



The Cook Islands International Visitor Survey Report

April – June 2019

Prepared for Cook Islands Tourism Corporation

by

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

www.nztri.org

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Executive Summary

This report focuses on the characteristics, expectations and expenditure patterns of tourists who visited the Cook Islands between 1 April and 30 June 2019. The data presented is collected from an online departure survey (<http://www.mycookislandsvisit.com>). There are 1,200 individual respondents to the survey - representing a total of 2,492 adults and 462 children in the expenditure analysis (this equates to 7% of all visitors during the period – based on the same period of 2019 visitor arrival data from the Cook Islands Statistics Office).

Around two thirds (67%) of visitors surveyed come from New Zealand, 17% of respondents come from Australia. Visitors are well educated (69% of visitors have some form of tertiary education) with a relatively high annual household income (53% earn over NZ\$100,000 per year). Over two in five of the visitors (41%) travel with one companion. Solo travellers are less common (9%).

Well over half (58%) of those surveyed are first time visitors to the Cook Islands, a further 25% have visited twice or three times before. The main purpose of visit is holiday-making (79%). The average length of stay in the Cook Islands is 8.0 nights. The majority of visitors (96%) stay either one or two weeks. Nearly one in five of visitors surveyed visited Aitutaki (19%).

Visitor spend prior to arrival in the Cook Islands (\$2,092 per person) has increased from both the 2017/2018 annual average (\$1,967 per person) and the same quarter of 2018 (\$1,911). Spend on the island (per person per day) is \$154. This spend is higher than the 2017/2018 annual average of \$149, and also a little higher than the same quarter for the previous year (\$153 for April to June 2018).

The average local spend per visitor during the entirety of their stay is \$1,232. When pre-paid spend and local spend are combined, it is estimated that each visitor brings \$2,069 to the Cook Islands economy (or approximately \$259 per day). This figure is slightly higher than the \$2,051 average for 2017/18 but a little lower than the April to June 2018 period (\$2,082).

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; poor weather; price of goods and services; stray animals and mosquitos; accommodation; rubbish and natural environment care; food and beverage; attractions and activities; and customer service.

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 96% 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 has run since mid-2012 and is continuing through 2019.

This report presents the results from April to June 2019. Over this three-month period, 7,334 visitors were contacted by email to take part in the survey, and 1,200 responses were received: a conversion rate of 16%. The conversion rate for this period is higher than both the 2017/18 annual average (14%) and the April to June 2018 quarter (13%). These responses cover a total of 2,492 adults and 462 children and it is this number that is used for the visitor expenditure analysis.

The data presented includes detailed information on:

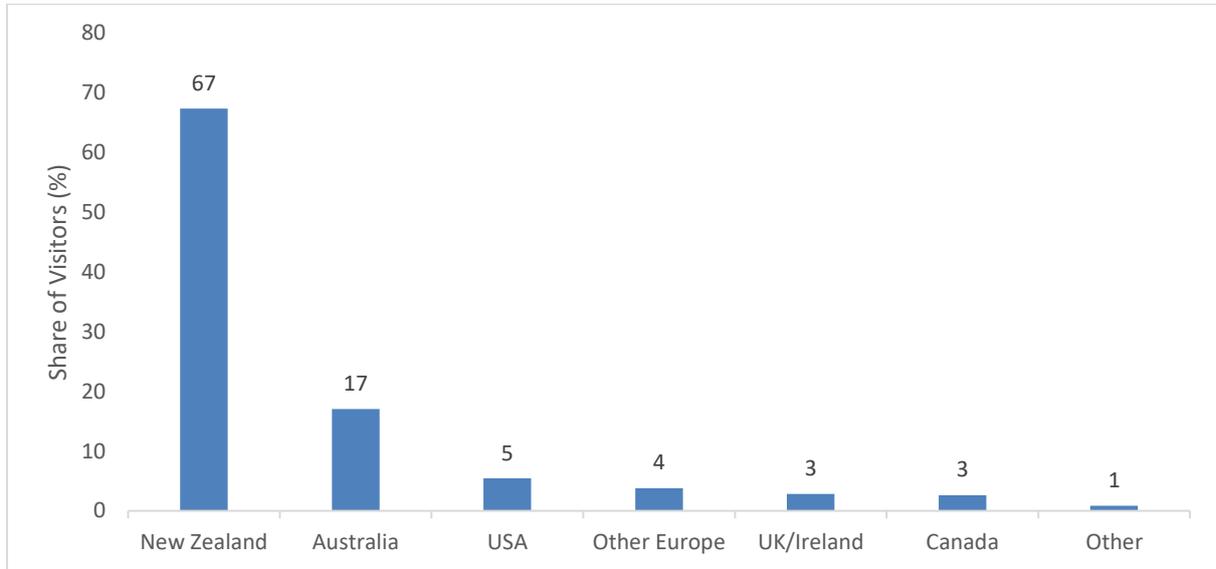
- The characteristics of visitors to the Cook Islands (age, gender, education, country of origin, income, purpose of visit, travelling companions, number of previous visits, length of stay, airline used, islands visited)
- Visitor information obtained about the Cook Islands, the factors influencing in 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 2017/18 annual averages or the 2018 April to June quarterly findings these are highlighted in the following discussion.

Visitor Characteristics

Over two thirds (67%) of the visitors surveyed come from New Zealand (Figure 1). The second largest visitor group is from Australia (17%). USA, other Europe, UK/Ireland, and Canada represent the other main source markets.

Figure 1: Country of origin (n = 954)



Auckland, Canterbury, Wellington, Waikato, and Bay of Plenty account for 72% of New Zealand visitors. For visitors from Australia, the regions of New South Wales, Victoria, and Queensland generate the highest numbers of arrivals (91%) (Figure 2-3).

Figure 2: New Zealand visitors (n = 689)

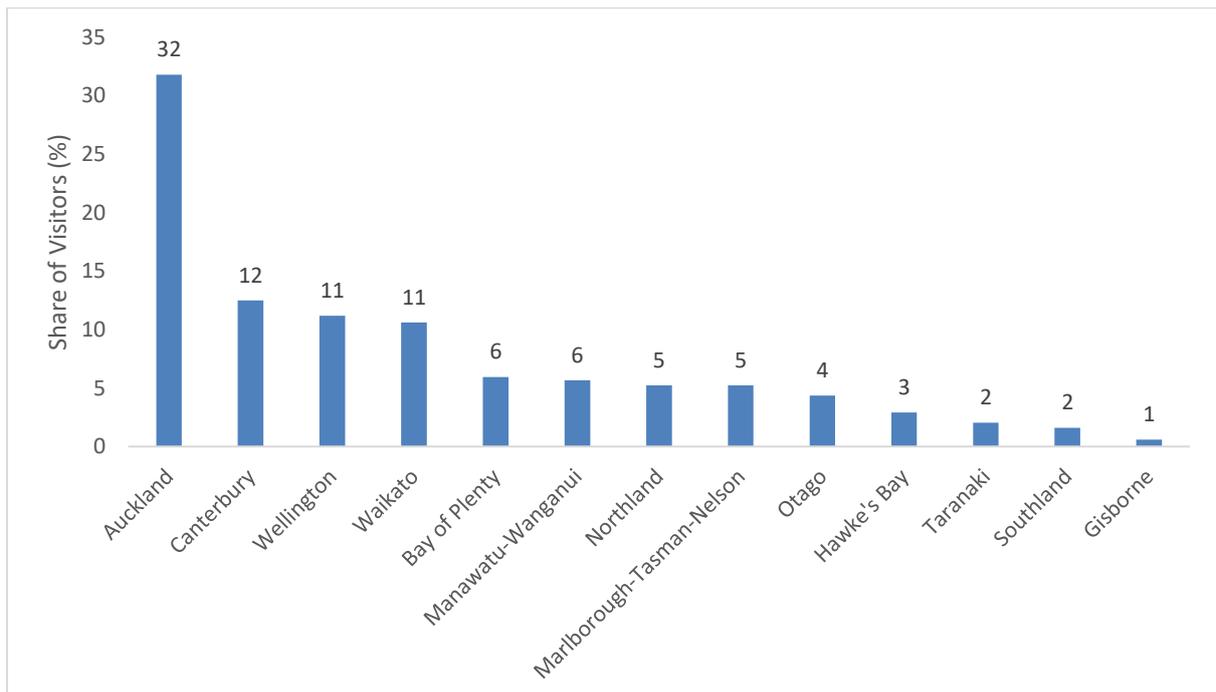
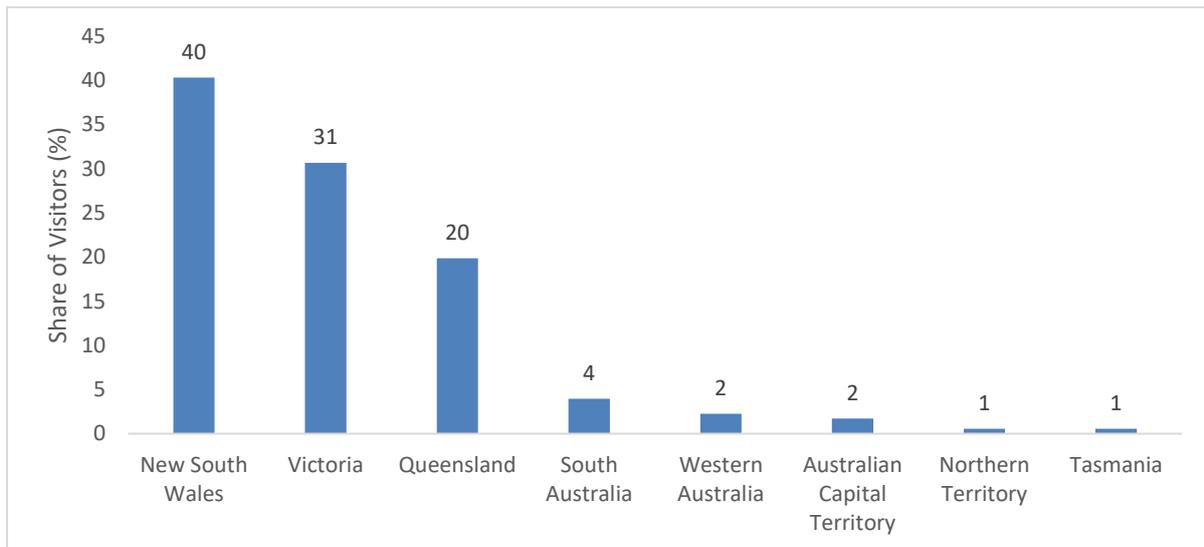
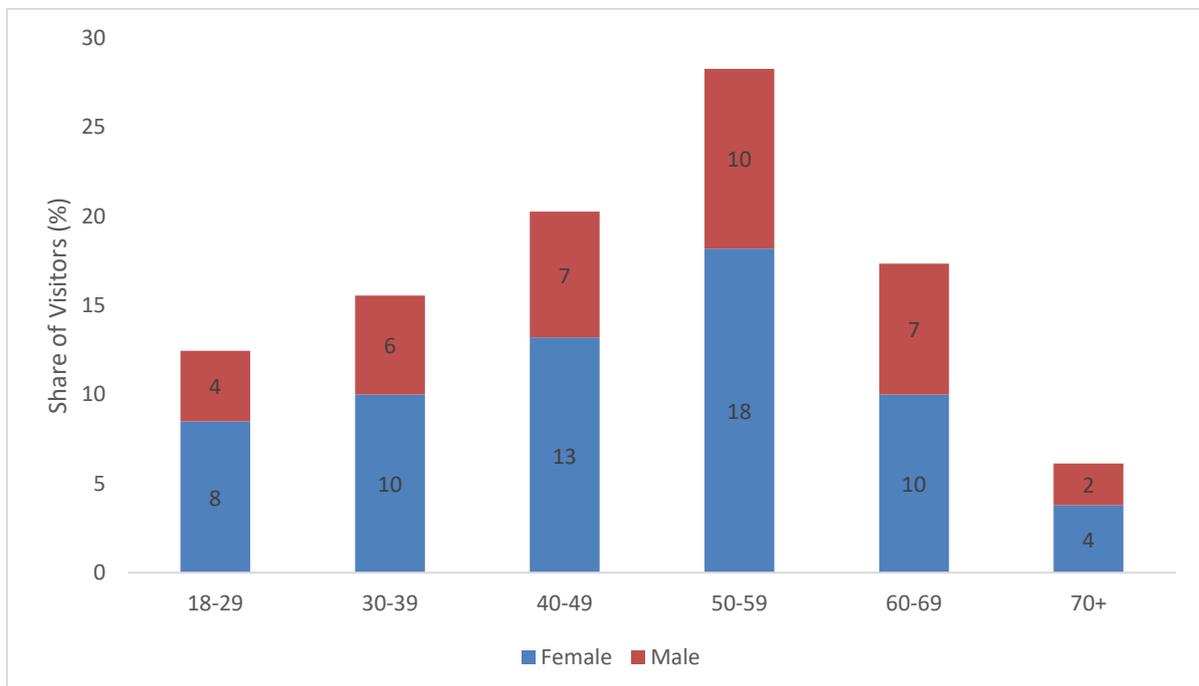


