



GSTC ACCREDITATION MANUAL
FOR CERTIFICATION BODIES - DESTINATION
Version 2.1

February, 2026

Document Control

This is version 2.1 of the GSTC Accreditation Manual for Certification Bodies - Destination and replaces any and all previous versions.

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Version Notes

The manual has been restructured to improve clarity and streamline requirements for CBs. The main updates include revisions to Clause 12.3.2.1.b, specifically the removal of the five-year operation requirement for DMOs; updated and aligned terminology reflecting the GSTC-Recognized Standard Owner – GSTC-accredited certification body (RSO-ACB) framework (formerly the CS-CB Framework); refined PART I and qualification requirements for GSTC auditors, including compliance with the GSTC Code of Conduct, clauses 10.17 and 10.18, and Annex B.

To make comments on this document, please email the GSTC at: accreditation@gstc.org

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The Global Sustainable Tourism Council

www.gstc.org

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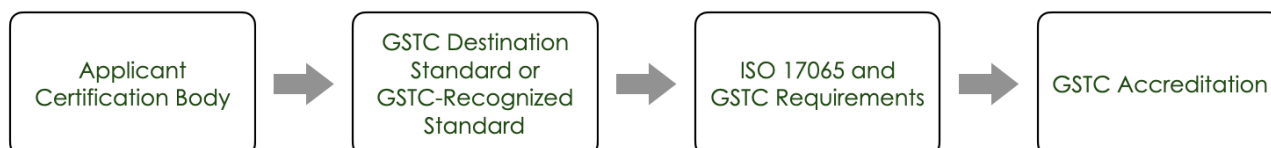
PART I: SCHEME OVERVIEW

Introduction

GSTC Accreditation is designed to be applicable to all bodies certifying tourism destinations for their sustainability management and performance. CBs may be accredited to certify to the GSTC Standards or use standards that maintain "GSTC-Recognized" status for their equivalence with the GSTC Standards.

GSTC Recognition Program	The GSTC recognizes the equivalence of a standard against the GSTC Standard (Hotel/Accommodation, Tour Operator, MICE (Meetings, Incentive Travel, Conferences/Conventions, Events/Exhibitions), and Destination). Please refer to the Manual for GSTC recognition of sustainable tourism standards (hereinafter, GSTC Recognized Manual) in its latest version for further details.
GSTC Accreditation Program	Accreditation of a CB that either uses the GSTC-Recognized standard OR certifies directly against the GSTC Standard (formerly, GSTC Criteria).

The diagram below provides a graphical depiction of the option for gaining accreditation to either certify directly to the GSTC Standard or to the GSTC-Recognized Standard, which is to say, a standard that is equivalent to the GSTC Standard. The CB may request the scope of their accreditation to include certification to both the GSTC Standard plus one or more GSTC-Recognized Standards.



Additionally, GSTC-Recognized Standard Owners (RSOs) that commit to subcontracting the certification to the GSTC-accredited CBs shall enter into the GSTC Licensing Agreement.

The GSTC Marks – Summary and Benefits

Necessity of Systematic Destination Management

Travel and tourism account for around 10% of the world's economic activity. It is a rapidly growing sector worldwide. International tourist arrivals are projected to continue rising, underscoring the need for a strategic and sustainable approach to tourism development.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2015 are aimed at, among other things, ending extreme poverty, fighting inequality and justice, and tackling climate change. The significant relevance of tourism to most of the 17 SDGs has been recognized. UN Tourism (formerly United Nations World Tourism Organization, UNWTO) is working with governments, public and private partners, development banks, international and regional financial institutions, UN agencies and international organizations to achieve the SDGs, with a special focus on Goal 8 (economic growth), Goal 12 (sustainable consumption and production patterns) and Goal 14 (marine resources) where tourism has been specifically featured.

Tourism's impact is most acutely felt at the destination level, where the interplay between visitors, local communities, businesses, and the environment shapes the long-term sustainability of the sector. Destinations are the heart of tourism, serving as the physical and cultural spaces where the benefits and challenges of tourism converge. The GSTC recognizes that sustainable tourism must be rooted in the unique characteristics, needs, and aspirations of each destination, ensuring that tourism contributes positively to local economies, cultures, and ecosystems while minimizing negative impacts.

Roles of Destinations in Sustainable Tourism

A sustainable tourism destination is one that balances economic growth, environmental protection, and social well-being for both residents and visitors. It requires collaboration among all stakeholders—governments, businesses, communities, and visitors—to create a shared vision for sustainable development. Some of the key roles of Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) include:

- **Local Economic Benefits Provision:** Tourism can drive business development and create employment opportunities, particularly for micro and small-enterprises that form the backbone of many destinations. Tourism can become a powerful tool for poverty alleviation and inclusive growth by supporting local businesses and fair labor practices.
- **Cultural Preservation and Community Empowerment:** Tourism shall preserve the cultural heritage of local communities while fostering mutual respect between visitors and residents. Empowering local communities to participate in tourism planning and decision-making ensures that benefits are equally distributed.

- **Environmental Protection and Conservation:** Destinations shall prioritize conserving natural resources, reducing carbon emissions, and minimizing pollution. This includes protecting biodiversity, managing water and energy use efficiently, and mitigating the impacts of climate change, which disproportionately affect vulnerable destinations.
- **Visitor Engagement:** Destinations shall encourage adoption of responsible behaviors and engaging visitors in destination management—such as respecting local customs, minimizing waste, supporting sustainable businesses, and participating in activities to improve and regenerate visited places—which are critical for the destination's long-term success.
- **Governance and Collaboration:** Effective policies, regulations, and enforcement mechanisms are essential for sustainable destination management. Participation and collaboration mechanisms with representation from public and private stakeholders, including governments, businesses, civil societies, academia, and local communities, are key for implementing holistic strategies and approaches to address the unique challenges of each destination.

Challenges at the Destination Level

While tourism offers significant opportunities for development, it also poses challenges that must be addressed at the destination level. These include:

- **Environmental Degradation:** Tourism can contribute to climate change, resource depletion, and pollution if not managed responsibly.
- **Overtourism:** Popular destinations often face overcrowding, which increases the need for infrastructure development, disrupts living costs, leads to dependence on tourism consumption, degrades natural and cultural sites, and disturbs local communities.
- **Negative Social and Cultural Impacts:** Unplanned tourism can lead to the displacement of traditional communities, loss of cultural identity, exploitation of local labor, and a perceived distortion of the sense of the place.

- Fragmentation of the Sector: Stakeholders have limited institutionalality and cohesion, reducing the possibilities to strengthen local capacities, understand market needs, plan in the medium and long term, attract investment, and manage the destination sustainably. These impacts fragment the benefits of tourism to the destination, encourage capital flight (human and economic), and increase the gaps between small, medium, and large companies, facilitating the disarticulation of tourism value chains.

Path Forward

By adopting the GSTC Destination Standard as the foundational guideline for managing tourism destinations, policies and strategies are developed to ensure sustainable implementation across various sectors, including society, culture, economy, and environment, while acknowledging the significance and role of tourism DMOs.

A commitment to continuous improvement is nurtured through ongoing collaboration with stakeholders and performance evaluations. Certification serves as a tool in this process, helping to enhance both internal and external awareness and recognition.

Moreover, stakeholders can ensure that tourism destination development is aligned with sustainability, resilience, and inclusivity principles through a certification process. By prioritizing sustainability at the destination level, tourism can become a transformative force for positive change, contributing to achieving the SDGs and ensuring a better future for all.

The Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC)

The GSTC is a multi-stakeholder initiative formed in 2007, including amongst its founding partners United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), UN Tourism, UN Foundation, Sabre Holdings, Rainforest Alliance, and others. It was formed in response to the challenges and opportunities of sustainable tourism, by merging two previous initiatives. In 2014, The GSTC merged with the Tour Operator Initiative (TOI) with TOI's operations and members joining the GSTC organization.

Numerous organizations from the public, private, and voluntary sectors, as well as from the tourism, environmental management, and sustainable development fields, have contributed to the work of the GSTC.

The mission of the GSTC is:

"To improve tourism's potential to be a driver of positive conservation and economic development for communities and businesses around the world and a tool for poverty alleviation".

The GSTC fulfils its mission by fostering increased knowledge and understanding of sustainable tourism practices and adopting universal sustainable tourism principles.

It also works in many other ways to strengthen education, communication, knowledge-sharing, and business engagement in the field of sustainable tourism and to achieve improved market access for sustainable tourism products.

A Common Agenda for Sustainable Tourism

The challenges of sustainable tourism articulated earlier encompass economic, social and environmental impacts. This broad spectrum of concerns is increasingly recognized by bodies promoting sustainable tourism. UNEP and UN Tourism identified an agenda for sustainable tourism based on twelve functional aims and showed how there are economic, social, and environmental dimensions to each of them. The dimensions are seen as interrelated. In the private sector, in tourism as well as in other economic spheres, enterprises and investment projects are encouraged to consider a triple bottom line. Many companies report on corporate social responsibility policies and actions, which address a broad range of economic, social, and environmental impacts and initiatives beyond straight financial reporting. Some companies use the guidelines of the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI), the world's most widely used sustainability reporting framework.

