

COVID-SAFE SCHEMES: WHICH ONES CAN YOU TRUST?

Some schemes let airlines and hotels claim they've taken extra precautions against coronavirus without checks or inspections

BY JO RHODES



Airline schemes



Airlineratings.com's Covid-19 Compliance Rating

Airlineratings.com has always ranked airline safety and now does the same with Covid-19 safety measures. It's more of a rating system than an accreditation scheme, Airlineratings checks the info on airline websites against seven criteria – including the deep clean of aircraft and social distancing on board – following up for clarification if necessary. British Airways, Qatar and Emirates were named among its top-20 Covid-compliant airlines. Like many of the hotel schemes, it relies on what airlines claim to be doing and little else. There are no inspections. Airlineratings told us: 'With all the Covid restrictions and quarantine issues, it's extremely difficult and – in many cases – impossible to check airlines' compliance.'



IATA's Health Safety Standards Checklist for Airline Operators

Despite looking at the 30-page document, we're still confused how this works. The health checklist is based on guidance from the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), covering everything from pre-arrival information to onboard air quality. The International Air Transport Association (IATA) says interested carriers can sign up for free to boost passenger confidence. But despite looking at the website and contacting IATA, we still don't know who is signed up. IATA did tell us these were guidelines rather than a formal accreditation scheme, and that airlines self-assess. It's worth noting that IATA represents the airline industry and has faced criticism in the past for underestimating the risk of catching Covid-19 on a flight – describing it as less likely than a lightning strike.



Skytrax's Covid-19 Safety Rating

Another organisation that has expanded its rating of airlines to include a Covid-19 assessment. Skytrax independently audits 190 protocols, including cabin cleanliness, use of face masks and changes to onboard catering. It also sends its researchers on board to swab high-touch areas, such as door handles and seat belt buckles, for contamination. Qatar received a five-star rating, while both British Airways and easyJet were awarded four stars under the scheme. Skytrax has been quick to distance itself from other 'hypothetical ratings' that 'lack credibility'. As it concludes on its website: 'Any Covid-19 health certifications that simply ask airlines to complete an online box-ticking exercise to state what their Covid measures are (or should be), can't deliver credible results.'

The prospect of a post-lockdown getaway might fill you with excitement and anxiety. After months of hiding from the world, we want to know that hotel rooms will be thoroughly sanitised and airlines will do their best to manage social distancing.

Businesses have signed up to various certification schemes to reassure us that safety measures are in place to reduce the risk from Covid-19. Some schemes are rigorous, involving

on-site inspections and hygiene checks. Others simply ask managers to self-certify – which means just ticking a few boxes on a form, it seems.

Take the World Travel & Tourism Council's (WTTC) Safe Travels global safety and hygiene stamp. It sounds grand. It can endorse almost anything – from a single holiday rental to an entire nation. More than 100 countries are already approved – including parts of Brazil, which is



linked to a more infectious variant. The WTTC told us that the stamp 'doesn't indicate the level of Covid-19 in a destination'. So what does it do?

The WTTC website boasts the stamp 'recognises destinations and businesses around the world that have adopted the Safe Travels health and hygiene global standardised protocols'. But according to its T&Cs, it's not accredited by any health body. The WTTC says it takes 'no responsibility' for checking applicants are doing what they say they're doing.

Instead it relies on an 'accurate and honest' self-assessment. In essence, this means that businesses are marking their own homework, which we think is a conflict of interest.

When we approached the WTTC, it told us the guidelines aimed to provide 'global consistency'. Worryingly, it isn't the only industry badge scheme or rating that's little more than a box-ticking exercise. Here, we assess the assessors, so you're not fooled into thinking a hotel or airline is safer than it really is.

Businesses are marking their own homework. It's a huge conflict of interest

Accommodation



VisitBritain We're Good to Go

Of 12,640 Good to Go accommodation businesses, VisitBritain has inspected just 354 – less than 3%. While lockdown has slowed progress, VisitBritain told us that spot checks weren't a prerequisite, but to audit compliance and investigate complaints. Last year, we found evidence of poor cleaning at the approved Folkestone Britannia hotel. VisitBritain said it saw no reason to drop it from the scheme after receiving 'confirmation of cleanliness processes'. Britannia said there's 'more to do' despite spending £2m on Covid precautions. To join, applicants only need to tick a few boxes to say they have a Covid risk assessment in place and are following guidelines. These businesses now also automatically get the WTTC's Safe Travels stamp. After all, why have one pointless badge when you can have two?



AA Covid-19 confident

This free-of-charge scheme is open to all types of accommodation, including pubs with rooms and glamping pods. It's another convenient online self-assessment application – but AA told us managers are asked to submit evidence of a completed risk assessment and relevant staff training. They must also agree to adapt to changing guidelines and submit to future audits 'as required'. In return, properties will receive the AA Covid-19 Confident logo for their website and a digital certificate to display at their property. In March, the AA had spot-checked 10% of properties, a number it intends to grow when restrictions are lifted. The AA told us that the self-assessment was just 'one element', adding that only 53% of applicants had been approved so far.



Global Secure Accreditation Certificate of International Good Practice

Designed by security and safety specialists the Global Secure Accreditation (GSA), this certificate verifies that 'all reasonable steps' are being taken to 'stop and limit' the threat of Covid-19. Each property is audited by an independent assessor, either with an evidence-based online process (including photos or videos of Covid-19 measures) or an on-site inspection. Although, assessments are taking place virtually because of restrictions. The GSA told us that applicants are monitored at regular intervals to check they're continuing to maintain standards. Assessors also dish out site-specific advice for following best practice, which – in our eyes – has a lot more clout than a one-size-fits-all checklist.



Quality in Tourism Safe, Clean & Legal

This pass or fail scheme was originally launched in 2018 to ensure hotels and holiday rentals had appropriate fire safety and hygiene standards in place. It's been updated to include Covid-19 measures. Crucially, all properties are inspected by an independent third party – who examines high-touch areas, such as handles and remote controls, and even swabs for bacteria if concerned. Currently, Best Western is approved and Which? Recommended Provider Forest Holidays is going through the lengthy application process. Quality in Tourism's director, Deborah Heather, dismisses any scheme that doesn't inspect every property. She told us: 'It's misleading if nobody is checking the life and limb stuff. Consumers have no idea they could be putting their relatives at risk.'

WHAT ONE HOTEL DID TO BECOME COVID-19 SAFE

Wayne Moore took over managing the Kentisbury Grange Hotel Devon in July last year.

Wayne wanted to adopt the right procedures from the off to reassure guests that every measure had been taken to limit the spread of the virus. After researching different

schemes, he applied for Quality in Tourism's Safe, Clean & Legal.

He told us: 'I wanted to talk to a person and get guidance that was site specific rather than a generic tick list.' Wayne said the process was 'vigorous' with an inspector visiting the property to assess their Covid-19

procedures. They advised on best practice, as well as training the housekeeping and reception staff. 'I was told we needed steam cleaners, so I ordered them straight away. Now we fog soft furnishings and quarantine them for 72-hours before putting them back in rotation.' Wayne

has also overhauled his check-in, sanitising keys and popping them in an envelope.

'It's so important because one case of Covid and its game over,' he said. 'I can sleep at night knowing I've done everything humanly possible to keep my staff and my customers safe.'