



Awards & Certification Program

Audit Report

Läänemaa



28. May 2026



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1. Introduction and background

This report presents the results of evaluating the destination of **Läänemaa** against the Green Destinations Standard.

The Green Destinations Standard is 'Recognised' by the Global Sustainable Tourism Council to be aligned with commonly agreed and regularly updated set of guidelines (GSTC-Destination criteria) that define sustainability of tourism destinations.

Evaluation with the Green Destinations Standard aims to:

- Assist destinations in identifying and analysing weak elements in their policies, as a basis for an agenda for improvement;
- Inform consumers and the travel industry on the sustainability levels of participating destinations.

The system enables destinations to show how exactly they “make a difference” when they receive recognition through the Awards program or become certified. In combination with the Green Destinations Reporting System, this destination award and certification program provides transparency on all issues that consumers associate with sustainability.

The system informs the creation of quality and sustainability maps for destination policymakers and stakeholders. In addition, it enables consumers to compare destinations through performance; this can help consumers in the process of holiday selecting their next holiday destination.

This report sets out how the Awards and Certification are attributed; the details of the audit; the assessment results and remarks on non-compliances; and presents the auditors' final conclusions.

Green Destinations Assessment & Certification

Green Destinations offers two types of recognition for sustainability good practice:

1. 'Certification' is attributed in case all mandatory Green Destinations Standard criteria are fully complied with.
2. 'Awards' (Bronze, Silver, Gold, Platinum) are attributed based on scores calculated from compliance to the Green Destinations Standard Criteria.

Attribution of Ratings and Awards

Scores are assigned to all Green Destinations Standard criteria, ranging from 0 to 2:

- “0” (red) means non-compliant (or not sufficient motivation/information/evidence provided)
- “1” (orange) means partially compliant, or compliance is expected in the near future (e.g. policy is being drafted, there is evidence that this is being executed)
- “2” (green) indicates full compliance for a criterion.

These scores are re-calculated to 6 GD Standard Theme scores on a 10-point scale.

Bronze, Silver, Gold and Platinum awards

The simple average of the 6 themes provides the Overall Score, which defines the Award level:



Awards are branded as 'QualityCoast Award' or 'Green Destinations Awards'; as benchmark in the process towards destination Certification.

If the compliance to the mandatory criteria is 80% or higher, the destination qualifies for “Green Destinations Certified”. Applicants for this recognition undergo a rigorous audit and are required to have solid evidence of compliance to all criteria. *GD Certified* destinations are entitled to carry the logo of the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) – the UN body that oversees and accredits sustainability certification in the tourism sector.

Assessment Results and Follow-up

Green Destinations issues this Report with an overview of criteria scores and with suggestions for further improvements. Successful applicants will be featured on our websites. No public reference will be made about unsuccessful applications.

Successful applicants become Awarded Destinations

Applicants who achieve Bronze or higher Award levels will be invited to one of our international events, where they will receive the Award Certificate, and an Award Flag. Awarded Destinations can order extra flags and banners, which can be displayed throughout the destination's territory during the validity of their Award (24 months) or Certified (36 months) status.

Prior to the lapsing of their Award or Certification validity period, applicants will be encouraged to submit an application for Renewal. The assessment of the new application will take into consideration the coherence between the improvements indicated in the previous one and the integration of the suggestions and recommendations made by the Auditor.

Appeals & Complaints

An appeal is a formal, written request by an applicant that deals with a formal reconsideration of an Award or certification decision, following receipt of their audit result or any further feedback provided regarding post-audit improvement evidence, made by Green Destinations.

A complaint is a formal written communication of dissatisfaction, other than appeal, by Applicants, Auditors, and other relevant stakeholders, relating to the activities of Green Destinations staff, contractors, auditors, or Members holding a Green Destinations Award or Certification where a response from Green Destinations is expected.

Applicants can make Appeals within 90 days after any award or certification decision made by Green Destinations, following communication of the audit result and during the initial period granted for the submission of improvements, which is within 90 days of the communication. Green Destinations reserves the right to refuse any appeal which is not submitted within this timescale.

