



The Cook Islands International Visitor Survey Report

January – March 2020

Prepared for Cook Islands Tourism Corporation

by

**New Zealand Tourism Research Institute
Auckland University of Technology**

www.nztri.org

August 2020

Acknowledgements

NZTRI would like to acknowledge the Cook Islands Tourism Corporation (special mention to Metua Vaiimene and Jake Numanga), the Cook Islands Statistics Office, Immigration Cook Islands, and Rarotonga International Airport for their support in this ongoing research. This report was prepared by Simon Milne, Mindy Sun, Jin Yi, Nathaniel Dobbin, Amanda Nodder, and Dinesha Senarathana.

Executive Summary

This report focuses on the characteristics, expectations and expenditure patterns of tourists who visited the Cook Islands between 1 January and 31 March 2020. This is the last quarterly report prior to the onset of COVID-19 and as such represents an important barometer of the pre-pandemic performance of the industry. The data that underpins the report is generated by an online departure survey (<http://www.mycookislandsvisit.com>). There are 990 individual respondents to the survey - representing a total of 2,089 adults and 361 children in the expenditure analysis (this equates to 10% of all visitors during the period – based on the same period of 2020 visitor arrival data from the Cook Islands Statistics Office).

Just over half (52%) of visitors surveyed come from New Zealand, 21% of respondents come from Australia. Visitors are well educated (72% of visitors have some form of tertiary education) with a relatively high annual household income (56% earn over NZ\$100,000 per year). Two fifths of visitors (41%) travel with one companion. Solo travellers are less common (12%).

Over half (59%) of those surveyed are first time visitors to the Cook Islands. The main purpose of visit is holiday-making (76%). The average length of stay in the Cook Islands is 8.8 nights. The majority of visitors (93%) stay within two weeks. Twenty six percent of visitors surveyed visited Aitutaki.

Visitor spend prior to arrival in the Cook Islands (\$2,179 per person) decreased slightly from the same quarter in 2018/19 (\$2,197), but increased from the 2018/19 annual average (\$2,047 per person). Spend on the island (per person per day) is \$166. This spend is slightly higher than both the 2018/19 annual average of \$162 and also the same quarter for the previous year (\$162 for January to March 2019).

When pre-paid spend and local spend are combined, it is estimated that each visitor brings \$2,324 to the Cook Islands economy (or approximately \$265 per day). This figure is higher than the annual average for 2018/19 (\$2,189), and the January to March 2019 period (\$2,321).

Overall visitor satisfaction levels with services and experiences in the Cook Islands remain high. The most appealing elements are environment, cleanliness and weather; local people; activities, attractions, entertainment and events; and atmosphere. The least appealing elements are the lack of public services, facilities and infrastructure; food and beverage; price of goods and services; stray animals and mosquitos; rubbish and natural environment care; customer service, poor weather; attractions and activities; and accommodation.

The future intentions of visitors remain similar to those seen in the previous year: 89% of those surveyed state that they would return to the Cook Islands, and 97% would recommend the Cook Islands to friends or family.

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Introduction

The Cook Islands government, local businesses and communities require a clear picture of the characteristics, expectations and expenditure patterns of visitors to the nation. This information enables effective planning and development of the tourism industry and highlights its crucial role within the broader Cook Islands economy.

Visitors to the Cook Islands are asked to complete a web-based survey within a few weeks of the completion of their visit. The Cook Islands online International Visitor Survey (IVS) has run since mid-2012 and is scheduled to run through 2020 and 2021.

This report presents the IVS results from January to March 2020. Over this three-month period, 8,483 visitors were contacted by email to take part in the survey, and 990 responses were received: a conversion rate of 12%. The conversion rate for this period is lower than the 2018/19 annual average (16%) and the January to March 2019 period (14%). The 897 responses cover a total of 2,089 adults and 361 children when we examine visitor expenditure. This is the last quarterly report prior to the onset of COVID-19 and as such represents an important barometer of the pre-pandemic performance of the industry.

The data presented includes detailed information on:

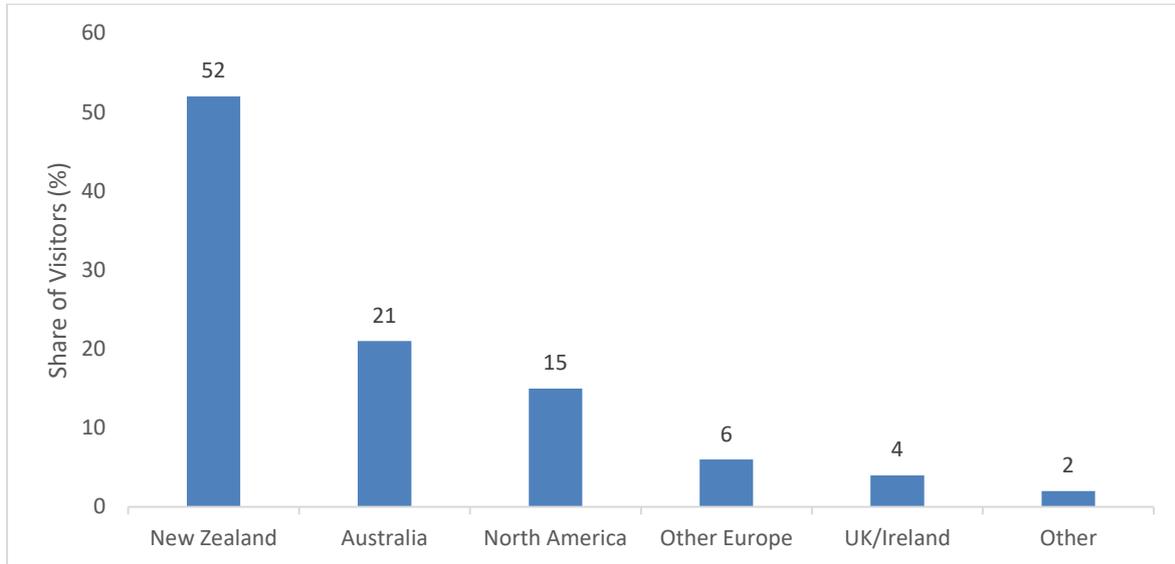
- The characteristics of visitors to the Cook Islands (age, gender, education, country of origin, income, purpose of visit, travelling companions, number of previous visits, length of stay, airline used, islands visited)
- Visitor information obtained about the Cook Islands, the factors influencing in the travel decision making process, and booking information
- Visitor expenditure (amount of money spent prior to arrival and while in the Cook Islands, items of spending)
- Visitor satisfaction (most and least appealing elements of the visit, overall satisfaction, satisfaction with activities)

Wherever there are significant or notable variations from the 2018/19 annual averages or the 2018/2019 January to March quarterly findings these are highlighted in the following discussion.

Visitor Characteristics

Just over half (52%) of the visitors surveyed come from New Zealand (Figure 1). The second largest visitor group is from Australia (21%). North America and Europe represent the other major source markets.

Figure 1: Country of origin (n = 849)



Auckland, Wellington, and Canterbury account for 57% of New Zealand visitors (Figure 2). The regions of New South Wales, Queensland, and Victoria generate 93% of arrivals (Figure 3) from Australia.

Figure 2: New Zealand visitors (n = 441)

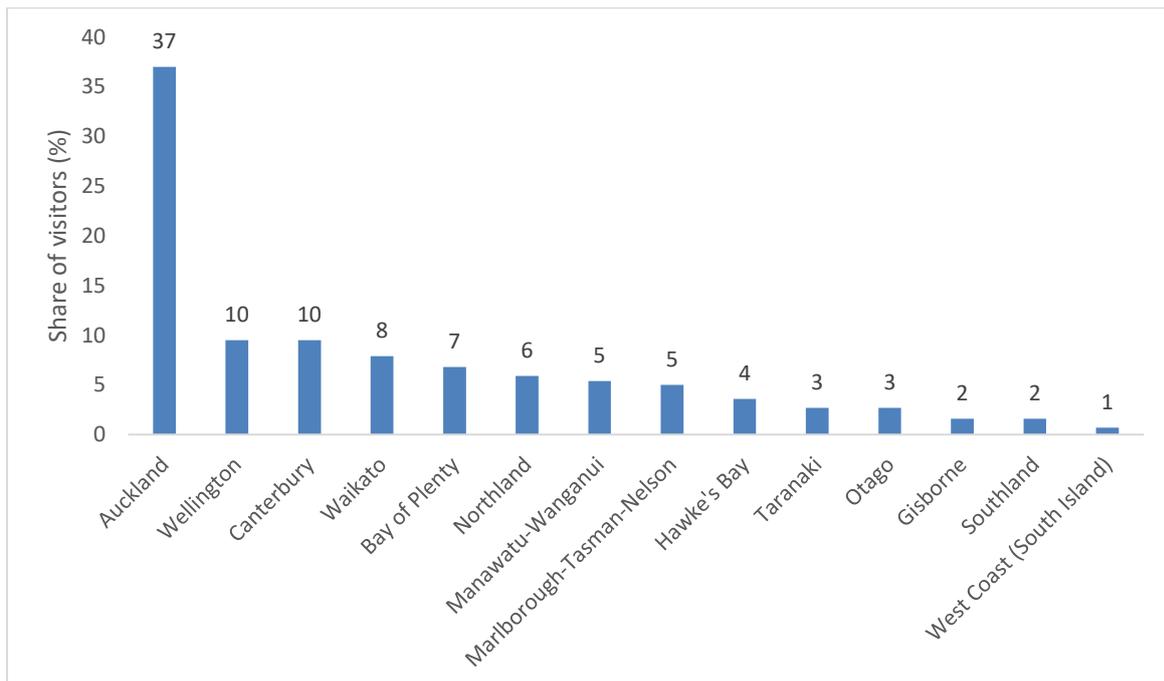
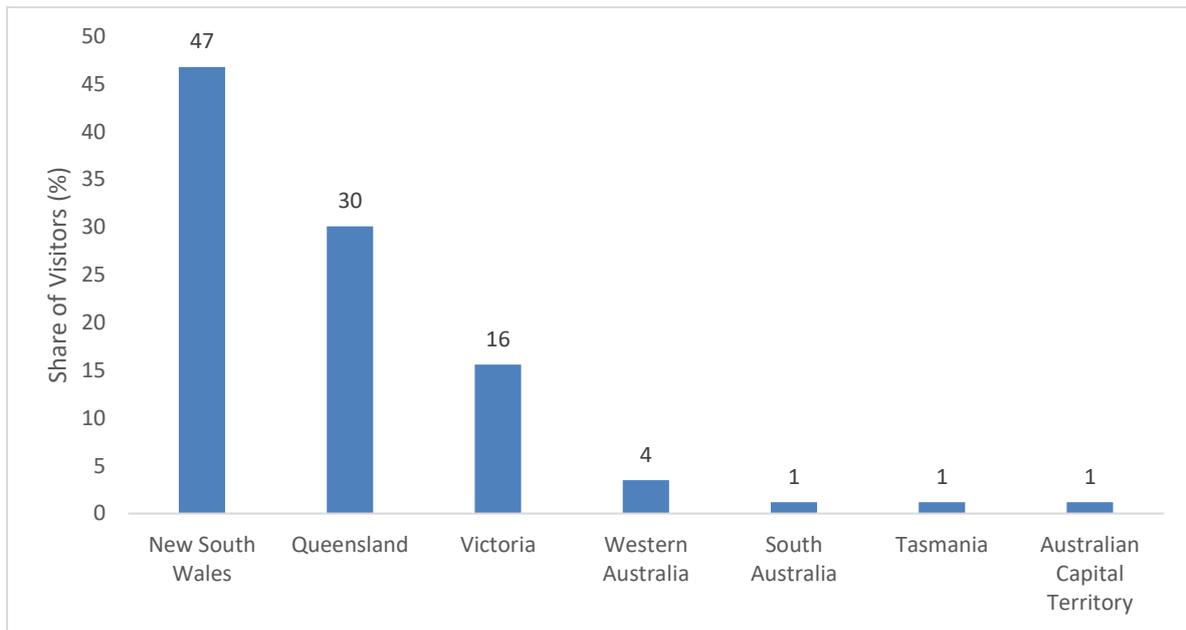
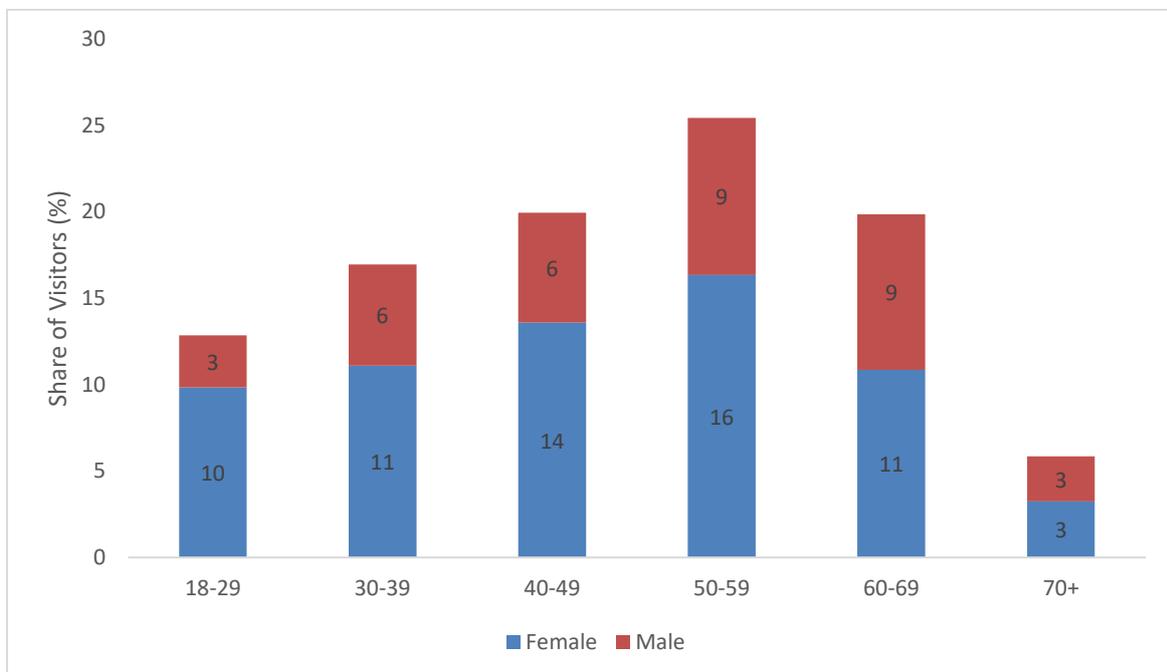


Figure 3: Australia visitors (n = 173)



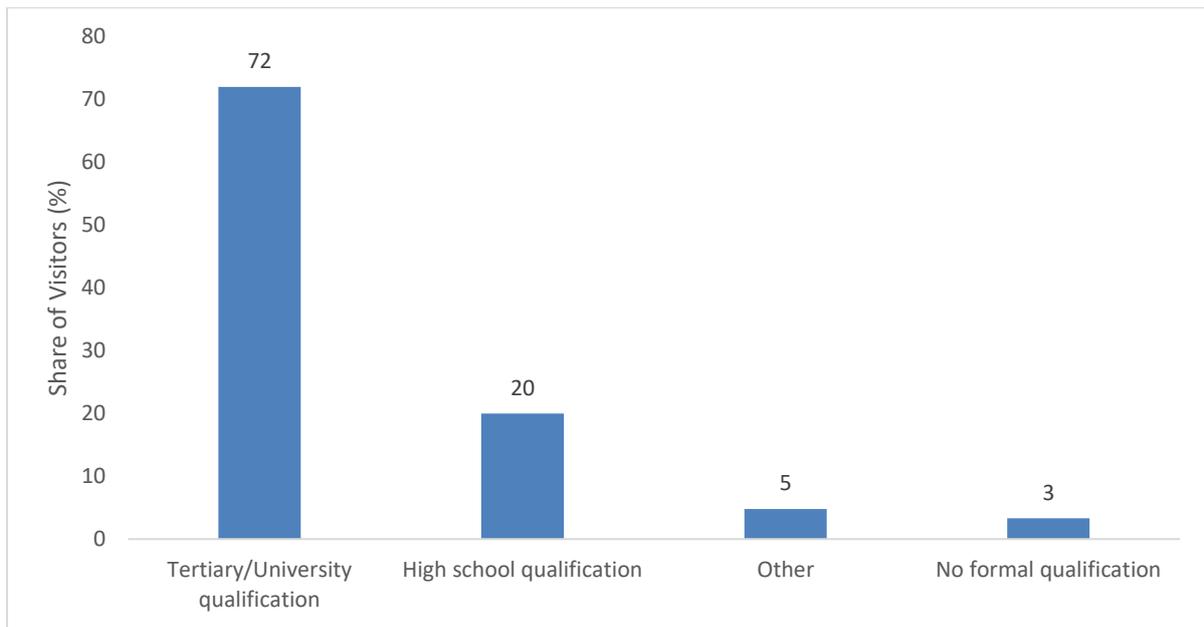
More women (65%) than men (35%) completed the survey (Figure 4). The most significant age categories are the 50 to 59 age group (25%), followed by those aged 40 to 49 year (20%), 60 to 69 (20%), 30 to 39 (17%), and 18 to 29 (13%). There are relatively few travellers in the 70 plus age bracket (6%). Those under 18 are not surveyed for ethical reasons.

