

Case Report

Sustainability in the Hotel Sector: A Research Study in Greece

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Tourism is an essential economic sector in Greece, contributing over 25% to its GDP. The hotel sector is a significant component of the tourism industry, which plays also a vital role in the economy of Greece.

However, its environmental impact—manifesting through high energy usage, water consumption, and waste generation—poses significant challenges. This study explores sustainable practices within Greek hotels, emphasizing the adoption of circular economy principles, green certifications, and guest engagement strategies. Using case studies, published data from surveys, and policy analysis, the study identifies barriers such as financial limitations and infrastructural gaps. Recommendations include financial incentives, regional policy customization, and technology-driven solutions. By aligning with global frameworks like the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Greece has the opportunity to position itself as a global leader in sustainable tourism^[1].

Introduction

Sustainability in the hotel sector encompasses various practices aimed at minimizing environmental impact while maximizing economic and social benefits. In Greece, where tourism is a key economic driver, the adoption of sustainable practices is crucial not only for environmental preservation but also for enhancing competitiveness in a crowded market.

Deloitte-INSETE Sustainability Report^[2], indicates that Greek tourism enterprises are actively engaging in sustainability efforts, with a comprehensive survey revealing that many are setting sustainability targets and measuring their performance against these goals. Furthermore, initiatives such as the introduction of a sustainability-focused hotel rating system aim to classify hotels based on

their environmental and social impacts, illustrating a commitment to sustainable tourism practices^[3], Greece's Sustainability-based Hotel Rating System Moving Forward^[4].

The adoption of such practices not only addresses environmental concerns but also aligns with global trends towards sustainability, which are becoming the "new normal" in the hospitality industry^[5].

This shift is crucial for maintaining Greece's attractiveness as a tourist destination while ensuring that the local communities benefit economically and socially from tourism activities, according to Papallou, et al^[6].

Tourism in Greece is synonymous with cultural exploration, scenic landscapes, and luxury accommodations. Drawing over 33 million visitors annually pre-COVID, the sector has consistently generated employment and revenue^[7]. However, tourism's environmental footprint—accounting for 11% of global greenhouse gas emissions—is a growing concern. Accommodation alone contributes 1-3% of this share due to high energy usage, water dependency, and waste generation^[8].

Post-COVID sustainability momentum

The pandemic reshaped global travel trends, reducing emissions while exposing the vulnerabilities of overreliance on mass tourism. Greece's recovery trajectory reflects a sharp rebound, with arrivals reaching 80% of pre-pandemic levels in 2023^[1]. This resurgence provides a critical window for embedding sustainability into the core of the hospitality sector.

Discussion

Hotels in Greece are increasingly adopting sustainable practices to minimize their environmental impact and enhance their appeal to eco-conscious travelers.

The following are specific illustrative examples:

- Energy Efficiency

Four Seasons Astir Palace Hotel Athens: This hotel has implemented various initiatives aimed at preserving the environment, such as energy-efficient lighting and appliances, and a commitment to reducing carbon emissions through various operational strategies^[9].

Royalty Hotel Athens: The hotel uses energy-efficient lighting and appliances, along with solar water heating systems, to reduce its carbon footprint^[10].

- Water Conservation

Many hotels, including those surveyed in recent studies, have developed water management systems that aim to conserve water through efficient fixtures and practices. This includes measures like low-flow showerheads and toilets, which significantly reduce water consumption across hotel operations^[11],

- Local Sourcing

Royalty Hotel Athens emphasizes sourcing products and services from local suppliers. This not only supports the local economy but also reduces transportation emissions associated with importing goods^[10].

- Waste Management

Eco-friendly hotels in Greece are implementing waste reduction strategies, such as recycling programs and composting organic waste. These efforts help minimize landfill contributions and promote a circular economy within the hospitality sector^{[12][11]}.

- Guest Engagement

Some hotels offer guests opportunities to participate in sustainability initiatives, such as local cultural experiences or educational programs about environmental conservation. This engagement fosters a deeper connection between guests and the local community while promoting sustainable tourism practices,^[11].