Appeals and complaints are requested to be sent by email to contact@greendestinations.org, marking the subject line with 'Appeal' or 'Complaint'.

It is not possible to make any appeals by telephone, fax or other communication channels.

Appeals and Complaints will be reviewed by an Appeals & Complaints Panel that will be appointed by the Programme Manager and consist of a Senior Auditor and two members of the GD Appeals & Complaints Committee with sustainable tourism and certification experience.

2. Evaluation and audit process: On-site Audit

The Awards and Certification are issued for periods of two years. For pre-certification Awards, destinations require an on-site audit every 4 years; and a desk-audit every 2 years. For Certification, an on-site audit is required every 2 years. In this case, **Läänemaa** received an **on-site audit**.

Evaluation of the application of **Läänemaa** started with the submission of a self-assessment on the online platform. The Green Destinations Secretariat subsequently performed a 'Technical Check' to evaluate whether the self-assessment was complete; and has reported back to the Destination on any missing aspects. When the self-assessment was deemed sufficiently complete by the secretariat, the audit was ordered.

During the audit, information relevant to the audit objectives, scope and criteria, including information relating to interfaces between functions, activities and processes was collected and recorded by appropriate sampling. Only verifiable information has been used as audit evidence. The audit evidence is based on samples of the documented information and information provided by staff members. Therefore there is an element of uncertainty in auditing, and those acting upon the audit conclusions should be aware of this uncertainty. All objective evidence is contained in the online reporting and audit system.

The audit was performed in two phases. During the first step (desk verification), all documentation and documented proof such as procedures, policies, contracts, statistics, etc. provided by the destination were checked to confirm: existence and implementation of the sustainability management system, consistency in the implementation of policies and procedures, and compliance to the minimum required by the Green Destinations standard. The auditor prepared a number of remarks for any inconsistencies, insufficiently documented compliance or other unclear explanations.

During the second step, the auditor has visited the destination of **Läänemaa**. Relevant staff and stakeholders were interviewed, several areas and sites have been visited and inspected, and hard-copy and/or physical evidence was checked.

Based on the on-site audit, the auditor has drawn up his/her final verdict on criteria compliance (non-compliant, partially compliant or fully compliant) and indicator performance; which was presented as 'recommendation' to the Certification Committee. The Committee has reviewed the auditor recommendations and made the final decision on criteria compliance and indicator performance.

Confidentiality

Unless required by law, the audit team, the Committee and those responsible for managing the audit program will not disclose the contents of documents, any other information obtained during the audit, or the audit report, to any other party without the explicit approval of the audit client. If disclosure of the contents of an audit document is required, the audited client will be informed as soon as possible.

3. QualityCoast & Green Destinations Awards

QualityCoast and Green Destinations Awards are labels indicating achievement levels against the **Green Destinations Standard**. QualityCoast Awards were initiated in 2007 by the Coastal & Marine Union (EUCC) as a program to measure the success of Integrated Coastal Zone Management (ICZM) for coastal communities, towns and islands.



In 2016, the successful QualityCoast sustainability assessment methodology was made available to non-coastal destinations through the **Green Destinations Standard** which received 'Recognised' status by the UN body for sustainable tourism – the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) for adhering to globally agreed standards for sustainable destination management. In 2017 QualityCoast became part of Green Destinations' Assessment & Certification Programme, which in 2018 received 'Accredited' status by the GSTC for adhering to procedures for sustainability certification. In the same year, the '**Green Destinations Award**' was launched: equivalent to the QualityCoast Award but applicable to non-coastal destinations.

The importance of QualityCoast and Green Destinations Awards for tourism sustainability

Participation of destination management organisations in the Award program improves their awareness performance and achievements in an international context. The comparison with other awarded destinations provides the community with a good picture of its strengths and weaknesses. The assessment and recommendations provide the local authority with guidance to be considered in an agenda for improvement. QualityCoast and Green Destinations Awarded destinations join a network of like-minded communities and share their experiences and best practices in order to improve sustainability and social responsibility in tourism.