Figure 4: Distribution of age and gender (n = 871)



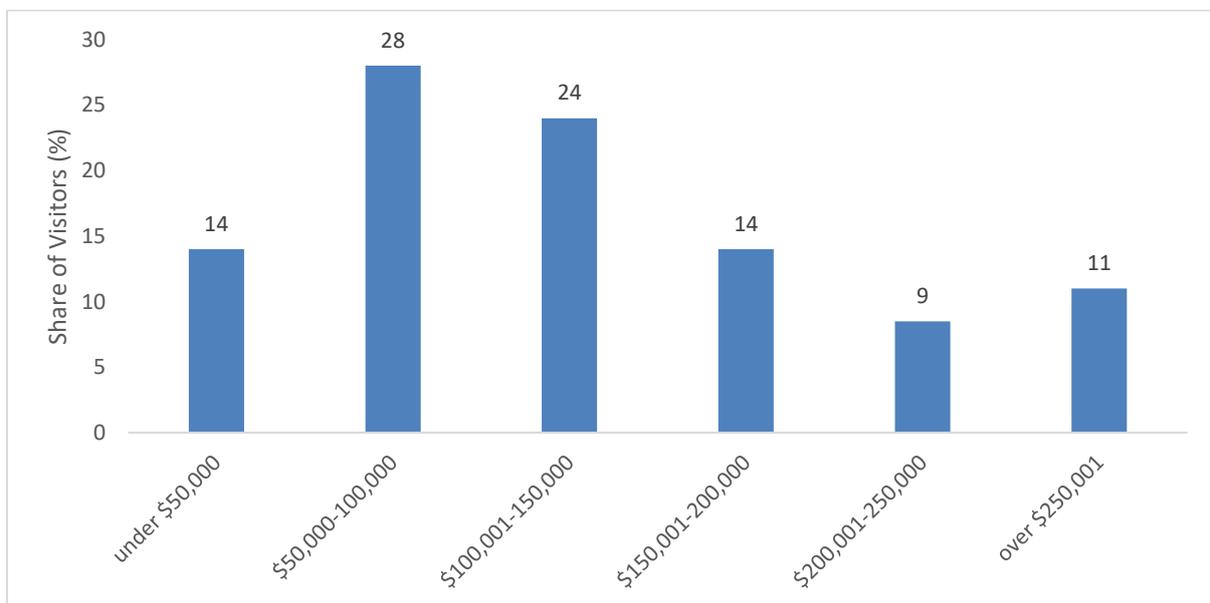
Visitors are well educated, with nearly three quarters (72%) of those surveyed having some form of tertiary qualification, and a further 20% having completed a high school education (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Highest qualification (n = 877)



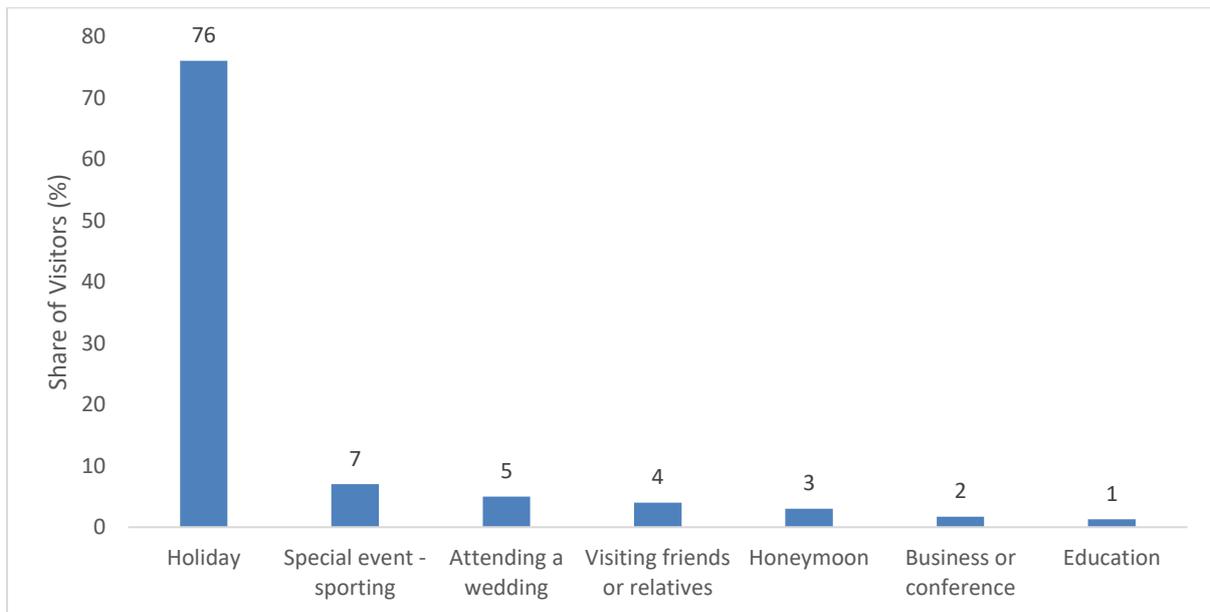
Over a quarter of visitors (28%) have an annual household income of between NZ\$50,001 and NZ\$100,000. A quarter (24%) of those surveyed earn between NZ\$100,001 and NZ\$150,000. A further 34% of respondents have a household income of over NZ\$150,000 per year (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Annual household income in NZD (n = 687)



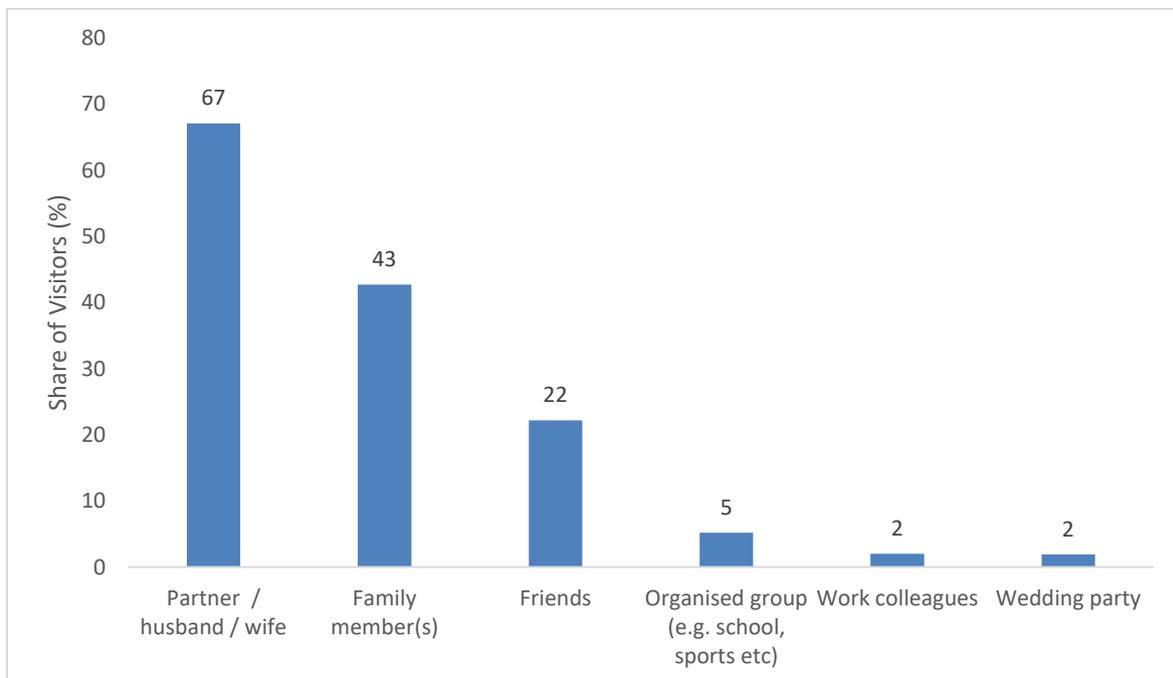
Over three quarters of (76%) respondents come to the Cook Islands for a holiday. Other reasons given include participating special sporting event (7%), attending a wedding (5%), visiting friends or relatives (4%), for a honeymoon (3%), for business and conference (2%), and education (1%).

Figure 7: Main purpose of visit (n = 989)



The majority (88%) of visitors travel with one or more companions. Among this group, most travel to the Cook Islands with a partner or spouse (67%). Visitors also travel with other family members (43%), or with friends (22%). Those travelling in an organised group, with work colleagues, or as part of a wedding party represent smaller shares of the sample (Figure 8).

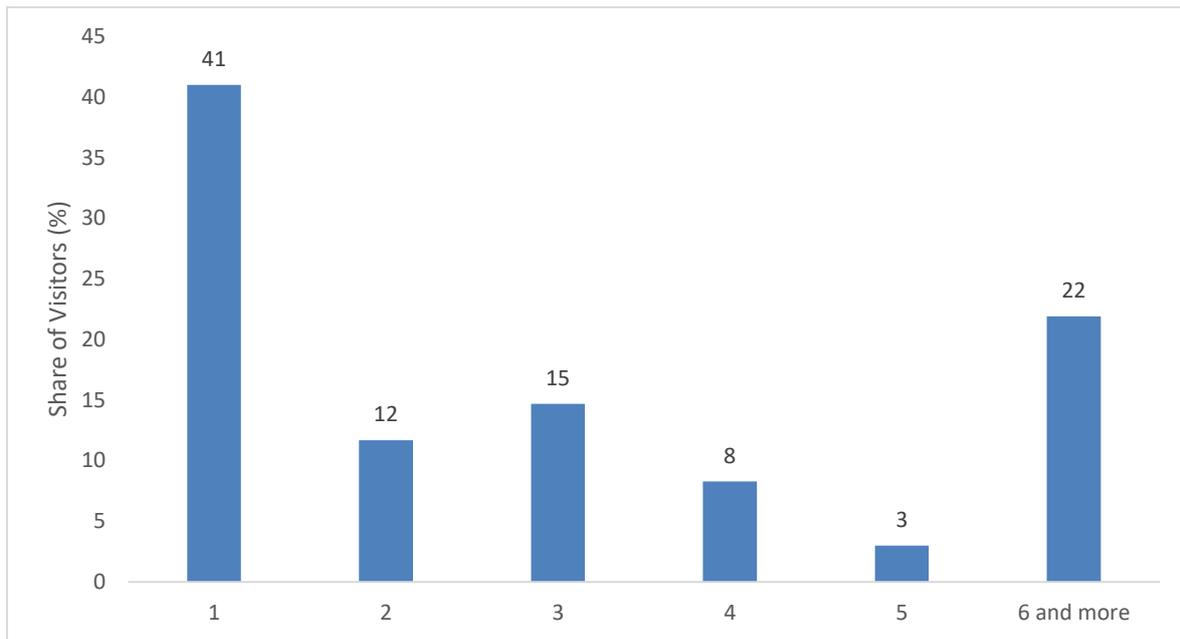
Figure 8: Travelling with whom? (n = 871)



Note: Multiple responses, therefore total does not add up to 100%

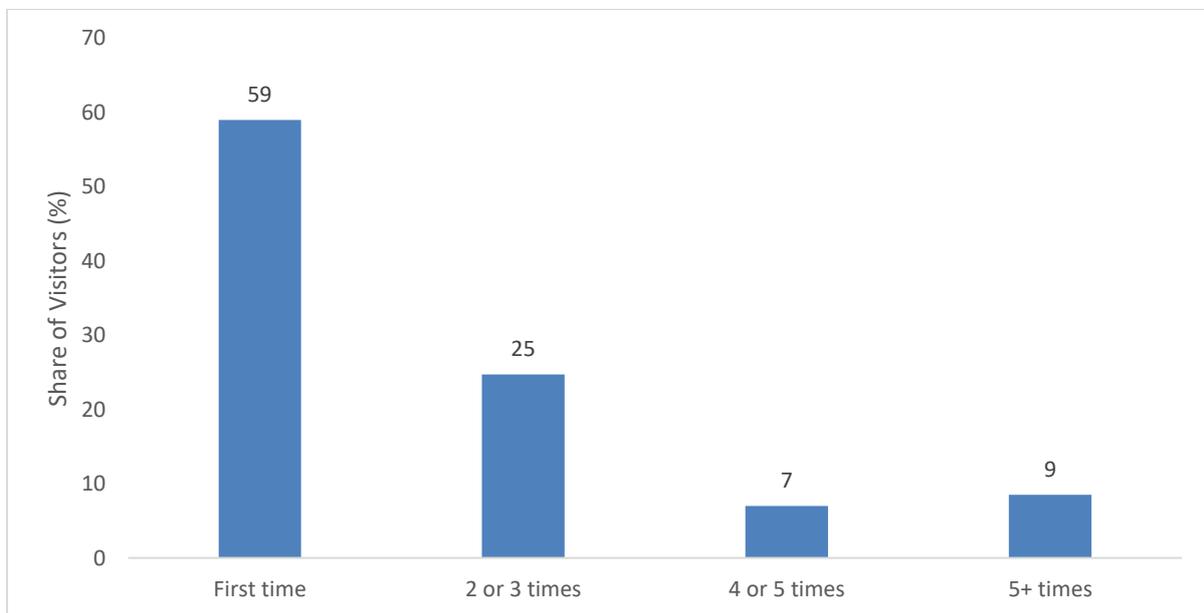
If we exclude those travelling alone, two in five visitors (41%) travelled with one companion on their visit to the Cook Islands (Figure 9), and over one in five visitors (22%) travelled with more than six people.

