

Health and Hygiene Certification Programs in Tourism Recovery

Jeff Wilks^{1*} and Sarah Prager²

¹Griffith Institute for Tourism, Griffith University, Australia

²Barrister at Deka Chambers, London, UK

ISSN: 2690-9707



***Corresponding author:** Jeff Wilks, Griffith Institute for Tourism, Griffith University, Australia

Submission: 📅 December 01, 2022

Published: 📅 December 06, 2022

Volume 2 - Issue 2

How to cite this article: Jeff Wilks* and Sarah Prager: Health and Hygiene Certification Programs in Tourism Recovery. *Associative J Health Sci.* 2(2). AJHS. 000532. 2022.
DOI: [10.31031/AJHS.2022.02.000532](https://doi.org/10.31031/AJHS.2022.02.000532)

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Opinion

The World Health Organization (WHO) announced on 14 September 2022 that the end of the COVID-19 pandemic was in sight, based on weekly declining numbers of new deaths reported [1]. However, they also warned that there is still a risk of more variants, deaths, disruption, and uncertainty, so governments must continue with policies to save lives, protect health systems, and avoid social and economic disruption.

Even though overall numbers were declining, during the week prior to the announcement, the week of 5-11 September, there were more than 3.1 million new COVID-19 cases reported globally and just under 11,000 deaths [2]. Monitoring shows the propensity for COVID-19 to surge and the WHO recognized that “current trends in reported COVID-19 cases and deaths should be interpreted with caution as several countries have been progressively changing COVID-19 testing strategies, resulting in lower overall numbers of tests performed and consequently lower numbers of cases detected” [2].

There is now general agreement among medical and health authorities that COVID-19 is likely to persist as an endemic infection for years to come, and that viral disease outbreaks (not just COVID-19) are increasing in frequency and severity worldwide [3]. While the risk of geographic spread via air travel differs significantly between emerging infectious diseases [4] the travel and tourism industry is clearly identified as an important partner in the public health response to disease control [5]. Health and hygiene continues to be an important pillar of travel destination competitiveness as measured by the World Economic Forum [6] and a critical factor in tourism recovery [7].

The speed at which borders are reopening to tourists worldwide means that priorities for COVID-19 preventive health measures are changing rapidly. Vaccination passports, travel corridors, COVID-19 testing, quarantine requirements, passenger tracing, mask wearing, and physical distancing requirements have all been relaxed for many international travel destinations.

It has been suggested that official hygiene and cleanliness certification schemes are an effective means to prevent the spread of COVID-19, are a valuable public health initiative generally, and increase tourist trust and confidence [8]. At a time when supports for cleanliness and hygiene in place early in the pandemic are declining in many travel destinations it is important to examine the legal and practical aspects of certification programs as part of a broader set of harmonized industry-wide health and safety protocols.

According to the Asian Development Bank (ADB) [9]:

- A. A set of harmonized industry-wide health and safety protocols can support the recovery of the travel and tourism sector in Asia and the Pacific from the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic

B. Harmonized health and safety guidelines can be adapted across different operating environments and with different levels of transmission risk-high versus limited transmission

C. Restarting travel and tourism in the region should consider the entire travel ecosystem- from aviation to small and medium-sized enterprises. This will help ensure that health and safety measures are applied and adhered to across the traveler's journey and that smaller businesses are not left behind

D. Wearing face masks, effective handwashing, regular and hygienic surface cleaning, and physical distancing- along with the approved procedures and products- form the basis of expert informed health and safety protocols

E. COVID-19 will have a lasting effect, yet the pandemic offers an opportunity to rebuild and strengthen the travel and tourism sector.

Industry reports show that tourists are very aware of the importance of health precautions, making these considerations crucial in selecting travel destinations. For example, a 2020 report by the Pacific Asia Travel Association (PATA) found that 91% of consumers surveyed indicated that cleanliness is the main criteria when choosing accommodation, with 79% saying it is important to publicly display compliance to government safety standards [10].

More recently, a 2022 Tripadvisor report with 10,000 respondents across five countries found that the majority of travellers agree cleanliness measures of a hospitality business will be an important factor in their travel decision-making next year, even after COVID-19 cases have dropped worldwide [11]. Importantly, most travellers in the five countries surveyed don't want to see hotels and restaurants go back to pre-pandemic health and safety policies after outbreaks are behind us.

Many health and safety certifications were promoted during the pandemic. The largest was the World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC) 'Safe Travels' Global Protocols & Stamp for the New Normal [12]. The Protocols were to ensure that people are and feel safe, based on common standards and advice across a range of tourism and hospitality sectors. Each sector has four pillars, namely:

- A. Operational and Staff Preparedness
- B. Ensuring a Safe Experience
- C. Rebuilding Trust and Confidence, and
- D. Implementing Enabling Policies.