The GSTC program aligns with this broad approach to sustainable tourism and encourages certification schemes to move beyond a more mono-dimensional, often environmental focus. The principles for sustainable tourism behind the GSTC program are that:

- Sustainability objectives should be defined, and actions coordinated by an effective management system;
- Tourism should bring the greatest possible social and economic benefits to local communities, and any negative impacts on them should be minimized;
- Local cultural heritage must be respected, and opportunities should be taken to strengthen its integrity and richness; and
- Impacts on the global and local environment, through pollution and depletion of natural resources, should be minimised and support should be given to the conservation of local landscapes and biodiversity.

These principles of sustainable tourism are seen as relevant in all parts of the world and can be reflected in many different kinds of tourism enterprises. The overall agenda remains the same. However, key concerns about tourism impacts and priorities for improving sustainability will vary from place to place. It is hoped and expected that sustainable tourism standards will be adapted to local and industry sector conditions and that they will far exceed the minimum requirements outlined in this manual.

GSTC Standards

The GSTC has developed the following Standards and associated indicators (formerly known as GSTC Criteria):

- a. GSTC Hotel Standard (GSTC-H): version 4.0, December 2025
- b. GSTC Tour Operator Standard (GSTC-TO): version 4.0, December 2025
- c. GSTC Destination Standard (GSTC-D): version 2.0 December 2019;
- d. GSTC MICE Standard (GSTC-M): version 1.0 February 2024; and
- e. GSTC Attraction Standard (GSTC-A): version 1.0 November 2024.

GSTC Assurance Decision-Making Committees

The GSTC Accreditation Decision-Making Committee (ADMC) and the GSTC Recognition Decision-Making Committee (RDMC) are appointed by the GSTC and are responsible for performing the following functions:

- ADMC
 - Grant, pause, or withdraw accreditation status of certification bodies on behalf of the GSTC.
- RDMC
 - Declare standards to be “GSTC-Recognized standard”

Principles for the implementation of the GSTC Accreditation

The following principles apply to all aspects of the GSTC assurance program – including work performed by RSOs and GSTC-accredited certification bodies (ACBs):

- **Integrity:** Integrity should be demonstrated in every aspect of the process, requiring honesty, fairness, and consistency throughout.
- **Credibility:** The process should spread confidence in certification as a meaningful way of identifying and stimulating good sustainability practice in the tourism sector.
- **Impartiality:** The process should not be open to any forms of influence which might raise doubts about the objectivity of the decisions taken.
- **Accessibility:** Recognition of standards and accreditation should be as accessible as possible to all relevant RSOs and certification should be as accessible as possible to all tourism enterprises. There should be no discrimination on grounds of size and location and financial barriers should be minimized.
- **Comprehensiveness:** All recognized sustainable tourism standards covering sustainable tourism should address all aspects of sustainability, including socio-economic, cultural, and environmental impacts.
- **Rigorousness:** Accreditation and certification should be robust processes and require high standards and levels of sustainability to be met.

- **Effectiveness:** The process should be impact-driven and shaped to help as many tourism enterprises as possible achieve maximum change towards sustainability. The accreditation programme should strengthen the impact of certification schemes.
- **Transparency:** The standards required and processes adopted should be transparent and available for scrutiny by stakeholders.
- **Diversity:** The process should recognize and encourage the diversity of local, regional, and sectoral certification schemes, including their criteria and standards, provided there is no loss of sustainability outcomes.
- **Achievability:** The accreditation process must be practicable and sustainable over time and not place burdens on certification schemes that they could not meet.

Stakeholder Engagement in Continuous Review and Improvement of the GSTC Accreditation

ACBs and those interested in accreditation, along with other stakeholders interested in the GSTC Accreditation Program, are welcome to share their comments on any aspect of the program and this manual. GSTC facilitates public consultations in alignment with revisions to the Accreditation Manual and has established a formal grievance mechanism to address issues raised by stakeholders. Additionally, if there are any requirements addressed in this manual that need to be clarified, or further information or answers to questions are needed, please submit requests or email accreditation@gstc.org.

Definitions

Refer to the latest version of the GSTC Accreditation Glossary published on the GSTC website.

Level of Requirement

In this document the following verbal forms are used:

- “**shall**” indicates a requirement; that is, the body must take the specified action to be in compliance;

- “**should**” indicates a recommendation; that is, the body is expected to take the specified action;
- “**may**” indicates a permission; that is, the body is allowed to take the specified action;
- “**can**” indicates a possibility or a capability; that is, the body commits to undertake the specified action.

PART II: OVERVIEW OF ACCREDITATION

1. Manual Structure

The Manual covers both the requirements of and accreditation processes to be implemented by GSTC, and for Certification Bodies, the certification processes they shall implement and the requirements and process for their accreditation.

This Manual is arranged in four parts:

- Part I introduces an overview of the GSTC, the GSTC Standards, Assurance Decision-Making Committees, and Accreditation principles;
- Part II sets out the manual structure, normative reference and requirements for GSTC in the accreditation of Certification Bodies;
- Part III sets out the requirements for CBs to become accredited and the market access benefits; and
- Annexes outline the GSTC-Recognized Standard - GSTC-Accredited Certification Body Framework (RSO-ACB Framework) and GSTC Auditor requirements.

2. Normative Reference

The following documents contain provisions that, through reference in this text, become part of the GSTC Accreditation Manual. For documents that specify a date or version number, later amendments or revisions of that document do not apply as a normative requirement. Readers are encouraged to review the most recent editions and any guidance documents available to gain further insight into how the document has changed and to consider whether or not to implement the latest changes. For documents without dates or version numbers, the latest published edition of the document referred to applies.

- ISO / IEC 17065:2012 Conformity Assessment Requirements for bodies certifying products, processes, and services.

- ISO 19011:2018 Guidelines for quality and/or environmental management system auditing.
- IAF MD 1:2023 IAF Mandatory Document for the Audit and Certification of a Management System Operated by a Multi-Site Organization.
- IAF MD 2:2023 IAF Mandatory Document for the Transfer of Accredited Certification of Management Systems
- IAF MD 4:2023 IAF Mandatory Document for the Use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) for Auditing/Assessment Purposes.
- IAF MD 5:2023 Determination of Audit Time of Quality, Environmental and Occupational Health & Safety Management System.
- ISEAL Code v1.1 ISEAL Code of Good Practice for Sustainability Systems

3. GSTC Requirement for GSTC-Endorsed Accreditation Bodies

- 3.1. The GSTC shall administer the accreditation for CBs for Industry certification. However, the accreditation of CBs located in the mutually agreed countries, including the countries inside of the European Union (EU), shall be administered by the GSTC-endorsed National Accreditation Body (NAB).

PART III: ACCREDITATION - REQUIREMENTS FOR CERTIFICATION BODIES

This section sets out requirements for CBs certifying that clients conform to the GSTC-Recognized standard and/or the GSTC Destination Standard. In addition to the GSTC specific requirements for certification of sustainable tourism destinations, this section uses ISO 17065:2012 as a basis.

Note: This Manual uses the term 'client' to refer to 'destination'. However, both terms are employed throughout the document.

4. Introduction

- 4.1. To become a GSTC-accredited Certification Body to certify to the GSTC Standard and/or GSTC-Recognized standard, a CB shall:
 - 4.1.1. Gain accreditation from GSTC or by the GSTC-Endorsed NAB in mutually agreed-upon countries, including EU countries; and
 - 4.1.2. Enter into a license agreement as set out in Part III for the use of the GSTC name, marks and/or logo.
- 4.2. All CBs are required to meet the minimum requirements that are set out in Part III of this Manual:
 - 4.2.1. All CBs will be subject to an assessment of their conformity to these requirements by the GSTC.
- 4.3. For initial GSTC accreditation, CBs shall demonstrate practical experience in operating its conformity assessment system. This includes having carried out at least one internal audit, one management review, and one full conformity assessment activity at least in the last 12 months prior to applying for GSTC accreditation.
 - 4.3.1. If a CB has not yet performed conformity assessments for actual clients, then the required conformity assessment activity can be simulated. A simulated conformity

assessment involves carrying out the full certification process for an organization - from initially receiving the certification application through to potentially issuing a certificate. This allows the CBs to assess the effective application of its procedures.

- 4.4. The internal audit and management review shall be completed by the CB's top management, following ISO 17065:2012 (Clauses 8.5 and 8.6, respectively).

Note: Simulated conformity assessment implies that a conformity assessment activity has been completed following the CB's service procedures and in compliance with the Reference Standard from the start (e.g., submission of certification application) to the end (e.g., issuance of certificate), based on a virtual scenario for conformity assessment.

5. Scope of Accreditation

- 5.1. The applicant CB shall specify the Reference Standard against which the certification will be granted:

5.1.1. The GSTC Destination Standard (**alternative A**). All the criteria in the GSTC Destination Standard are requirements and, therefore, mandatory for compliance.

5.1.2. The GSTC-Recognized standard (**alternative B**). All the requirements in the standard recognized as equivalent to the criteria of the GSTC Destination Standard are requirements and, therefore, mandatory for compliance.

5.1.2.1. For the GSTC-Recognized standard used by the CB under the GSTC-endorsed NAB accreditation, the standard shall reorganize its criteria and indicators as the same order of GSTC criteria and indicators. Any requirements beyond the GSTC Standard shall be specified in a separate section.