Promotional benefits of participation in Green Destinations Awards & Certification Program

Green Destinations carries out marketing & communication of the Awarded destinations to promote them as the most attractive destinations for visitors interested in nature and landscape, environment, and cultural identity; and to highlight their performance in tourism quality and sustainability. The marketing includes:

- invitation to present a Good Practice Story at yearly Global Green Destinations Days conferences
- social media publicity campaign on Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn
- promotion via the yearly Top 100 Story competition (Awarded & Certified destinations automatically pre-qualify for Top 100 selection - www.greendestinations.org/top100)
- newsletters
- a page on www.goodtravel.guide - a Green Destinations affiliate platform to promote sustainable destinations and committed businesses to consumers

The destination's own international tourism marketing can profit from the status of Awarded or Certified destination as a credible, independent endorsement of sustainability commitments and achievements. Sustainability-based marketing efforts will increase the "green profile" of the destination both externally and internally and this will help to mainstream sustainability on local policy agenda and decision making. Contact certification@greendestinations.org for promotional materials such as flags, banners, high-resolution logos, imagery etc.

"QualityCoast" is registered by Coastal & Marine Union - EUCC as a European Union trademark; the use of the name is restricted under European law. However, QualityCoast and Green Destinations Awards are open for applications from all continents.

4. Audit details

General

Name destination	Läänemaa
Lead auditor name	Aivar Ruukel
Additional auditors	Imbi Lepik-Martinson (shadow auditor at on-site audit)
Date(s) onsite audit	11. May 2026
Scope of the certification	Green Destinations Award Program
Scope of the audit	Läänemaa

Locations visited

Name	Location	Date
n/a	Läänemaa Fondation office	11-05-2026
n/a	Town Center Haapsalu	11-05-2026
n/a	Wiigi Cafe	11-05-2026
n/a	Hestia Hotel Haapsalu SPA	11-05-2026
n/a	Chocolate Promenade	11-05-2026
n/a	Fra Mare Thalasso SPA	11-05-2026
n/a	Tuulingu Guest House	11-05-2026
n/a	Haeska Birdwatching Tower	11-05-2026
n/a	Visitor Center of Matsalu National Park	11-05-2026

Persons met / consulted

Name	Position	Date
Ivika Uusmaa	Green Coordinator at Läänemaa Foundation	11-05-2026

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Ene Sarapuu	Guide Association of Vormsi Island	11-05-2026
Ingrid Danilov	Development at Läänemaa Foundation	11-05-2026
Anneli Haabu	Vice Mayor of Haapsalu	11-05-2026
Briti Klimberg	Environmental specialist, Haapsalu	11-05-2026
Lauri Teorein	Hotel Manager, Hestia Spa Hotel	11-05-2026
Ants Ale	Fisherman and Guesthouse owner	11-05-2026
Nele Sõber	Project Manager at Environmental Board	11-05-2026
Riina Simmer	Marketing Manager VisitHaapsalu	11-05-2026
Marelle Saar	Business Advisor	11-05-2026

5. Audit results

The audit and evaluation have generated the following results.

The **Total Score** is generated by the simple average of the scores on each of the 6 themes.

The **Award level** is defined by the Total Score value: >5.9 = **Bronze**; >6.9= **Silver**; >7.9= **Gold**; >8.9 = **Platinum**

Award scores	
Destination Management	8.7
Nature & Scenery	10.0
Environment & Climate	9.1
Culture & Tradition	10.0
Social Well-being	9.4
Business & Communication	7.3
Total	9.1

Total	9.1
Award level	Platinum Award
“GSTC Certified” Compliance level*	78.7%

*The “GSTC-Certified Compliance level” indicates the share of mandatory criteria from the Green Destinations Standard considered 'fully compliant', and thereby indicates how far the destination is from “GSTC Certified” level. “Certified” destinations are committed to full compliance to the Green Destinations Standard mandatory criteria, and will receive worldwide recognition through the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) – the UN body that has accredited the Green Destinations Certification Program.