These examples demonstrate the integration of sustainability practices within Greek hotels, highlighting a broader shift in the hospitality industry towards environmental responsibility.

Hotels' environmental practices and certifications

Energy efficiency initiatives

Greek hotels are integrating advanced technologies to optimize resource usage. For example, the Hotel Grande Bretagne in Athens employs energy-efficient systems, reducing energy consumption by up to 40%^[13]. Similarly, several boutique hotels on Santorini have adopted renewable energy sources, including solar panels and wind turbines, which have significantly lowered their dependency on fossil fuels. More Greek hotels that embracing renewable energy solutions, can met in Santorini and Crete adopting solar and wind energy systems. For instance, **Santorini Eco Suites** has installed solar panels

that cover 70% of its energy needs, significantly lowering its carbon footprint^[14]. **Hotel Verde Mykonos** employs advanced insulation technologies, reducing heating and cooling costs by 40%^[15].

Water conservation practices examples

Water scarcity is a pressing concern on Greek islands. Several hotels have adopted innovative solutions. For example, **Rainwater Harvesting**: Resorts in Naxos collect and filter rainwater for non-potable uses, cutting reliance on municipal supplies by 50%^[16]. **Greywater Recycling**: Luxury resorts in Rhodes have implemented systems that reuse greywater for irrigation, benefiting surrounding agricultural communities^[17].

Adoption of green certifications

Certifications such as Green Key, LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design), and EarthCheck have become benchmarks for environmental responsibility. LEED-certified properties are estimated to save 30% in water usage and up to 40% in energy costs, making them highly attractive for environmentally conscious travelers^[18]. In Greece, over 100 hotels have achieved Green Key certification, reflecting the growing momentum toward sustainability. Examples include:

- **Grand Hyatt Athens**: Achieved LEED Gold certification by incorporating energy-efficient lighting, rainwater harvesting, and waste segregation systems^[19].
- **Ikos Resorts**: Certified under EarthCheck for their zero-waste initiatives and efforts to minimize water usage^[18].

How do sustainable practices impact the competitiveness of hotels in Greece

Sustainable practices in hotels significantly enhance competitiveness in Greece's tourism sector. Some key impacts are:

Enhanced guest satisfaction: Hotels that adopt sustainable practices often experience higher guest satisfaction levels. Research indicates that guests perceive environmentally responsible hotels more favorably, leading to increased loyalty and positive reviews, which are crucial in a competitive market^[20].

Increased reservations and revenue: Implementing eco-friendly practices can lead to a notable increase in bookings. Some studies report that eco-friendly hotels may see up to a 30% rise in reservations due to their appeal to the growing segment of environmentally conscious travelers^[11]. This increase in demand directly translates into higher revenue.

Cost savings: Sustainable practices often result in reduced operational costs. For example, energy-efficient systems and water-saving technologies lower utility expenses, allowing hotels to allocate resources more effectively. This financial benefit can be a significant competitive advantage, especially in a market where profit margins can be tight ^[21]

Differentiation in a crowded market: As the Greek tourism sector becomes increasingly competitive, sustainability serves as a differentiator. Hotels that actively promote their green initiatives can attract eco-conscious travelers who prioritize sustainability in their accommodation choices. This differentiation is vital for standing out among numerous options available to tourists ^[22].

Compliance with regulations and certifications: According to Velissariou E., Gerolymos V.,^[23] many travelers today look for hotels with recognized sustainability certifications. By obtaining such certifications, hotels not only comply with environmental regulations but also enhance their marketability, appealing to a demographic that values corporate responsibility.

Contribution to local economy and community: Sustainable hotels often engage with local suppliers and communities, fostering economic growth and social responsibility. This practice not only enhances the hotel's image but also builds goodwill among locals and visitors alike, further solidifying its competitive position^{[2][23]}.

In conclusion, the integration of sustainable practices in Greek hotels not only benefits the environment but also plays a crucial role in enhancing competitiveness by improving guest satisfaction, increasing bookings, reducing costs, differentiating from competitors, complying with regulations, and contributing positively to local economies.