Example: Recognized standard criterion/indicator identifier (GSTC criterion identifier) - C2.5 (GSTC B7).

5.1.3. A CB can be accredited for alternative A, alternative B, or both alternatives. In the case of alternative B, a CB can be accredited for more than one GSTC-Recognized standard.

5.1.3.1. The GSTC-Recognized status shall be granted following the GSTC-Recognized Manual.

5.1.3.2. A CB can be accredited for one or more than one GSTC-Recognized standard upon submission of a scope extension request to the GSTC, according to its rules.

5.1.3.3. When applying for a scope extension to provide auditing and certification services against a GSTC-Recognized Standard, the CB shall follow the GSTC Checklist and Steps outlined in the Recognized Standard Owner - GSTC-accredited Certification Body Framework (Annex A).

Note: When solely the GSTC Destination Standard is mentioned as a Reference Standard, the GSTC-Recognized standard also applies.

Note: The GSTC Checklist: Recognized Standard Owner - GSTC-accredited Certification Body Framework is presented in Annex A.

5.1.4. The geographic area to which the accreditation will apply:

5.1.4.1. A CB can be accredited to grant certification worldwide or to a reduced geographical scope. In this case, the geographical coverage to which the accreditation is valid shall be clearly defined.

5.1.4.2. The geographic area of a CB accredited to certify against the GSTC-Recognized standard shall be aligned with the geographic coverage of the GSTC-Recognized standard.

5.2. In its communication to the public and with tourism destinations, the CBs shall make its accreditation scope clear.

5.3. Reliance on Legislation:

- 5.3.1. Reliance on legislation is applicable to a CB that certifies against the GSTC-Recognized standard;
- 5.3.2. Where a CB operates only in one country or a region that can be considered as one legal jurisdiction, it may demonstrate that:
 - 5.3.2.1. Accreditation Requirements are covered by legislation;
 - 5.3.2.2. The specific law(s) shall be identified; and
 - 5.3.2.3. The laws are enforced.
- 5.3.3. Acceptable evidence may include:
 - 5.3.3.1. A requirement for a legally binding sworn statement by the organization to be certified with respect to compliance with specific named laws and regulations; and
 - 5.3.3.2. Text from the CBs manual or standard indicating that compliance with specific named laws and regulations will be verified during the assessment.
- 5.3.4. When a CB operates only in one country, or a region considered as one legal jurisdiction, the GSTC-accredited status will only apply to the CB's area of operation.

6. Languages

6.1. Language for Accreditation

- 6.1.1. The language used for the GSTC accreditation service is English. All information requested by the GSTC shall be submitted in English.
- 6.1.2. If a CB wishes to receive accreditation services in a language other than English, the CBs shall provide interpretation and translation services, and the CBs shall ensure that

the services are fair and impartial. It is the responsibility of the CBs to cover the expenses of translation and interpretation services.

6.2. Language for Certification

6.2.1. The CBs shall conduct its audit processes in languages for which formal translations of the GSTC Destination Standard or a GSTC-Recognized standard are available. Only GSTC-published translations (for GSTC-D) or CB-produced translations created by accredited translators (for GSTC-D and/or Recognized standard) shall be used.

6.2.1.1. The audit team must be proficient in the language of the Reference Standard, as this will be used to conduct the audit process.

6.2.2. When a local, regional, indigenous, or native language is predominantly or partially spoken at a destination, the audit team may carry out the audit process with the assistance of a local translator and/or someone fluent in that language. The translator must not be an employee of the DMO being audited, nor have any conflicts of interest with the auditee destination.

6.2.3. If the destination uses local language documents, these may be translated to the language of the GSTC Destination Standard and/or the GSTC-Recognized standard by the destination for the auditors' review.

6.2.4. When the audit team does not speak the language of the destination, an audit may be completed only with a certified translation of documents and using a capable translator during the audit (who shall not be a staff member of the DMO being audited).

6.2.5. Where a CB works in a language other than English, it will provide translated documents in English as required for initial accreditation and ongoing requirements by the GSTC.

6.2.6. Any required reporting and correspondence with the GSTC shall be in English.

Note: Certified translation of documents is a translation of documents by an authorized legal translator who states that translated documents are an accurate representation of the original text.

7. Accreditation Expiration and Renewal

7.1. Accreditation status will apply to a CB until the earlier of:

- 7.1.1. The majority ownership of the CB changes.
- 7.1.2. The CB becomes insolvent or bankrupt or enters receivership, dissolution, or liquidation.
- 7.1.3. The CB is in breach of the GSTC License Agreement.
- 7.1.4. The standard used by the GSTC-accredited CB is no longer GSTC-Recognized.
- 7.1.5. Five years from the initial GSTC-accredited status.

Amendment of Accreditation Requirements

- 7.2. The GSTC shall give at least 90 days' notice of any changes to its accreditation requirements. The GSTC takes into account the views expressed by interested parties before deciding on the precise form and effective date of the changes.
- 7.3. Following a decision on and publication of the changed requirements, the GSTC shall verify that each GSTC-accredited CB conforms to the changed requirements within the transition time determined by the GSTC.

Amendment of the GSTC Standard

- 7.4. The GSTC shall inform all applicants and the GSTC-accredited CBs of any changes in the requirements of the GSTC Destination Standard:
 - 7.4.1. The GSTC shall establish a transition implementation plan for the GSTC-accredited CBs.
The transition implementation plan shall include:
 - 7.4.1.1. The dates when the revised GSTC Standard will enter into force;

- 7.4.1.2. The measures adopted to inform society, the GSTC-accredited CBs, and current applicants for accreditation;
 - 7.4.1.3. Prescriptions on how and when to conduct assessments for accreditation and certification purposes; and
 - 7.4.1.4. How to deal with eventual nonconformities.
- 7.4.2. The transition implementation plan shall be established in consultation with the GSTC-accredited CBs and other relevant interested parties.

Amendment of the GSTC-Recognized standard

- 7.5. When the GSTC-Recognized standard is amended by the standard owner, the GSTC shall be informed following the GSTC-Recognized Manual:
 - 7.5.1. Once the GSTC confirms the maintenance of the recognition status of the revised standard, the GSTC shall inform the GSTC-accredited CBs that have that standard in their accreditation scope, in order to establish the process to set up a transition period;
 - 7.5.2. The GSTC shall establish a transition implementation plan for accredited certifications according to the GSTC-Recognized standard. The transition implementation plan shall include:
 - 7.5.2.1. The dates on which the revised version will enter into force for accredited certification purposes;
 - 7.5.2.2. Prescriptions on how and when to conduct assessments for accreditation and certification purposes; and
 - 7.5.2.3. How to deal with eventual nonconformities.
 - 7.5.3. The transition implementation plan shall be established in consultation with the standard owner, the GSTC-accredited CBs, and other relevant interested parties.

- 7.6. If a standard is no longer Recognized by the GSTC, the standard owner has a twelve-month period to re-apply or renew the GSTC-Recognized status of the standard following the GSTC-Recognized Manual. During this period, the standard owner must communicate clearly with any affected CBs.

Ongoing Suitability of a Certification Program

- 7.7. If at any time, should the GSTC have reason to be concerned about the ongoing conformity of an already GSTC-accredited CBs against the GSTC Accreditation Requirements, it may require the CBs to provide further information, and may, as an ultimate sanction, withdraw the GSTC-accredited status.

Extension, Reduction, Suspension, or Withdrawal of Accreditation

- 7.8. The extension, reduction, suspension, or withdrawal shall be administered by the GSTC, according to the latest version of the GSTC Accreditation Procedure.
- 7.9. In the event of noncompliance with the obligations assumed by the applicant or the GSTC-accredited CB, and depending on the severity of the compromise to the system's quality and credibility in accreditation-related activities, sanctions can be established by the GSTC.
- 7.10. A CB can request an extension or reduction of its accreditation scope. In this case, the CBs shall make a formal request to the GSTC. The request shall indicate the reasons for the extension or reduction requested. The request shall be processed as an accreditation application. The assessment of the CBs may be simplified and processed in conjunction with the surveillance activities of the accreditation process:
- 7.10.1. The GSTC-accredited CBs shall apply for an extension of its scope to provide auditing and certification services to GSTC-Recognized standard owned by a certification scheme.
- 7.11. A CB can voluntarily request the withdrawal of its accreditation.

8. GSTC Requirements

- 8.1. The CBs shall comply with the requirements in ISO 17065:2012.
- 8.2. The CBs shall be accredited based on a defined Reference Standard as outlined in Section 5:
 - 8.2.1. The GSTC and the GSTC-endorsed NAB may further limit the technical or geographical scope of certification based on the justification provided or upon request by the CB.
- 8.3. Certification agreement
 - 8.3.1. The CBs shall, through legally enforceable arrangements, require that the certified client:
 - 8.3.1.1. does not make or permit any misleading statements regarding its certification;
 - 8.3.1.2. does not use or permit the use of a certification document or any part thereof in a misleading manner;
 - 8.3.1.3. amends all advertising matters when the scope of certification has been reduced;
 - 8.3.1.4. does not imply that the certification applies to activities and sites that are outside the scope of certification; and
 - 8.3.1.5. does not use its certification in such a manner that would bring the CBs, the GSTC and/or certification system into disrepute and lose public trust.
- 8.4. License, certificates, and marks of conformity
 - 8.4.1. Upon certification, the CBs shall issue their client with:
 - 8.4.1.1. GSTC Logo; and
 - 8.4.1.2. GSTC Logo Terms of Use; in accordance with the GSTC Logo Terms of Issuance.

