

TECHNICAL CIRCULAR

Ref. DC2026SPM083

Milan, 15-05-2026

To all accredited and accreditation-in-progress Certification Bodies

To the Associations of Conformity Assessment Bodies

To all DCI Assessors/Experts

Their offices

SUBJECT: Technical Circular DC No. 18/2026 – Provisions regarding accreditation for the GSTC Destination scheme, version 2.1

INTRODUCTION

Tourism destinations constitute the territorial level where the effects of tourism—both positive and critical—are most directly experienced in economic, social, cultural, and environmental terms. Within the reference framework of the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC), tourism sustainability is primarily addressed at destination level, recognizing that only through structured and continuous territorial management can tourism processes be governed effectively.

Tourism that is planned and managed responsibly can represent an important development lever for destinations, contributing to local economic growth, job creation, the enhancement of natural and cultural resources, and the overall improvement of the quality of places. These benefits, however, are not automatic and require appropriate policies, tools, and organizational arrangements.

In the absence of effective destination governance, the growth of tourist flows may generate significant imbalances. The phenomenon of overtourism, which is increasingly frequent in highly attractive contexts, is attributable to situations where the intensity or concentration of tourism exceeds the territory's capacity to absorb its effects without compromising environmental, social, and cultural balance. Consequences may include the deterioration of ecosystems, congestion of spaces and infrastructure, a worsening of residents' quality of life, and a progressive loss of authenticity and attractiveness of the destination itself.

Within the GSTC framework, these critical issues are addressed by placing destination management at the center and recognizing the strategic role of organizations responsible for coordinating and steering tourism policies. The adoption of Sustainability Management Systems makes it possible to integrate planning, stakeholder engagement, impact monitoring, and corrective actions, providing a solid basis to prevent and mitigate dynamics related to overtourism.

REGULATORY CONTEXT

The Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) is a multi-stakeholder initiative established in 2007, which includes among its founding partners UNEP, UNWTO, the UN Foundation, Sabre Holdings, and Rainforest Alliance, among others. It was formed in response to the challenges and opportunities of sustainable tourism, bringing together two previous initiatives. In 2014, GSTC merged with the Tour Operator Initiative (TOI), with TOI members' operations joining the GSTC organization.

More than 250 organizations from the public, private, and non-profit sectors, as well as from tourism, environmental management, and sustainable development, have contributed to the work of GSTC and its two predecessor bodies.

GSTC's mission is: "To maximize tourism's potential to be a driver of positive conservation and economic development for communities and businesses worldwide and a tool to alleviate poverty".

The GSTC certification scheme for tourism destinations stems from the internationally recognized need to have a single, credible, and shared reference framework to assess tourism sustainability at destination level.

Destination certification against the GSTC Standard fits into this context as an independent verification tool of the effectiveness of the adopted management systems. It does not merely attest compliance with formal requirements but aims to strengthen destinations' ability to steer tourism development toward sustainable, resilient, and socially shared models over the medium and long term.

Tourism, in fact, by directly affecting the environment, local communities, infrastructure, governance, and economic systems, requires tools that go beyond sector-based or voluntary approaches and enable systemic, verifiable, and comparable assessments. In this context, the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) has developed a system based on:

- global sustainability standards,
- quality assurance mechanisms,
- formal accreditation of certification bodies,

in line with international best practices in conformity assessment.

SCHEME-SPECIFIC ELEMENTS

The GSTC scheme is also fully consistent with the 2030 Agenda and with the role attributed to tourism as a cross-cutting lever for achieving the SDGs, particularly with regard to inclusive economic development, sustainable production and consumption models, ecosystem protection, and territorial governance.

The standard covers, in an integrated manner:

- destination governance and strategic management;
- socio-economic benefits for local communities;
- protection of cultural heritage;
- environmental safeguarding, climate, natural resources, and biodiversity.

All requirements contained in the reference standards are mandatory and are subject to conformity assessment within the scope of certification.

The scheme is not conceived as an isolated “pass/fail” mechanism, but as a structured pathway supporting sustainability.

To this end, the following are provided for:

- candidacy status, which attests the existence of a DMO, i.e., the (public, private, or mixed) organization responsible for coordinating, managing, and developing tourism in a destination and, consequently, a minimum governance framework;
- verification of the Sustainability Management System (SMS-verified), focused on organizational and planning capabilities;
- full destination certification, attesting compliance with all standard requirements.

This structure enables:

- the gradual entry of destinations into the system;
- alignment between management maturity and level of recognition;
- the promotion of continuous improvement, a foundational element of the GSTC scheme.

