

As sustainability moves from aspiration to expectation, tourism finds itself under growing pressure to demonstrate real, measurable progress. Travellers are increasingly alert to environmental claims, regulators are tightening the rules, and businesses must navigate a crowded landscape of labels and promises. Against this backdrop, the EU Ecolabel has emerged as one of the most established and credible reference points for sustainability in tourism accommodation.

The EU Ecolabel is the official environmental label of the European Union. Introduced by the European Commission in 1992, it identifies products and services that meet high environmental standards across their entire life cycle. In tourism, the label has been awarded to hotels and campsites since 2000, signalling reduced environmental impact without compromising comfort or performance.

Today, more than 900 holiday accommodations across Europe and beyond carry the EU Ecolabel – a figure that continues to grow as sustainability becomes central to competitiveness. For Dr Kristin Stechemesser, Research Assistant at the German Environment Agency (UBA), the importance of such a recognised and credible label lies in clarity and trust. “There are currently too many labels and claims on the market. This makes it really difficult for consumers to make the right choice,” she explains.

### ***Cutting through the greenwashing***

In an environment where sustainability language is widely used but unevenly defined, a common benchmark is essential.

This challenge is one reason why the EU has introduced the Empowering Consumers for the Green Transition (EmpCo) Directive. Its aim is to combat greenwashing and protect consumers from misleading environmental claims, requiring EU member states to transpose the rules this month (March 2026), with enforcement beginning on September 27, 2026. EmpCo is significant for all “credible and trustworthy labels”, says Stechemesser. By choosing the EU Ecolabel, accommodation providers can demonstrate that their environmental claims align with European legislation, offering reassurance to guests and partners alike, she adds.

### ***Less impact, more performance***

At its core, the EU Ecolabel helps tourism businesses systematically reduce their environmental footprint. It is classified as a Type I environmental label under ISO 14024, meaning it considers the full range of relevant environmental impacts associated with a service. “This means that we take into account the whole life cycle of the tourist accommodation service and

## EU ECOLABEL

# A trusted mark for sustainable stays



**Dr Kristin Stechemesser, Research Assistant at the German Environment Agency, explains why the EU Ecolabel has become a vital point of reference for sustainable tourism, and how it helps accommodation providers balance environmental responsibility, economic viability and traveller trust**

consider various environmental impact categories,” Stechemesser notes.

In practical terms, this translates into a strong focus on areas where accommodation providers can make a tangible difference: energy, water, waste and wastewater. Reducing energy consumption supports climate protection and improves carbon performance, while lower water use addresses growing concerns around freshwater scarcity. Waste prevention, sorting and recycling contribute to more efficient resource use, and the choice of environmentally friendly cleaning products reduces risks linked to human toxicity and ecotoxicity.

While the EU Ecolabel does not explicitly require a quality management system, Stechemesser points out that sustainability measures often go hand in hand with higher operational standards. “Some of the criteria of the EU Ecolabel increase quality, such as training employees in the use of technical equipment or in cleaning issues,” she says. Well-trained staff, efficient systems and clearer processes tend to improve both environmental outcomes and the guest experience.

Crucially, these improvements also make economic sense. “By applying these criteria, the company saves resources and thus money,” she says.

In a sector facing rising energy costs and tighter margins, resource efficiency is no longer just an environmental consideration but a business imperative. The EU Ecolabel, Stechemesser adds, “is therefore the right choice for investing in a ‘proper’ label and for remaining competitive in the long term”.

### ***From criteria to real-world benefits***

The structure of the EU Ecolabel reflects this balance between ambition and practicality. It addresses four key environmental areas – energy, water, waste and wastewater – alongside criteria related to general administration and management. These include environmental concepts with monitoring



The Hotel Luise in Erlangen, Germany, was EU Ecolabel certified in 2023

## EU ECOLABEL AT A GLANCE



- Official environment label of the European Union
- Introduced by the European Commission in 1992
- Certification of hotels and camping sites since 2000
- 900+ awarded holiday accommodations globally
- Independent verification in Germany through three bodies: German Environment Agency (criteria development); Independent auditors (on-site assessment); and RAL gGmbH (certificate review and issuance)
- Also certifies a range of environmentally friendly products, including detergents, cleaning agents, cosmetics, textiles and paints

systems, staff training, consumption tracking and the maintenance of technical equipment. Compared with many other labels, the requirements are demanding, combining 22 mandatory criteria with 45 optional measures that enable accommodation providers to tailor their approach while maintaining a high overall standard.

For travellers, this translates into confidence that environmental claims are meaningful. For businesses, it offers a structured way to identify environmental “hotspots” and address them systematically. Although the EU Ecolabel does not currently calculate a product carbon footprint, its comprehensive scope ensures that the most significant impacts of accommodation services are addressed in a coherent way.

Stechemesser says it is “conceivable that the EU Ecolabel will introduce a product carbon footprint in the future”.

### ***Trust in a crowded marketplace***

As sustainability claims multiply, trust has become one of the most valuable currencies in tourism. Independent and credible environmental labels play a

crucial role in maintaining that trust, particularly as regulation tightens.

Stechemesser emphasises that the EmpCo Directive will change the landscape by only allowing labels introduced by public bodies or based on robust, independently monitored systems. “Independent and credible sustainability labels are very important,” she says. For accommodation providers, this means that choosing a recognised label such as the EU Ecolabel is not only a signal to guests, but also a way to prepare for future regulatory requirements. “Companies can be sure that they comply with upcoming European legislation on environmental information for consumers when they choose the EU Ecolabel.”

### ***A clearer future for travel***

Looking ahead, Stechemesser hopes that credible labels such as the EU Ecolabel will become clear points of distinction in the tourism market.

“We hope that credible sustainability labels for environmental excellence will become established in the future and that hotels and campsites will focus

on these types of labels,” she says. A more transparent landscape would make it easier for travellers to factor sustainability into their decisions and reward businesses that invest seriously in reducing their impact. Industry platforms have an important role to play in this transition. By highlighting credible standards and explaining why they matter, events such as ITB Berlin can help build awareness and understanding across the sector. “This will make tourists more aware of these labels and encourage them to consider sustainability and sustainability labels when planning their next holiday,” Stechemesser concludes. In a tourism industry striving to align growth with responsibility, the EU Ecolabel stands as a practical tool for turning ambition into action.