Figure 3: Australia visitors (n = 176)



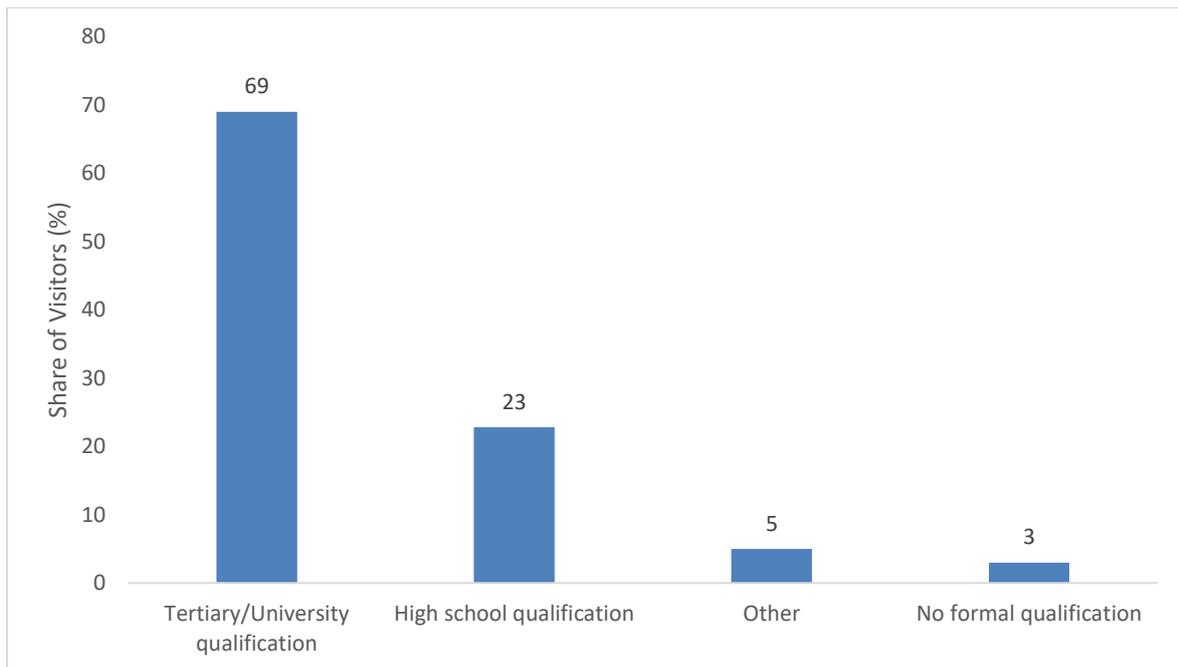
More women (64%) than men (36%) completed the survey (Figure 4). The most significant age categories are the 50 to 59 year (28%) grouping, the 40 to 49 year (20%) grouping, followed by those aged 60 to 69 (17%), 30 to 39 (16%), and 18 to 29 (12%). There are relatively few travellers in the 70 plus age bracket (6%).

Figure 4: Distribution of age and gender (n = 1061)



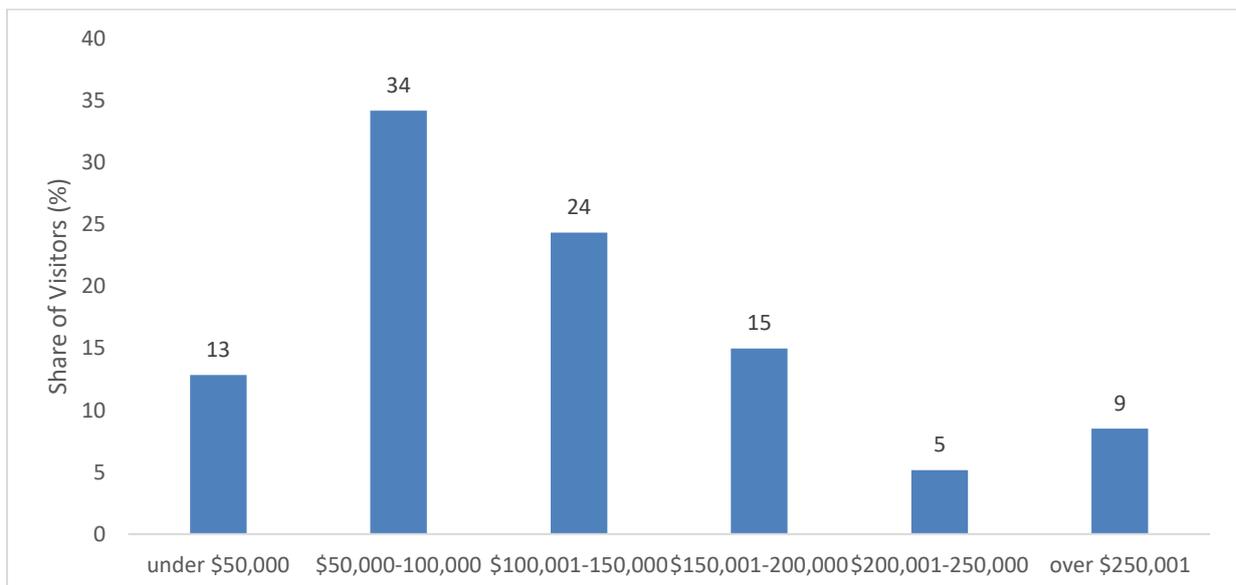
Visitors are well educated with over two-thirds (69%) of those surveyed having some form of tertiary qualification, and a further 23% having completed a high school education (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Highest qualification (n = 1063)



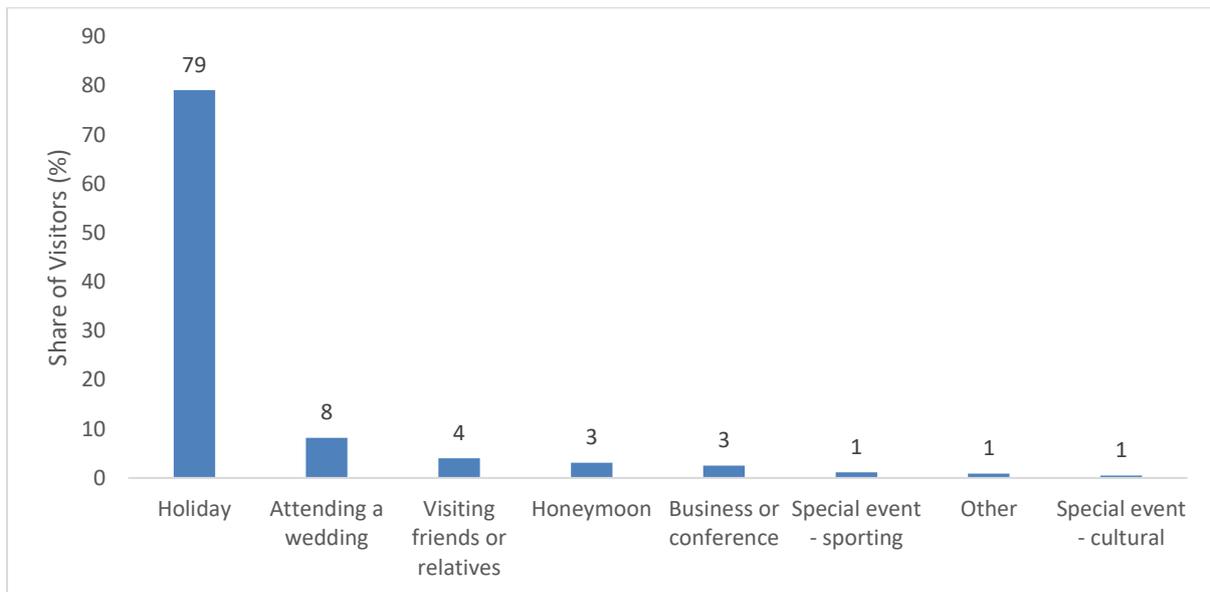
Over a third of visitors (34%) have an annual household income of between NZ\$50,001 and NZ\$100,000. Nearly a quarter (24%) of those surveyed earn between NZ\$100,001 and NZ\$150,000. A further 29% of respondents have a household income of over NZ\$150,000 per year (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Annual household income in NZD (n = 834)



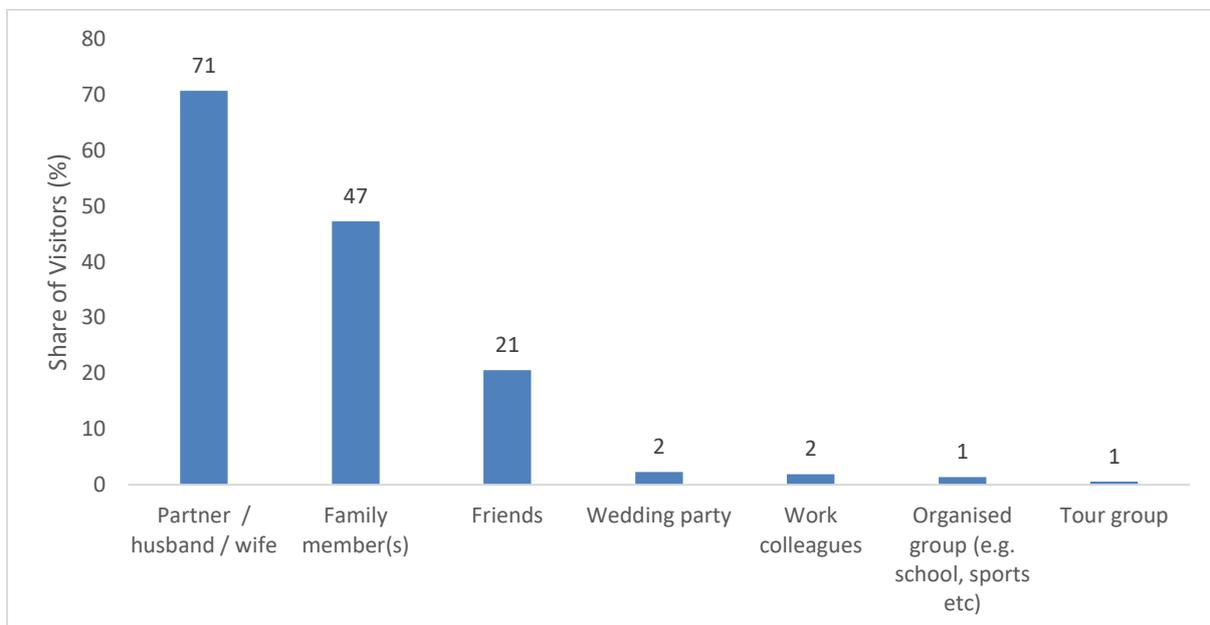
Nearly four in five (79%) of respondents come to the Cook Islands for a holiday. Other reasons given include attending a wedding (8%), visiting friends or relatives (4%), a honeymoon (4%), other (1%), business and conference (1%), and special sporting event (1%).