CERTIFICATION RULES

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| Normative references for certification | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• GSTC Accreditation Manual for Certification Bodies - Destination version 2.1 in force from 1st March 2026.• GSTC Destination Criteria Version 2.0 in force from 06th December 2019.• Guidance on the Grace Period for Three New Requirements for GSTC Destination Certification (in force until 31st december 2029). |
| Certification process | <p>In addition to the requirements of the accreditation standard UNI CEI EN ISO/IEC 17065 and the ACCREDIA Accreditation Regulations in their current version, the requirements of § 8 of the above Accreditation Manual apply, as well as what is provided for by the requirements of GSTC Accreditation Procedural Documents:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• GSTC Accreditation Procedure v.3.0;• GSTC Surveillance and Sampling Procedure v.1.0;• GSTC Witnessing Procedure v.1.0;• GSTC Opening and Closing Meetings Procedure v.1.0;• GSTC Findings Procedure v.1.0;• GSTC Grievance Procedure for Accreditation v.2.0;• GSTC Accreditation Fee Schedule version 3.0. |

Entities that may apply for certification

The requirements of §§ 12-13-14 of the document “GSTC Accreditation Manual for Certification Bodies - Destination version 2.1” apply.

Specifically, it is noted that there is the possibility to access certification through three (3) different pathways:

| Pathways to Certification | | Candidacy Status | Inclusion of GSTC SMS-verified? | Online Candidacy Course |
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| 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 |

Pathway 1: Three-phase approach – transition from GSTC Candidacy to GSTC SMS verified, and finally to GSTC certified.

- a. a) Phase 1: Application for **Candidacy** for GSTC destination certification. The CAB must verify that the client meets the requirements described in section 12.3 (i.e., completion of a specific online training course).
- b. b) Phase 2: Application to join the SMS-verified level (Sustainable Management System Verified). The CAB must verify that the client meets the requirements described in Section 13 (Requirements for Sustainable Destination Management Verification; the process must be initiated within 2 years from obtaining Candidate status; the destination must meet the requirements of Pillar A of the GSTC Destination Standard; the CAB verifies this through a document review. The GSTC Destination certification process must be initiated within 3 years from issuance of the certificate as an SMS-verified Destination).
- c. c) Phase 3: Application for the status of GSTC Certified Destination. The CAB must conduct a conformity assessment of the client against the Reference Standard to determine compliance with all applicable requirements. In addition, the CAB will verify that the client meets the specific requirements described in Section 14 (Requirements for Destination Certification: the application for GSTC destination certification must be submitted within 2 years from obtaining candidacy status or within 3 years from SMS-verified status; all requirements, including additional ones, must be verified by the CAB).

Pathway 2-1: Two-phase approach – from Candidacy to GSTC Certification.

- a. a) Phase 1: Application for Candidacy for GSTC destination certification. The CAB must verify that the client meets the requirements described in section 12.3 (i.e., completion of a specific online training course).
- b. b) Phase 2: Application for the status of GSTC Certified Destination. The CAB must conduct a conformity assessment of the client against the Reference Standard to determine compliance with all applicable requirements. In addition, Certification Bodies will verify that the client meets the specific requirements described in Section 14 (Requirements for Destination Certification: the application for

GSTC destination certification must be submitted within 2 years from obtaining candidacy status; all requirements, including additional ones, must be verified by the CAB).

Pathway 2-2: Two-phase approach – from GSTC SMS-verified to a GSTC Certificate.

- a. a) Phase 1: Application to join the SMS-verified level (Sustainable Management System Verified). The CAB must verify that the client meets the requirements described in Section 13 (Requirements for Sustainable Destination Management Verification; the destination must meet the requirements of Pillar A of the GSTC Destination Standard; the CAB verifies this through a document review. The GSTC Destination certification process must be initiated within 3 years from issuance of the certificate as an SMS-verified Destination).
- b. b) Phase 2: Application for the status of GSTC Certified Destination. The CAB must conduct a conformity assessment of the client against the Reference Standard to determine compliance with all applicable requirements. In addition, the CAB will verify that the client meets the specific requirements described in Section 14 (Requirements for Destination Certification: the application for GSTC destination certification must be submitted within 2 years from obtaining candidacy status; all requirements, including additional ones, must be verified by the CAB).

Direct pathway: The Destination applies directly for the status of GSTC Certified Destination; therefore, the CAB must carry out a conformity assessment of the client against the reference standard and confirm that the client meets all standard requirements, including any additional ones.

A Destination may not hold GSTC Destination Certification Candidacy status for more than two years.