Green Destinations Standard Scores

The overview below indicates compliance with the Green Destinations policy standard.

- **Green:** # compliant criteria
- **Orange:** # partially compliant criteria
- **Red:** # non-compliant criteria
- **Grey:** # non-audited criteria (e.g. optional or N/A)

Theme	Criteria	Achievements
0. Destination Characteristics	13	13
1. Destination Management	20	14 5 1
2. Nature & Scenery	8	8
3. Environment & Climate	20	14 3 3
4. Culture & Tradition	6	6
5. Social Well-being	18	16 2
6. Business & Communication	12	5 6 1

6. Remarks & non compliances

This section lists remarks that have been formulated by the auditor and Certification Committee for specific criteria. Criteria without remarks are not included in this section.

Remarks can be of the following types:

- Remarks to 'compliant' criteria
 - Positive remark recognising particular best practice performance
 - Criteria compliance approved but additional information (evidence) will be required upon award renewal
- Remarks to 'partially compliant' or 'non-compliant' criteria:
 - Recommendation to improve in the short term: aspects that are not in order or in place; but can be solved or improved with limited efforts
 - Recommendation to improve in the mid-term: aspects that require more thorough action to improve on and should be considered of high importance for the next application in 24 months

To qualify for "Green Destinations Certified" only mandatory criteria that are not yet compliant should be addressed. Improving non-compliant criteria will improve award level, but not the GD Certification compliance percentage.

Please note that the indicated deadlines for completion are suggestions in order to assist planning ahead for the next Award renewal.

 Approved
  Partial compliance
  Non compliance

1. Destination Management		
Visitor Management		
1.10. Visitor monitoring		Currently visitor monitoring is only partial. Data can be improved, including numbers of visitors to destination, visitor characteristics, activities, and preferences. Recommendation is to implement regular monitoring and upload the report ahead of the next audit.
1.11. Visitor satisfaction		Uploaded ReviewPro report about satisfaction with hotels and restaurants is a good start. Recommendation is to implement an overall visitor survey, which will cover and assess traveler satisfaction with quality and sustainability of the

		destination Läänemaa, and report results for the next audit.
1.13. Visitor management for destination assets	✓	There is no visitor management plan that applies to relevant tourism hotspots within Läänemaa. Recommendation is to develop a visitor management plan that could include information about most used tourist attractions, and how to reduce tourism impacts on these areas.
Monitoring & reporting		
1.15. Sustainability Indicators & Monitoring	✓ _R	Destination sustainability indicators are embedded in various documents. Please implement a monitoring system to gather quantitative data on sustainability indicators for the next audit.
1.16. Review and evaluation	✓ _R	Supporting document provides some proof of compliance but only partial. For the next audit please upload the evaluation report of progress on the objectives and targets of the (sustainable tourism) policy and action plan.
1.17. Public Sustainability Reporting	✓ _R	Public reporting about key sustainability results is missing today. Recommendation is to compile a report that presents progress in sustainability and make it public for the next audit.
2. Nature & Scenery		
Nature & animal experience		
2.6. Wildlife protection	✓	For next audit, please insert the web links to the laws by which "the wildlife protection in Läänemaa is ensured".
3. Environment & Climate		
Energy, Sustainable Mobility & Climate Change		
3.13. Reducing transport emissions from travel	✓ _R	Destination has not set quantitative goals to reduce transport emissions to and at the destination. Recommendation is for next audit to set quantitative reduction goals (e.g. a percentage of travel emissions reduction by a specified date).
3.14. Low-impact mobility	✓ _R	Destination Läänemaa does not have a low-impact mobility plan. It is recommended to