Figure 7: Main purpose of visit (n = 1200)



The majority (92%) of visitors travel with one or more companions. Among this grouping, most (71%) travel to the Cook Islands with a partner or spouse. Visitors also travel with other family members (47%), or with friends (21%). Those travelling as part of a wedding party, with work colleagues, in an organised group or in a tour group, represent smaller shares of the sample (Figure 8).

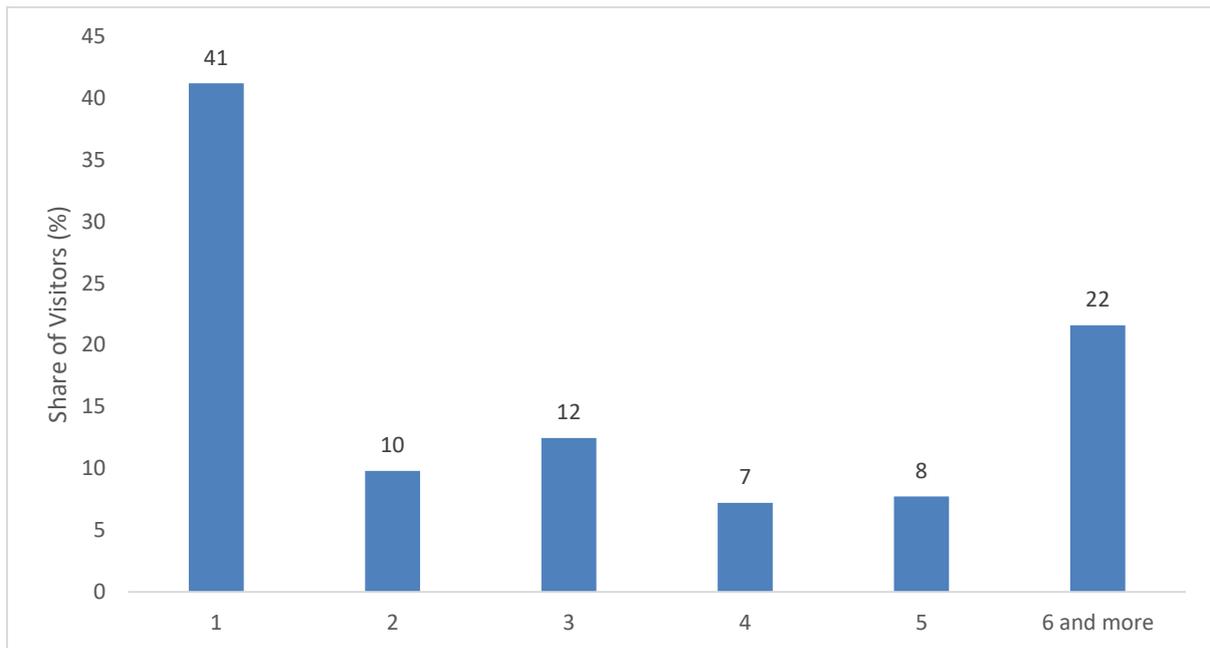
Figure 8: Travelling with whom? (n = 1098)



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

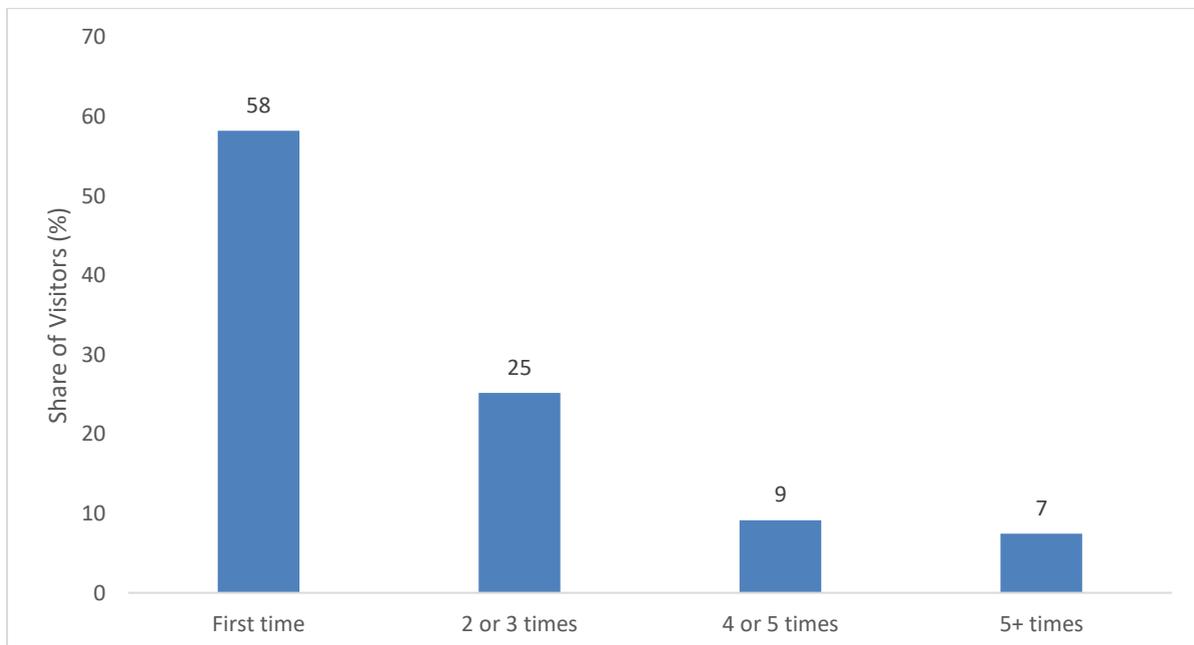
Over two in five of the visitors (41%) travelled with one companion on their visit to the Cook Islands (Figure 9), and nearly a quarter of the visitors (22%) travelled with more than six people.

Figure 9: Number of companions on trip (n = 1010)



Over half of the visitors (58%) are on their first visit to the Cook Islands. A further 25% have been to the Cook Islands twice or three times before. A smaller group (16%) have visited four or more times (Figure 10).

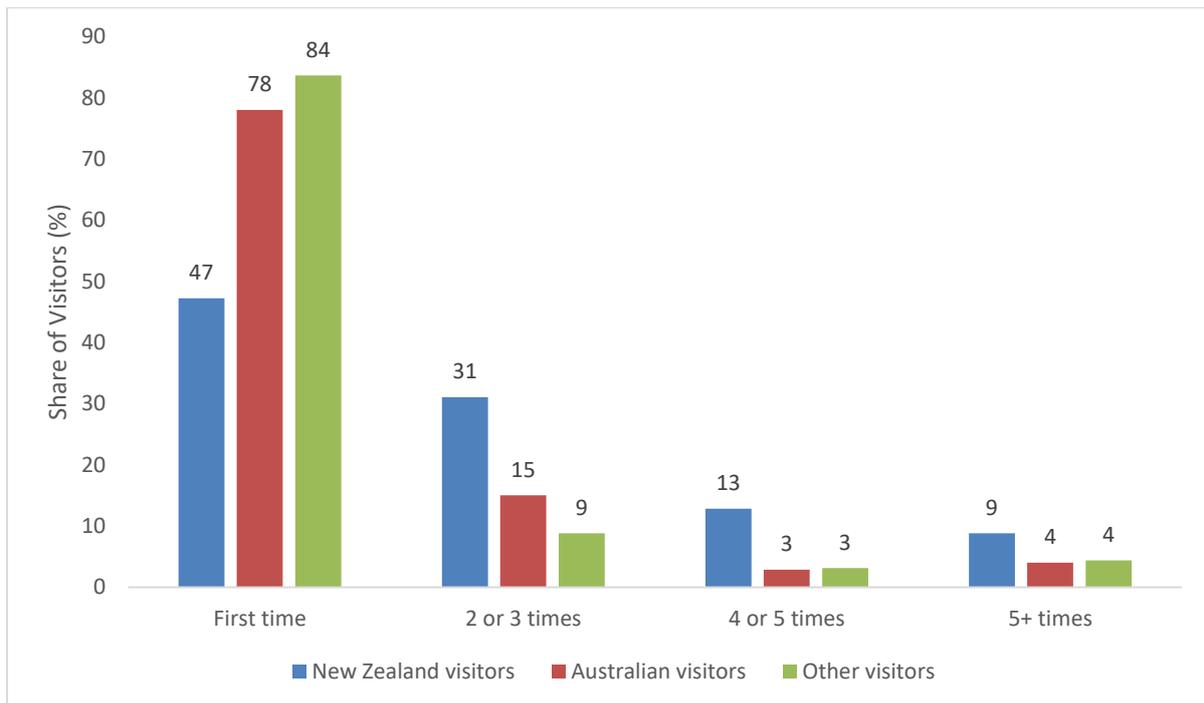
Figure 10: Number of visits to the Cook Islands (n = 1060)



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

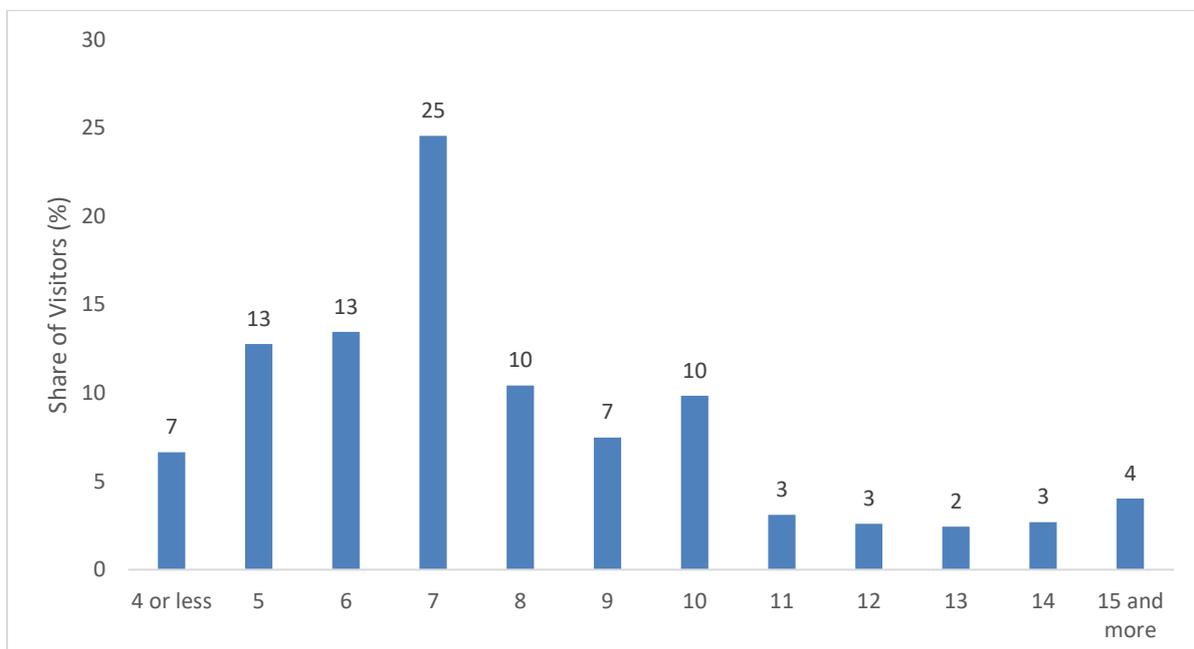
New Zealanders are more likely to be repeat visitors than those from other source markets (Figure 11). Over half of the surveyed visitors from New Zealand (53%) have visited the Cook Islands before compared to only 22% of visitors from Australia and 16% from other countries.

