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A growing number of travel operators are undergoing the B Corp certification process, which can offer insight into a company's environmental and social initiatives.

Credit...Simone Noronha

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Tanya Dohoney has worked on sustainability initiatives for decades. A retired attorney from Texas now living in Paris, she even started the recycling program for her workplace. When it comes to travel, she also values environmentally and socially responsible companies, which led her to choose Intrepid Travel, a certified B Corp company, for a tour in Morocco in 2019.

The sheer number of sustainability certifications for the travel and tourism industry is almost overwhelming and certainly confusing. Certified B Corp enterprises must meet standards set by B Lab, a Pennsylvania-based nonprofit founded in 2006 that awards for-profit companies with certifications for social and environmental performance, transparency and accountability. It can take years — and thousands of dollars — to achieve this accreditation. Globally, there are only 62 certified B Corps in the travel industry and 76 in accommodation and hospitality.

“When you see the B Corp logo, I know it’s been at least semi-vetted,” Ms. Dohoney, 64, said. “I do worry about greenwashing, but you have to start somewhere.”

Other travelers, increasingly concerned about the environmental and social impact of their planes, trains, food waste and more, feel the same way, and a growing number of travel operators are undergoing the B Corp certification process, joining multimillion dollar brands like Patagonia and Athleta, to differentiate themselves from competitors.

Aurora Expeditions, a small ship tour operator focused on polar travel, became certified in 2024, joining other travel companies like the lodging company Sawday’s, and tour companies Selective Asia and Byway. But Hayley Peacock-Gower, Aurora’s chief marketing officer, said the company has focused on sustainable travel since its inception.

“Much of this work we were already doing, but we have now committed to much more accountability and made a legal agreement to sustainability,” she said, adding that Aurora also amended the company’s constitution and formalized internal policies as part of the B Corp process.

What’s the certification process?

Companies are scored on five criteria — governance, workers’ rights, community impact, environmental impact and “stewardship of its customers” — and must achieve an assessment score of 80 or above to pass B Lab’s “Impact Assessment.” Once approved, a company must pay an annual fee based on gross annual revenue and location. For U.S.-based enterprises, this ranges from $2,000 for companies with under $500,000 in gross annual revenue to $50,000 for companies with revenue from $750,000 to $1 billion. (Some organizations, like those owned by women or veterans, can also qualify for discounted fees.)

“B Corp certification offers tourists confidence that they’re visiting and using providers that are responsible,” said Jorge Fontanez, chief executive at B Lab for the United States and Canada.

With more than 2,909 employees, Intrepid Travel is the largest B Corp in the travel industry, earning its certification in 2018.

“When there is so much green fatigue and so many certifications, it’s really hard to discern what’s best,” said Mikey Sadowski, Intrepid’s vice president of global communication. “We felt that B Corp really did have this disproportionate edge and level of trust.”

To meet B Corp standards, Intrepid, which offers trips in 120 countries on seven continents, focuses on initiatives like hiring local guides, sourcing local ingredients and materials, and reducing carbon emissions by planning train-based itineraries — instead of using air transit — when possible.

The Australia-based company recently completed its B Corp re-certification, which in 2024 includes an annual fee of 51,750 Australian dollars ($33,625) and another 900 Australian dollars ($585) for a submission fee, Mr. Sadowski said. For their original certification in 2018, the company also paid a one-time verification fee of 14,500 Australian dollars ($9,573).

Who gets left out?

While this certification can offer insights into a company's environmental and social initiatives — and perhaps maximize profits, by winning the business of like-minded travelers — these tours and accommodations are often geared toward customers with deep pockets.

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For budget travelers or those of less economic means, it can be challenging to find affordable travel companies with B Corp certifications.

"The reality is, B Corps generally skew to the luxury side of the market. And the idea of having any B Corp hostels, for example, is very rare," said Nick Pinto, a 31-year-old Colorado-based marketing manager who spends several months a year working and traveling abroad.

Mr. Pinto calls himself a "budget conscious traveler" and has found he's priced out of B Corp accommodations.

"It's tricky because you want programs like B Corp to be inclusive to create a broader movement," he said. Mr. Pinto recently spent several weeks in Mexico, but had noted that there were only two certified B Corp hotels in the country.

A third company, Hoteles BF, has since been certified.

What other certifications are out there?

Plenty, along with guidelines, verifications and "ecostars." The last, a certification doled out by the for-profit Ecostars, evaluates hotels' environmental impact per visitor stay. This certification, free to receive and apply for, is a fully digital process that takes two days on average to receive. Other certifications gauge sustainability efforts for short-term accommodations, tour groups and other subsectors of the travel industry.

To receive certification from the 1% for the Planet nonprofit, which was co-founded by the Patagonia founder Yvon Chouinard and Craig Mathews, of Blue Ribbon Flies, a fly-fishing outfitter, member companies must commit to donating 1 percent of their gross proceeds to environmental organizations. Annual dues start at $500.

The Global Sustainable Tourism Council nonprofit, which includes among its members government tourism boards, travel companies, tour operators and N.G.O.s, vets sustainability certificates.

Organizations also rely on guidelines and resolutions issued by the United Nations as part of the entity's sustainable development agenda. The guidelines call for biodiversity and climate action initiatives, as well as energy efficiency and renewable energy usage in accommodations. Courses and webinars, which are free to enroll in and to view, charge a per-course fee of 49 euros ($53) if a user wants to complete assignments and receive a certificate of completion.

Many tour operators and travel companies have additionally announced efforts to reach net carbon neutrality, but carbon offsets have been shown to rarely capture or reduce real emissions, or reduce future emissions. The tour operator Run the Alps used to offset the flight emissions for travelers coming to its tours, but the company is re-evaluating the practice.

"Offsetting is not the panacea we hoped it was," said Hillary Gerardi, the sustainability director at Run the Alps. "We're trying to move from being good to doing good, which means beyond reducing our footprint, we're trying to leave some

positive impact in our community."

The tour operator is a member of 1% for the Planet and works with the local research center and citizen-science organizer, CREA Mont Blanc.

But even when a travel company is committed to sustainability, B Corp certification can be a big ask for smaller operations.

"We're entirely aligned with B Corp status, but up until this year, we were a really tiny company. The certification and process would have been too onerous," said Doug Mayer, the company's founder.

But with the company's growth, Mayer is considering taking the step.

"I can see it coming up for us," he said.

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