Figure 9: Number of companions on trip (excluding those travelling alone) (n = 791)



Over half of visitors (59%) are on their first visit to the Cook Islands. A further 25% have been to the Cook Islands two or three times before. A smaller group (16%) have visited four or more times (Figure 10).

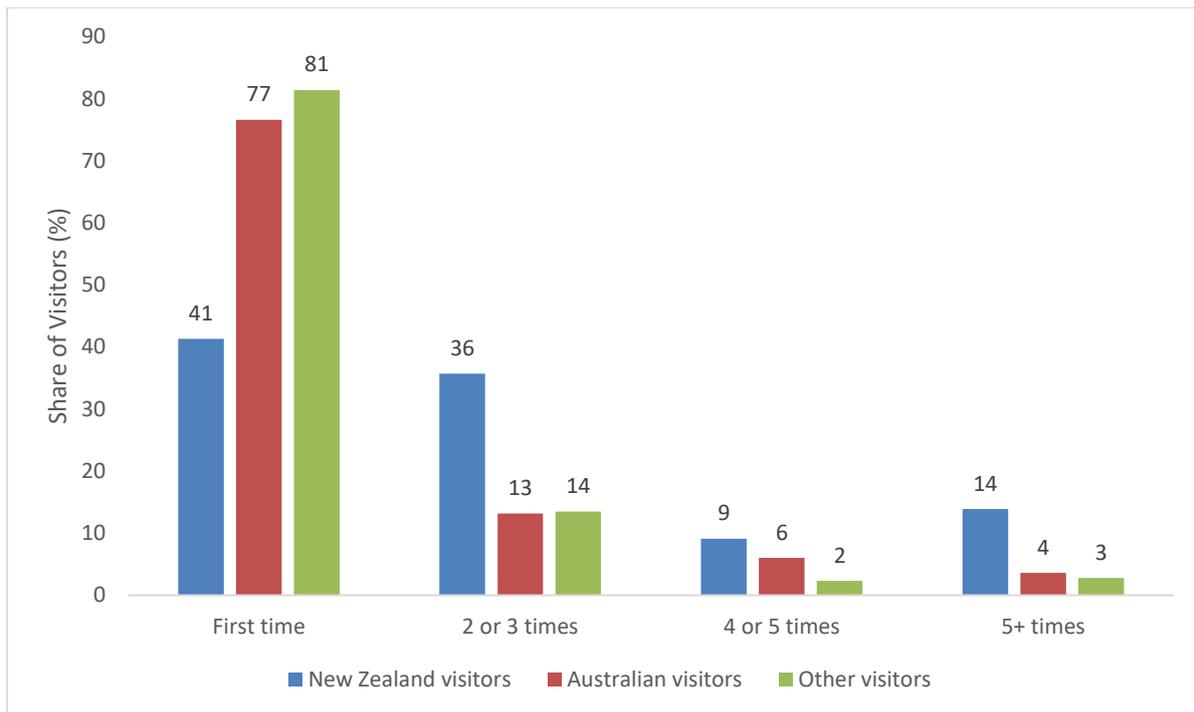
Figure 10: Number of visits to the Cook Islands (n = 877)



Note: Due to the decimal carry, total does not add up to 100%

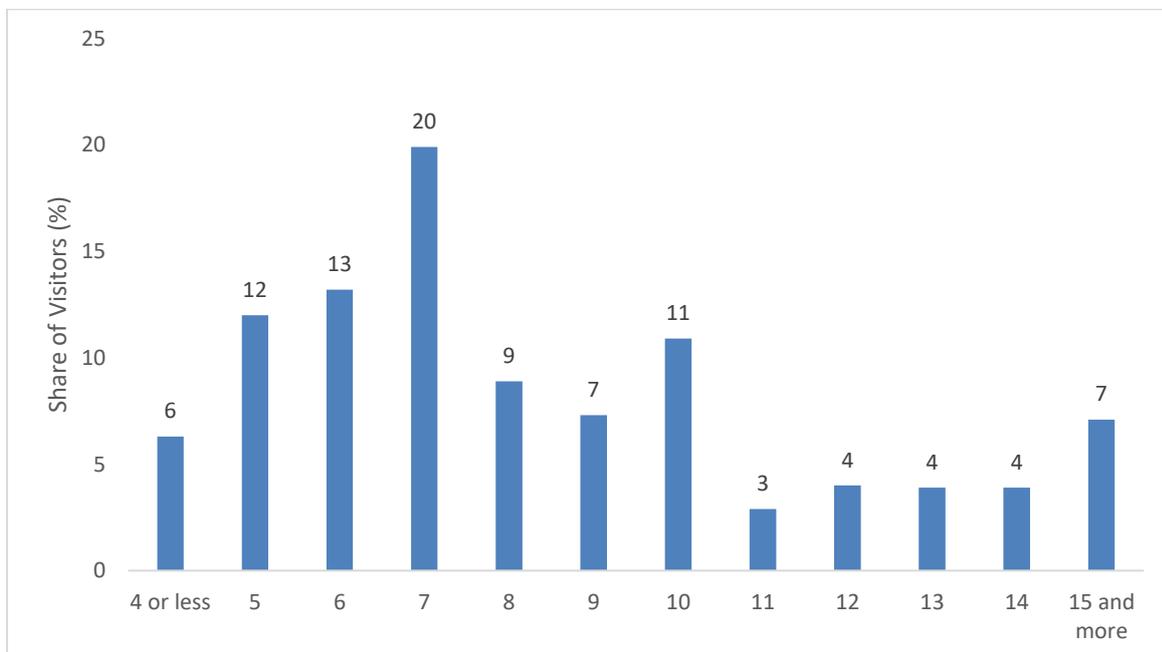
New Zealanders are more likely to be repeat visitors than those from other source markets (Figure 11). Over half of the surveyed visitors from New Zealand (59%) have visited the Cook Islands before, compared to only 23% of visitors from Australia and 19% from other countries.

Figure 11: Number of previous visits to the Cook Islands – country breakdown



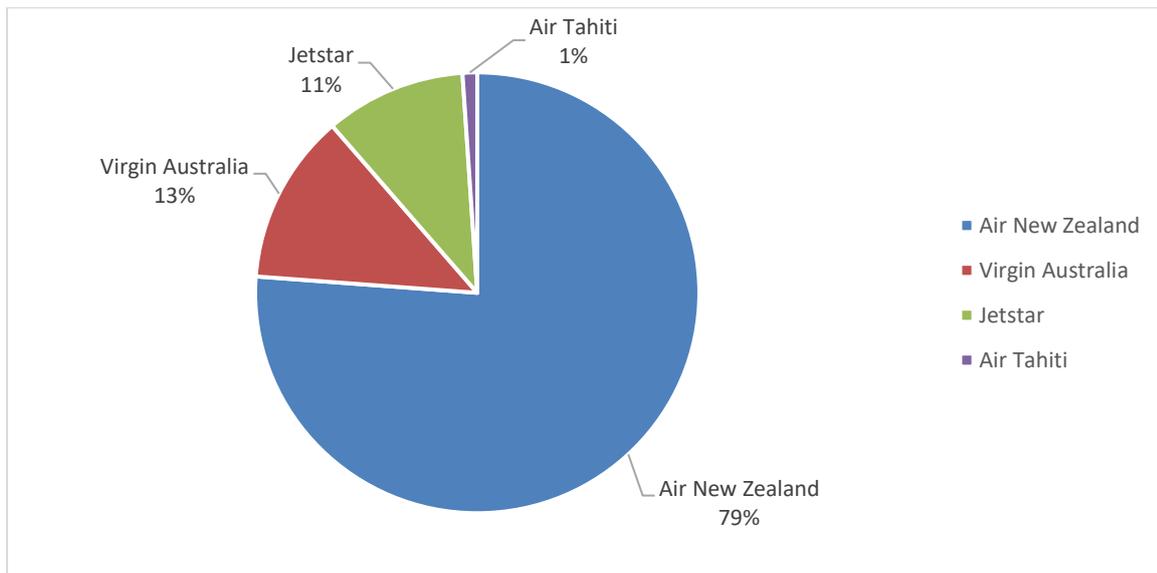
The average length of stay in the Cook Islands is 8.8 nights with 78% of visitors spending ten or fewer nights in the country (Figure 12).

Figure 12: Length of stay in nights (n = 972)



Over three quarters of visitors (79%) travel to/from the Cook Islands with Air New Zealand, a further 13% of visitors travelling with Virgin Australia, followed by 11% of visitors fly with Jetstar and 1% of visitors travelling with Air Tahiti (Figure 13).

Figure 13: Mode of transport (n = 985)

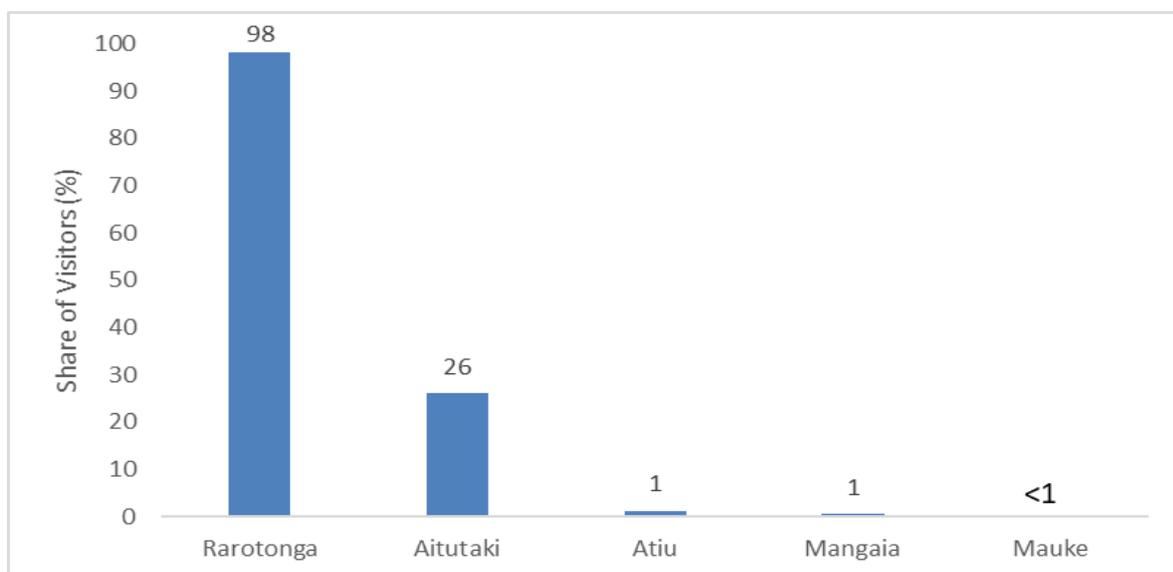


Note: Multiple responses, therefore total does not add up to 100%

For 80% of visitors, the Cook Islands is the sole destination for their trip. For 20% of the visitors surveyed the Cook Islands is part of a larger journey, including some visitors who are on an around-the-world trip. For those travelling to other countries as part of a bigger trip, the top destination mentioned is New Zealand (87%), followed by Australia (26%), other Pacific countries (12%), Asian countries (12%), United States of America (12%), South America (4%), Europe (1%), and Canada (1%).

The vast majority (98%) of visitors to the Cook Islands spend time on Rarotonga, with Aitutaki being the second most visited island (26%). Far fewer visitors spend time on Atiu (1%), Mangaia (1%), and Mauke (less than 1%) (Figure 14).

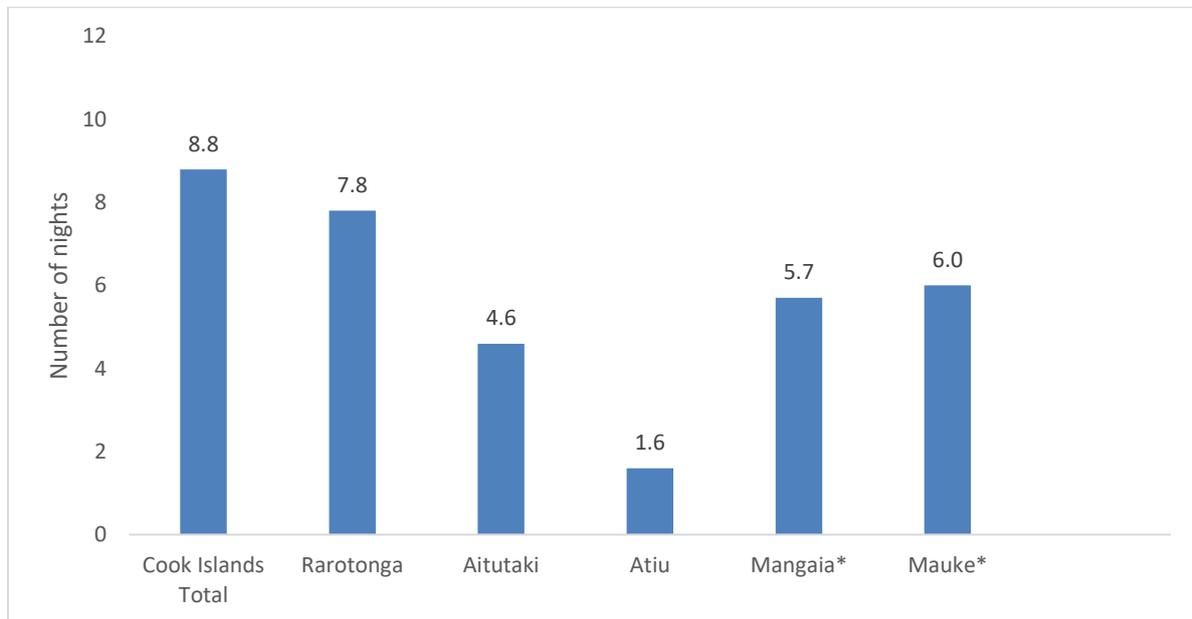
Figure 14: Visited Islands (n = 976)



Note: Respondents could visit more than one island, so total may do not add up to 100%

The average length of stay on Rarotonga is 7.8 nights (Figure 15). For the visitors that went to Aitutaki, the average number of nights spent on the island itself is 4.6. It should be noted that small sample sizes for Atiu, Mangaia and Mauke mean that we must treat length of stay figures with some caution.