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



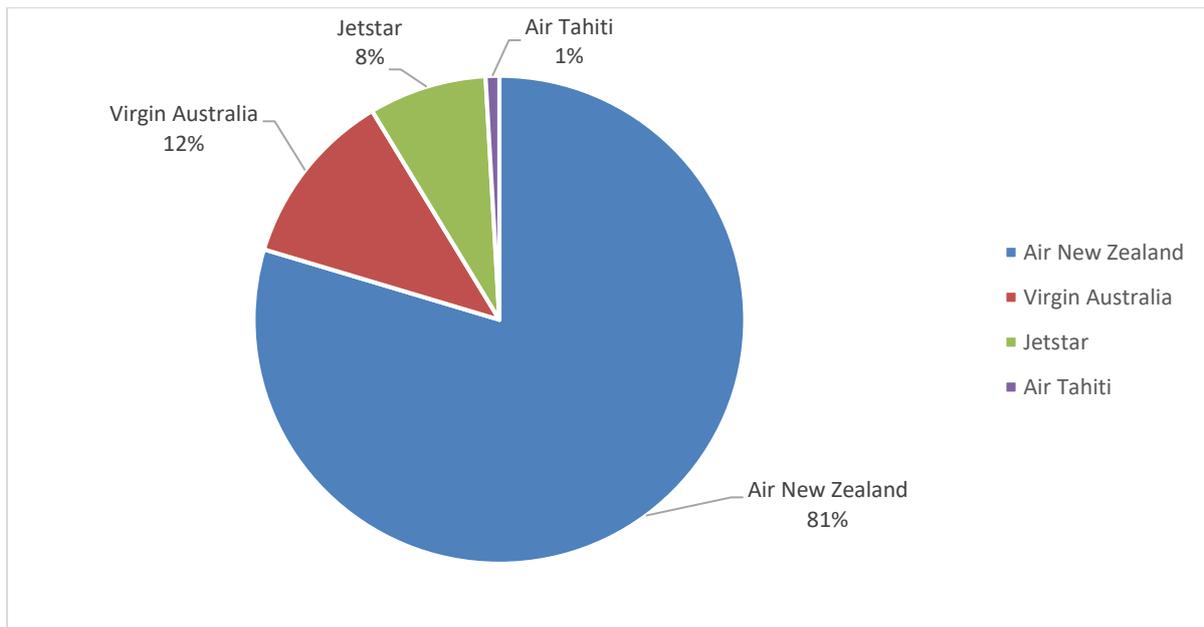
The average length of stay in the Cook Islands is 8.0 nights with 85% of visitors spending 10 or fewer nights in the country (Figure 12).

Figure 12: Length of stay in nights (n = 927)



Over four in five of visitors (81%) travel to/from the Cook Islands with Air New Zealand, a further 12% of visitors fly with Virgin Australia, followed by eight percent of visitors travelling with Jetstar and one percent travelling with Air Tahiti (Figure 13).

Figure 13: Mode of transport (n = 1199)

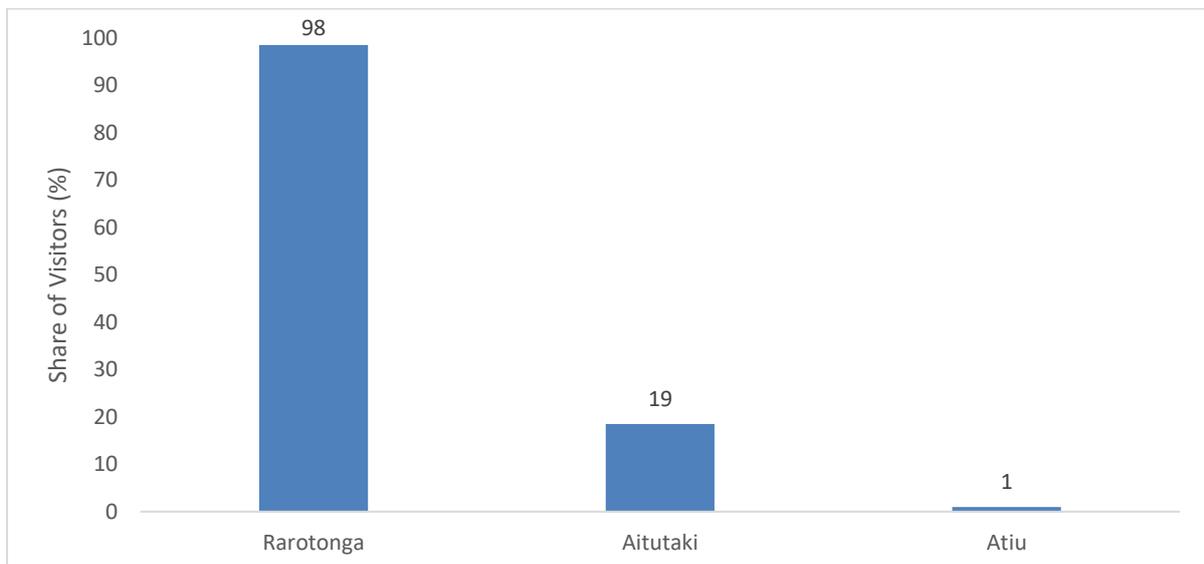


Note: Multiple responses, therefore total does not add up to 100%

For 87% of visitors, the Cook Islands is the sole destination for their trip. For 13% 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 their trip, the top destination mentioned was New Zealand (77%), followed by travel to Australia (22%), Asian countries (18%), other Pacific countries (17%), United States of America (11%), Canada (3%), and Europe (3%).

The vast majority (98%) of visitors to the Cook Islands spend time on Rarotonga, with Aitutaki being the second most visited island (14%) (Figure 14).

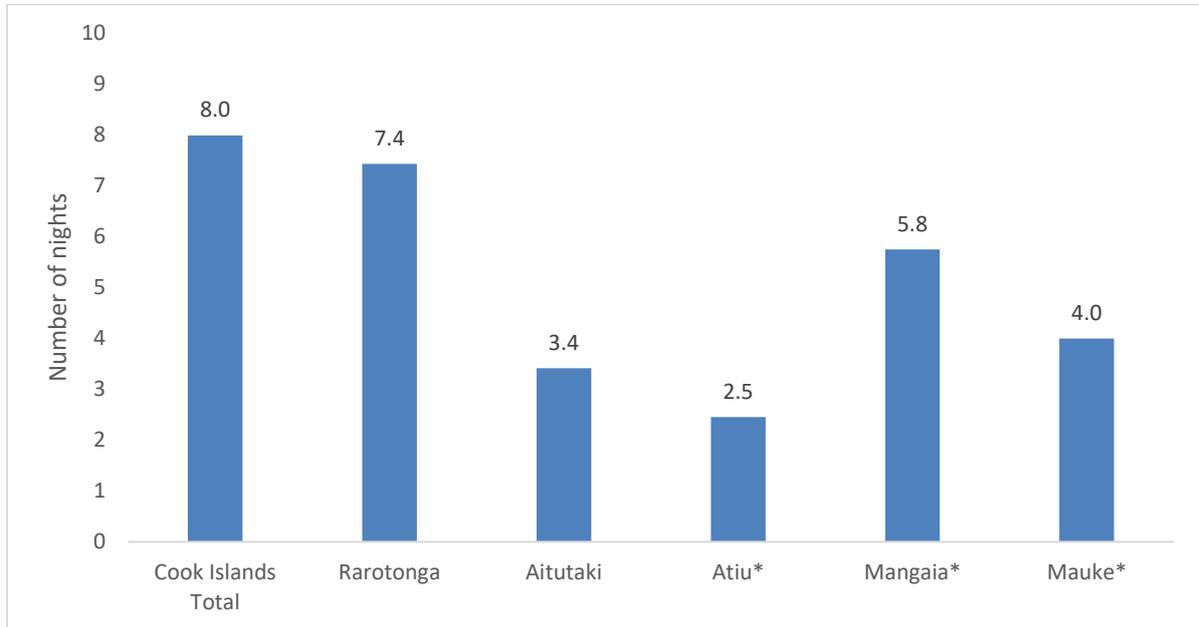
Figure 14: Visited Islands (n = 1199)



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 7.4 nights (Figure 15). For the visitors that went to Aitutaki, the average number of nights spent on the island itself is 3.4. It should be noted that sample sizes for Atiu, Mauke and Mangaia are small.

Figure 15: Average length of stay in the Cook Islands and on each island (n = 2-1166)

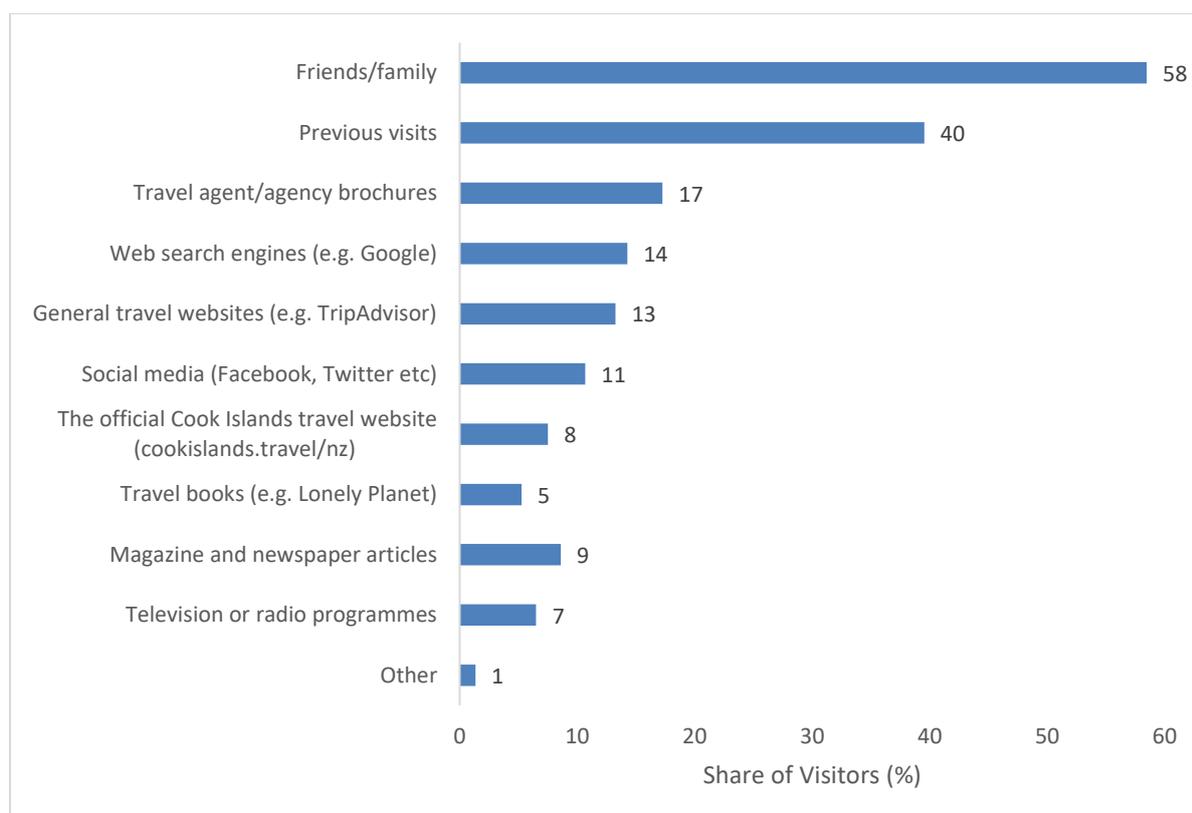


Note: *n≤11

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 (58%) of respondents ranked word of mouth from friends and family members as the most important influence, followed by previous experience (40%). Travel agents/agency brochures (17%), web search engines (e.g. Google) (14%), general travel websites (e.g. TripAdvisor) (13%), social media (Facebook, Twitter etc) (11%), and the official Cook Islands travel website (8%) played less significant roles.

