce greenhouse-gas emissions.
- Protect biodiversity.
- Promote sustainable mobility.

DIGITAL TRANSITION

Digital tools can help businesses measure and manage resources more efficiently.

Examples include:

Smart energy monitoring

Track electricity consumption and identify inefficient systems.

Digital water monitoring

Monitor water consumption and detect unusual use.

Smart thermostats

Optimise heating and cooling according to room occupancy.

Digital guest communication

Inform visitors about towel reuse, waste separation, water conservation and sustainable transport.

Digital destination management

Monitor visitor flows and provide real-time destination information.

BUILDING TOURISM RESILIENCE

A resilient tourism destination can:

ANTICIPATE → PREPARE → RESPOND → RECOVER

Climate adaptation

- Assess local climate risks.
- Prepare heatwave and wildfire plans.
- Improve building resilience.
- Protect water resources.
- Increase shade and green infrastructure.
- Diversify tourism activities and seasons.

Business resilience

- Diversify tourism products.
- Strengthen local supply chains.
- Develop digital sales channels.
- Improve staff skills.
- Prepare emergency and business continuity plans.

Community resilience

- Involve local communities.
- Support local employment.
- Protect cultural heritage.
- Strengthen cooperation between municipalities, tourism businesses and civil society.

GREEN + DIGITAL = SMARTER TOURISM

AREA	GREEN ACTION	DIGITAL SOLUTION
Energy	LED & efficient equipment	Smart energy monitoring
Heating/Cooling	Efficient HVAC	Smart thermostats
Water	Efficient fixtures	Digital water meters
Waste	Separation & recycling	Waste monitoring
Housekeeping	Reduced unnecessary laundry	Digital guest communication
Transport	EV charging	Digital mobility information
Food	Food waste reduction	Digital stock monitoring
Buildings	Better insulation	Building management systems

Start small

A small hotel does not need to invest immediately in expensive technology.

Start with measurement.

Monitor monthly:

Electricity • Water • Heating • Waste • Food

YOU CANNOT MANAGE WHAT YOU DO NOT MEASURE.



CERTIFICATION & GOOD PRACTICES

Why does certification matter?

A sustainability certification system can help tourism businesses:

- Define clear sustainability requirements
- Collect evidence
- Monitor performance
- Improve resource efficiency
- Strengthen staff awareness
- Manage risks
- Communicate credible sustainability performance
- Improve market positioning
- Respond to changing visitor expectations

Certification is more than a logo

The real value lies behind the certificate:

MANAGEMENT → EVIDENCE → MONITORING → ASSESSMENT → IMPROVEMENT

GLOBAL SUSTAINABILITY FRAMEWORKS

GSTC — Global Sustainable Tourism Council

GSTC provides internationally recognised sustainability criteria and a framework for tourism. A typical certification journey is:

Preparation → Gap Assessment → Implementation → Documentation → Audit → Corrective Actions → Certification → Continuous Improvement

GSTC certification is generally implemented through recognised or accredited certification bodies.



GREEN KEY

Green Key is an international sustainability certification programme for tourism and hospitality businesses. Its criteria cover areas including:

- Environmental management
- Energy
- Water
- Waste
- Food
- Sustainable purchasing
- Staff involvement
- Guest information
- Indoor environment
- Corporate social responsibility

As of 2026, Green Key reports more than 9,000 certified establishments in more than 90 countries. The programme covers hotels, hostels, small accommodations, campsites, restaurants, conference centres and attractions. Certification involves documented criteria, assessment/audit and periodic renewal.



TÜRKİYE SUSTAINABLE TOURISM PROGRAMME

Türkiye has developed a national sustainability programme in cooperation with GSTC.

The programme covers:

Sustainable Management • Socio-economic Sustainability • Cultural Sustainability • Environmental Sustainability

The programme is being implemented progressively with the objective of achieving full international-standard alignment by 2030.

Lower operating costs • Better resource efficiency • Stronger risk management • Improved market positioning • Greater transparency



REGIONAL GOOD PRACTICES

🇹🇷 TÜRKİYE

The national sustainability programme demonstrates how sustainability can become part of everyday hotel management rather than an isolated environmental project.

LESSON: Make sustainability part of daily operations.

🇧🇬 BULGARIA

Green Key provides a common framework for tourism establishments and makes sustainability performance more visible to visitors.

LESSON: Certification can create a common sustainability language across borders.

🇧🇬 LOCAL & CIRCULAR FOOD PRACTICES

Examples from Bulgaria demonstrate how local sourcing, food-waste reduction, reuse and recycling can become part of a business's identity.

LESSON: Sustainability can improve the customer experience — not simply reduce costs.

🇪🇺 SMART ENERGY MANAGEMENT

European hotel examples demonstrate the potential of smart room controls and energy-management systems to reduce unnecessary energy consumption.

LESSON: Digital monitoring can make sustainability investments more effective.

THE 10-POINT ACTION PLAN

Start today. Improve continuously.

1. MEASURE

Establish monthly baselines for:
Energy • Water • Waste • Food

2. SET TARGETS

Set annual reduction targets for energy, water, waste and emissions.