Figure 15: Average length of stay in the Cook Islands and on each island (n = 4-945)

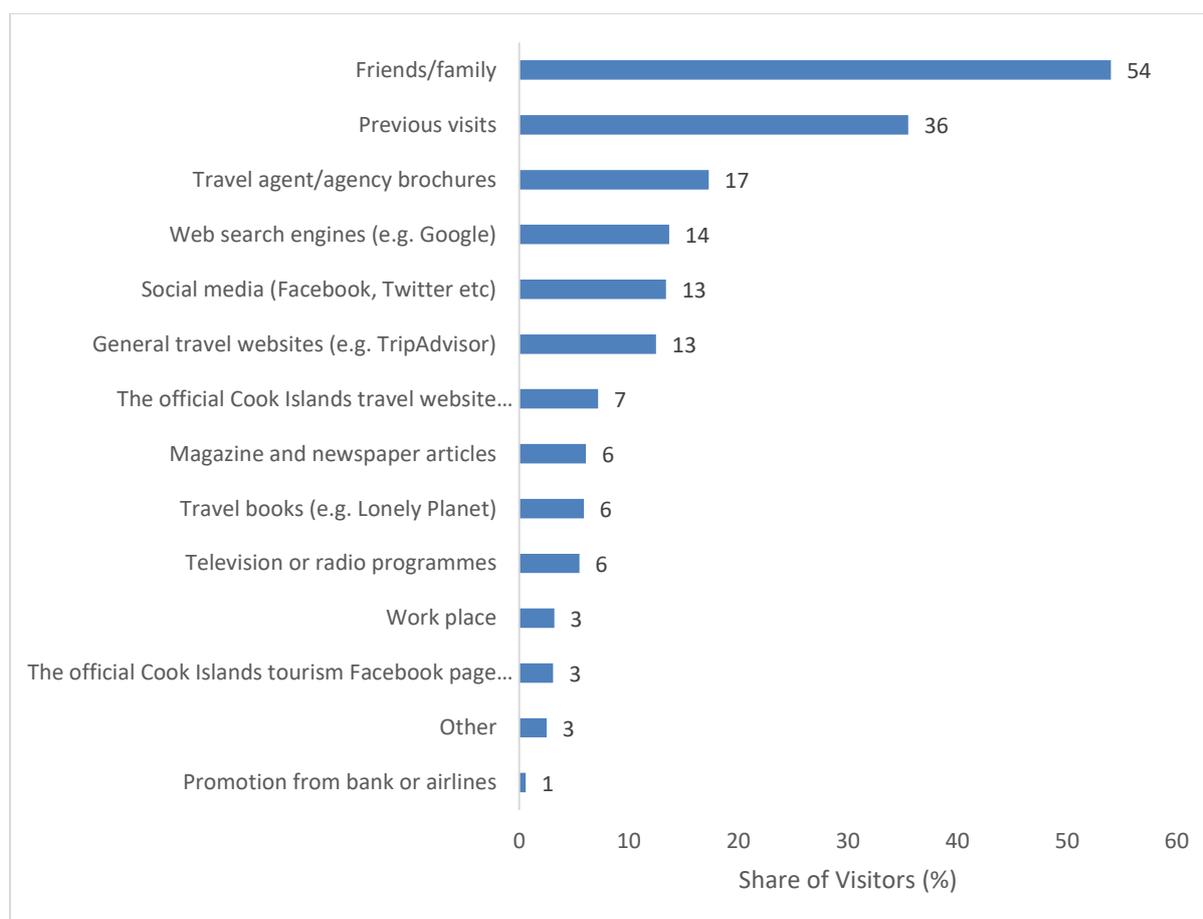


Note: *n<10

Information Sources and Purchasing Behaviour

Participants were asked how they had found out about the Cook Islands as a holiday destination for this trip (Figure 16). Over half (54%) of respondents ranked word of mouth from friends and family members as the most important influence, followed by previous experience (36%), travel agents/agency brochures (17%), web search engines (e.g. Google) (14%), social media (Facebook, Twitter etc) (13%), general travel websites (e.g. TripAdvisor) (13%), and the official Cook Islands travel website (7%).

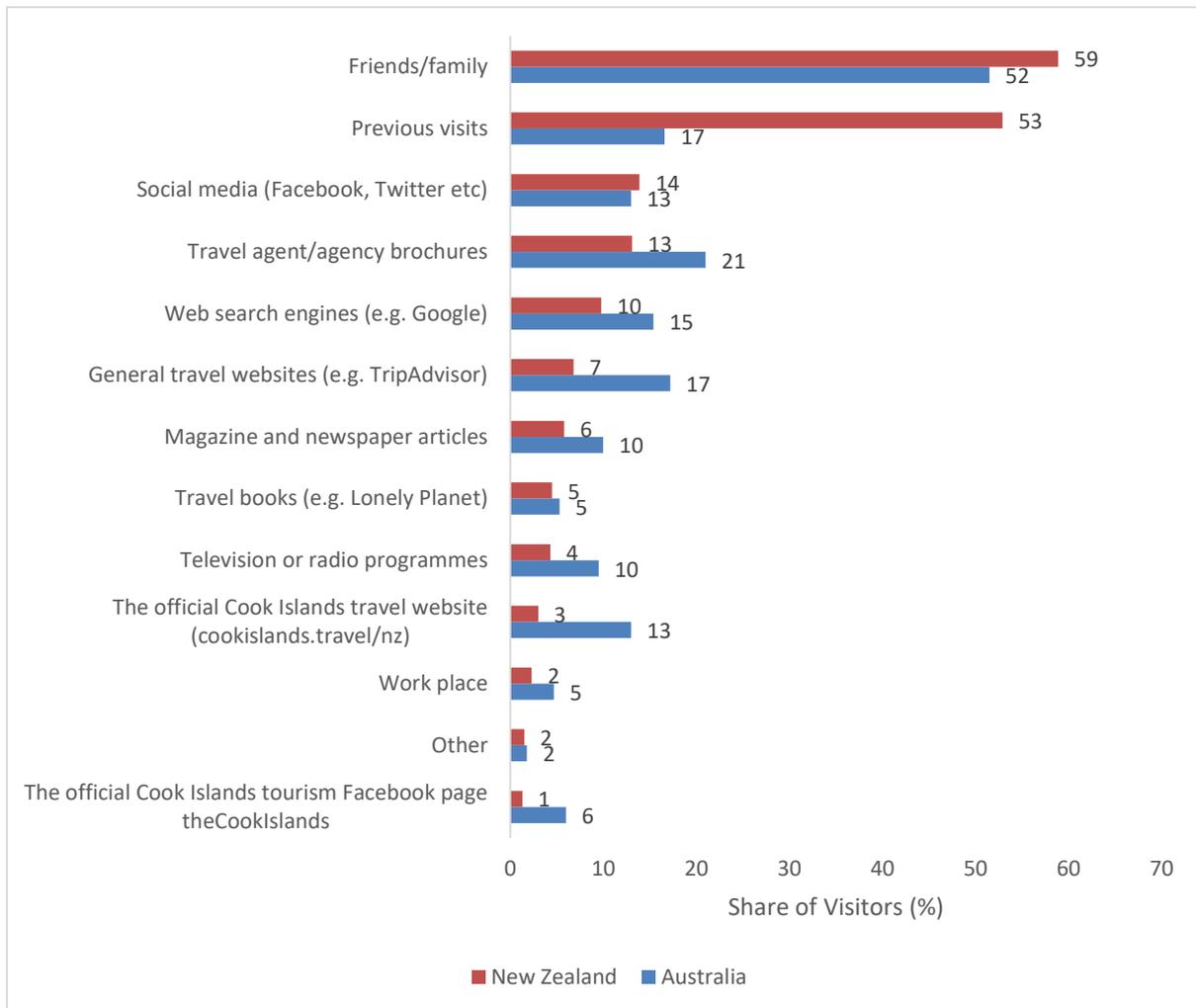
Figure 16: How did you find out about Cook Islands as a destination (n = 978)



Note: Multiple responses, therefore total does not add up to 100%

Visitors from New Zealand are more likely to seek information about the destination via word of mouth from friends and family members (59%). There are more repeat visitors from New Zealand than Australia and this is reflected by the fact that over half of visitors (53%) from the former ranked their previous visits as the most important information source (compared to 17% for Australian visitors). Australian visitors are more likely than their New Zealand counterparts to rank travel agent, web search engine, general travel websites, the official Cook Islands travel website and Facebook page, television or radio programmes, magazine and newspaper articles as the most important influence sources.

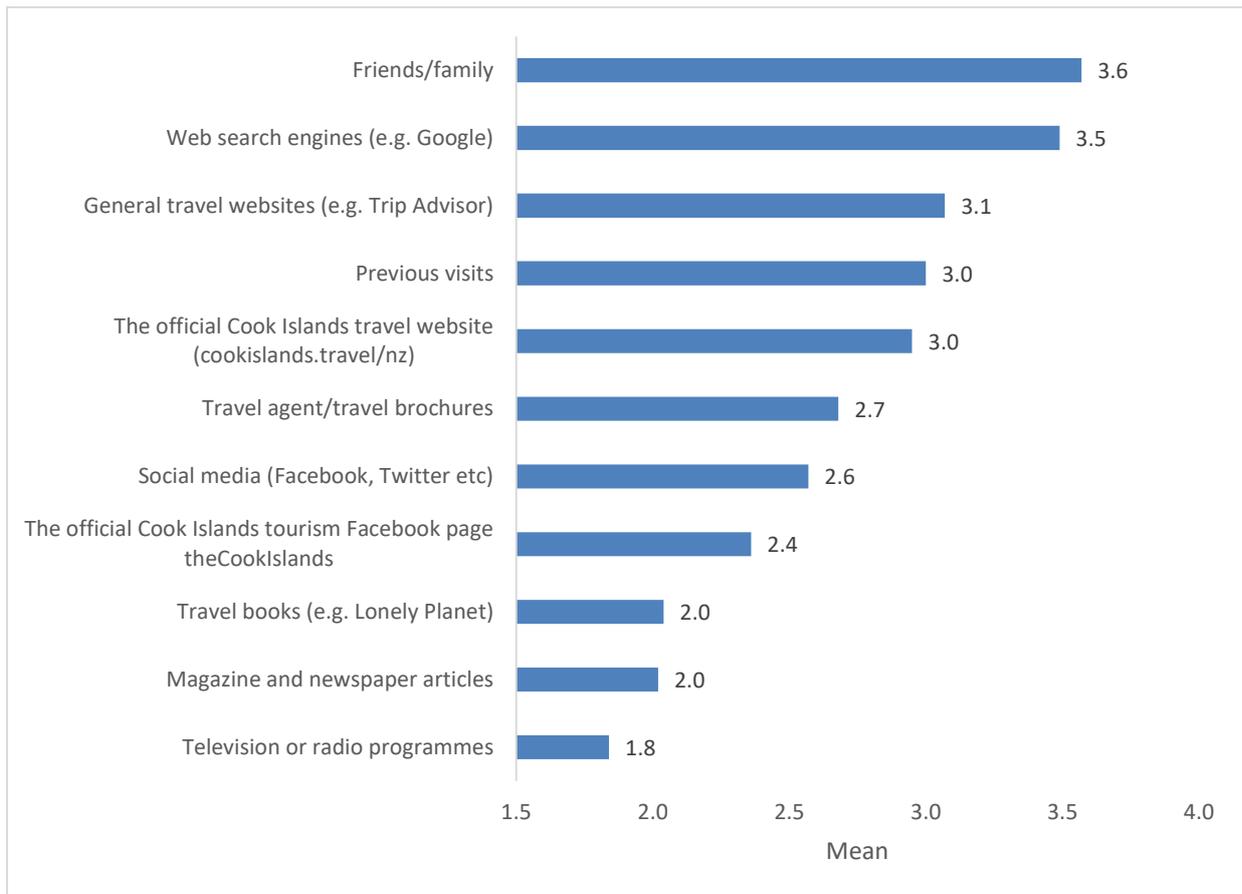
Figure 17: How did you find out about Cook Islands as a destination – country breakdown



Note: Multiple responses, therefore total does not add up to 100%

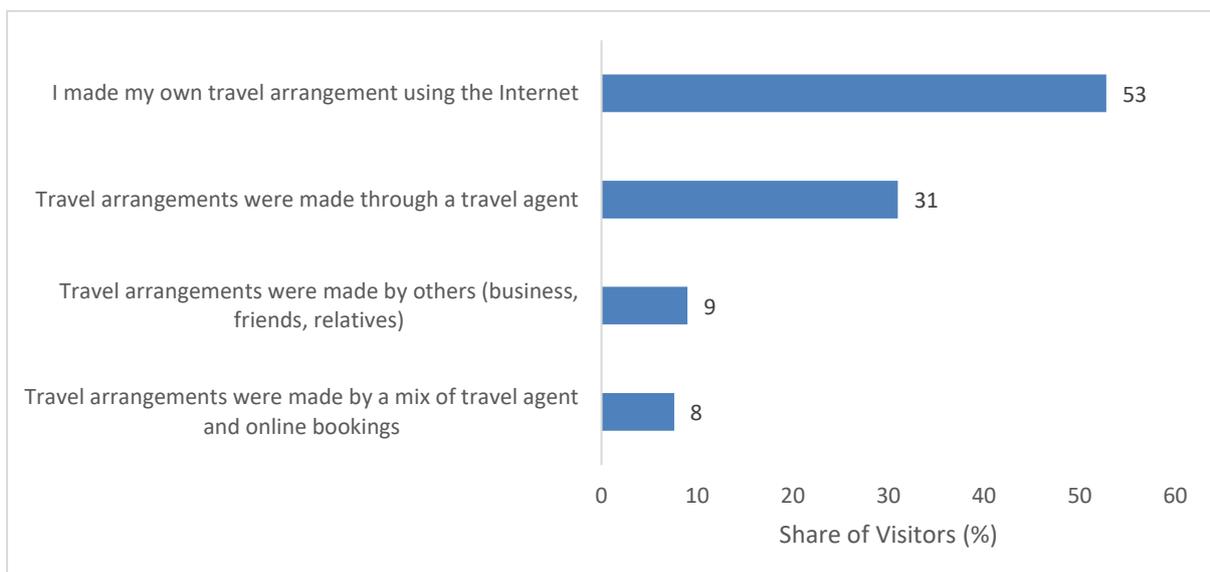
When visitors were asked to rate the importance of the listed information sources used to plan their trip, friends and family members (3.6) ranked as the most important source, closely followed by web search engines (e.g. Google) (3.5) (Figure 18). Other important information sources are general travel websites (e.g. Trip Advisor) (3.1), previous visits (3.0), and the official Cooks Island travel website (cookislands.travel/nz) (3.0).

Figure 18: Importance of information source used when planning your trip (n = 683-876)



Over half of visitors surveyed (53%) made their own travel arrangements through online channels (Figure 19). Nearly a third of visitors surveyed (31%) purchased a pre-paid trip through a physical travel agent, followed by 9% of visitors whose travel arrangements were made by others, or who used a mix of travel agent and online bookings (8%).

Figure 19: How did you purchase your travel to the Cook Islands (n = 975)

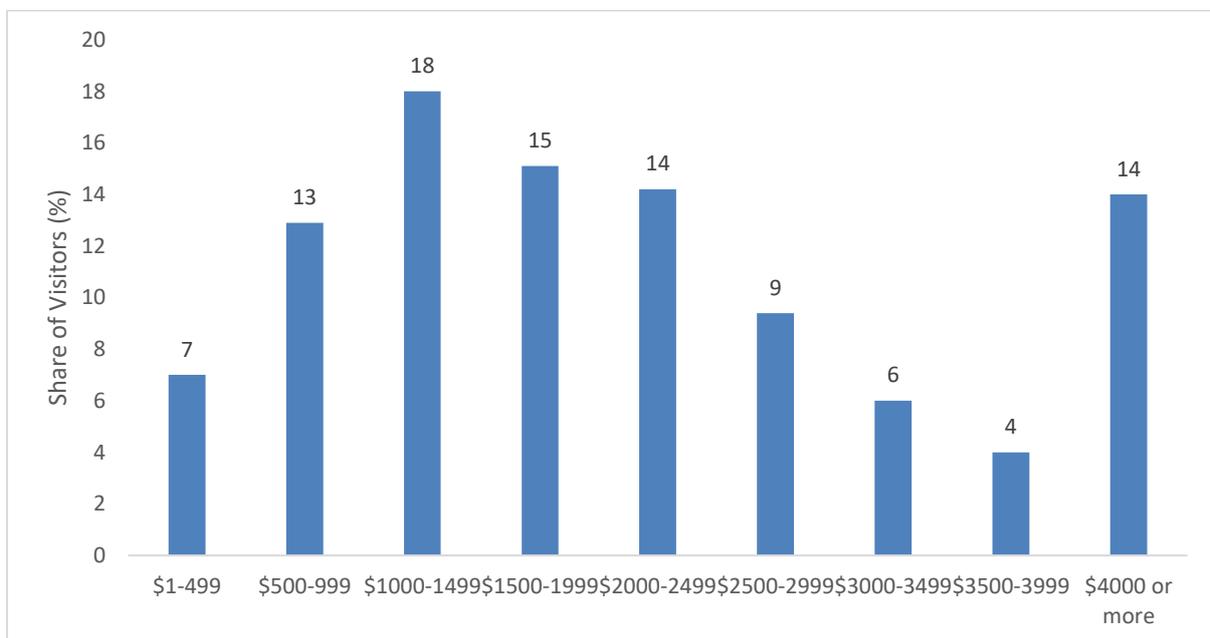


Visitor Expenditure

The IVS asks a range of questions about visitor expenditure, both prior to arrival and while in the Cook Islands. All the figures below are based on respondent estimates of their own spending and any others they spent money on (e.g., spouse, children). The following pre-paid expenditure section is based on the number of adults and children that respondents included in their cost estimates: 2,450 people comprising 2,089 adults and 361 children.