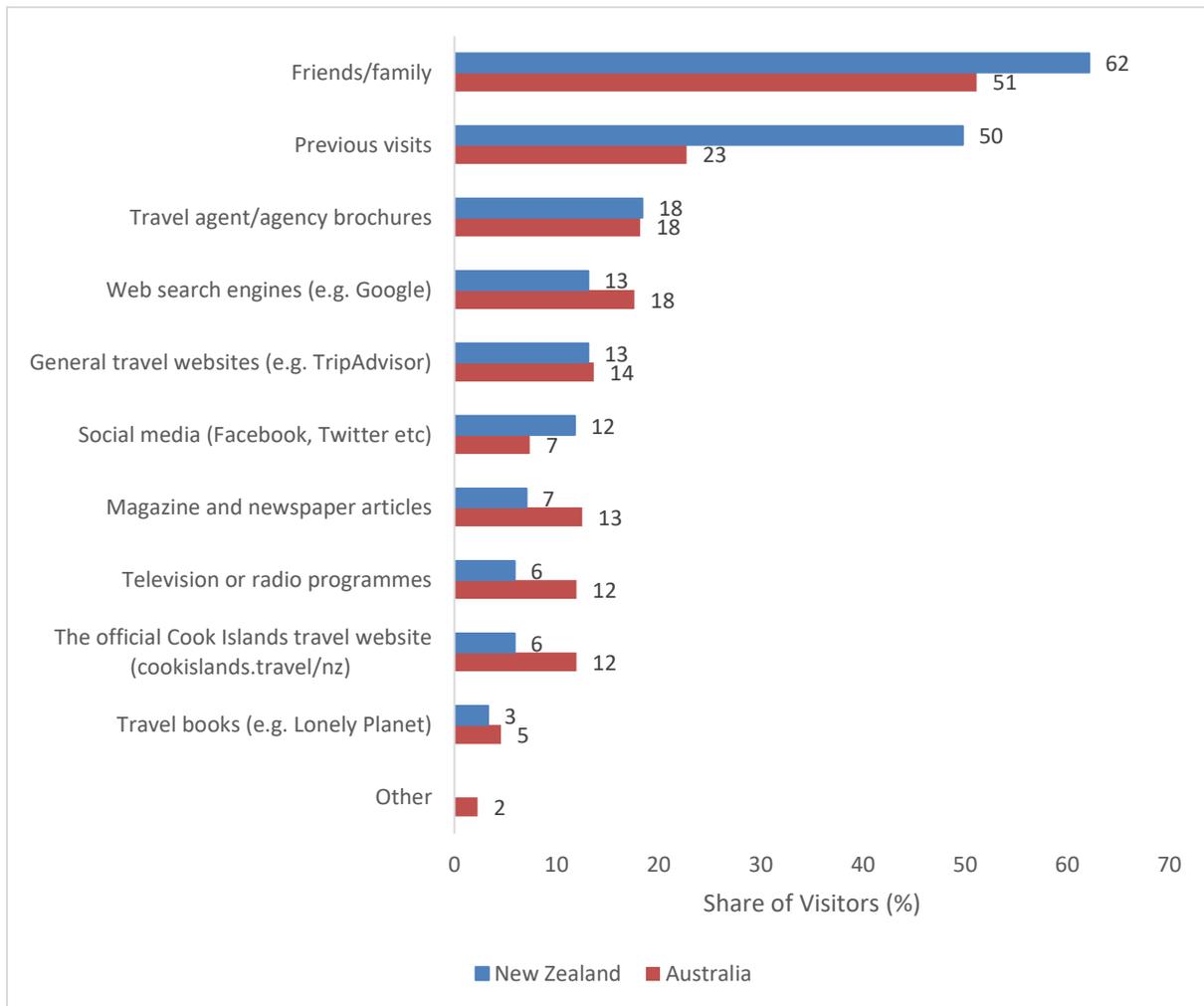
Figure 16: How did you find out about Cook Islands as a destination (n = 1199)



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 (62%). There are more repeat visitors from New Zealand than Australia and this is reflected by the fact that half of visitors from New Zealand (50%) ranked their previous visits as the most important information source (Australian visitors 23%). Australian visitors are more likely than their New Zealand counterparts to rank the official Cook Islands travel website, web search engines (e.g. Google), television or radio programmes, magazine and newspaper articles, general travel website (e.g. TripAdvisor), and travel books (e.g. Lonely Planet) as the most important influence.

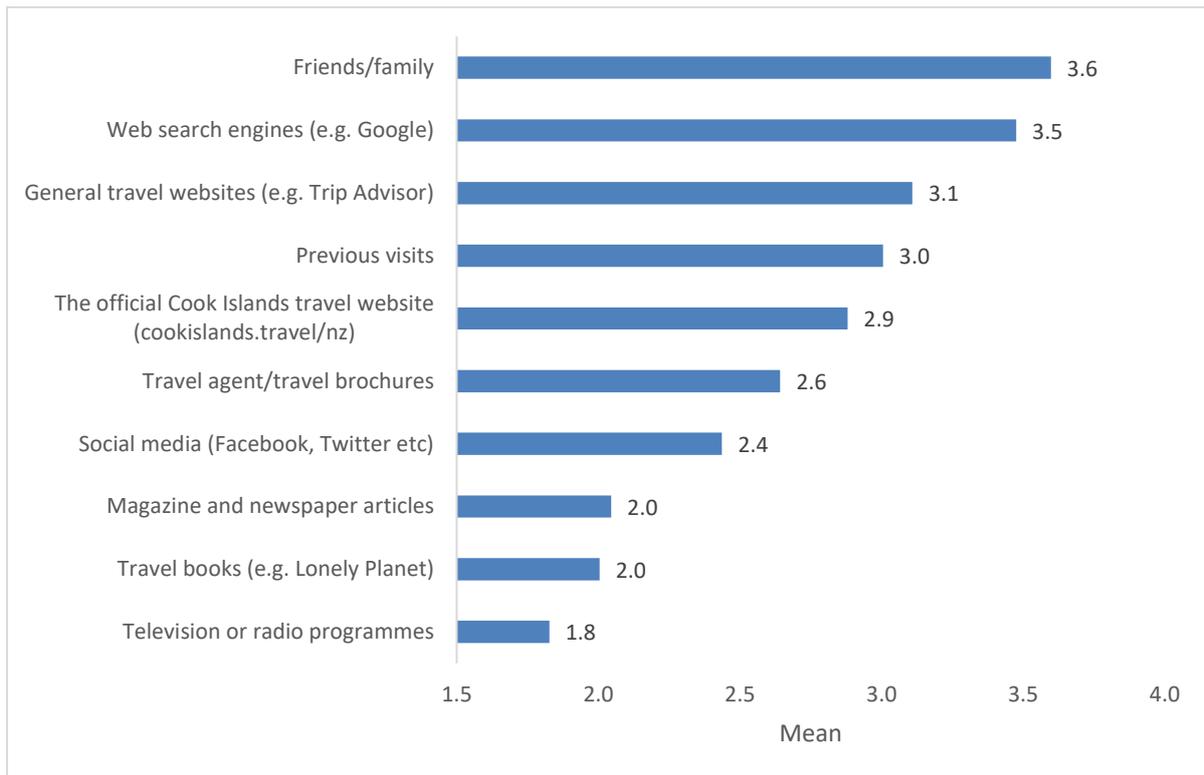
Figure 17: How did you find out about Cook Islands as a destination – country breakdown



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

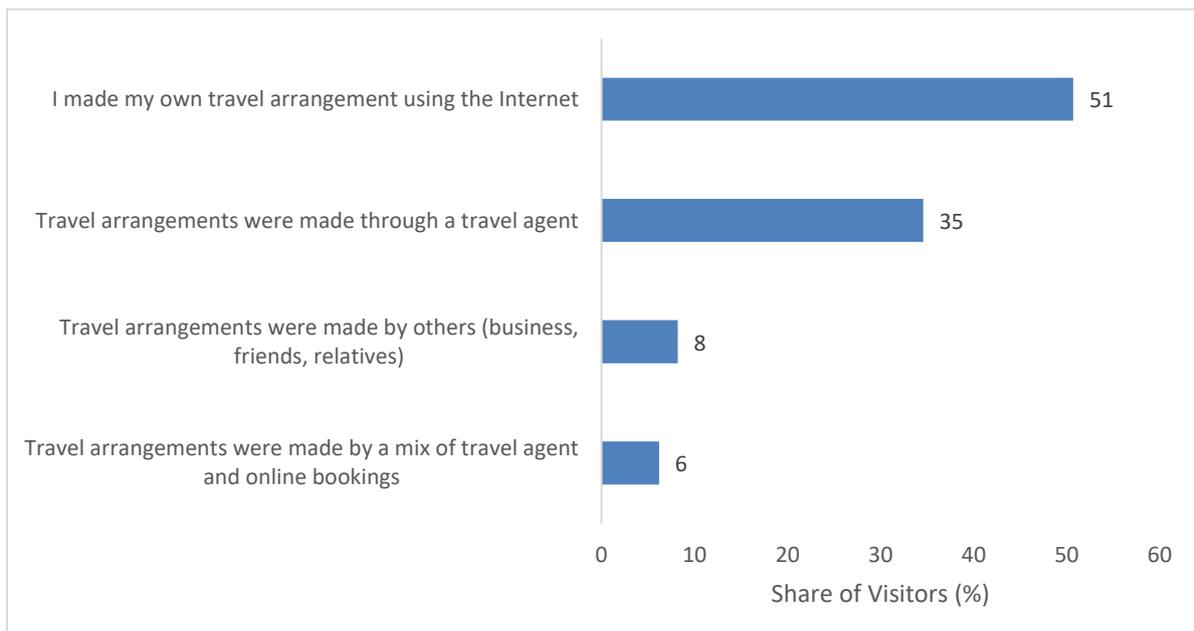
When visitors were asked to rank the importance of the listed information sources used to plan their trip, friends and family members (3.6) ranked as the most important source, closely followed by web search engines (e.g. Google) (3.5) (Figure 18). Other important information sources are general travel websites (e.g. Trip Advisor) (3.1), previous visits (3.0), and the official Cooks Island travel website (cookislands.travel/nz) (2.9).