3. IMPROVE HVAC

Maintain heating and cooling systems, optimise temperatures and avoid conditioning empty rooms.

4. SAVE WATER

Install efficient fixtures, repair leaks and monitor consumption.

5. PREVENT WASTE

Eliminate unnecessary packaging and single-use products.

6. REDUCE FOOD WASTE

Measure kitchen and buffet waste and improve purchasing and portion management.

7. REUSE & RECYCLE

Establish clear collection systems for paper, glass, metal, plastics and organic waste.

8. BUY RESPONSIBLY

Prefer:

Local • Seasonal • Durable • Repairable • Environmentally preferable
products and services.

9. INVOLVE PEOPLE

Train staff and give guests simple opportunities to participate.

10. IMPROVE CONTINUOUSLY

Use audits, certification systems and annual reviews to identify the next improvement.

CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION CAN SUPPORT

-  Sustainable coastal tourism
-  Cultural heritage tourism
-  Nature-based tourism
-  Local food and gastronomy
-  Low-carbon tourism and mobility
-  Water conservation
-  Waste prevention
-  Biodiversity protection
-  Responsible visitor management
-  Joint sustainable tourism products

A SHARED FUTURE FOR SUSTAINABLE TOURISM

Sustainable tourism is not only about protecting the environment.

It is about making tourism more resilient, competitive, responsible and valuable for local communities and future generations.

The transition to sustainable and responsible tourism is not a single investment or a single certification. It is a continuous process of measuring, improving, learning and cooperating.

Sustainable tourism is a continuous process of measuring, improving, learning and cooperating — operators • authorities • communities • visitors • NGOs • universities.

FROM SUSTAINABLE TOURISM TO RESPONSIBLE DESTINATIONS

A sustainable destination cannot be created by one hotel, one municipality or one project. It requires cooperation between:

**TOURISM OPERATORS • LOCAL AUTHORITIES • LOCAL COMMUNITIES • VISITORS
TRAVEL AGENCIES • DESTINATION MANAGERS • UNIVERSITIES • NGOs**

THE MESSAGE IS SIMPLE

MEASURE

What you consume.

REDUCE

What you do not need.

REUSE

Whenever possible.

PROTECT

Water, nature and cultural heritage.

REDUCE

Carbon emissions and waste.

SUPPORT

Local people, businesses and communities.

INVOLVE

Visitors and staff.

IMPROVE

Continuously.



ABOUT THE PROJECT

The project “CARE-Tour - Cross-Border Cooperation for Energy Efficiency in the Tourism Sector and an Eco-Friendly Bulgaria-Türkiye Region” (Ref: BGTR0300129) is implementing under the Interreg VI-A IPA Bulgaria-Türkiye Programme 2021-2027, Priority 1: Environmentally Friendly Cross-Border Region, Specific Objective 2.1 - Promoting Energy Efficiency and Reducing Greenhouse Gas Emissions, with the European Union co-financing support under the Programme.

The project is led by İnci İnşaat Turizm Gıda Tekstil Pazarlama İthalat İhracat Ticaret ve Sanayi Limited Şirketi (Türkiye), with Profit AD (Bulgaria) as the project partner.

Project Objectives and budget

CARE-Tour aims to promote energy efficiency and sustainable tourism through cooperation between two tourism businesses operating in the cross-border regions of Edirne, Türkiye, and Yambol, Bulgaria.

Through the planned investments and joint activities, the project aims to achieve at least 42% energy efficiency improvement and reduce greenhouse gas emissions by more than 78 tonnes per year.

The total project budget is EUR 320,665.98. The project is financed through a grant consisting of 85% European Union funding (IPA III CBC Funder - 272.566,08 EUR) and 15% co-financing from the participating countries.

The project has a total duration of 18 months and is planned to be completed in February 2027.

Expected Results

CARE-Tour is expected to contribute to a more energy-efficient and environmentally friendly tourism sector in the Bulgaria-Türkiye cross-border region.

Target: At least 42% energy efficiency improvement and more than 78 tonnes of annual greenhouse gas emission reduction.

KEY REFERENCE SOURCES

- Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC)
- Türkiye Tourism Promotion and Development Agency (TGA) - Türkiye Sustainable Tourism Programme
- European Commission - Tourism Transition Pathway
- European Union - Packaging and Packaging Waste Regulation (EU) 2025/40
- European Commission - Single-Use Plastics Policy
- UN Tourism - Water Management and Climate Action
- UNEP - Tourism, Resource Efficiency and Climate Impacts
- Green Key International - Certification Criteria and Good Practices

“CARE-Tour - Cross-Border Cooperation for Energy Efficiency in the Tourism Sector and an Eco-Friendly Bulgaria-Türkiye Region” (Ref: BGTR0300129)

The Editor of the material: İnci İnşaat Turizm Gıda Tekstil Pazarlama İthalat İhracat Ticaret ve Sanayi Limited Şirketi and Profit AD

Date of publishing: August 2026

This publication has been co-funded by the European Union. Its contents are the sole responsibility of İnci İnşaat Turizm Gıda Tekstil Pazarlama İthalat İhracat Ticaret ve Sanayi Limited Şirketi and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union, the partner countries and the Managing Authority of the Programme.