- 8.4.2. CBs shall require their client to use the GSTC Logo in accordance with the GSTC Logo terms and conditions.

8.5. Management of Impartiality

- 8.5.1. Personnel who have provided consultancy services for a client shall not be used for auditing or decision making for that client for a minimum period of two years.
- 8.5.2. If within a period of two years following an initial audit the CB's personnel involved in the audit or certification decision making become involved with the client as staff, contractors or consultants, the CBs shall review the audit and all decisions arising from it to ensure that there was no conflict of interest at the time of the audit and/or certification decision.

8.6. Publicly available information

- 8.6.1. The CBs shall also maintain public information about;
 - 8.6.1.1. Technical scopes in which it is accredited;
 - 8.6.1.2. Geographical areas in which it is accredited; and
 - 8.6.1.3. Dispute mechanisms, including complaints and appeals procedures, available in the languages the CBs operate.

8.7. Certification requirement

- 8.7.1. The CBs shall define the scope of the certification, specifying the geographical coverage and the boundaries of the destination that have been subject to evaluation against the Reference Standard.
- 8.7.2. During the five-year accreditation period, the geographical scope and Reference Standard described in the certification documentation shall be adequately communicated. If the certified destination jointly advertises its GSTC certification along with such out-of-scope destinations, the advertising material shall clearly differentiate

between those that are included within the scope of the GSTC certification and those that are not included.

- 8.7.3. When the Reference Standard is the GSTC-Recognized Standard, CBs shall have legal authorization to provide auditing and certification services to the GSTC-Recognized Standard.
- 8.7.4. Where a GSTC-Recognized standard is used for GSTC certification, CBs shall have legal authorization to use that standard-relevant marks and logos following Annex A.
- 8.7.5. All the requirements in the GSTC Standard-equivalent criteria or indicators of the GSTC-Recognized standard are mandatory and shall be assessed for conformity.

8.8. Certification Application:

- 8.8.1. The CBs shall obtain all the necessary client information to allow the proper planning of audits in accordance with the relevant certification scheme. This information shall include, at a minimum:
 - 8.8.1.1. Information about the client's sustainability management system and performance;
 - 8.8.1.2. The Reference Standard (standards and/or other normative documents established) for which the client is seeking certification;
 - 8.8.1.3. The general information of the client, including its name and the address(es) of its physical location(s), description of its process and operations and other information, and any relevant legal obligations;
 - 8.8.1.4. General information concerning the client relevant to the certification for which the audit is conducted, such as the client's activities, its human and technical resources, and its functions and relationship in a larger corporation, if any;

- 8.8.1.5. Information concerning all outsourced processes used by the client that will affect conformity to requirements.

Note: A variety of media and mechanisms can be used to collect this information at various times, including an application form. Such information gathering can be in conjunction with or separate from, the completion of the legally binding agreement (the certification agreement) specified in Clause 4.1.2 of ISO/IEC 17065:2012.

8.9. Application review

- 8.9.1. CBs shall clearly identify the Reference Standard and the geographical area, as described in Clause 5.1.

8.10. Audit plan

- 8.10.1. The CBs shall ensure that an audit plan is based on documented requirements of the CBs as well as requirements described in this manual.
- 8.10.2. An audit plan shall be developed following ISO 19011:2018 Clause 6.
- 8.10.3. The audit plan shall include the type of audit, such as an initial audit, a surveillance audit, and a recertification audit in the third year before certification expires.
- 8.10.4. The certification cycle shall be three years, and the audit program shall establish, as a minimum, a surveillance audit every year and a recertification audit that shall be conducted prior to the expiration of certification.
- 8.10.5. The three (3)-year certification cycle begins with the certification or recertification decision.
- 8.10.6. Determining the audit plan and any subsequent adjustments shall consider the level of risk of the client, including the client's size, complexity, population, the total number of visitors, tourism's contribution to the client economy, and the previous audits' demonstrated effectiveness level and results.
- 8.10.7. The audit plan shall include the roles and responsibilities of the auditor and audit team.

8.11. Auditor or personnel requirements

- 8.11.1. The CBs shall assign an auditor and/or audit team in conformity with the requirements set out in the GSTC Auditor Qualification, Knowledge and Skills in Section 10.
- 8.11.2. The CBs and audit team assigned shall communicate and approve the audit plan with the client.
- 8.11.3. The CB's auditor shall follow the guidance on auditing provided in ISO 19011:2018. In this case, the recommendations in that standard (ISO 19011:2018) shall be understood as obligations.
- 8.11.4. During the audit, information should be collected through appropriate sampling methods. Guidance on sampling techniques for interviewing personnel and collecting information is necessary for the CBs to ensure an effective and representative audit process.
- 8.11.5. The auditor shall conduct interviews with relevant stakeholders to assess the sustainability compliance of the destination and the performance of the management organization. The auditor shall conduct such interviews in each audit and especially when the information collected is considered insufficient or incomplete, lacking quality or veracity.

Note: The relevant stakeholders to the destination's tourism development and management include tourism businesses, communities, civil societies, academia, DMO, and other public and private organizations and individuals. During an audit, CBs shall identify the full range of stakeholders involved and ensure their inclusion in the process.

- 8.11.6. The client shall be informed in writing about any stakeholder interview undertaken but shall not be informed of any information that stakeholders request to remain confidential.

8.12. Evaluation tools

8.12.1. CBs shall have an assessment tool that shall be used by auditors to evaluate all GSTC Standards. The evaluation tool shall include:

8.12.1.1. Guidance for conducting the audit and the types of evidence required;

8.12.1.2. All additional criteria or indicators specific to a GSTC-Recognized standard, when applicable;

8.12.1.3. The additional evaluation requirements for use of the GSTC name, marks and logos as they relate to certification; and

8.12.1.4. If CBs operate within specific jurisdictions, countries or areas, specific guidance on local application of the criteria may be included within the evaluation tool.

8.13. Risk assessment

8.13.1. CBs shall define the client's risk level through a risk assessment to determine audit frequency and duration.

8.13.2. Three primary risk factors that shall be considered by CBs when conducting the risk assessment are:

a. The likelihood that the client's location and/or operations may cause negative environmental, social, economic, or cultural impacts, assessed based on:

i. The Climate Change Performance Index (CCPI) Rating

ii. The presence of the site within or near internationally and nationally protected areas, including:

1. UNESCO World Heritage Sites

2. IUCN Protected Areas Category I to IV; and

3. Wetlands of International Importance (Ramsar List)

b. The Rule of Law index of the country in which the client operates.

- c. The volume of visitors during the high season compared to the population.

Note 1: UNESCO List: UNESCO provides a [List of World Heritage in Danger](#). When the lists of sensitive areas are unavailable, the CBs should rely on the national legislation where the client is located to determine the sensitive areas.

Note 2: Rule of Law index: [World Justice Project](#) provides updates to the Rule of Law Index.

Note 3: Volume of visitors: The high season will be determined based on the tourism statistics for the past three years.

8.13.3. The client may be considered low risk if at least three aspects listed in this clause apply:

- a. The Destination's Climate Change Performance Index (CCPI) Rating is classified as High or Very High.
- b. The destination's sensitive protected areas are conserved but not considered in danger by international conventions or national regulations;
- c. The Rule of Law Index for the country where the client is located is 0.60 points or higher; and,
- d. The volume of visitors during the high season does not exceed the total resident population.

8.13.4. CBs may consider other secondary data and define risk level based on the following:

- a. Media monitoring about the destination. News related to the management, sustainable performance, and reputation of the destination may be closely monitored.
- b. Any other information gathered through online searches, social media, or networks.
- c. Any other relevant information already within the knowledge of the CB's personnel.

- 8.13.4.1. CBs shall ensure that the determination of risk along with potential mitigation practices are documented.

8.14. Audit Time

- 8.14.1. CBs shall develop documented procedures for determining the audit time in conformity with the audit frequency and duration based on the determined risk.
- 8.14.2. Travel time to and from audited sites and time spent for the pre-assessment in order to gather information (review of documentation and defining level of risk) shall not be included in determining the audit time.

8.15. Audit formats

- 8.15.1. Initial and re-certification audits shall be conducted on-site.
- 8.15.2. Surveillance audits may be performed on-site or in a hybrid format based on the client risk level. (see Clause 8.19.4.1.)

8.16. Nonconformities

- 8.16.1. The CBs shall inform the client of all nonconformities in writing. There are 2 classifications for the nonconformities:
 - 8.16.1.1. Major nonconformity; and
 - 8.16.1.2. Minor nonconformity.
- 8.16.2. When major nonconformities have been issued:
 - 8.16.2.1. CBs shall provide a period of 90 days from the issue date for the closing of nonconformity.
 - 8.16.2.2. For the closing to be accepted by the CBs, adequate root cause analysis, correction, corrective, and/or preventive action shall be provided by the client.
 - 8.16.2.3. Evidence for correction and corrective actions shall be documented.