Figure 18: Importance of information source used when planning your trip (n = 925-1084)



Over half of visitors surveyed (51%) made their own travel arrangements through online websites (Figure 19). A smaller group of visitors surveyed (35%) purchased a pre-paid trip through the travel agent, followed by 8% of visitors whose travel arrangements were made by others, or who used a mix of travel agent and online bookings (6%).

Figure 19: How did you purchase your travel to the Cook Islands (n = 1197)

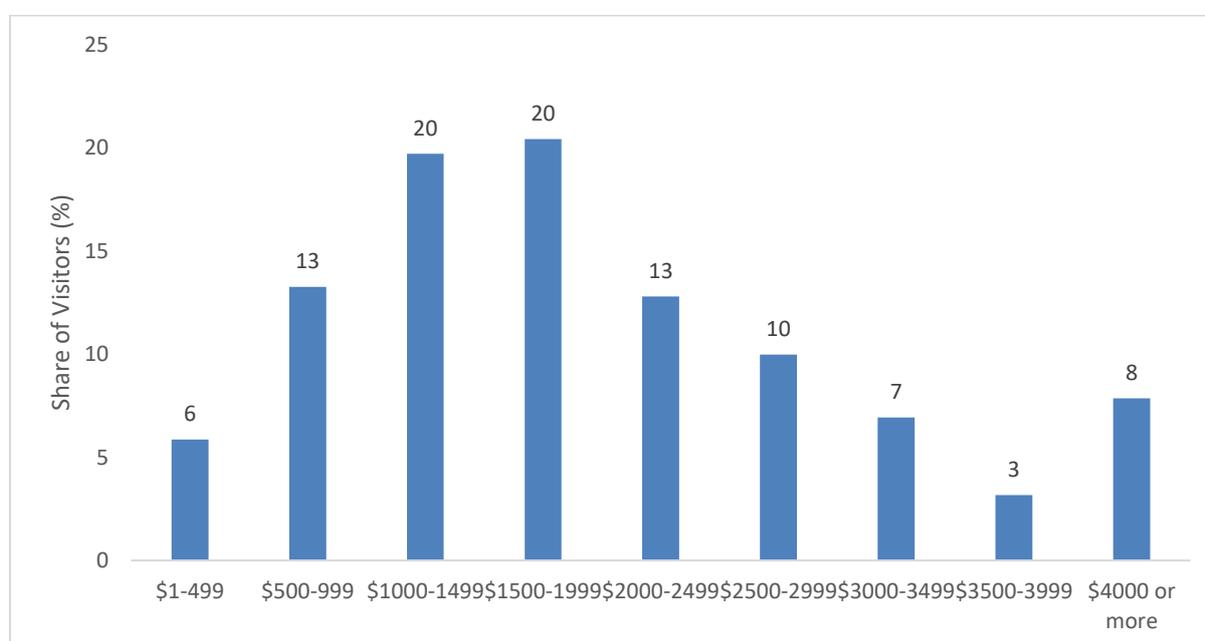


Visitor Expenditure

The survey 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: 2,954 people comprising 2,492 adults and 462 children.

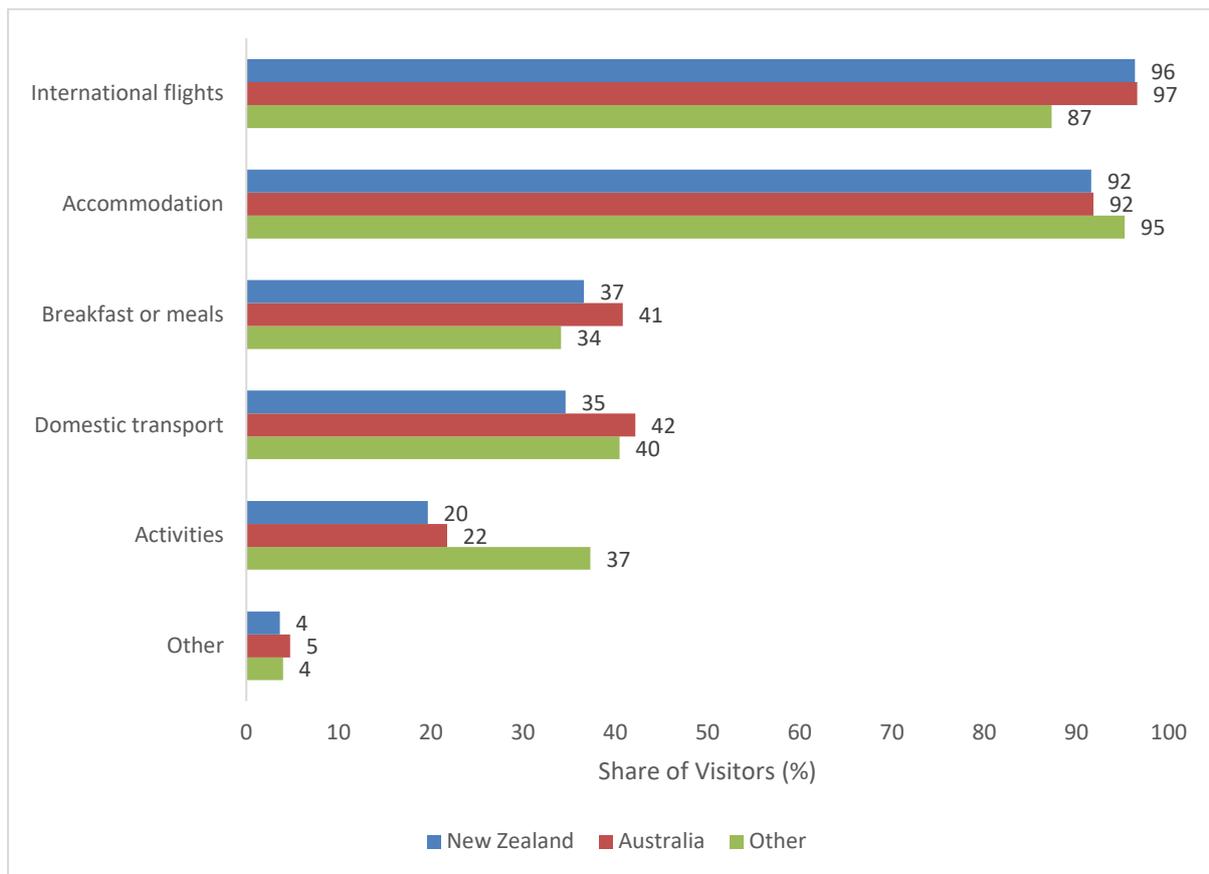
On average, visitors to the Cook Islands spend NZ\$2,092 per person prior to arrival. Over half (53%) of the visitors spend between NZ\$1,000 and NZ\$2,499 prior to arrival (Figure 20). The prepaid figure per person is higher than that for the same quarter for 2018 (NZ\$1,911) and the previous full year (average prepaid spend of NZ\$1,967 for 2017/18).

Figure 20: Amount of money spent per person prior to arrival (n = 852)



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 for 95% of visitors from other countries (Figure 21). Over one third of visitors prepaid for breakfast and meals prior to arrival (37% New Zealand visitors; 41% Australian visitors, 34% 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\$105 and for the average total visit is NZ\$837 (8.0 nights).

The total spend per visitor per day while in the Cook Islands (excluding any pre-paid expenditure) is NZ\$154 (Table 1). This figure is higher than the overall spend figure for 2017/18 (NZ\$149) and close to the same 4th IVS survey quarter in 2018 (NZ\$153). The majority of money spent locally is on accommodation (44%), restaurants, cafes and bars (21%), and shopping (7%). These per person expenditure figures are based on 1,200 survey responses covering a total of 2,783 people (2,342 adults and 441 children).

By multiplying daily in-country spend by the average stay (8.0 nights) we can see that spend per person per visit to the Cook Islands is on average NZ\$1,232. The total figure of what is spent locally and what flows back to the Cook Islands from pre-paid expenses is therefore NZ\$259 per visitor per day (\$154 + \$105), or NZ\$2,069 (\$1,232 + \$837) for each visitor.

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

Expenditure Items	n = 1,200	
	<i>Mean (NZ\$)</i>	(% of spend)
Accommodation	68	44
Restaurant, cafes and bar	33	21
Shopping	11	7
Vehicle rental	9	6
Activities	8	5
Domestic flights	8	5
Groceries	7	5
Other	2	1
Internet	2	1
Cruising	2	1
Petrol	2	1
Public transportation	1	0
Total Expenditure	154	100

Table 2 provides an overview of the in-country expenditure by the visitor's country of origin. Visitors from Australia have the highest average spend per person per day at NZ\$187. European visitors spend on average at NZ\$153 per day, closely followed by New Zealand visitors (NZ\$152 per day). The United States visitors during this period spent the least at NZ\$142 per day.

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

Expenditure Items	n = 153	n = 403	n = 2,002	n = 107
	USA/ Canada	Australia	New Zealand	Europe
Accommodation	59	81	68	74
Restaurant, cafes and bar	30	43	33	20
Shopping	10	17	10	10
Vehicle rental	8	10	10	8
Activities	8	11	8	10
Domestic flights	11	7	8	11
Groceries	8	7	7	10
Other	1	2	2	4
Internet	2	3	2	2
Petrol	2	2	2	2
Cruising	2	3	1	2
Public transportation	1	1	1	1
Total spend (NZ\$)	142	187	152	153

Average Australian spend per person for this quarter (NZ\$187) is higher compared to the same quarter in 2018 (NZ\$178) and the 2017/18 average of NZ\$168. The average spend of

NZ\$142 for visitors from the United States of America/Canada for this period is significantly lower than both the same quarter in 2018 (NZ\$162) and the 2017/18 average of NZ\$164. European visitors spend at NZ\$153 per person per day is considerably higher than both the same quarter in the previous year (NZ\$138) and the average for 2017/18 of NZ\$133. New Zealanders' spend of NZ\$152 per person per day is higher than both the same quarter in the previous year (NZ\$147) and the average of \$148 for 2017/18.

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). Nearly two thirds (63%) of the visitors surveyed were 'very satisfied' with their overall experience of the Cook Islands. Very few visitors (2%) were unsatisfied (a score of 2 or lower) with their visit.