Guest perception and behavioral insights

Understanding the behavioral intention gap

Despite growing environmental awareness, a significant gap exists between guest preferences and actions. A 2023 Booking.com^[24] survey found that while 76% of travelers favor sustainable

accommodations, only 20% actively book them. Contributing factors include:

- **Cost Concerns:** Perception of higher prices for eco-certified hotels.
- **Limited Awareness:** Lack of clear communication regarding green certifications^[15].
- **Skepticism:** Concerns about greenwashing, where sustainability claims are exaggerated or false^[14].

Approaches to closing the gap

To address these barriers, Greek hotels are leveraging technology and transparency and implementing innovative strategies to engage eco-conscious travelers like the following:

- **Interactive Displays:** IoT-based systems in hotels like Crete's Olive Grove Eco Lodge allow guests to monitor their energy and water consumption during their stay^[16].
- **Eco-Tourism Packages:** Properties in Thessaloniki offer guided tours to local sustainable farms, creating immersive experiences that connect travelers with eco-friendly practices^[18].

Applying circular economy principles in tourism

The circular economy framework emphasizes a regenerative approach to resource use, aiming to minimize waste while maximizing utility. Unlike the traditional linear model of "take-make-dispose," the circular economy advocates for closed-loop systems where materials and resources are continuously reused. In tourism, particularly in hotels, this concept translates into reducing environmental impact while enhancing value for local communities and businesses.

Greek hotels are pioneering various initiatives to this direction:

- **Food Waste Management:** In Mykonos, Hotel Artemis collaborates with local farms to convert food waste into compost, reducing landfill contributions by 40%^[14].
- **Local Sourcing:** Resorts in Corfu prioritize purchasing from local suppliers, reducing carbon emissions associated with transportation and boosting the local economy^[17].
- **Crete's Sustainability Model:** Hotels in Crete have emerged as leaders in circular economy adoption. Properties like the Blue Lagoon Resort compost all organic waste onsite, producing fertilizer for nearby olive groves^[16]. Additionally, partnerships with local fishermen ensure sustainable seafood sourcing, creating a closed-loop supply chain.

The circular economy in tourism provides significant environmental, economic, and social benefits, particularly in Greek destinations. Environmentally, it reduces waste and optimizes resource use, enabling hotels to lower their carbon footprints. Economically, the adoption of circular practices often results in substantial cost savings; for example, hotels that implement water reuse systems report annual reductions in utility expenses of up to 25%^[19] or 20% through wastewater reuse for irrigation or heating^[25]. Socially, these initiatives contribute to community engagement by creating jobs, stimulating local businesses, and reinforcing cultural identity. Moreover, hotels that actively embrace circular economy practices enhance their reputation, attracting eco-conscious travelers, boosting occupancy rates, and fostering guest loyalty.

Challenges and Opportunities

Despite its promising potential, the adoption of circular economy practices in tourism faces several challenges. High initial costs, such as those associated with installing rainwater harvesting or composting systems, can deter smaller establishments from embracing these initiatives^[19]. Additionally, a lack of knowledge and expertise among many hoteliers hinders the effective implementation of circular economy practices^[15]. The progress is further impeded by fragmented implementation; while regions like Crete and Mykonos have made significant advancements, others lag behind due to insufficient infrastructure and support^[25].

However, these challenges present opportunities for innovation. Collaborative initiatives, such as public-private partnerships and industry-wide training programs, can address these gaps effectively.

Recommendations for Policymakers

The pursuit of sustainable tourism in Greece represents a critical intersection of economic development, environmental stewardship, and cultural preservation. As the nation continues to be a premier destination for travelers worldwide, it faces the pressing challenge of balancing the benefits of tourism with the need to protect its rich natural and cultural heritage. Policymakers play a pivotal role in this endeavor, as their decisions can foster an environment where sustainable practices thrive, ensuring that tourism remains a viable economic driver for generations to come. To effectively promote sustainable tourism, it is essential for policymakers to adopt a comprehensive approach that encompasses diverse strategies aimed at enhancing the overall tourism experience while safeguarding

the environment. This includes diversifying tourist offerings beyond traditional sun-and-sea packages, promoting eco-friendly practices among businesses, and encouraging community engagement in tourism development. By implementing these strategies, Greece can not only enhance its competitiveness in a crowded market but also create a more resilient and responsible tourism sector. As we explore recommendations for policymakers, it is crucial to recognize that the future of Greek tourism depends on collaborative efforts that prioritize sustainability. This commitment will not only benefit the economy but also ensure that Greece's unique landscapes and cultural treasures are preserved for future visitors. For all these reasons the following policies and strategies are crucial.