Completion of the online Candidacy course is required both for Step 1 and for all Step 2 pathways.

Competence criteria for the audit team and personnel involved in the certification process

Knowledge and competence requirements and the criteria for maintaining auditor qualification are defined in §§ 9 and 10 of the document “GSTC Accreditation Manual for Certification Bodies - Destination version 2.1”.

In particular, Auditors must have:

- general, documented knowledge of audit principles and techniques (ISO 19011),
- knowledge of the certification body's certification processes;
- specific knowledge of sustainability terminology, practices, and processes;
- audit or work experience, namely:
 - qualification as a Lead Auditor in any internationally recognized certification programme (such as IRCA, ASQ, etc.) in sectors relevant to tourism, or at least 2

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| | <p>years of experience in the hotel tourism sector, environmental management, or the social sector;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ training on auditing methods: training on the applicable scheme documents, successful completion of the GSTC training. <p>All Auditors, in order to be qualified as GSTC Auditors, must attend and pass a course divided into a theoretical and a practical part (for details, refer to Annex B of the document “GSTC Accreditation Manual for Certification Bodies - Destination version 2.1” updated on 10.02.2025).</p> <p>It will be sufficient for Auditors to attend only the introductory part of the course relating to “Understanding sustainable tourism”, provided that the following conditions are met:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - more than 3 years of work experience in tourism certification; - having completed at least 5 destination audits conducted against a GSTC-Recognized standard or the GSTC Standard for Destinations, carried out in the previous three (3) consecutive years. <p>In any case, the qualifications of personnel involved in the various stages of the certification process shall also take into account the geographic scope of the Certification Body’s client portfolio and the competencies needed for locally applicable regulatory, cultural, and linguistic aspects.</p> |
| <p>Competence criteria for reviewers and decision makers</p> | <p>Knowledge and competence requirements and the criteria for maintaining qualification for reviewers and decision makers are defined in § 11 of the document “GSTC Accreditation Manual for Certification Bodies - Destination version 2.1”.</p> <p>In particular:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Reviewers and decision makers must have knowledge and competence in relation to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • audit techniques and principles applicable to system audits; • knowledge of UNI CEI EN ISO/IEC 17065; • knowledge of GSTC criteria and indicators applicable to the scheme; successful completion of GSTC auditor training; • certification processes; • terminology, processes, and principles applicable to the tourism sector; • terminology, processes, and principles applicable to the sustainable tourism sector; • certification processes for multi-site organizations/groups. |
| <p>Audit duration</p> | <p>As provided for in § 8.14 of the document “GSTC Accreditation Manual for Certification Bodies - Destination version 2.1”, audit duration is determined based on the risk associated with the client, taking into account the factors already defined but not limiting the assessment to them.</p> |

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| | <p>The CAB shall also take into account the travel time required to reach and return from the audited sites and the time spent reviewing documentation preparatory to defining the level of risk; these times may not be counted when determining audit duration.</p> |
| Assessment of multi-site organizations | <p>For the assessment of a multi-site organization, document IAF MD 01 applies.</p> |
| How the audit is conducted | <p>For audit modalities, please refer to the requirements contained in the document “GSTC Accreditation Manual for Certification Bodies - Destination version 2.1”, with particular attention to the following provisions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. - at least initial and recertification audits must be conducted on site; b. - the first surveillance audit after certification is issued must be carried out no later than 12 months from the decision date; c. - remote audits or mixed-mode audits are allowed depending on the risk associated with the individual destination and the characteristics of interested parties, sites, attractions, or other interests available to it. In any case, for destinations identified at least as low risk, surveillance audits may be carried out in hybrid mode; d. - in cases of situations identified as High risk, annual surveillance must be carried out on site; e. - unannounced audits are permitted. <p>When identifying the associated risk, the CAB must always take into consideration other factors such as, for example: any Nonconformities previously issued (major and minor), changes that have environmental, social, economic, cultural, etc. impacts.</p> |
| Decision | <p>Before the decision is taken, the effectiveness of the treatments and corrective actions for Nonconformities shall also be verified where such Nonconformities constitute a failure to meet one or more requirements of the applicable reference standard, or relate to situations that raise significant doubts about the ability of the client’s sustainability management processes to achieve the expected results.</p> <p>In such cases, it will therefore not be possible to take a decision solely on the basis of accepting the findings management plan proposed by the organization.</p> |
| Note | <p>The certification document shall be managed and drafted in accordance with the provisions of § 8.18 of the document “GSTC Accreditation Manual for Certification Bodies - Destination version 2.1”, as well as the ACCREDIA mark use regulation RG-09 in its current version.</p> |
| Transfer of certification | <p>The provisions of the ACCREDIA Accreditation Regulations RG-01 General Part and RG-01-03 in their current revision apply.</p> |