Figure 22: Overall satisfaction with experience of the Cook Islands (n = 1072)

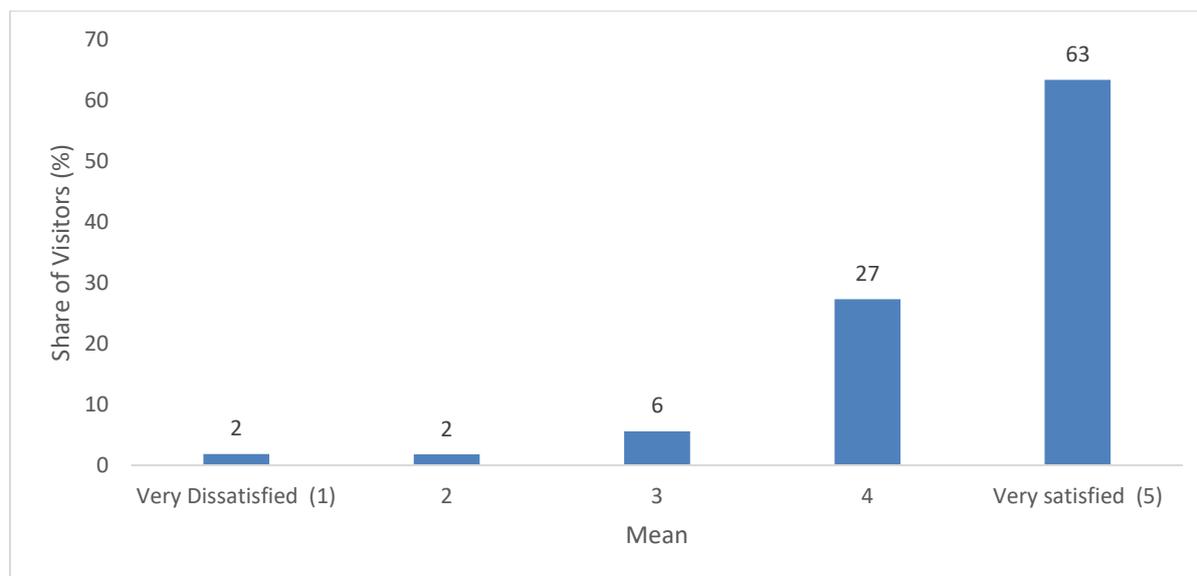


Figure 23 shows the percentage of respondents who undertook specific activities while on their visit to the Cook Islands. Almost all visitors visited a beach (98%) and visit at least one restaurant or café (98%) during their trip. Most of the respondents either go swimming (94%) or visit a local market (88%), 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 deep-sea fishing, kitesurfing, bonefishing, and whale watching) (Figure 23). Activities involving cultural interaction (average satisfaction of 4.6) rank the highest, followed by land-based products (4.5), shopping (4.4), and water-based experiences (4.0). It should be noted that whale watching and bonefishing are characterised by relatively low numbers of participants (n = 13-17) with lower levels of satisfaction (1.8 and 2.6). If these two activities are removed from the analysis, the average satisfaction for water-based experiences rises to 4.3.

Figure 23: Degree of participation in activities (n range = 11-1141)

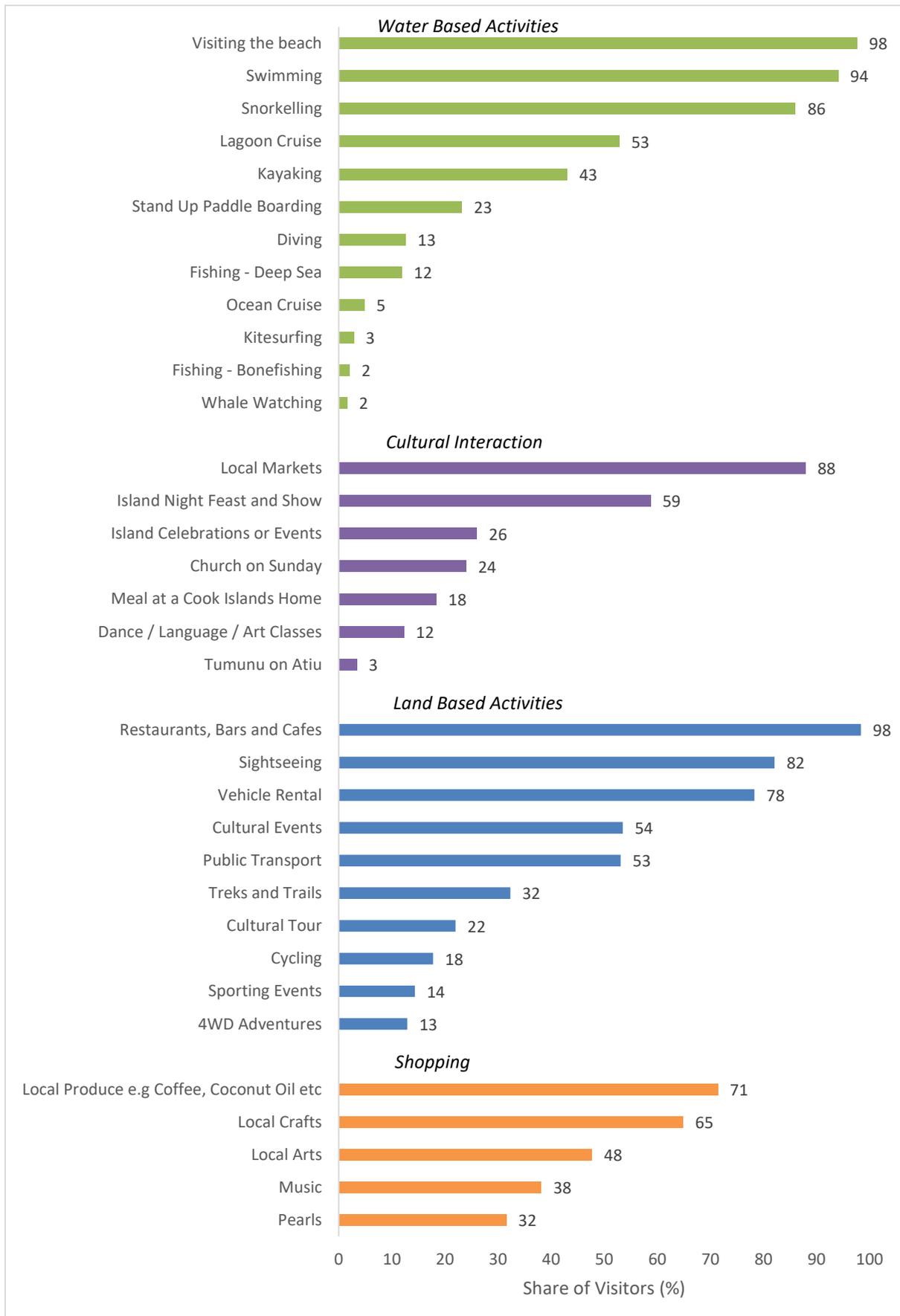
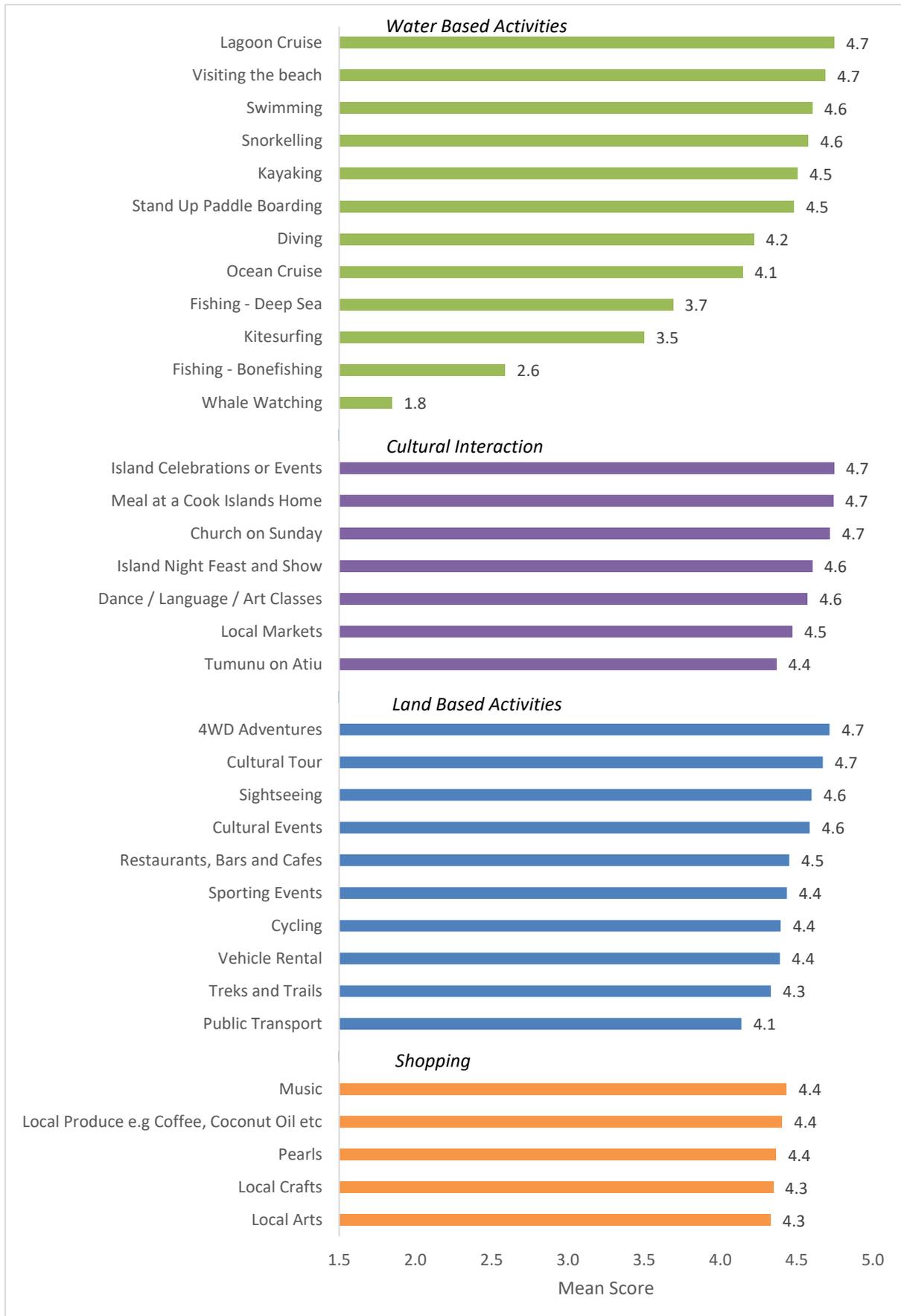