8.16.2.4. In case the closing is not sufficient, the CBs shall implement sanctions.

8.16.3. When minor nonconformities have been issued:

8.16.3.1. CBs shall provide a period of 90 days from the issue date for the closing of nonconformity.

8.16.3.2. For the closing to be accepted by CBs, adequate root cause analysis, correction, corrective, and/or preventive action shall be provided by the client.

8.16.3.3. Evidence for correction shall be documented.

8.16.3.4. Corrective actions shall be verified during the next audit.

8.16.3.5. In case the closing is not sufficient, the CB shall upgrade to major nonconformities and follow the procedure outlined in Clause 8.16.2.

8.17. Technical Review and Certification Decision

8.17.1. CBs shall designate at least one person for the technical review and certification decision who has not participated in the audit process.

8.17.2. CBs shall ensure that the individual(s) responsible for making certification decisions are either directly employed by them or bound by a legal contract.

8.17.3. CBs shall maintain a documented system and procedures for the technical review process and be able to demonstrate their implementation.

8.17.4. CBs shall confirm, prior to making a certification decision, that:

8.17.4.1. The information provided by the audit team is sufficient with respect to the certification requirements and the scope for certification.

8.17.4.2. It has reviewed, accepted, and verified the effectiveness of correction and/or corrective actions for all nonconformities that represent:

a. Failure to fulfill one or more requirements of the Reference Standard; or

- b. A situation that raises significant doubt about the ability of the client's sustainability management processes to achieve its intended outputs.

8.17.4.3. It has reviewed and accepted the client's planned correction and/or corrective action for any other nonconformities.

8.18. Certificates requirements

8.18.1. CBs shall provide the client with formal certification documentation that clearly conveys or permits identification of the following:

- a. The full legal name of the certified destination, along with the name and address of the legal entity of the organization or individual legally responsible for the destination.
- b. The Reference Standard, including an indication of issue status (e.g., revision date or version number) used for the audit of the certified destination;
- c. The full name, legally registered address, the logo of the CBs, and GSTC Logos (GSTC-accredited Certification Body Logo and GSTC-certified Logo which contains unique identification code);
- d. The logo of the GSTC-Recognized standard owner may be included under the RSO-ACB Framework;
- e. Any other information required by the latest version of the GSTC Guidelines for the Certification Certificate.

8.18.2. Certificate shall be issued no later than 6 months from the last day of the audit. If this timeframe is exceeded, the CBs shall consider the need for extra audits and document the justification.

8.18.3. CBs shall have rules for certified destinations that jointly advertise other tourism destinations that have not been GSTC-certified to the Reference Standard. The advertisement of those other destinations shall not imply that the destinations are GSTC-certified to the Reference Standard.

8.18.4. CBs shall maintain an up-to-date publicly available database of certification of clients including:

- a. Full name of the certified destinations;
- b. Full name and address of the certified destinations' management organizations;
- c. Reference Standard; and
- d. Validity and duration of the certificate.

8.19. Surveillance Audits

8.19.1. Surveillance audits shall be established in the audit program and include periodic audits to assure ongoing validity of the demonstration of fulfillment of the Reference Standard requirements.

8.19.2. Surveillance audits shall be conducted annually. The first surveillance audit following initial certification shall be conducted no later than 12 months from the certification decision date.

8.19.3. Surveillance audits are not necessarily full sustainability management process audits. Surveillance audits may focus on key processes, a portion of the destination management organization, and/or sensitive issues. In the 3-year certification cycle, all requirements shall be covered.

8.19.4. Formats of Surveillance Audits

8.19.4.1. Surveillance audits may be performed on-site or in a hybrid format (a combination of on-site and remote) based on the client risk assessment result by the CB and the characteristics of the stakeholders, sites, attractions, or other businesses the destination has.

8.19.4.2. For high-risk situations, on-site audits shall occur annually.

8.19.4.3. For low-risk or extremely low-risk clients, as determined by the CB's risk assessment, surveillance audits may be performed in a hybrid format.

8.19.4.4. In addition to the overall risk assessment, CBs may consider other relevant factors when determining the modality (on-site or hybrid) for conducting surveillance audits. These factors include but are not limited to nonconformities identified in previous audits and social, economic, cultural, or environmental changes in the client.

8.19.5. Additional Requirements

8.19.5.1. CBs shall follow IAF MD 4:2023 for conducting remote or hybrid audits.

8.19.5.2. CBs' decision on conducting on-site or hybrid audits shall be documented.

8.19.5.3. CBs may undertake random and unannounced monitoring visits.

8.19.5.4. CBs shall maintain certification based on the demonstration that the client continues to comply with the Reference Standard.

8.20. Termination, reduction, suspension, or withdrawal of certification

8.20.1. When a nonconformity with certification requirements is established, the CBs shall define the actions needed to address the following:

- a. Continuation of certification under specified conditions (e.g., extra audit)
- b. Reduction in the scope of certification
- c. Suspension, withdrawal, or termination of the certification

8.20.1.1. Appropriate action taken to lift the suspension, withdrawal, or termination of the certification shall be documented.

9. Personnel Competence Criteria

9.1. CBs shall comply with the requirements in ISO 17065:2012 6.1 Certification body personnel.

9.2. The GSTC Requirements to ISO 17065:2012 Clause 6.1:

- 9.2.1. All personnel involved in the audit or certification decision-making activities shall meet the criteria set out for the relevant role undertaken.
- 9.2.2. Personnel shall possess the knowledge and skills necessary to achieve the intended results of the roles they are expected to perform. Personnel shall possess generic knowledge and skills and shall also be expected to possess the discipline and sector-specific knowledge and skills described in this section.
- 9.2.3. Specific requirements for the GSTC auditors, reviewers, and decision-makers are set out in Sections 10 and 11, respectively.

10. Auditor Qualifications, Knowledge, and Skills

- 10.1. Individuals engaged to undertake audits (which may have one or more members) shall meet the following criteria.

Personal Attributes

- 10.2. Auditors shall possess personal attributes to enable them to act following the principles of auditing stated in ISO 19011:2018. Auditors shall exhibit professional behavior during audit activities, including being:
- 10.2.1. **Ethical:** fair, truthful, sincere, honest, and discreet;
 - 10.2.2. **Open minded:** willing to consider alternative ideas or points of view;
 - 10.2.3. **Diplomatic:** tactful in dealing with people;
 - 10.2.4. **Observant:** actively aware of physical surroundings and activities;
 - 10.2.5. **Perspective:** aware of and able to understand situations;
 - 10.2.6. **Versatile:** adjust readily to different situations;
 - 10.2.7. **Tenacious:** persistent and focused on achieving objectives;
 - 10.2.8. **Decisive:** reach timely conclusions based on logical reasoning and analysis;

- 10.2.9. **Self-reliant:** acts and functions independently while interacting effectively with others;
- 10.2.10. **Firm:** able to act with fortitude; act responsibly and ethically, even though these actions may not always be popular and may sometimes result in disagreement or confrontations;
- 10.2.11. **Open to improvement:** willing to learn from situations;
- 10.2.12. **Culturally sensitive:** observant and respectful to the culture of the auditee; and
- 10.2.13. **Collaborative:** interact effectively with others, including members of the audit team and auditee's personnel.

Knowledge and Skills

10.3. Generic knowledge for auditing:

- 10.3.1. **Knowledge of audit principles, practices, and techniques.** Auditors shall have knowledge of generic audit principles, practices, and techniques, as specified in this manual, sufficient to conduct certification audits and to evaluate internal audit processes.
- 10.3.2. **Knowledge of the CB's process.** Auditors shall have knowledge of a CB's process sufficient to perform audits in accordance with the CB's certification process.
- 10.3.3. **Communication skills appropriate to all levels within the client.** Auditors shall be capable of communicating effectively with persons at any level of an organization using appropriate terminology and expressions.
- 10.3.4. **Note-taking and report-writing skills.** Auditors shall be capable of reading and writing with sufficient speed, accuracy, and comprehension to record, take notes, and effectively communicate audit findings and conclusions.
- 10.3.5. **Presentation skills.** Auditors shall be capable of clearly presenting audit findings and conclusions.

10.3.6. **Interviewing skills.** Auditors shall be capable of interviewing to obtain relevant information by asking open-ended, well-formulated questions and listening to understand and evaluate the answers.

10.3.7. **Audit-management skills.** Auditors shall be capable of conducting and managing an audit to achieve the audit objectives within the agreed timeframe.

10.4. Specific knowledge of sustainability:

10.4.1. Auditors shall have knowledge of the terminology, practices, and processes common to sustainability sufficient to understand the context of the client's operations, including:

10.4.1.1. Sustainability terminology;

10.4.1.2. Aspects and impacts of sustainability;

10.4.1.3. Ability to interpret laws and regulations;

10.4.1.4. Techniques for identification and evaluation of sustainability aspects and impacts and their sustainability significance;

10.4.1.5. Needs, expectations, and concerns of the local community, workforce, and other relevant stakeholders, including heritage, cultural customs, and religious sensitivities; and

10.4.1.6. Social, environmental, economic, and political context in destination development and management.

Education and Work Experience

10.5. Auditor competence can be acquired using a combination of the following:

10.5.1. Education or training that covers generic auditor knowledge and skills under the supervision of an experienced auditor; and

- 10.5.2. Experience involving the exercise of judgment, decision-making, problem-solving, and communication with managers, professionals, peers, customers, and other interested parties.