- **Comprehensive financial support**

1. **Grants for SMEs:** Small and medium-sized hotels often lack the capital to adopt green technologies. The government should provide targeted grants covering up to 50% of the installation costs for renewable energy systems^[1].
2. **Tax Relief for Sustainability Investments:** Extend tax benefits to hotels that achieve certifications like LEED or EarthCheck^[18].

- **Infrastructure development**

1. **Recycling Facilities:** Build centralized waste management and recycling plants on islands such as Paros and Milos, which currently lack adequate infrastructure^[17].
2. **Renewable Energy Networks:** Establish solar farms and wind turbines to power entire regions, particularly on energy-deficient islands^[16].

- **Enhanced certification and training**

Mandatory environmental certification for hotels within five years, combined with sustainability training programs for hotel staff through collaboration with NGOs and academic institutions, can drive significant progress in sustainable tourism practices^{[19][15]}.

- **Mandatory sustainability reporting**

Aligning with the European Green Deal, Greek hotels should be required to report their environmental performance. Transparency can drive accountability and help stakeholders identify best practices^[26].

- **Public-private partnerships**

Collaboration between government, industry, and academia can foster innovation. For instance,

partnerships could fund research into low-cost sustainability solutions tailored to Greece's unique geography.

- **Strengthening local supply chains**

Supporting local economies can generate a ripple effect of sustainability in tourism. Encouraging hotels to source food, furniture, and other supplies from local businesses not only reduces the carbon footprint associated with transportation but also strengthens the local economy^[19]. Additionally, providing funding and support for cooperatives that produce eco-friendly products, such as organic linens and natural cleaning agents, fosters sustainable production practices while empowering local communities^[15].

- **Regional customization of policies**

Given Greece's diverse geography, policies aimed at promoting sustainability in tourism should be tailored to regional needs. For islands with limited resources, strategies should prioritize water conservation and effective waste management to address resource scarcity^[19]. On the mainland, efforts should focus on expanding renewable energy installations and fostering community engagement to support sustainable development^[15]. Tailoring these approaches ensures that regional challenges and opportunities are effectively addressed, maximizing the impact of sustainability initiatives across the country.

Hotel managers' attitudes towards sustainability impact their implementation of green practices

The attitudes of Greek hotel managers towards sustainability significantly influence the implementation of green practices within their establishments. These attitudes can shape decision-making processes, resource allocation, and the overall commitment to sustainable development in the hospitality sector. There are several ways in which these attitudes impact sustainability efforts.

The attitudes of hotel managers towards sustainability significantly influence the implementation and success of green practices in the hospitality sector. Managers who prioritize sustainability are more likely to invest in energy efficiency, waste reduction, and water conservation policies, while those who view it as a secondary concern may inadequately support such initiatives^[19]. Positive attitudes foster a culture of environmental responsibility, enhancing employee engagement and participation in training programs focused on green practices, which strengthens the overall commitment to

sustainability^[15]. Additionally, sustainability-oriented managers are more likely to pursue innovative solutions, adopt new technologies, and collaborate with local suppliers to reduce environmental impact^[21]. This proactive mindset also extends to leveraging sustainability as a marketing tool to attract eco-conscious travelers, thereby enhancing brand image, boosting customer loyalty, and driving further investment in green initiatives^[25]. Moreover, managers committed to sustainability tend to stay informed about relevant regulations and funding opportunities, facilitating compliance and enabling access to financial incentives for implementing environmentally friendly technologies^[19]. Conversely, negative attitudes towards sustainability can lead to resistance to change, as managers may perceive sustainable practices as costly or disruptive, ultimately resulting in missed opportunities for operational and environmental improvements^[15].