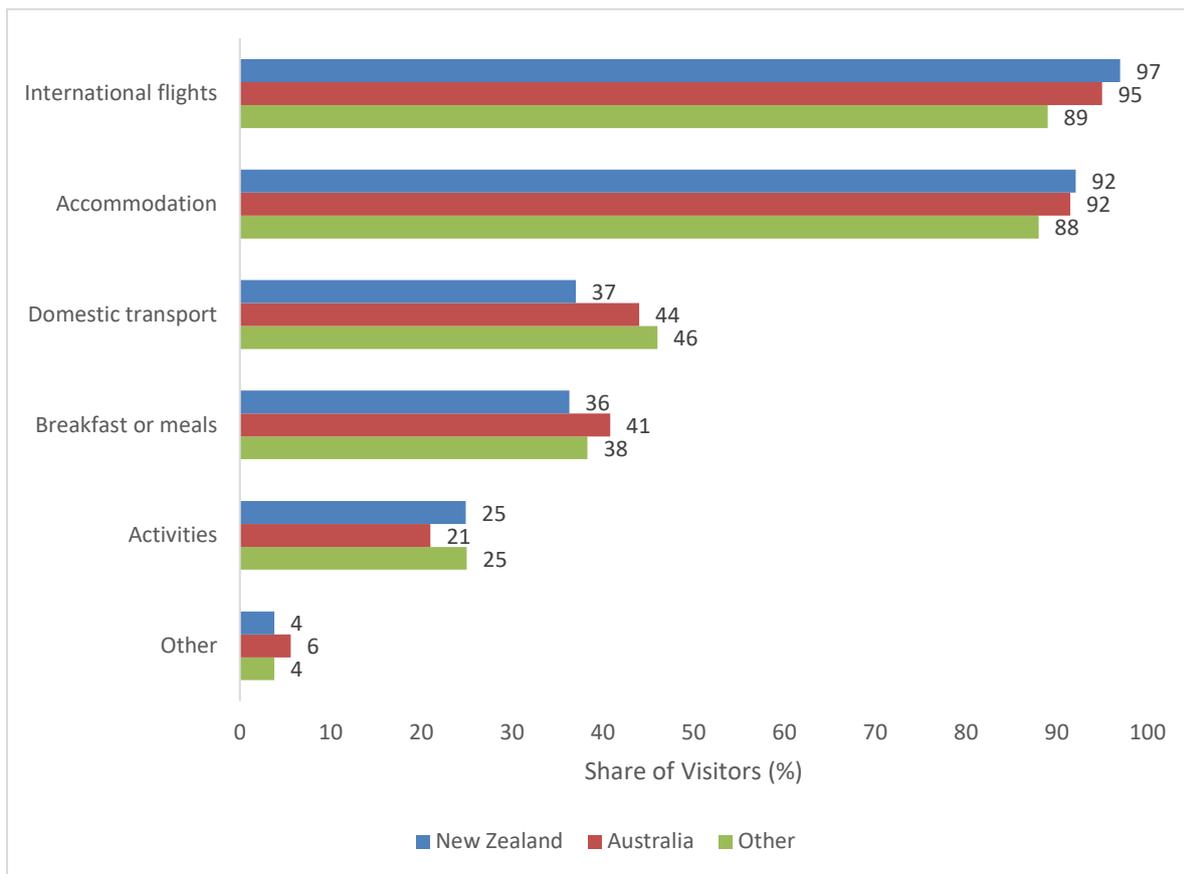
On average, visitors to the Cook Islands spend NZ\$2,179 per person prior to arrival. Nearly half (47%) of the visitors spend between NZ\$1,000 and NZ\$2,499 prior to arrival (Figure 20). The prepaid figure per person is slightly lower than the same quarter for 2018/19 (NZ\$2,197), while higher than the previous year (average prepaid spend of NZ\$2,047 for 2018/19).

Figure 20: Amount of money spent per person prior to arrival (n = 711)



In addition to international flights and domestic transport, spending prior to arrival usually includes accommodation: in 92% of the cases for New Zealand visitors, 92% for Australian visitors, and 88% of visitors from other countries (Figure 21). Over one third of visitors prepaid for breakfast and meals prior to arrival (36% New Zealand visitors; 41% Australian visitors, 38% of visitors from other countries). Activities are much less likely to be included in pre-paid expenses.

Figure 21: Items included in money spent prior to arrival



Note: Multiple responses, therefore total does not add up to 100%

It is difficult to estimate accurately the proportion of the pre-paid spend that flows to the Cook Islands. For the purposes of this study, and based on previous research in the region, we conservatively estimate that 50% of the pre-paid spend is allocated to airfares. Of the remaining 50% of the pre-paid spend, 80% of this flows back to local operators. In total this means that for every pre-paid dollar, 40 cents flows to the Cook Islands. We estimate that the pre-paid spend figure per day flowing back to the local economy is NZ\$99 and for the average total visit is NZ\$872 (8.8 nights).

The total spend per visitor per day while in the Cook Islands (excluding any pre-paid expenditure) is NZ\$166 (Table 1). This figure is slightly higher than both the overall spend figure for 2018/19 (NZ\$162) and the same 3rd IVS survey quarter in 2018/19 (NZ\$162). The majority of money spent locally is on accommodation (41%), restaurants, cafes and bars (20%), and shopping (8%). These per person expenditure figures are based on 567 survey responses covering a total of 2,184 people (1,857 adults and 327 children).

By multiplying daily in-country spend by the average stay (8.8 nights) we can see that spend per person per visit while in the Cook Islands is on average NZ\$1,453. The total figure of what is spent locally and what flows back to the Cook Islands from pre-paid expenses is therefore NZ\$265 per visitor per day (\$166 + \$99), or NZ\$2,325 (\$1,453 + \$872) for each visitor.

Table 1: Average visitor expenditure in the Cook Islands (per person per day)

Expenditure Items	n = 2184	
	Mean (NZ\$)	(% of spend)
Accommodation	68	41
Restaurant, café, and Bar	34	20
Shopping	14	8
Domestic flights	11	6
Activities	10	6
Vehicle rental	10	6
Groceries	9	5
Other	3	2
Internet cost	2	1
Cruising	2	1
Petrol	2	1
Public transport	1	0
Total spend (NZ\$)	166	100%

Table 2 provides an overview of the in-country expenditure by visitor country of origin. Visitors from Australia have the highest average spend per person per day at NZ\$185. Visitors from United States of America/Canada spend on average at NZ\$184 per day, followed by European visitors (NZ\$160 per day). New Zealand visitors during this period spent the least at NZ\$156 per day.

Table 2: Average expenditure per visitor per day by country of origin

Expenditure Items	n = 1,255	n = 402	n = 279	n = 128
	New Zealand	Australia	USA/Canada	Europe
Accommodation	65	79	69	58
Restaurant, café, and Bar	33	38	35	38
Shopping	13	14	19	11
Activities	10	10	12	9
Vehicle rental	10	8	13	5
Groceries	8	10	11	10
Domestic flights	8	12	16	19
Other	3	4	1	3
Internet cost	2	3	3	3
Petrol	2	2	3	1
Cruising	2	5	1	3
Public transport	0	1	1	1
Total spend (NZ\$)	156	185	184	160

New Zealanders' spend of NZ\$156 per person per day is slightly lower than the same quarter in the previous year (NZ\$158), while higher than the average of \$148 for 2018/19. Average

Australian spend per person for this quarter (NZ\$185) is considerably higher compared to the same quarter in 2018/19 (NZ\$176) and the 2018/19 average of NZ\$174. The average spend of NZ\$184 for visitors from the United States of America/Canada for this period is higher than both the same quarter in 2018/19 (NZ\$170) and the 2018/19 average of NZ\$158. European visitors spend at NZ\$160 per person per day is lower than the same quarter in the previous year (NZ\$168), while higher than the average for 2018/19 of NZ\$141.

Visitor Satisfaction

Visitors were asked to indicate their overall satisfaction with their experience of the Cook Islands on a scale from 1 'very dissatisfied' to 5 'very satisfied' (Figure 22). Over two thirds (68%) of the visitors surveyed were 'very satisfied' with their overall experience of the Cook Islands. Very few visitors (3%) were unsatisfied (a score of 2 or lower) with their visit.

Figure 22: Overall satisfaction with experience of the Cook Islands (n = 954)

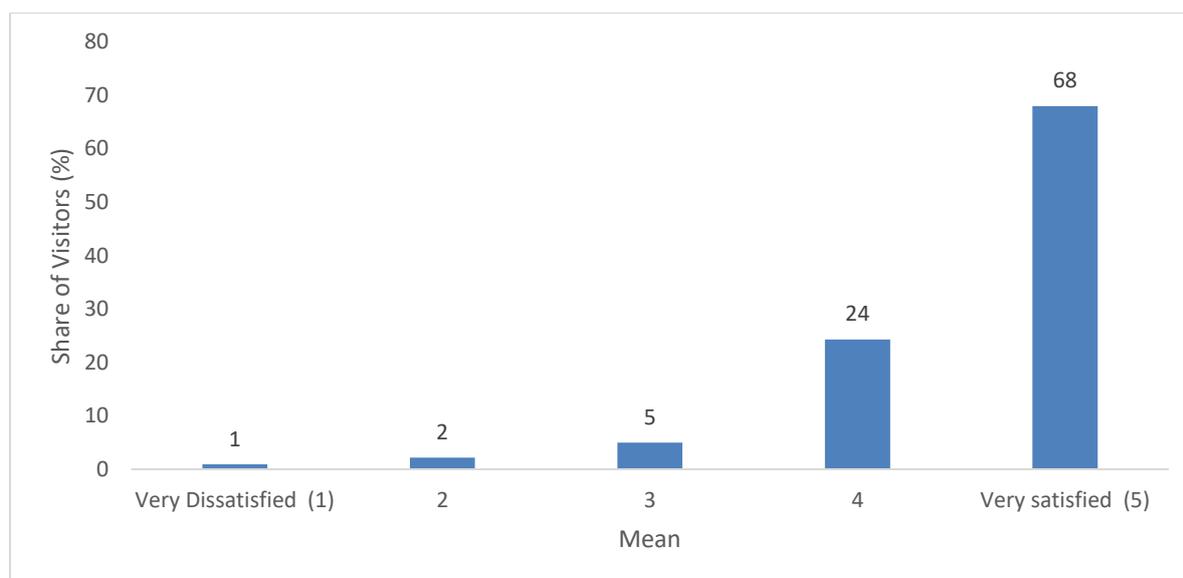


Figure 23 shows the percentage of respondents who undertook specific activities while on their visit to the Cook Islands. Almost all visitors visited a beach (98%) and frequented at least one restaurant or café (98%) during their trip. Most of the respondents either go swimming (94%) or visit a local market (87%), and 59% of visitors experience an Island Night and Feast Show.

Visitor satisfaction is generally high with all activities undertaken (almost all registering more than 4 out of a possible high of 5 except bonefishing and kitesurfing) (Figure 23). Activities involving cultural interaction (average satisfaction of 4.6) rank the highest, followed by land-based products (4.5), shopping (4.5), and water-based experiences (4.4). It should be noted that kitesurfing, whalewatching, Tumunu on Atiu, and bonefishing are characterised by relatively low numbers of participants (n = 19-30).

Figure 23: Degree of participation in activities (n range = 19-957)