10.6. Education:

- 10.6.1. Auditors shall have formal education sufficient to acquire the knowledge and skills described in Clause 10.3. A secondary education certificate is the minimum level required for auditors engaged to undertake audits for destinations.

10.7. Work and Audit experience:

- 10.7.1. Lead auditor qualification in any internationally recognized certification programs (such as IRCA, ASQ, etc.) in sectors relevant to tourism; or
- 10.7.2. At least 2 years of experience in the hospitality tourism industry, environmental management, or social sector.

10.8. Training on Auditing:

- 10.8.1. The auditor shall complete the following via online or offline, and CBs shall document the auditor qualification, including the evidence of the training below:
 - 10.8.1.1. Audit techniques and practices based on ISO 19011:2018.
 - 10.8.1.2. Auditing to the Reference Standard(s) for GSTC Certification.

10.9. The GSTC Auditor Training

- 10.9.1. The auditor shall successfully complete the GSTC Auditor Training.

Note: This shall be "GSTC Auditor Training" distinct from other GSTC sustainable tourism training programs for other tourism stakeholders:

- 10.9.1.1. Auditors for Destination shall attend the Auditor Training on the GSTC Destination Standard. Completion of the training grants eligibility to audit the Destination scope.

10.9.1.2. Auditors satisfying the following requirements shall only attend GSTC's introductory session via online or offline as a mandatory training course:

10.9.1.2.1. Having over 3 years of work experience in tourism certification;
and

10.9.1.2.2. Completed at least 5 audits of Destination against a GSTC-Recognized standard or the GSTC Destination Standard completed within the previous three (3) consecutive years.

10.9.1.2.3. If some or all of the 5 audits were completed prior to the GSTC's Recognition of the standard, the decision to accept those audits will be based on how similar the standard was before and after GSTC's Recognition. The final decision lies solely with the GSTC and is at GSTC's discretion.

Note: The outline of the GSTC Auditor Training course is presented in Annex B. Questions on GSTC Auditor Training should be directed to the GSTC.

10.9.2. **Evaluation of the GSTC Auditor Training.** Auditors shall successfully pass the approved GSTC Auditor Training evaluation, which is divided into online written exam and field performance test evaluations:

10.9.2.1. **Online evaluation.** The passing marks for the written exam on the contents and application of the GSTC Destination Standard shall be 85%+. The exam may be re-taken once, with the same requirement of 85%+ passing marks. If failed a second time, the entire training course shall be repeated prior to additional testing.

10.9.2.2. **Field evaluation.** Passing marks for the field performance test on the ability to apply the GSTC Destination Standard to the field and the audit skills shall be 75%+. In the case of failure to pass the field performance test, the auditor shall observe at least five (5) field audits as a trainee auditor or

conduct supplementary mock-audits and be evaluated internally by both qualified staff within the CB and GSTC.

10.9.2.3. The auditors satisfying 10.9.1.2 shall take the online exam but shall be exempted from the field evaluation. The passing mark for the online evaluation shall be 85%+.

10.9.2.4. Auditors are allowed to retake the exam one time, with the same requirement of 85%+ passing mark. If failed a 2nd time, the training course shall be repeated prior to additional testing.

10.10. The CB shall determine whether or not personnel are competent to undertake audits, review audit reports, and make certification decisions in each country covered by its accreditation scope, considering that there may be significantly different regulatory, cultural, and language issues.

10.11. Auditors auditing against a GSTC-Recognized standard shall receive specific training on the interpretation, use and application of that standard. This training shall be provided by the Standard Owner or the CB as such content is not part of the GSTC Auditor Training.

Maintenance and Improvement of Competence

10.12. The GSTC-qualified auditors shall continually improve their competence. Auditors shall maintain their auditing competence through regular participation in sustainability audits and continual professional development. Continual professional development involves the maintenance and improvement of competence. This may be achieved through means such as additional work experience, training, private study, coaching, attendance at meetings, seminars, conferences, or other relevant activities.

10.13. Auditors shall demonstrate their continuing professional development.

10.14. Auditors shall attend follow-up training organized by the GSTC whenever changes are made to the GSTC Destination Standard.

- 10.15. Up-to-date records of auditor competency shall be maintained. The record of auditors newly qualified for the GSTC destination auditing shall be submitted to the GSTC for reviewing and managing the GSTC's list of qualified auditors.
- 10.16. Verification mechanisms:
- 10.16.1. **Periodical Evaluation.** The CB shall evaluate auditors' competence at least every three years through a combination of an observed on-site audit, shadow audits, and feedback from different sources, such as a review of audit reports or client feedback. The evaluation of auditors shall be recorded.
 - 10.16.2. **Revised GSTC Destination Standard Examination.** Approved Auditors shall pass an examination within six months of the issue of revised GSTC Destination Standard or certification requirements. The GSTC shall manage and communicate the type of examination required (e.g., online, field performance, or both) to assess competency, as well as to provide value and benefit to CBs and independent auditors.

Compliance with GSTC Code of Conduct

- 10.17. Auditors conducting audits under the GSTC Standards shall comply at all times with the GSTC Code of Conduct and Integrity Agreement for Individuals Qualified in GSTC Auditor Training, as amended from time to time. By conducting such audits, the auditors acknowledge their obligation to adhere to the principles of professionalism, integrity, objectivity, confidentiality, independence, and ethical conduct set out therein.
- 10.18. Failure to comply with the Code of Conduct may result in the suspension or revocation of the auditor's GSTC qualification and authorization to conduct audits under the GSTC Standards.

11. Reviewers and Certification Decision Makers: Qualification, Knowledge, and Skills

- 11.1. The personnel appointed by the CB as reviewers and certification decision-makers shall collectively possess the following knowledge and skills:
 - 11.1.1. Auditing principles, practices, and techniques: Knowledge of generic management systems auditing principles, practices, and techniques sufficient to understand a certification audit report;
 - 11.1.2. Knowledge of the GSTC Destination Standard used as Reference Standard: Successful completion of the GSTC Auditor Training;
 - 11.1.3. Knowledge of the GSTC-Recognized standard used as Reference Standard: Knowledge of the Reference Standards being specified for certification sufficient to make a decision based on a certification audit report, including the understanding of local, social, cultural, and business contexts;
 - 11.1.4. CB processes: Knowledge of the CB's processes sufficient to determine if expectations of the CB have been fulfilled based on the information submitted for review;
 - 11.1.5. Tourism sector: Knowledge of the terminology, practices, and processes common to a client's work sufficient to understand an audit report in the context of the Reference Standard;
 - 11.1.6. Terms, definitions, and processes in sustainable tourism: Knowledge of the terms, definitions, and processes related to sustainable tourism sufficient to understand a certification audit report;
 - 11.1.7. Language understanding to allow them to use the relevant language version of the GSTC Destination Standard and, if applicable, the GSTC-Recognized standard:
 - 11.1.7.1. Should comfortably read and speak the language used by most personnel in the tourism destination and in which the reports are written; and

11.1.7.2. This only applies to audits and certifications not undertaken in English. See Section 6 of this Manual regarding languages for audits and auditors.

11.1.8. Knowledge of multi-site and group certification (if applicable): understanding and applying requirements and guidance for multi-site and group certification.

12. Eligibility for Destination Certification and Steps

12.1. GSTC Destination Certification shall be made through the following options.

12.1.1. Step-by-step pathways.

12.1.1.1. Pathway 1: Three-step approach - Candidacy to GSTC SMS-verified to GSTC-certified.

- a. Step 1: Applying for GSTC Destination Certification Candidacy Status. CBs shall verify that the client meets the requirements described in 12.3.
- b. Step 2: Applying for GSTC Sustainable Management System Verified (SMS-verified) destination status. CBs shall verify that the client meets the requirements described in Section 13.
- c. Step 3: Applying for GSTC-certified Destination status. CBs shall conduct a conformity assessment of the client against the Reference Standard to determine compliance with all applicable requirements. In addition, CBs shall verify that the client meets the specific requirements outlined in Section 14.

12.1.1.2. Pathway 2-1: Two-step approach - Candidacy to GSTC-certified.

- a. Step 1: Applying for GSTC Destination Certification Candidacy Status. CBs shall verify that the client meets the requirements described in 12.3.

- b. Step 2: Applying for GSTC-certified Destination status. CBs shall conduct a conformity assessment of the client against the Reference Standard to determine compliance with all applicable requirements. In addition, CBs shall verify that the client meets the specific requirements outlined in Section 14.

12.1.1.3. Pathway 2-2: Two-step approach - GSTC SMS-verified to GSTC-certified.

- a. Step 1: Applying for GSTC SMS-verified Destination Status. CBs shall verify that the client meets the requirements described in Section 13.
- b. Step 2: Applying for GSTC-certified Destination status. CBs shall conduct a conformity assessment of the client against the Reference Standard to determine compliance with all applicable requirements. In addition, CBs shall verify that the client meets the specific requirements outlined in Section 14.

12.1.2. Directly applying for GSTC-certified Destination status: CBs shall conduct a conformity assessment of the client against the Reference Standard and confirm that the client meets all requirements of the standard.

12.2. A client shall not hold a GSTC Destination Certification Candidacy status for more than two years (see Clause 13.2). The client shall obtain either a GSTC SMS-verified Destination or a GSTC-certified Destination status.