The WTTC issues a Global Safety Stamp to companies and destinations in recognition of their adoption of the Safe Travels Protocols. Currently there are more than 400 destinations around the world holding the certification, and while this is an excellent initiative the limitation is that the stamp is based on self-assessment and honesty. However, without the capacity to independently audit services and facilities, and to enforce standards, there is no guarantee of quality or compliance. Also, circumstances change

over time, so regular monitoring or re-certification is important to maintain standards. In order to include a large number of tourism businesses in a hygiene certification program an online self-assessment process is a necessary first step. A program run in Sri Lanka, the 'Safe & Secure' Certified Tourism Services Providers, offers an additional level of confidence as it is independently audited by management firm KPMG [13]. Certified providers are issued with a QR code that allows customers to verify that hygiene practices meet the requirements of the COVID-19 Health Protocol.

In Indonesia the government introduced the CHSE (Clean, Health, Safety, and Environment) certification program in 2020 and contracted a private company TÜV Rheinland Indonesia to conduct face-to-face audits of tourism businesses. A total of 1,374 audits were completed in 45 days, with businesses receiving an Indonesia Care certificate issued and signed by the Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy [14].

While official certification is clearly important, a recent study of hotel patrons found that customers are more concerned with evidence of hygiene, sanitation, and cleaning practices than with certifications, and they expect to witness real and objective actions to guarantee safety [15]. How to guarantee that certifications actually represent good hygiene practices remains the challenge.

Legal standing and responsibility for hygiene certifications

Whilst the relevant local authorities will bear primary responsibility for hygiene certification, whether that be local councils, municipalities, or regions, it should be recognized that resource concerns mean that they are only able to inspect tourist premises on a periodic basis. A hotel inspected annually may present a very different picture some months later. Whilst a local authority certification may be of some assistance in determining whether a particular establishment is compliant with local standards, it does not necessarily tell the whole story.

Most tour operators, recognizing this, independently audit the accommodation to which they send holidaymakers. Within the EU and UK this is a response to the EU Directive No. 2015/2302, which renders those who provide packages and linked travel arrangements liable for the acts and omissions of their suppliers [16]. As a result of this provision, and of reputational considerations, it is of paramount importance to retailers and tour operators to ensure that their suppliers are properly audited and are compliant with all relevant local standards at all times. Consequently, most EU tour operators carry out pre-season audits and many require independent auditors to assess larger hotels' hygiene and safety policies and systems on a monthly basis.

As a result of this patchwork of oversight it is not unusual for larger establishments in highly developed tourist destinations, such as Spain, to be audited by national and municipal authorities, tour operators from various departure nations, independent auditors, and internally. In practice, the national authority might carry out an annual audit; the municipal authority and some tour operators might carry out a pre-season audit; other tour operators

might audit monthly; and others will require monthly independent audits. The hotel itself is also likely to conduct its own internal audits and policy reviews. To this should be added spot checks and occasional food and water sampling and testing, any of which might be undertaken by any of these auditing bodies.

This may appear to be a daunting prospect for a hotelier. However, in this context auditing is supportive, not punitive. Auditors are seeking to identify risks and to encourage hoteliers to rectify their policies and systems before the hazard eventuates, thus preventing the spread of infection and avoiding serious concerns before they arise. Very much the same factors are relevant in hygiene certification as in legionella control – the risk of infection in closed environments is high, therefore appropriate monitoring is key to identifying the risk of infection, preventing the spread of infection, and alleviating any infection which does arise. It is easier to prevent an outbreak than it is to contain it; auditors are there to head off the risk before it eventuates.

Seen in this light, the importance of appropriate monitoring, auditing and certification is clear. Holidaymakers, tour operators, local authorities and hoteliers themselves all require reassurance that the establishment in question operates adequate standards of hygiene; certification provides that reassurance and, if monitoring systems are robustly implemented, should be an indicator that the premises present a low risk of infection.

Conclusion

In summary, hygiene certification programs can be an important element in a set of harmonized industry-wide health and safety protocols to support the recovery of the travel and tourism sector. Providing evidence of hygiene care and a government or industry compliance certification is key to restoring trust for travellers. To guarantee that certifications actually represent good hygiene practices it is suggested that independent audits, spot checks and an annual renewal process be built into programs. This quality assurance will legally protect tourism operators and the agencies issuing certifications. It will also contribute to a comprehensive strategy of protective measures that minimize the risk of transmission of COVID-19 and other communicable diseases [8,17].

Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests in the drafting of this paper.

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