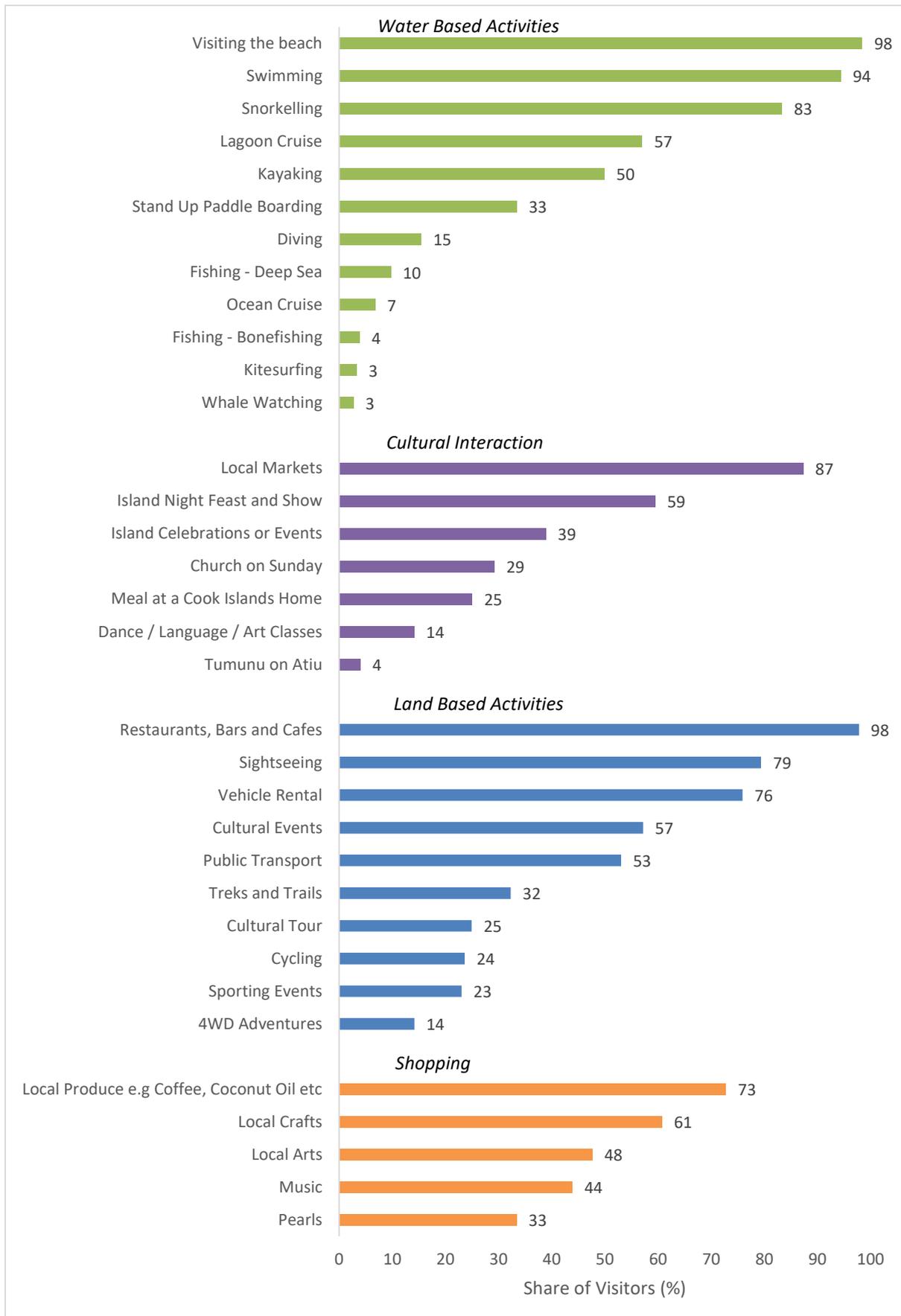
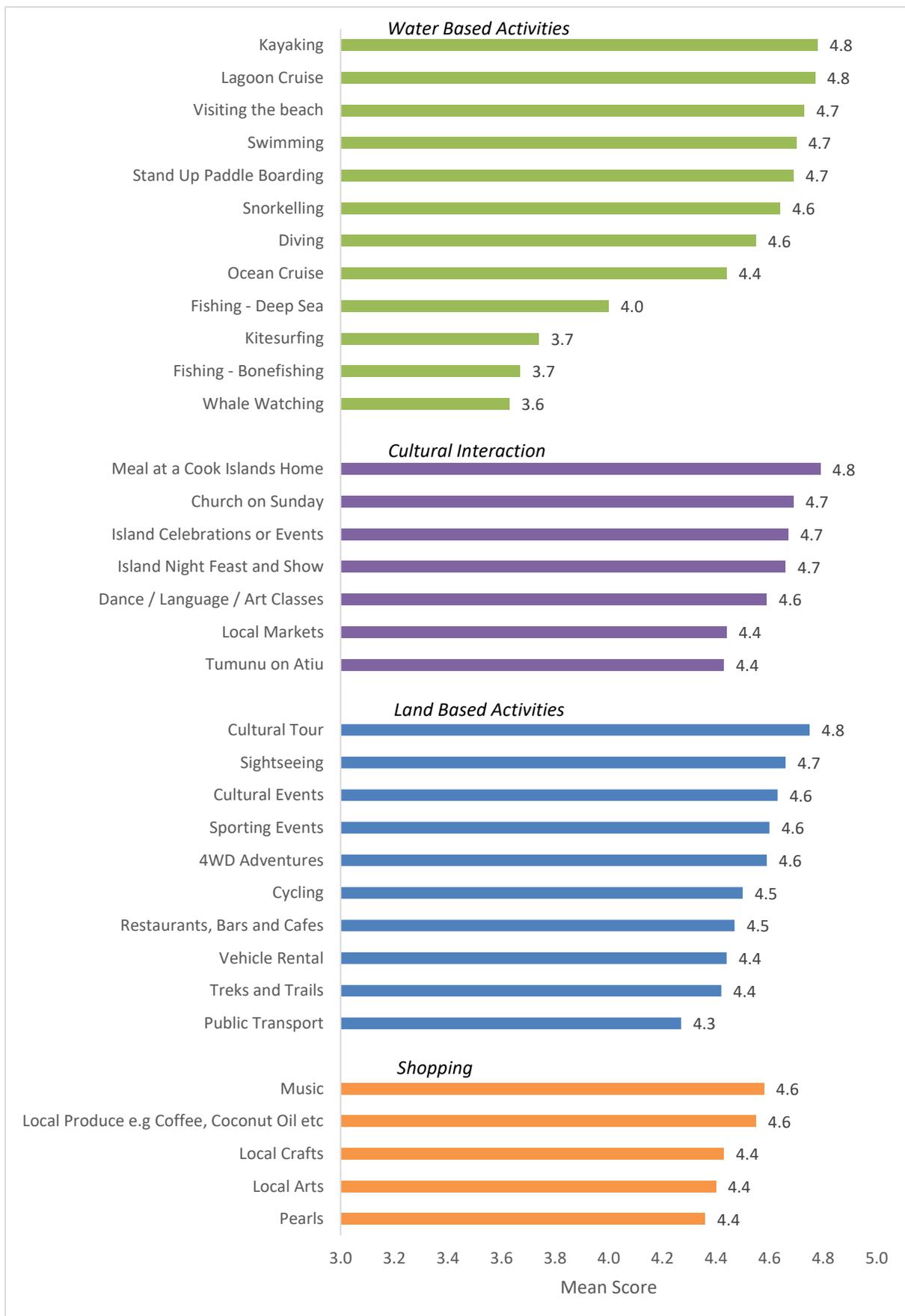


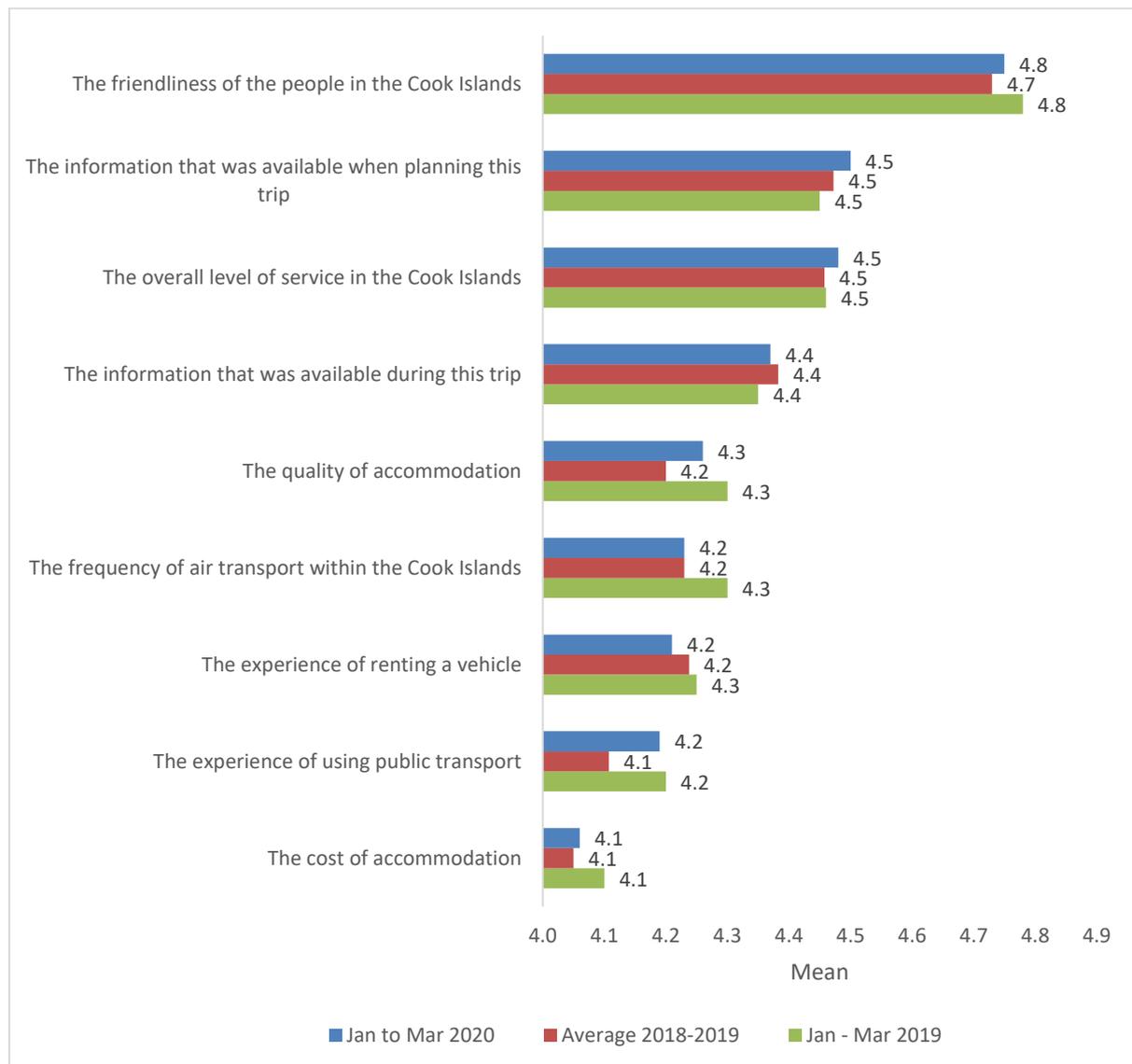
Figure 24: Degree of satisfaction with activities participated in (mean score out of 5)



Visitors were asked to rate their level of satisfaction with nine different statements relating to their most recent visit to the Cook Islands. Responses from the period of January to March 2020 are compared to the annual average for 2018/19, and the same quarter of 2018/19 (Figure 25).

Respondents consistently highlight the friendliness of the people in the Cook Islands. As can be seen from Figure 25, the degree of satisfaction with the majority items are similar to both the same quarter in 2018/19 or the annual average for 2018/19. Overall visitor satisfaction levels are fairly consistent with the previous findings and no rating fell below 4 out of 5.

Figure 25: Degree of satisfaction with Cook Islands services (mean score out of 5)



Most appealing aspects of the Cook Islands

Visitors were asked “What did you find most attractive or appealing about the Cook Islands on your most recent visit?” (Table 3). The most appealing elements of the Cook Islands experience are the natural environment (43%), the friendly and welcoming local people (38%), the tourist attractions and activities on offer (28%) and the peacefulness and relaxing atmosphere of the country (22%). Smaller numbers of visitors mentioned aspects such as food and beverage (12%), culture (7%), non-commercial destination (6%), accommodation (5%), convenience and safety (4%), overall good experience (3%), level of service (3%), emotional connection (2%), family friends (1%), and price of goods and services (1%).

Table 3: Most appealing aspects of the Cook Islands (n=894)

Themes	Share of respondents (%)
Environment, cleanliness & weather	43
Local people	38
Activities, attractions and entertainment, events	28
Atmosphere	22
Food and beverage	12
Culture	7
Un-commercial	6
Accommodation	5
Convenience and safety	4
Overall good experience	3
Level of service	3
Emotional connection	2
Family friends	1
Price of goods and services	1

* Share of respondents who made a comment in each theme. Respondents could give more than one answer, so total does not add up to 100%.

Environment, cleanliness & weather

The beautiful scenery, natural environment, the beaches, and gardens in the Cook Islands were mentioned by nearly half of the respondents (43%) as the most appealing aspects for their trip. Words like ‘beautiful’, ‘clean’, ‘paradise’, ‘crystal’, and ‘warm’ to describe the attraction of the local environment. Most comments here focused on the beauty and the cleanliness of the beaches and lagoons, the warm weather, the beautiful scenery, and the landscapes of the islands in general. Comments included:

“Beautiful beaches and lagoons.”

“The beautiful scenery and just being away on a holiday.”

“Beautiful lagoon. Peaceful.”

“Clean air, water and no red dust...”

"Weather was average to good compared with other visits. We came for a rest and got it."

"Unspoiled location."

"Overall cleanliness."

"... the nature is very luxuriant."

"Loved the weather (even if it did rain for the first days we were there)."

"The water has no words adequate to describe it."

"The People and the beauty of the islands. The neatness of both the private houses and all public facilities. Most beautiful water on the planet."

"... overall cleanliness of Raro in comparison to other islands ie. Samoa, Tonga Fiji."

"The lush landscape and its beauty."

"Weather and natural beauty of the island."

"The natural environment, unspoiled by modern development."

"I really enjoyed the weather, even beautiful when it rains."

"Crystal clear water of a lovely temperature."

"Lagoon, no pollution, nature."

"The outer islands are beautiful, Aitutaki was absolutely amazing."

"When the sun shone on Muri Lagoon it was like being in a postcard. Absolutely beautiful!!!"

Local people

The second most significant attraction for the visitors is their interaction with local people in the Cook Islands. Over a third (38%) of respondents expressed that the warmth and welcoming nature of local people is an important factor of having a positive travel experience. Key words that dominated the responses include "friendly", "welcoming", "helpful", "lovely", "beautiful", "amazing", "happy", "kind", "relaxed", "perfect", "accommodating", "wonderful", "humble", and "passionate". Comments included:

"Friendliness of the local people."

"The amazing people."

"The people and the sea were perfect."

"The friendliness of the tour guide over on Aitutaki."

"... beautiful people."

"If I needed something then it was easy to find and everyone was accomodating. `Cookies' are happy & proud. Wonderful characters and great to talk to. Very colourful & passionate."

"The People. Amazing Happy People. Just love the short time we were there. Will visit again."

"The people are so friendly and treat you like family. Always willing to help."

"The wonderful warm-hearted nature of the local people."

"People were very helpful, friendly and lovely."

"... the people are extremely friendly and welcoming."

"The friendliness of the people and staff in the Cook Islands. Everybody was warm and welcoming and we felt right at home!"

Activities, attractions, entertainment & events

Activities, attractions, entertainment, and events were mentioned by twenty-eight percent of respondents as the most appealing element of their visit to the destination. The availability of water related activities including snorkelling, surfing, swimming, lagoon cruise, diving, fishing, and kayaking are mentioned frequently. In addition, land-based activities like hiking, cross island walking, cycling, 4wd ride, and markets are also mentioned by many respondents. Aitutaki lagoon, Muri lagoon, and One-foot Island are top attractions mentioned. Comments included:

"Diving."

"... snorkeling in the lagoon, swimming every day."

"... the wakama was being held and we watched this and joined in on most days, fantastic."

"... variety of goods and services during the Saturday morning open market."

"... number and variety of activities"

"The ability to relax and choose what activites we wanted to without pressure from outside influences."

"... the activities koka cruise and paddleboarding beautiful."

"... participated in Motu2Motu events and the experience is wonderful."

"... trekking parts of the cross island track, deep sea fishing, touring Atutaki by bus & boat."

"... snorkelling was amazing and free use of the kayaks and equipment was amazing."

"Awesome place to scooter around. No stress on the roads."

"Walking along beach at leisure was safe and relaxing."

"Warm water and Snorkeling. Loved the 4WD mud buggy tour too."

"Day trip to Aitutaki, Te Vara Nui Village."

"I also loved the island night show - it was a highlight of our trip and the best one I saw whilst travelling in Polynesia."

Atmosphere

The Cook Islands is described as a very peaceful, relaxing, and laid-back destination by respondents and this atmosphere is an appealing factor for twenty-two percent of those surveyed. Visitors love the slower pace of local life, which mostly refers to island pace. Some of the words used to describe the atmosphere in Cook Islands are "relaxing", "calm", "chilled", "tranquillity", and "laid back". Comments included:

"Relaxed atmosphere."

"Slower pace of life. Peacefulness. Roosters, hens and chicks roaming around."

"Peaceful atmosphere."

"... laid-back island life."

"Relaxing, no rush, clean tidy island. Takes me back to a time when it was all rush."

"To be able to relax and do things in our own time."

"The unpretentious lifestyle."

"Slower pace of life."

"A place where it was easy to relax made for a great holiday destination."

"The chance to relax and unwind in a familiar, low-pressure environment."

"The loving Aloha atmosphere given by each resident."