12.2.1. If a client selects Pathway 1, the CB shall initiate Step 3 within three years of issuing the GSTC SMS-verified Destination Certificate. (see Clause 13.4)

12.3. Eligibility for step-by-step pathways 1 and 2 (2-1 and 2-2).

12.3.1. Completion of a Destination Certification Candidacy Course.

12.3.1.1. To be eligible as a Candidate for Destination Certification, the applicant organization representative shall complete the free online GSTC Candidacy Course. This is an online asynchronous course, which the proposed Candidate can take at any time prior to applying for Candidacy.

Table 1. Step-by-step pathways to Certification

Pathways to Certification		Inclusion of Candidacy Status	Inclusion of GSTC SMS-verified	Online Candidacy Course
Step-by-Step Pathways	Three-step approach: Candidacy → GSTC SMS-verified → GSTC-certified	✓ Yes	✓ Yes	✓ Yes
	Two-step approach: Candidacy → GSTC-certified	✓ Yes	✗ No	✓ Yes
	Two-step approach: GSTC SMS-verified → GSTC-certified	✗ No	✓ Yes	✓ Yes
Direct to Certification	Fully direct to GSTC-certified	✗ No	✗ No	✗ No

12.3.2. Submission of the documents demonstrating a sustainable tourism management system is in place by a DMO. The documents include the following:

12.3.2.1. Introduction of DMO:

- a. The name of the organization applying for candidacy.
- b. Demonstrate that the organization has been in place to manage destination.
- c. Link to the organization's website.
- d. Name and geographic description of the destination.
- e. Inventory of destination tourism businesses, including hotels/accommodations, tour operators, and tourism attractions.

- f. The organization's chart or structure, which identifies all paid and contracted employees and with the lead person responsible for certification clearly identified.
- g. The organization's most recent strategic plan, including its mission statement, goals, and objectives.
- h. The organization's financial plan outlining current and future funding sources for operating the destination organization.

12.3.2.2. **Governance and regulatory responsibilities.** Information on governing bodies or organizations who are responsible for the following areas:

- a. Policy-Making Body, with respect to the destination's ordinances, permitting systems, and development.
- b. Workforce Development and Management.
- c. Safety and Security Management.
- d. Risk and Crisis Management.
- e. Destination Planning.
- f. Land Development and Property Management.
- g. Cultural Resources Management.
- h. Climate Change Management.
- i. Energy and Power Production.
- j. Natural Resources Management.
- k. Water Quality and Stewardship Management.
- l. Waste Management.
- m. Pollution Control.

n. Transportation Management.

12.3.2.3. **Stakeholder Engagement.** List the organization's annual activities that demonstrate engagement with the following destination stakeholders:

a. Private tourism sector.

b. Public sector.

c. Civil society.

d. Residents.

12.3.3. CBs shall verify the submitted information through a desk assessment to accept the destinations as GSTC Destination Certification Candidates.

12.3.3.1. CBs shall submit the list of destinations with the GSTC Destination Certification Candidacy status to the GSTC within 10 days of officially granting the destination the Candidacy status.

12.3.3.2. The GSTC shall review the CB's verification reports related to the Candidacy and/or the GSTC SMS-verified during surveillance audits.

12.4. Eligibility for Destination Certification

12.4.1. A destination is ineligible for the GSTC Certification if:

12.4.1.1. It has had its certificate withdrawn within the last 2 years.

12.4.1.2. It has had its certificate suspended within the previous 6 months.

12.4.2. The CB shall require the destination to declare any cases of forced labor convictions or environmental violations in the destination during the application and certification periods.

12.4.3. If documented cases of forced labor or environmental law violations have occurred in the past two years, the Destination shall disclose them to the CB and provide

evidence of the prevention, response, and follow-up mechanisms implemented, along with the outcomes achieved.

- 12.4.3.1. Certification may only be denied if the destination fails to demonstrate that it has a functional framework for managing such cases or if there is evidence of poor governance or inaction.

13. Requirements for Sustainable Destination Management Verification

- 13.1. Destinations can apply for the GSTC SMS-verified Destination status before seeking GSTC Destination Certification.
- 13.2. CBs shall initiate the verification process within two years of obtaining GSTC Destination Certification Candidacy status if the destination follows the three-step pathway as outlined in 12.1.1.1.
- 13.3. CBs shall verify if the destination meets Pillar A requirements of the GSTC Destination Standard through desk assessment.
- 13.4. CBs shall initiate the GSTC Destination Certification process within three years of issuing the certificate of the GSTC SMS-verified Destination.
- 13.5. CBs shall guide their clients in claiming their GSTC SMS-verified status rather than delivering it as a GSTC-certified destination.

14. Requirements for Destination Certification

Time Limits for Destination Candidacy and GSTC SMS-verified Status

- 14.1. Destinations shall apply for the GSTC Destination Certification after obtaining the GSTC SMS-verified Destination status or the GSTC Destination Certification Candidacy status within no later than the following periods.

- 14.1.1. The GSTC Destination Certification application shall be submitted within 2 years of obtaining Candidacy status or 3 years of being a GSTC SMS-verified destination (see Clause 12.2).
- 14.1.2. CBs shall verify compliance with all applicable requirements during the certification process, regardless of the destination's GSTC Candidacy or SMS-verified status.

Requirements for Certified tourism businesses, Renewable energy, and Green transport

- 14.2. The CBs shall verify the following requirements before proceeding with the certification process.
 - 14.2.1. The destination shall have a baseline and a clear plan for sustainable tourism management with specific targets for certified tourism businesses, renewable energy, and green transport. CBs are responsible for verifying the plan's existence, completeness, and adequacy to ensure they meet the required standards.
- 14.3. **Certified Tourism Businesses.** At least 15% of the following tourism businesses have been certified to international or national sustainability standards, which include the GSTC Standards.
 - 14.3.1. The international or national sustainability standards shall cover social, cultural, and environmental aspects of sustainability.
 - 14.3.2. The certification in clause 14.3.1 shall be performed by certification bodies accredited by national or international accreditation organizations.
 - 14.3.3. Only certified tourism businesses with a registered legal address in the destination shall be considered when estimating the percentage of certified businesses, and these shall be limited to the following types:
 - 14.3.3.1. Hotels/Accommodations
 - 14.3.3.2. Tour operators
 - 14.3.3.3. MICE

14.3.3.4. Attractions

14.3.3.5. Food and Beverage Service Providers

14.3.4. The percentage of the certified tourism businesses includes:

14.3.4.1. The percentage of GSTC-certified hotels/accommodations;

14.3.4.2. The percentage of GSTC-certified tour operators;

14.3.4.3. The percentage of GSTC-certified MICE businesses;

14.3.4.4. The percentage of GSTC-certified attractions;

14.3.4.5. The percentage of GSTC-certified food and beverage service providers;

14.3.4.6. The percentage of certified tourism businesses to the GSTC-Recognized standards that are used by GSTC-accredited CBs; and

14.3.4.7. The percentage of certified tourism businesses against other international or national standards that are described in clauses 14.3.1 and 14.3.2.

14.3.5. CBs shall justify why a destination is awarded GSTC certification when less than 15% of the destination's tourism businesses are certified as sustainable.

Note: The percentage of GSTC-certified MICE businesses (14.3.4.3), attractions (14.3.4.4), and food and beverage service providers (14.3.4.5) shall be counted from the launch of such certification. However, other available GSTC certifications that comply with clauses 14.3.4.1 and 14.3.4.2 may be registered.

14.4. **Renewable energy.** Destinations set targets for renewable energy production and supply with a defined timeframe that is aligned with the national climate change strategy and renewable energy production.

14.4.1. Renewable energy supply accounts for at least 10% of the total where applicable.

14.4.2. CBs shall justify why a destination is awarded GSTC certification with less than 10% of its energy coming from renewable sources.

14.4.2.1. Meeting the planned targets shall be verified annually.

14.5. **Green transport.** Destinations set targets for green transport and cleaner mobility aligned with national climate change strategy and target and provide evidence that confirms the implementation of the target.

14.5.1. Destinations have a green transportation policy with a specific target of green public transportation.

14.5.2. At least 10% of rental vehicles and tour buses use green transport solutions.

14.5.3. CBs shall justify why a destination is awarded GSTC certification when less than 10% of rental vehicles and tour buses offer green transport solutions.

Note: See the definition of Green transport in the Glossary.

Note: "Requirements for Certified tourism businesses, Renewable energy, and Green transport" are applied from 2030. Please refer to the document "[Guidance on the Grace Period for Three New Requirements for GSTC Destination Certification \(Under the GSTC Accreditation Manual for Certification Bodies – Destination v2.0\)](#)".

Sampling Requirements

14.6. The CBs shall have documented procedures for determining the sampling process and audit duration based on the following factors:

14.6.1. The size of the DMO;

14.6.2. Tourism contribution to the destination economy;

14.6.3. The ratio of the volume of visitors to the number of residents;

14.6.4. The percentage of residents involved in tourism-related businesses;

14.6.5. The complexity of tourism businesses in terms of numbers, types, and size;

14.6.6. Culturally significant and/or sensitive tangible and intangible heritage, such as UNESCO World Heritage sites, archaeological sites, national or local heritage, and/or Indigenous communities; and

14.6.7. Environmentally important and/or vulnerable sites include locally, nationally, or internationally protected areas, sites vulnerable to climate change, high biodiversity ecosystems, etc.