Conclusions

The future of the hotel sector in Greece hinges on its ability to embrace sustainability. By overcoming challenges through education, government support, and collaborative efforts, Greek hotels can not only reduce their environmental impact but also enhance their appeal to a growing segment of eco-conscious travelers. Continued research into effective sustainability practices will be essential for guiding this transition.

This study underscores the transformative potential of sustainability in Greece's hotel sector.

The primary insights derived include:

- Hotels adopting renewable energy and waste management systems achieve measurable environmental and economic benefits.
- Guests are increasingly interested in eco-friendly accommodations but require more transparent communication and cost accessibility^[7].

Another conclusion is that government policy plays a pivotal role in promoting sustainability in Greek hotels through regulatory frameworks, financial incentives, training programs, and promotional efforts. While significant progress has been made, ongoing challenges must be addressed to maximize the impact of these policies. By enhancing support mechanisms and increasing awareness among hotel operators, Greece can further advance its commitment to sustainable tourism and environmental stewardship in the hospitality sector^[19].

One of the most significant barriers is the high initial cost associated with implementing sustainable technologies and practices. Many hotels, particularly smaller establishments, may lack the financial resources to invest in energy-efficient systems, waste management solutions, or renewable energy sources. This financial burden can deter hotel operators from pursuing sustainability initiatives, as they may prioritize immediate profitability over long-term environmental benefits^[21].

Although there are regulations promoting sustainability in the hotel sector, navigating these regulations can be complex. The existing regulatory framework may not provide sufficient incentives or support for hotels to adopt sustainable practices. Additionally, some hotels may struggle to comply with regulations due to a lack of clear guidelines or resources for implementation. This regulatory uncertainty can create hesitation among hotel operators to invest in sustainability measures^[15].

Operational challenges also play a significant role in hindering sustainability efforts. Many Greek hotels operate within a highly competitive market where cost-cutting measures are often prioritized over environmental considerations. This competitive pressure can make it difficult for hotels to allocate resources toward sustainability initiatives. Furthermore, smaller hotels may lack the staff expertise necessary to implement and manage sustainable practices effectively^[25].

Cultural attitudes toward sustainability can significantly influence the adoption of sustainable practices in the hospitality sector. In some instances, there is a perception that sustainability may conflict with the image of luxury or high-quality service, which can discourage hotels from implementing eco-friendly initiatives^[21]. Furthermore, if market demand for environmentally conscious accommodations does not strongly impact consumer preferences, hotel operators may feel less motivated to prioritize and invest in sustainability measures^[19].

Hotel managers' attitudes are crucial in driving sustainability in the hospitality sector. Those who prioritize sustainability implement energy-saving and waste-reduction practices, foster employee engagement, embrace innovation, and leverage eco-friendly efforts as marketing tools to attract conscious travelers. Their commitment also ensures regulatory compliance and access to green funding opportunities. Conversely, negative attitudes can hinder progress, highlighting the importance of cultivating a proactive sustainability mindset for long-term environmental and economic benefits.

Future vision

Sustainability must become a cornerstone of Greece's tourism identity. By aligning with global frameworks like the European Green Deal, Greek hotels can enhance their competitiveness while preserving the natural beauty and cultural heritage that attract millions of visitors annually.

Pathways forward

To sustain progress in promoting sustainable tourism in Greece, it is essential to implement a multifaceted strategy. First, expanding research through region-specific studies will help identify tailored sustainability solutions that address local challenges and opportunities. Second, launching national consumer education campaigns will emphasize the importance of choosing eco-certified accommodations, thereby fostering a more informed traveler base and encouraging responsible tourism choices^{[1][27][28]}.

Finally, collaboration across sectors is crucial; uniting government, industry, and academia can drive innovation and scalability in sustainable practices, ensuring that Greece remains competitive in the global tourism market while preserving its unique cultural and environmental assets^{[29][27][28]}.

By prioritizing sustainability, Greece can ensure its tourism industry thrives while safeguarding its environmental and cultural legacy for generations to come.

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Declarations

Funding: No specific funding was received for this work.

Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.