"It has a great vibe. An awesome mixture between the slow relaxed island style but with enough modern conveniences if you want that as well. It's got the right balance"

between Island & Western vibes.”

Food and beverage

Food and beverages were identified as an appealing aspect by twelve percent of respondents. Their comments focused on the food and beverage variety, quality, and range of fresh food available in the Cook Islands. “Amazing”, “excellent”, “high standard/quality”, “delicious”, “awesome”, “local” and “fresh” are some frequent terms to describe the attraction of food for tourists. Many visitors mentioned the local sea food and fruits. Comments included:

“... affordable with awesome food.”

“Relaxation by the pool and beach drinking cocktails. The market was great. Good cafes available.”

“The delicious tuna sashimi and Kia masts!!!!”

“Enjoyed the fresh fruits.”

“The quality of all prepared food at restaurants and markets.”

“All good was delicious, loved Trader Jacks, loved restaurant at Moana Sands Lagoon Resort, loved food at Vili Burger.”

“I would rate the food we ate in many restaurants as world class.”

“More choice of fresh foods available in local shops (e.g. Wigmores & CITC supermarket). Some very good new cafes have opened in the last couple of years too.”

“Good options for food/drink and some cheap places to go.”

“Amazing fruit! Wonderful local cafe and a couple of lovely restaurants. The NZ wine was delish. :)”

Culture

Seven percent of the respondents considered Cook Island’s unique culture as one of the most appealing aspects of their visit. Art, traditions, religion and other cultural aspects shape lives of the local indigenous community of the islands. Comments included:

“... the genuine culture and respect that the local people have for their heritage and island life and their desire to look after their island home.”

“... sense of community and culture.”

“... the cultural / feast in the mountain village.”

“The slower pace of life and true Polynesian culture.”

“Cook Island Maori culture.”

“... the tour up into the interior, with cultural talks ...”

“Hard to explain. Just the whole culture of the island and the people.”

Not too commercialised

Six percent of the survey participants mentioned that the lack of commercial development on the Cook Islands was one of the most appealing factors for them. They were inclined to the rustic, less commercially developed and secluded ambience of the Cook Islands. Many believed that the rural or closed to nature experience is the salient characteristic of the destination. Comments included:

“Not many tourists. A local feel.”

“... that it is still not exposed to mass tourism.”

“Authenticity of the place/s unspoiled by the tourism industry.”

“... unspoiled by modern development.”

“I appreciated the fact that not one single person approached me to sell something.”

“The fact that you were not pestered by salespeople.”

“Low key, not crowded or packed with tourist traps.”

“Not so commercialized...”

“How undeveloped it was! Locals were so nice.”

“I like that the Cook Islands are quiet and relaxed. Now it’s a tough balance, because you want to be ready for tourists and give them something to do, but also people know about the Cooks as a relaxing place where you aren’t overwhelmed by touristy stuff and bright lights and such.”

“That is still authentic and not too over-commercialised.”

Accommodation

Five percent of respondents expressed that the accommodation they stayed in was an appealing aspect of their visit to the Cook Islands, referring to the privacy, environment, luxury, and in-house restaurant and cafes, and the friendly and supportive staff. Comments included:

“Very nice bungalow at Tamanu Beach Resort.”

“The Aitutaki Lagoon Resort and Spa was honestly wonderful. We fell more in love

with it each day.”

“Our accommodation was amazing.”

“So beautiful, relaxed, great food and accommodation, in the two years since my previous visit everything has improved and is fabulous.”

“Simplicity and beauty of local hotels on the beach.”

“We used Air BNB to book our accommodation, and we adored our host. Incredibly informative and helpful.”

“The location of the villa with access directly onto the stunning beach and the lovely safe lagoon and the very relaxed and happy feeling we experience.”

Convenience & Safety

The convenience and safety of the Cook Islands as a holiday destination were mentioned by four percent (4%) of respondents. They referred to safety, currency, proximity, ease of travel around the islands, safe speed-limits, hassle-free services, and accessibility of attractions. Some tourists emphasise safety particularly feeling safe at night. Comments included:

“... speaking the same language and using the same currency as NZ, proximity to NZ.”

“I feel safe walking around by myself.”

“Easy to navigate and everything we needed close by.”

“Loved driving around at the slow speed limit.”

“Relaxed and safe place.”

“Low crime rate. Felt very safe. No people trying to sell things on the beaches.”

“So family friendly...relaxed and safe for our grandchildren.”

“Kids friendly beach. No big waves. Also very clean.”

“It is very easy to holiday there. Very clean and able to use nz\$ makes it so easy. Very pretty. Much nicer than Samoa, Fiji and Tonga. Feels safe. easy to get around.”

Overall good experience

Three percent of visitors surveyed focused on their overall experience when discussing appealing factors. Comments such as “everything”, “wholeness”, “general” and “it was all so amazing” demonstrated the holistic nature of the overall experience gained. Comments included:

“Everything.”

“I loved everything. Such a beautiful spiritual place with beautiful people and such an appreciation for where they live and what they have. Will definitely be back.”

“love the sun / water and people.. 10 / 10”.

“It was all attractive.”

“Everything, friendly locals, great food , what’s not to love ...”

“The whole is beautiful.”

Level of service

Three percent of visitors commented on the service and local hospitality they experienced. The quality of service at the accommodations, restaurants, and resort also won recognition from some visitors. Comments included:

“... very polite staff.”

“Staff were friendly, knowledgeable and witty.”

“Level of care held by staff at Captain Tamas snorkeling for the elderly. Mother – in - law is 77yrs. Although she initially declined a life jacket but it was soon apparent that she needed one. Staff were keeping an eye on her and ensured she was well looked after...even though there was heaps of family around.”

“The excellent service we received. You do not feel compelled to be doing something every minute of your stay.”

“The staff at our resort were amazing they worked hard to make my daughter feel like a princess they ensured the wedding party and guests were welcomed and we were treated like royalty.”

“Also, the kindness and hospitality of the Maori people is just incredible. We walked away from our trip wishing that that kind of service and kindness could be reflected around the world.”

“The local bus and the time availability ie morning to late which gave us the option to try other local Restaurants on the Island and relax then return to our accommodation late. The bus driver with the spider on his neck! He was funny and very helpful.”

Emotional Connection

A small number of respondents (2%) gave feedback regarding the direct emotional connection they feel with the destination. Comments included:

“The island is beautiful and feels like a second home.”

“Love the place - a beautiful place for a holiday etc -we have been back 5 years in a row and will be back many more times.”

“Have been on several previous holidays - we love The Cook Islands!”

“We fell in love with the cook islands over 20 years ago, so always enjoy the place.”

Family and friends

One percent of the respondents commented on links being strengthened with family and friends in the Cook Islands as a most appealing aspect of their visit. These visitors mentioned words like “family”, “friends”, and specific family members. Further comments included:

“... catching up with relatives and friends.”

“Beach, food, visiting family.”

“Learning about my genealogy.”

“Its beautiful views the sea and the stories of my Ancestors that came with the great migration.”

“I was born on the island in 1964 and was there to visit my mother Mama Here, The people the scenery and the resorts we visited and the whole atmosphere of the island was great. We went to all the resorts in the area we stayed in and thoroughly enjoyed every one we went to.”

Price of goods and services

Another one percent of the respondents commented on the price of goods and services in the Cook Islands as a most appealing aspect of their visit. These visitors mentioned words like “affordable”, “good value” and “cheap”. Further comments included:

“... fresh food and value for money dining.”

“... relative affordability compared with French Polynesia and Hawaii.”

“Well priced when compared with Hawaii.”

“Good options for food/drink and some cheap places to go.”

“Good value for the money. Easy travel from LAX.”

Least appealing aspects of the Cook Islands

Visitors were asked: “What did you find least attractive or appealing about the Cook Islands on your most recent visit?”. Table 4 summarizes key themes respondents felt were least appealing. Comments ranged from issues with public services, facilities and infrastructures, food and beverage, price of goods and services, stray animals and mosquitos, rubbish and natural environment care, customer service, poor weather, attractions and activities, accommodation, local people, too touristy, flight-related issues, rental cars and scooters through to lack of information, safety, and disappointment with law and legislation.

Table 4: Least appealing aspects of the Cook Islands (n=828)

Themes	Share of respondents (%)*
Public services, facilities and infrastructure	15
Food and beverage	12
Price of goods and services	10
Stray animals and mosquitos	10
Rubbish and care of the natural environment	10
Customer service	9
Poor weather	8
Attractions and activities	8
Accommodation	7
Local people	3
Too touristy	3
Flight-related issues	2
Rental cars and scooters	2
Lack of information	2
Safety	2
Law and legislation	1

* Share of respondents who made a comment that falls into each theme. Respondents could give more than one answer, so total does not add up to 100%.

Public services, facilities, and infrastructure

Fifteen percent of respondents considered the destination’s public services and facilities to be the least appealing aspects of their Cook Islands experience. Most comments focused on limited and unreliable public transport, road conditions, poor internet connection, toilet facilities, and the lengthy waiting time at the airport and its limited facilities. Feedback included:

“Least attractive would be the state of the road around the island. Parts are really good and others not so much. But really it’s completely fine.”

“Probably the quality of the road - we hired electric bikes and it was dangerous on some parts of the road. Lots of pot holes!”

“More traffic, would like to see smaller buses running more often. Some of the places we visited 17 yrs before need to be maintained better, showing signs of wear and

tear. A better organized and maintained recycling program to be proud of.”

“No footpaths on road for walking.”

“The public toilets at the Saturday market.”

“Quality of drinking water. Would be wonderful to be able to drink the tap water and not have to use bottled water which contributes to the trash/plastic problem.”

“Limited ATMs.”

“Public bus could run a little more often.”

“There’s no good internet or public transport with good frequency.”

“Lack of free WiFi.”

“Taxi availability.”

Food

Twelve percent of respondents noted that the food and beverage in the Cook Islands was the least appealing aspect of their visit. Comments tended to focus on the lack of local produce (especially fresh fruit, veggies and seafood), the high prices, and limited food choices. Comments included:

“Lack of cafe/food stores.”

“Night markets are a great idea and could be better if it wasn’t full of flies and had more variety of foods! Only one or two stalls were of top quality the rest very average. Supermarket/grocery shopping so expensive you’re better off bringing a chilly bin of food over with you. Needs more variety of healthier food options.”

“The seafood meals seemed like all the seafood was frozen, not fresh. It was strange that there was not more fresh seafood available. No seafood markets in a place in the middle of the Pacific Ocean seemed strange.”

“Most of the resorts were expensive to eat and drink at.”

“Limited availability of food in stores on Aitutaki especially when arrive on Saturday and not much open till Monday.”

“Very happy with the whole lot. If I was pushed to give an answer, some of the food at the night market could be better.”

“Food variety.”

“The market food let us down. We were looking for a really good island kai and couldn’t find anything. Lots of flies too with not much attempt to cover kai while cooking.”

“Lack of enough restaurantes, cafes in Aitutaki.”

“Food- so little vegetarian options available. The food is highly processed and unhealthy.”

“There was a bakery selling all sorts of really unhealthy food which just seemed a shame when there is so much beautiful local produce and cuisine available.”

“Lack of a fresh seafood market where you can buy and get your seafood cooked on site.”

“The coffee wasn’t good.”

Price of goods and service

Ten percent of the respondents stated that the least appealing part of their visit was the price of goods and services, with comments focused on the cost of food, accommodation, internet, transportation. Key words that dominated the responses included “expensive” and “overpriced”. Comments included:

“Expensive accommodation and food/beverages.”

“The transport from the airport was expensive.”

“Living costs very expensive.”

“Price of the pearl jewellery.”

“Prices even local product like fruits.”

“This accommodation I found pricey. Last time we stayed at the sunset and I found it more value for money.”

“Most of the resorts were expensive to eat and drink at.”

“Cost to fly to the island next to Rarotonga.”

“The lack of good accommodation at reasonable prices.”

“... the expensive meals and general prices.”

“The cost of the taxi to the airport ... horifically expensive.”

“Cost to keep connected with friends and whanau through social media using local mobile data options. The \$50 sim is definitely the best one to get, but I had to get 2 for the time we were there.”

“The cost of the local bus. \$5 each way! That’s expensive.”

“Very expensive for ordinary every day household necessities.”

Stray animals and mosquitos

Stray animals, noisy roosters, chickens and mosquitoes/insects were mentioned by ten percent of respondents. Dogs tended to dominate. Comments included:

"The dogs free roaming - many with 3 legs due to traffic accidents. They all looked well cared for but lacking in love and attention. Chickens roaming in food areas."

"The stray dog population. They pose a hazard to scooters and drivers. It is a problem easily curtailed by rounding up the male dogs and neutering."

"In Aitutaki there were no stray dogs in sight, but in Raratonga were lots of them and for someone who is scared of big barking dogs can be daunting/scary to have them roaming on the beaches."

"Roosters were very loud very early each morning."

"Mosquito plague and sand flies."

"Sea cucumbers were everywhere on Raratonga."

"Lots of ants and cockroaches in accommodations."

"Sea slugs in the water."

Rubbish and natural environment care

Rubbish and natural environment care were mentioned by ten percent of respondents as a least appealing element of their visit to the Cook Islands. Comments mostly focused on the degradation of coral reefs, the amount of rubbish, water pollution, poor condition of the lagoons and beaches, plastic waste, and threatened marine life. Comments included:

"Went for many beach & road walks and disgusted with the amount of rubbish about. Surely there must be people willing to clean up the island!"

"Quality/ health of the reef is very disappointing. I have been coming to Raratonga to dive every year for the last 8 years, and to see the steady decline is tragic. The state of the reef is now such that I will no longer dive in Raratonga."

"... rubbish every where, poor selection of alternative things to do."

"Some public areas were a bit dirty."

"In Raratonga the amount of rubbish - Picked up loads of it by the airport during a short walk along the beach front."

"A lot of locals were burning their rubbish/waste in fires. It was very Smokey sometimes during the day."

"Pollution, the amount of recyclable materials thrown off the road. I picked up 4

large bags on my walking treks.”

“I was first time in the Cooks back in the 1990s and then again in 2012. This time, my wife and I noticed garbage, bottles, tins, refuse strewn on the roadsides and along the streets in Avarua.”

“Still seeing single-use plastic cups, cutleries and straws at some restaurants and cafes. (The hotel was shocking of this using single-use cups for their bar. Too lazy to wash glasses??) You need to keep beautiful islands. Definitely compared to our first visit 10 years ago, we saw less live corals, fish, and giant clams sadly.”

“That I would be happy to leave the island now. The sea weed at the beach attracting the aggressive and dangerous dengue mosquitoes. The fact that you have dengue here. Nevertheless I have fallen in love with the island.”

Customer service

Nine percent of respondents mentioned customer service as a least appealing aspect of their holiday in the Cook Islands. Their comments often focused on customer service at the airport, followed by complaints about the service at restaurants, accommodation and transport. Most visitors used words such as “very slow services” “rude”, “unhelpful” to describe the services. Comments included:

“Poor service (not customer oriented).”

“Quite rude service when we tried to rent a vehicle in a few places.”

“Late pick up to the airport.”

“The hotel where I stayed was poorly maintained and the staff were unavailable most of the time.”

“The awful bus driver I encountered.”

“Some of the restaurant staff don’t try very hard or you don’t get the gorgeous Cook Islands smile.”

“Lack of customer service eg car rental office at the hotel- staff were not helpful and were rude.”

“In Rarotonga some customer service is not welcoming.”