14.7. The CBs shall ensure the samples represent diverse stakeholders, including businesses, communities, civil societies, academia, and public bodies, as well as places most visited and conflicts raised due to tourism. The procedure shall meet IAF MD1:2018 Requirements.

15. Certification Program with Multilevel Award System

15.1. The certification scheme collaborating with the GSTC-accredited CB that allows multiple levels of compliance shall ensure that the minimum level meets the GSTC Destination Standard, and the certification process for any level shall comply with the requirements stated in this Manual, as long as the level is referred to as certification.

Example: A certification scheme categorizes hotels into three levels: Bronze, Silver, and Gold. For a hotel to be referred to as "certified at the Bronze level," it shall meet all GSTC Standard or its criteria or indicators equivalent to the GSTC Standard and have a valid GSTC-Recognized status.

16. Branding & Market Access

16.1. Licensing Agreement:

16.1.1. A GSTC-accredited CB shall operate in accordance with a Certification Body Licensing Agreement (CBLA) with the GSTC.

16.1.2. The CBLA establishes the terms of licensing for the GSTC-accredited CB to use the GSTC trademarks specific to the agreement (including the GSTC-certified Logo for destination and the GSTC-accredited Logo). The agreement delineates terms and

conditions of use, ownership, and application of the trademarks, duties, and usage guidelines. It outlines the duration, termination conditions, and licensing logo fees.

16.1.3. A RSO subcontracting auditing and certification services with one or more GSTC-accredited CBs shall operate in accordance with a Recognized Standard Owner Licensing Agreement (RSOLA) with the GSTC.

16.1.3.1. The RSOLA establishes the terms of licensing for the RSO to use the GSTC trademarks specific to the agreement (including the GSTC-certified Logo for destination). The agreement delineates terms and conditions of use, ownership, and application of the trademarks, duties, and usage guidelines. It outlines the duration, termination conditions, and licensing logo fees. The use of the GSTC-accredited Logo by the RSO owner is not permitted.

16.1.3.2. RSO shall not state or imply in its marketing or operational material or instructions that it is a GSTC-accredited CB. Further guidance in this regard is provided within the RSOLA.

16.2. Market Access for Certified Destinations:

16.2.1. The GSTC shall make publicly available a list of the GSTC-accredited CBs together with a summary of each CB authorized for publication by the CB.

16.2.2. The GSTC may arrange publicity and promotion of the GSTC-accredited CB and tourism businesses and destinations certified by the GSTC-accredited CBs.

16.2.3. The GSTC-accredited CBs shall provide a list of certified destinations to the GSTC upon request.

16.2.4. The certificate holders of ACBs and RSOs, who have a valid licensing agreement, may be eligible for various market access opportunities and promotions directly from the GSTC, depending on available resources. Engagement in these programs and activities shall comply with the terms of the licensing agreements with the GSTC, as well as any separate Trademark Licensing Agreements and Non-disclosure Agreements that the GSTC may require.

- 16.2.5. The GSTC Logo Usage relating to the GSTC Destination Certification shall comply with the terms of the CBLA with the GSTC.

Annex A - GSTC Checklist: Recognized Standard Owner - GSTC-accredited Certification Framework (RSO - ACB Framework) (Normative)

This document outlines the steps for implementing the Recognized Standard Owner - GSTC-accredited Certification Body Framework (RSO - ACB Framework) for accreditation described in Clause 5.1.3.3 of this Manual. The CB and the RSO shall comply with the Checklist and steps below, when the CB applies for the scope extension of accreditation to provide auditing and certification services against the GSTC-Recognized Standard on behalf of the standard owner.

A.1. Checklist and steps

A.1.1. The RSO signs a service agreement with an GSTC-accredited CB:

- The RSO agrees to no longer manage/provide auditing and certification services.
- The agreement sets out the rules for carrying out auditing and certification services on behalf of the RSO.
- The RSO and ACB agree on the role of the RSO auditors in the accredited process, in line with the main principle that the RSO shall not be involved in the certification and the entire process shall be carried out only by the ACB on behalf of the RSO. If RSO auditors continue to audit under the RSO-ACB Framework arrangement, these auditors will have to qualify as the GSTC auditor following the respective GSTC Accreditation Manual requirements and no conflict of interest shall be ensured.
- The RSO can sign a service agreement with one or more ACBs to perform all the auditing functions and certification decisions for the certification of clients.

A.1.2. Licensing Agreement GSTC & RSO/ GSTC - ACB:

- Enter into a Licensing Agreement with the GSTC, which provides rules of engagements for the GSTC logo and trademark usage.

- Enter into a CBLA with the GSTC, which provides rules of engagement for the GSTC logo and trademark usage for its own clients and for clients of any and all Recognized Standard Owners that contract with the CB to conduct certification/auditing functions on their behalf.

A.1.3. The ACB submits an application for extension of technical sub-scope to GSTC:

- The CB shall indicate and provide the evidence regarding the GSTC-Recognized Standard owned by the respective RSO.
- The Standard of the RSO shall be the GSTC-Recognized Standard. If the GSTC-Recognized status is expired, the RSO shall re-apply or renew the GSTC-Recognized status of the standard in accordance with the latest version of the [GSTC-Recognized Manual](#).

A.1.4. GSTC reviews the application:

- To determine the duration and type of assessment needed.
- For technical scope extensions, a desk review shall be always required. Whether witnessing is necessary will be determined based on structural similarities between the GSTC Standard and the Recognized standard. This review shall be conducted by the GSTC.
- The extension of the geographical scope of the Recognized standard shall be applied separately by the RSO and the CB's capacity with the extended geographical scope shall be assessed after the approval of the RSO-ACB Framework.

A.1.5. GSTC carries out a desk review to assess the GSTC-accredited CB's readiness of the certification using the RSO's GSTC-Recognized standard:

- Major nonconformities resulting from the desk review shall be satisfactorily closed before the witness assessment can be scheduled.

A.1.6. GSTC carries out a witnessing to assess the GSTC-accredited CB's capability of auditing to the GSTC-Recognized standard:

- Major nonconformities resulting from the witness assessment shall be satisfactorily closed by the agreed due date or within 90 days.

A.1.7. Upon a positive GSTC decision to extend the scope of accreditation, the GSTC-accredited CB will be entitled to carry out certification services on behalf of the RSO.

A.1.8. The ACB carries out the certification audit and makes the certification decision against the GSTC-Recognized Standard, while the RSO remains the owner of the standard but shall not be involved in any part of the certification process.

A.2. Associated documentation

A.2.1. The GSTC Accreditation Manual for Certification Bodies - Destination in its latest version.

A.2.2. GSTC Accreditation Procedure in its latest version.

A.2.3. GSTC Recognized Standard Owner - GSTC-accredited Certification Body (RSO-ACB) Framework in its latest version.

Annex B - Outlines the GSTC training modules, evaluation criteria, and sanctions protocol applicable to GSTC Destination Auditors.

B1. Training modules and evaluation

B1.1. The GSTC Auditor Training modules consist of the following content:

- a. Understanding of sustainable tourism;
- b. Overview of the GSTC;
- c. GSTC Destination Standard criteria and indicators; and
- d. Explanation on the exams.

B1.2. The completion of the auditor training requires the following:

- a. Attendance of the training designated for auditors;
- b. 85% + achievement in the written exam; and
- c. 75% + achievement in the performance test (mock audit).
- d. The auditors who meet the requirements of Clause 10.9.1.2 may attend the sessions on "Understanding of sustainable tourism" and "Overview of the GSTC" as outlined in Clause B1.1.

B2. GSTC Auditor Training Sanction

B2.1. GSTC may sanction those who cheat during the test. For auditors, GSTC may issue a 2-year sanction prohibiting them from participating in GSTC Auditor Training.

B2.2. If, on the second chance, the auditor is again caught cheating, the auditor will be prohibited from attending GSTC Auditor Training.

B3. Sanction protocol for GSTC Auditors

B3.1. Sanction protocol for GSTC Auditors is designed to uphold the integrity and standards of the auditing process to ensure accountability and professionalism. Sanctions will be imposed on GSTC Auditors who violate accreditation requirements related to:

- Conflict of Interest;
- Impartiality; and/or
- Fraud.

B3.2. Violation or misbehavior of auditors can be recognized (or identified) via grievances, complaints, compliance assessment, or oversight activities, and shall be verified through the GSTC's investigation and documentation.

B3.3. In case of misbehaviour by GSTC Auditors, the following disciplinary actions shall be implemented:

B3.3.1. Initial warning: The auditor shall be formally given a warning letter from the GSTC and shall be suspended as an authorized GSTC Auditor from the GSTC Certification for a period of 3 months.

B3.3.2. Subsequent warning: Upon recurrence of misbehaviour, a second warning shall be issued. The information will be published on the GSTC website, and the CB's hired or contracted auditor will be suspended for 3 months accompanied by a suspension of the authorized GSTC Auditors from the GSTC Certification for a period of 6 months. The auditor shall retake the GSTC Auditor Training Course after three months to be authorised again. The CB shall have additional training and monitoring activities.

B3.3.3. Final warning: In the event of further misbehavior, the auditor's authorization will be withdrawn, and relevant sanctions shall be imposed on the CB.