		create it for next audit.
Climate change adaptation		
3.20. Climate change information	✓ _R	Evidence of the climate change information to the community and visitors is missing. It is recommended to develop and display about the consequences of climate change in the context of Läänemaa.
4. Culture & Tradition		
Cultural heritage		
4.2. Managing tourism impacts on culture	✓	How are impacts on culture managed? Please upload evidence for next audit.
5. Social Well-being		
Human respect		
5.6. Accessibility	✓ _R	This criterion is partly compliant. For the next audit please have a dedicated plan for accessibility.
Community participation		
5.10. Inhabitant satisfaction	✓	Good initiative with resident satisfaction survey in 2025. Please have it every year.
Health & safety		
5.17. Health & safety	✓ _R	Tourist-related health & safety risk monitoring is not yet in place at the destination. Recommendation is to create a program for monitoring tourist-related health & safety risks.
6. Business & Communication		
Business involvement		
6.3. Publication of certified enterprises	✓ _R	Currently there is in Tourism Information Center in the town of Haapsalu. Information for visitors is provided by network of various hotels, spas, museums and other businesses. During onsite audit one of them was visited. Information about sustainability-certified businesses was not available at this counter. Recommendation is to ensure that information about sustainable offerings will be made available.

6.4. Water consumption (enterprises)	✓ _R	Currently the plan to reduce water consumption is missing. A recommendation is to draw up a plan or program to promote water consumption reduction among enterprises in Läänemaa.
6.5. Solid waste (enterprises)	✓ _R	Currently the plan to reduce solid waste is missing. A recommendation is to draw up a plan or program to promote solid waste reduction and recycling among enterprises in Läänemaa.
6.6. Energy consumption (enterprises)	✓ _R	Currently the plan to reduce energy consumption is missing. A recommendation is to draw up a plan or program to promote promoting the reduction of energy consumption among enterprises in Läänemaa.
6.7. Greenhouse gas emissions (enterprises)	✓ _R	Currently the plan to reduce GHG emissions is missing. A recommendation is to draw up a plan or program to promote reduction and reporting on GHG emissions by enterprises in Läänemaa.
Information & marketing		
6.11. Sustainability information to visitors	✓ _R	Sustainability information on visithaapsalu can be improved. Please update for next audit.

7. Auditor recommendations and conclusions

Overall impression

Läänemaa is certainly one of the most sustainable tourist destinations in Estonia. Traditionally, tourism has played an important socio-economic role in Läänemaa County, and effective nature conservation and the nature-friendly lifestyle of the people are strong foundations for sustainability. Läänemaa also has a wealth of experience in the Estonian context on how to deal with the potential negative impacts of tourism, including those caused by seasonality or managing the some really popular tourist attractions.

In Läänemaa, there is generally a high awareness of environmental protection. The coordinator of the Green Team, Mrs. Ivika, who works as a Tourism Manager at Läänemaa Foundation, is very committed to developing sustainable tourism in the destination. Läänemaa is part of the UNESCO West Estonian Archipelago Biosphere Reserve, which promotes harmony between people, traditions, and nature through sustainable development. In Läänemaa, there is good cooperation between stakeholders both in daily operations and when coordinating strategic matters, which provides strong potential for implementing sustainability and sustainable tourism in a systematic and consistent way.

Additional remarks

Läänemaa has a Tourism Development Program for 2026–2030, which provides the framework for strategic tourism efforts at the destination. This document encourages sustainable practices alongside stakeholder collaboration, but it could be improved with a more systematic approach that fully addresses all components and impacts of sustainable tourism.

Auditor recommendation

Some of the enterprises in the destination already hold green certificates and are committed to sustainability. For the next audit, it is recommended to increase the number of certified tourism businesses.

It is recommended to overview tourism impact analysis on a regular basis.

More detailed recommendations are provided in the auditor's comments on certain criteria that were only partially approved, where there are risks that could negatively affect the development status if not addressed.

Signature

The report was electronically signed within the Green Destinations online system.

Ivika Uusmaa, Sustainability coordinator, signed on 03 June, 2026

Aivar Ruukel, Green Destinations auditor, signed on 02 June, 2026