“Some stall holders selling fruit were rude and put a downer on our visit.”

“The public bus was so old I thought it was going to fall apart. The bus driver wasn't very helpful and seemed grumpy. Around half the waitresses were really disinterested in us and didn't seem very happy/ didn't give 'customer service' with a smile”.

Poor weather

Eight percent of visitors mentioned poor weather while in the Cook Islands. More specifically, visitors complained about the rain, storm, wind, humidity, heat and sickness due to the bad weather but several also acknowledged that the weather was seasonal and nobody's fault. Comments included:

"The humidity - but nothing you can do about that!"

"The rain! And lack of drainage."

"Loved it all but if I had to choose the weather wasn't the best when I was there."

"Nothing was really negative (unfortunately we had rain for the entire stay)."

"We were booked for Aitutaki island visit but due to weather the flights for cancelled. The frequency of flights to Aitutaki was very less and we couldn't see the most beautiful part of Cook Islands during our stay in Raratonga for six nights, seven days. That was disappointing part of our most recent first visit."

"Was the rainy season. We would love to go again but would choose July or August."

"Heavy rain which nobody can do anything about."

"The heat."

"A real shame that a cyclone affected the resort and wiped out the swimming pool for a couple of days but that was no ones fault."

"The storm on New Years 2020."

"I would try to return in the cooler months."

Attractions and activities

Eight percent of respondents mentioned attractions and activities as the least appealing aspect of their Cook Islands visit. Their concerns focused on the limited range of attractions and activities available, especially the lack of kids' activities and local crafts, poor facilities in the attractions, poor water-based activity experience (snorkelling, swimming, fishing, etc.) and the access to the waterfall and beaches. Some comments focused on the poor selection of shops and the fact that shops and stores close on weekend/holiday. Comments included:

"Lack of activities during Christmas season and wet weather."

"When it was rainy, there were a few activity so I think it is a little bit not good point."

"I would have appreciated more options to find local items for sale."

“The lack of appropriately marked nature walks and hiking trails. The islands have a lot of interior beauty, and investing in trailhead signage and parking areas would be helpful in experiencing those for the adventurous visitor.”

“Definitely there was a shortage of detailed information about the Vaka Eiva races and what to expect, bring, do, plan for including dates and times and everything. That was probably the MOST frustrating thing for me.”

“Missing more local shops that sell art and crafts even an market.”

“Would have liked more quality handicrafts to purchase. Especially wood carvings and masks.”

“One of the mini golf courses lacked maintenance of the grounds and surrounding gardens.”

“For peak season, everything was closed a lot of the time.”

Accommodation

Seven percent of visitors surveyed mentioned their accommodation while in the Cook Islands as being a least appealing aspect of their stay. Some visitors rated the cost of accommodation as expensive for the value received, and some also pointed out that some accommodation needed an upgrade of facilities and/or service. Respondents used a variety of words to describe accommodation including “awful”, “disappointed”, “terrible”, “dated”, and “poor”. Comments included:

“We were upset with our resort which was overpriced and we are currently taking this up with senior management there as it spoiled our enjoyment of what is a lovely island and location.”

“Our accomodation was in need of upgrade. Service was very good but would be much better if dining area and bar were updated a little.”

“Need accommodations that have their own fitness facility.”

“Accommodation options are more expense and of less quality than Fiji.”

“The lack of good accommodation at reasonable prices.”

“The hotel where I stayed was poorly maintained and the staff were unavailable most of the time.”

“We had an air conditioner in our rented house but it was to costly to operate. As we come from a cooler climate we found it hard to sleep at night.”

“Probably our accommodation, staff weren’t too welcoming & they forget about your orders a lot and the overall quality of the hotel. It wasn’t very clean. We would of gotten over the cleanliness of the hotel if teh customer service was good. OR if there

was even an atmosphere in the hotel.”

“No WiFi at the hotel.”

“The state the accommodation was in. Loved the lay out, beautiful scenery, grounds well kept. But the rooms need complete overhaul.”

“Being Ripped Off by Expedia for a Hotel that was terrible & overpriced. No air conditioning plus electricity going out/no hot water. Room had bugs which the owner thought bug spray & burning a coil in the room would do the trick! No hotel should encourage burning a coil inside the room for bugs. I ended up 'eating' the cost of my 10 day stay (Expedia would not take responsibility) and booking into to an expensive hotel, where I was very happy, despite the hit to my bank account.”

Local people

A small group (3%) of respondents noted that the least appealing part of their visit was their interaction with local people in the Cook Islands. Recurrent themes related to unfriendly attitudes and rudeness. Comments included:

“I felt really disappointed that the people of the Cooks were not friendly. They depend on tourism yet they don't show any appreciation for the tourists - just how I felt.”

“The rather rude Cook Island lady who picked us up from the airport on arrival and wouldnt wait for anyone to get sims for their phones as she wanted to go home!”

“Somewhat rude to tourists.”

“General hospitality from locals.”

“Some land owners are becoming very greedy and are not completely welcoming of new investment which in turns provides less housing for workers who do the jobs the locals do not want.”

“Some of the locals obviously didnt like tourists.”

“Local attitudes towards foreigners. My husband is a foreigner and comments thrown our way in the local language weren't very nice!”

“Some of the people weren't as friendly as we expected having not long before being in Bali.”

Too touristy

Three percent of respondents mentioned the Cook Islands as being “too touristy”, commercialised, and busy in the traffic and stress on the infrastructure. Visitors also mentioned some negative behaviour on the part of other visitors. Comments included:

“Too many tourists now. It has lost its innocence of years ago.”

“Just a little bit more touristy each time I visit..”

“We have visited the island on three occasions, in the past four years. Each time for a two weeks stint. The thing that upsets me the most, especially our last visit, was the visible lack of fish in the lagoon (parrot fish for example). We snorkeled up and down the waters where we had our accommodation and I felt quite sad and sick at the thought that maybe too much tourism was the reason for the decline.”

“We have been for 20 years but it is beginning to look a bit crowded and tired.”

“We have visited three times over thirteen years and always loved it, I still loved the holiday but I think the island has become very commercialised and no where near as friendly as it used to be, I know you have to appeal to youngsters but the party bus was tasteless and youths put us off going out at night, speeding bikes were a problem also.”

“From previous visit I feel that Rarotango is becoming to commercialize.”

“How island has become a little more westernised since my last visit.”

“Getting to busy with tourists.”

Flight related issues

Two percent of respondents mentioned flight related issues as the least appealing aspect of their visit to the Cook Islands. Visitors mentioned unavailability of direct flights, poor frequency, arrival and departure times, delays or cancellations, and lost baggage. Comments included:

“The Air NZ flight from Sydney did not have any arrival/immigration cards on board. Had to wait on arrival to collect and fill out in the queue whilst waiting for immigration clearance.”

“The cost in getting there. A direct flight from Brisbane even just once a week would be a good initiative to test the market on.”

“Few flights to islands.”

“Only the long plane ride.”

“I arrived on the 22nd and my bags didn’t arrive until the 26th. It was impossible to get any assistance on Rarotonga. I just had to wait until my suitcase arrived.”

“Our luggage only arrived 1 day before we left the island. We missed out on doing cultural tours or other tours as every morning we went to the airport looking for luggage.”

“All flights to Aitutaki were booked out so we were not able to go on a 1 day trip there.”

“Flight times meant we had to book accommodation for an extra day even though we only needed a room a couple hours.”

“I wish that there were more flights from California and they were cheaper.”

“Jetstar plane canceled upon return but not your fault!”

Rental cars or scooters

Two percent of respondents mentioned rental cars and scooters as least appealing aspects of their Cook Islands visit. Respondents referred to the quality and the availability of rental vehicles, the lack of information about the process of renting vehicles and the unreliable service. Comments included:

“Rental scooter was getting too old.”

“The rental car service we booked with didn’t show up to the airport when we got in, we weren’t able to get hold of them and ended up having to pay for a taxi to get to our accomodation.”

“Rental car was not at the airport where it was meant to be.”

“Quite rude service when we tried to rent a vehicle in a few places.”

“One of the rental car operators we went to was hopeless service.”

“Waiting times for rental cars.”

“... high cost of ebike hire, would be better to get tourists onto ebikes rather than scooters.”

“... lack of car rental and quality of hotel bikes.”

“Lack of customer service eg car rental office at the hotel- staff were not helpful and were rude.”

Lack of information

A lack of available information was mentioned by two percent of visitors surveyed. Areas where information was lacking included transportation, activities and safety signs. Comments included:

“No information about the clothes standards on buses (can't go on buses with stomach showing, never been told that before).”

“... lack of information about closing down of everything before we arrived.”

“Needed to be given more information that restaurants etc would be closed on public holiday.”

“The roads from Muri to the southern side of island. Lack of road signs.”

“I wasn’t sure where to go swimming in a place that was less interrupted by coral but I probably could have if I’d asked a local. Uncertainty about things. When the best time to go to the markets was. Where to find food in off-hours like 3pm or 11am...Also, as a new visitor to Cook Islands, what would you suggest I do with my time? What about sample itineraries for different times and different budgets? 1-3 days, 3-5, 5-7 days. Or 1-3 days and 4-7 days? And for different budgets? Basic or first class? What about needs for Cook Islands schools or anything that may need supplies that groups like mine (11 ppl) could bring over to contribute? To schools or animal shelters or hospitals or anything that might benefit.”

Safety

A small number of visitors surveyed (2%) mentioned safety in the Cook Islands as a least appealing factor. In particular, this group referred to petty theft, and poor safety while on the road and water. Comments included:

“Fast and dangerous drivers on the island.”

“Someone trying to break into our accommodation at night.”

“Food poisoning at seafood restaurant.”

“Got sick :(This seems to be related to the amount of dairy products that are used in a large amount of dishes that I was encountered.”

“Lack of safety on some tours.”

“Response by the emergency services.”

“Lack of procedure around cyclone warnings and evacuation, safety procedures.”

Law and Legislation

One percent of respondents stated that their whole experience was disappointing due largely to societal factors not controlled by laws and regulations. Comments included:

“Closures. Disorganisation. The ridiculous scooter license law/racket.”

“Having to get a Cook Islands drivers license. Takes up too much time and organising.”

“We didn't realise that the Cook islands strictly observes weekends and Public holidays and found that lots of tours and events did not operate on the weekends.”

“Same sex proposed legislation is not a good thing.”

Suggestions for improvements

When asked if there was anything that could have improved their visit to the Cook Islands 41% of visitors took the time to make a comment. Suggestions mentioned by respondents focused on the need for more entertainment, activities, transport (19%), public services and infrastructure (18%), availability, quality and price of food & drinks (15%), accommodation (10%), improvements to the environment, safety and animal care (10%), the need for better information (7%), weather (6%), the attitudes of locals and customer services (6%), flights (5%), better value for money (3%), and the law and legislation (1%). Comments on these themes included:

“Public transport options. For example, affordable shuttle services and chartered tours at a reasonable price, i.e. hire a driver for the day.”

“Be provided with key information upon arrival, such as vouchers, map and key activities. we stumbled upon the tourist map on our second last day...”

“Customer service is a little hit and miss, most places are great especially resorts, restaurants etc. But not so much at general places like the supermarket.”

“More independent walks and bike activities. Activities too expensive and goods really expensive.”

“If Aitutaki tour is getting cancelled, it would be good to provide alternate options to tourists to cover Aitutaki during their visit if weather supports.”

“Also being able to get to other islands easier.”

“More engagement with the authentic culture of Rarotonga.”

“More working ATM.”

“Service of Wifi availability to contact family and kids.”

“The roads and infrastructure, the water and waste systems!”

“More public toilets.”

“More high end places to dine and shop.”

“More attention to the reef.”

“Tidy up the Island and beaches.”

“A higher standard of shops and accomodation. ”

“More information about the availability of shopping/tours/activities during weekends and public holidays.”

Reasons to return to the Cook Islands and recommend to others

The majority of visitors (89%) indicated that they would consider re-visiting the Cook Islands in the future. This figure is lower than the 2018/19 annual average (92%), and the identical quarter in 2018/2019 (93%). Of the seven percent of visitors who indicated they would not want to return to the Cook Islands, the majority stated that did not wish to return because of a desire to visit another destination and because they have “been there and done enough”. Some visitors commented that a holiday to the Cook Islands is relatively expensive (especially accommodation and food) and not good value for money. A few visitors mentioned a lack of things to see and do, long travel distance, and a lack of the customer service. Other factors given for not wishing to return included, environmental care, weather, and the homosexuality law. Comments included:

“I loved it but I’ve seen enough; there are too many places in the world that I want to see before I would consider returning. I have recommended CI to others though.”

“It is too far away (we live in Amsterdam, the Netherlands) so it was a once in a lifetime experience.”

“It is a long way from home and there are many other places in the world to visit. We did enjoy it and would recommend the Cook Islands.”

“Maybe. but it was a little too expensive to do activities and buy food for our budget.”

“The resort has changed management and we really liked the old manager and her resort dog. Also we’ve been annually for probably ten years so feel like we’ve done our dash.”

“Too too hot rained 4 days and nights. No dry clothes.”

“Service and food quality not up to international standards.”

“I am very concerned about the negative debate about the need for homosexual law reform. It is imperative the law changes to ensure LGBTIQ+ Cook Islanders are no longer treated as criminals.”

“Too expensive to get out to Aitutaki, which was a good thing. It made it a once in a lifetime experience.”

Over half (52%) of the visitors among those who said they would return stated that they would definitely include the outer islands in their next visit. A further 44% of visitors indicated they would “maybe” visit outer islands next time. Of those who said they will or may visit outer islands the next time, most (90%) mentioned they would like to include Aitutaki. Atiu was the

second most mentioned island at 35%; another 26% of visitors stated that they would like to visit Mangaia, 22% of the respondents would like to visit Mauke. A few mentioned the high cost of visiting outer islands as a barrier to a return visit to the country.

Nearly all visitors surveyed (97%) said that they would recommend the destination to their family and friends which is consistent with previous survey periods. Only 3% of visitors would not recommend the Cook Islands to others and this is largely based on not good value for money, environmental degradation, and gay discrimination.

Final observations

This report shows that the Cook Islands tourism industry generally performed well during the survey period of January to March 2020. Overall visitor satisfaction levels and the desire to recommend the destination to others have remained very consistently high, and it is clear that the destination is making a generally positive impression on visitors. It is a little worrying however to see a decrease in the willingness to return (from 93% to 89%) from the same quarter in the 2018/19 year.

Despite the overall positive performance this report again highlights that there is room to enhance the visitor experience and to increase the economic yield and broader community benefits associated with tourism. As with previous reports, this quarter's research highlights issues around the infrastructure, food and beverage, as well as the rubbish and natural environment care in the Cook Islands. There are also some concerns about the on-going issues around stray dogs, price of goods and services, and the value for money/quality of service provided by accommodation and food/beverage operations.

It is vital to continue to build on this overall positive industry performance and to convert it into even greater economic benefits for local people. It is critical to find ways to build on and develop the visitor experience in a manner that enhances local economic linkages. The report reinforces the fact that cost effective on-line research can generate information that is of value to both the tourism industry and government policy makers. As the survey continues we are able to explore in more detail on the characteristics of different market segments and the overall impacts and performance of the industry.

Finally, this report provides a snapshot of how the industry was performing just prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, and during the early stage of the global outbreak. The information provided in this report is important for future industry lobbying and engagement with the Cook Islands government to understand and guide the recovery of the industry.