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| Applicable IAF documents | IAF MD 1 and 4 documents apply.– |
| General note | Where not detailed in this circular, it is understood that all provisions of the document GSTC Accreditation Manual for Certification Bodies - Destination version 2.1 are in any case applicable. Where not detailed in this circular, it is understood that all provisions of the document GSTC Accreditation Manual for Certification Bodies - Destination version 2.1 are in any case applicable. |

RULES FOR ACCREDITATION/EXTENSION

Accreditation standard: UNI CEI EN ISO/IEC 17065, current version

STRUCTURAL REQUIREMENTS

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| Requirements for submitting the application | CABs applying for accreditation (also understood as an extension to a specific scheme) must have carried out at least one internal audit, management review, and one full conformity assessment activity. If the latter is not available, the CAB may carry out a simulation which shall cover the entire certification process, i.e., from the initial receipt of the certification application through to the possible issuance of the certificate. |
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In addition to the provisions of the accreditation standard UNI CEI EN ISO/IEC 17065, the ACCREDIA Accreditation Regulations in their current version, and what is stated in the previous box “Certification rules”, any additional provisions contained in §§ 7-8-9 of the document “GSTC Accreditation Manual for Certification Bodies - Destination version 2.1” apply, with the difference that the ACCREDIA accreditation cycle always has a duration of 4 years.

Different scenarios may arise, depending on the ACCREDIA accreditations already held by the Certification Body submitting the application for accreditation or extension.

If the CAB already holds accreditations issued by other Accreditation Bodies, an assessment shall be carried out on a case-by-case basis, in accordance with the applicable EA MLA and Global MRA agreements.

The prerequisites established in RG-01 and RG-01-03 for the granting and extension of accreditation remain unchanged and are further complemented by the following provisions.

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| A | CAB already accredited in accordance with UNI CEI EN ISO/IEC 17065:2012 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Document review: 1 day; • On-site assessment at the CAB's premises: 1 day + reporting; • 1 witness audit of a duration appropriate to the client's organizational size. ACCREDIA reserves the right to assess, case by case, the suitability of the organizations and audit teams proposed for accreditation and subsequent surveillance activities. |
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| B | CAB NOT accredited in accordance with UNI CEI EN ISO/IEC 17065:2012, but already accredited to other accreditation standards | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Document review: 1 day; • On-site assessment at the CAB's premises: 2 days + reporting; • 1 witness audit of a duration appropriate to the client's organizational size. ACCREDIA reserves the right to assess, case by case, the suitability of the organizations and audit teams proposed for accreditation and subsequent surveillance activities. |
| C | CAB NOT accredited in accordance with UNI CEI EN ISO/IEC 17065:2012 and not accredited to other accreditation standards | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Document review: 1 day; • On-site assessment at the CAB's premises: 4 days + reporting. • 1 witness audit of a duration appropriate to the client's organizational size. ACCREDIA reserves the right to assess, case by case, the suitability of the organizations and audit teams proposed for accreditation and subsequent surveillance activities. |

DOCUMENTATION TO BE SUBMITTED TO ACCREDIA FOR DOCUMENT REVIEW

Please refer to what is indicated in forms DA-00 and DA-01, with the following additional requests:

- procedure for defining certification scopes and a certificate template;
- procedure for determining audit time;
- procedure for conducting audits;
- information on the status of the full conformity assessment activity;
- list of potential clients and related scopes and upcoming audit activities (data needed to plan the witness audit).

For CABs NOT accredited to UNI CEI EN ISO/IEC 17065, in addition to the documents listed above, the documentation required in the accreditation application must be sent.

MAINTENANCE OF ACCREDITATION

For the maintenance of accreditation, throughout the entire accreditation cycle, annual surveillance (at headquarters or witness audit) will be conducted; its frequency may be reduced to only one surveillance and one witness audit in the cycle if the CAB has certified fewer than 10 sites under the scheme.

ACCREDIA nevertheless reserves the right to modify the above surveillance timing based on a risk-based approach that takes into account various factors such as, for example:

- changes to the certification scheme;

- changes in the CAB's structure or other similar situations;
- scheme-related criticalities;
- a high number of certificates issued;
- receipt of complaints/reports regarding the CAB's activities and/or certified organizations;
- the CAB's performance within the scheme;
- specific resolutions of the competent CSA;
- etc...

Yours faithfully.

Dott. Emanuele Riva
Director Department
Certification and Inspection