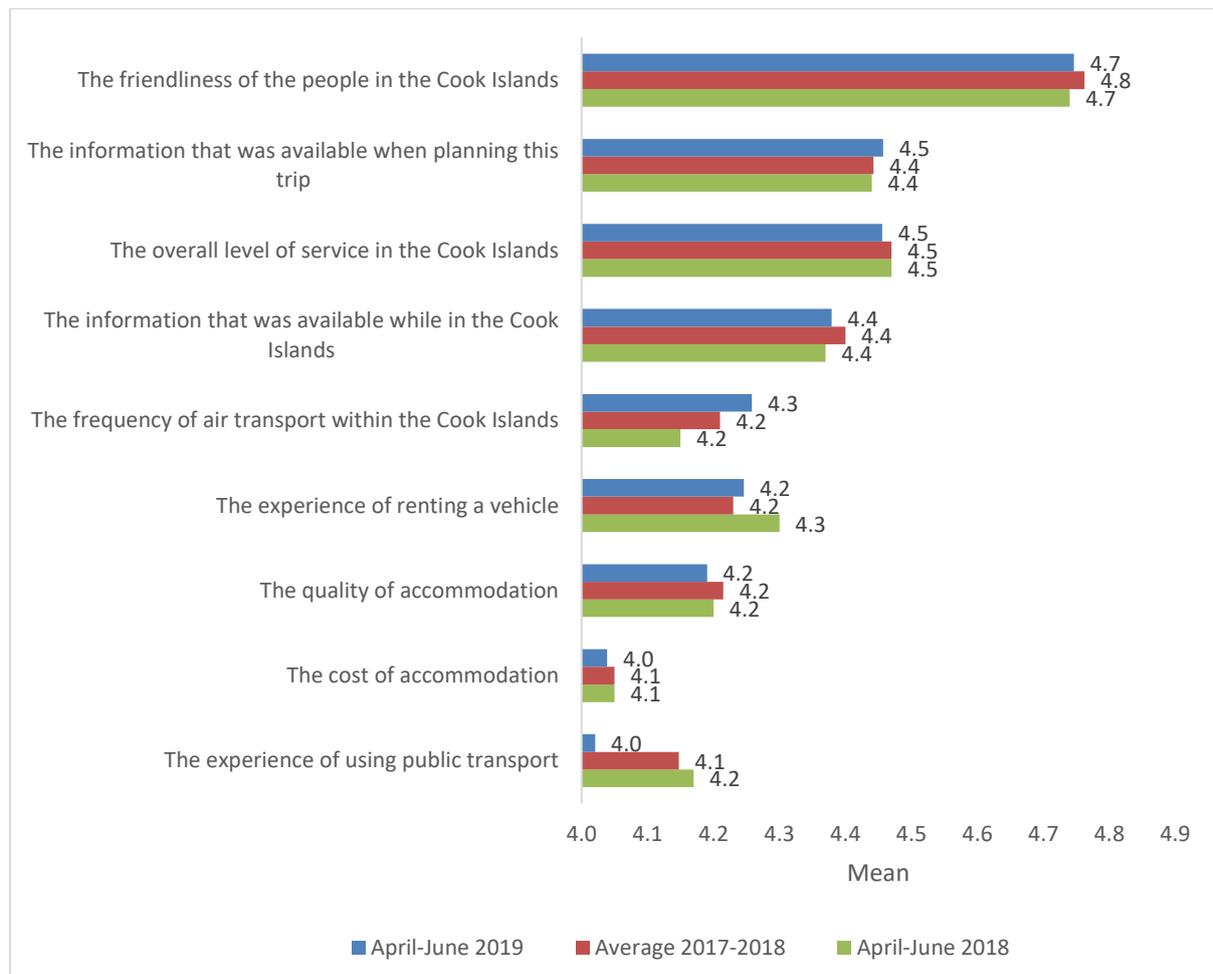
Figure 24: Degree of satisfaction with activities participated in (mean score out of 5)



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 April to June 2019 are compared to the annual average for 2017/18, and the same quarter of 2018 (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 friendliness of the people in the Cook Islands is similar to the same quarter for 2018 but is slightly lower than the average for 2017/18. The degree of satisfaction with the overall level of service in the Cook Islands, the information that was available while in the Cook Islands, and the quality of accommodation are the same as the annual average for 2017/18 and the same quarter for 2018. Visitor satisfaction with the information that was available when planning their trip, as well as the frequency of air transport within the Cook Islands, is slightly higher than both the average for 2017/18 and the 4th quarter in 2018. Respondent satisfaction with the cost of accommodation and the experience of using public transport is slightly lower than the average for 2017/2018 and the same quarter for 2018. The level of satisfaction with the experience of renting a vehicle remains the same as the average for 2017/2018, and is slightly lower than the same quarter for 2018.

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 were the environment, cleanliness, and weather (34%), the friendly and welcoming local people (28%), the tourist attractions and activities on offer (21%), and the peacefulness and relaxing atmosphere of the islands (19%). Smaller numbers of visitors mentioned aspects such as food and beverage (9%), convenience and safety (5%), accommodation (5%), un-commercial destination (3%), culture (3%), overall good experience (3%), level of service (2%), family friends (1%), as well as price of goods and services (1%).

Table 3: Most appealing aspects of the Cook Islands (n=1070)

Themes	Share of respondents (%)
Environment, cleanliness & weather	48%
Local people	38%
Activities, attractions and entertainment, events	28%
Atmosphere	27%
Food and beverage	11%
Convenience and safety	7%
Accommodation	6%
Un-commercial	4%
Overall good experience	4%
Culture	3%
Level of service	3%
Family friends	2%
Price of goods and services	1%
Emotional connection	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 (48%) 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 weather, the scenery, and the landscapes of the islands in general. Comments included:

“The beaches - the lagoon in Aitutaki. The lagoon cruises on both Rarotonga and Aitutaki.”

“Exquisite beauty, serene, no high-rise hotels.”

“...see so much coral and so many fish.”

"The tranquillity of the water, the beautifully kept gardens."

"Coming from the UK we enjoyed the beach and atolls experience and the temperature of the sea and lovely weather."

"And how relatively 'untouched' the beaches and islands are compared to more developed islands like Fiji."

"Lovely clean environment."

"The cleanliness of everyone's properties. The beautiful clear water with a diversity of sea life."

"The beautiful beaches and water and sunsets!!"

"It was just so beautiful. Like paradise."

"The lagoon, the sea, the beaches."

"Their true concern for recycling and preserving their environment."

"The sea breeze air."

"Beaches are beautiful. Everything is close by. Weather is warm."

"The scenery, blue water and green countryside."

"The water was clear and warm."

"Climate. Cleanliness of the island as a whole."

"The beaches and the water, stunning!"

"Local people are so happy and kind and proud of the country and being so tidy no litter around anywhere."

"The beauty of the landscape and countryside was amazing."

"The green lushness of the island, the beauty of the place- idyllic."

"The natural beauty of Aitutaki."

"Friendly dogs on Rarotonga."

"We loved the local dogs (one caught a ride on a kayak with us). The dogs are very gentle. Loved the beach and lagoon, pity about the wind but that just life, we still had an awesome time. Kids loved it."

"We love Rarotonga and can't wait to come back. Love the climate, clean beaches and water and relaxed lifestyle. Would love to spend more time here."

“How clean it was and how proactive the Government/public are to re-cycle, cut down on plastic waste, litter etc. I think you could go another step with electric vehicles only, more use of solar energy etc and become a boutique eco destination.”

“The beautiful beaches and the clean clear water. Made snorkelling a very memorable part of our holiday.”

Local people

The second ‘most appealing’ feature for visitors is their interaction with local people in the Cook Islands. Over a third of the respondents (38%) expressed that the warmth and welcoming nature of local people was an important factor in having a positive travel experience. Key words that dominated the responses included ‘friendly’, ‘welcoming’, ‘helpful’, ‘wonderful’, ‘lovely’, ‘relaxed’, ‘inclusive’, ‘amazing’, ‘positive’, ‘kind’, ‘happy’, ‘honest’, ‘easy going’, ‘accommodating’, and ‘respectful’. Some of the good examples included:

“Genuinely awesome friendly locals, met a few whilst hitching around the island!”

“The laid-back nature of the people on Aitutaki, low key and friendly, really lovely.”

“We always enjoy meeting new people and the welcoming nature and friendly people we meet.”

“The people were exceptionally friendly and accommodating.”

“Everyone we came across was very helpful in our quest to find different things.”

“The kindness of the native people. They were so welcoming and opened up their homes for us.”

“Being able to engage with your culture and have people be so nice about it was absolutely amazing. I felt like anywhere I went people wanted to teach us things if we asked and wanted to learn.”

“Local people/our hosts were great ambassadors for the Cook Islands.”

“The local people were wonderful and helpful.”

“The people. So friendly and sweet, everyone welcomed us and made meaningful conversation. :)”

“The kind, warm, welcoming and funny residents of the Cook Islands.”

“The people were friendly and welcoming wherever we went.”

“Everyone was always very welcoming and friendly. Kia Orana was always said in a happy way.”

"The people in the shops were very nice and helpful."

"The people, we have made some friends with locals."

"The friendliness of the locals. They put a smile on their face every day."

"Cultural and friendliness, pride of the islanders."

"Lots to see and do with friendly hosts."

"The amazingly friendly people, especially at Punanga Nui Markets."

"The connectedness and inclusiveness of everyone we meet."

"The manaaki and aroha of the local people."

"Friendly people, especially bus drivers."

"Everyone on the island was so friendly and could just talk to people even ended up talking to one of the security guards at the wedding for a long time. Such hospitality."

"The people & overall positive vibe."

"Such friendly, helpful, relaxed people."

"Relaxed nature of the people."

"How we were made to feel when we were out. People show us respect. And anywhere you go that is the main thing Respect."

"People in Aitutaki are very cool."

"Local knowledge on tours and great sense of humour. Honesty of people."

Activities, attractions, entertainment & events

Activities, attractions, entertainment, and events were mentioned by over a quarter (28%) of respondents as the third most appealing element of their visit to the destination. The availability of water sports including snorkelling, surfing, swimming, lagoon cruise, diving, fishing, and kayaking was the most frequently mentioned attractions. In addition, land-based activities like hiking, buggy, cross island walking, and cycling were also mentioned by respondents. Moreover, local events, the welcoming singing and dancing at the airport, food markets, and museums were also mentioned frequently by visitors. Aitutaki lagoon and Muri lagoon were also rated as highly appealing by visitors. Comments included:

"Aitutaki was a real treasure."

"Aitutaki was absolutely stunning!"

"The Muri beach night market and the lagoon at Muri beach."

"Muri Beach is second only to Autitaki for a beautiful location."

"We enjoy meeting the people and participating in local events."

"We also loved the walk over the island. This was a real adventure. Swimming at the waterfall with many locals was a great way to cool off."

"Brewery tour was an unexpected delight."

"We were grateful to learn how to open coconuts and to pick fruits from tree."

"The art galleries were of particular interest and the museum on the wet days. Locals are generous to share such a small space with tourists. It was great to disengage with the overwhelming concerns and agenda of the wider world."

"To go snorkelling and kayaking."

"Snorkelling, crab races, and seeing the big crab. Sand. Shells. Tie dying a sarong."

"...I enjoyed our hike on Te Rua Manga (The Needle) the most. It was nice and cool in a forest and up on a top there were great views and we were accompanied by a local rooster which was nice and funny (literally a rooster joined us and went with us on the top of the mountain and back). :)"

"The underwater world."

"The ice machine worked well for ice for fishing. There were enough FADS working this time."

"Enjoyed the Sea scooter giant trevally tour and the 4x4 mud buggies tour."

"Loved the mud buggies and relaxing on beach, the lagoon cruise was awesome along with some of the bars."

"Loved the amazing cultural show - can't think of its name but it was magnificent with tour of the complex explaining how the islands came to be, and the dinner and show. Fabulous."

"Cultural night."

"We loved the cruise it was an amazing experience and very entertaining. We had 20 of us do it and would do it again."

"We loved snorkling the lagoon and the highlight of our trip was the lagoon cruise."

"The Vaka cruise was amazing also."

"The history - I forgot to mention we visited the museum."

"Plenty for the kids to do."

"Loved using e bikes."

Atmosphere

The Cook Islands is described as a very peaceful, quiet, relaxing, and laid-back destination by respondents and this atmosphere is an appealing factor for over a quarter of those surveyed (27%). People love the slower pace of local life and used the words of 'relaxing', 'casual', 'calm', 'chilled', 'tranquillity', and 'laid back' to describe the overall atmosphere of the Cook Islands. The notion of 'island time' and the 'laid back vibe' were also mentioned. Comments included:

"The simplicity of everything, being away from the hustle and bustle."

"It definitely has a pacific island holiday feel."

"Peace and quiet."

"Pace of life, relaxation."

"The casual carefree lifestyle."

"It was the most relaxing holiday I've ever had. Everything was laid back and casual."

"Slower pace of life, the opportunity to catch your breath."

"The lovely appeal and atmosphere for all ages of the island."

"Good to not be burdened by TV, a social media."

"The laid-back nature of the people on Aitutaki, low key and friendly, really lovely."

"Just being able to relax and enjoy time away from work."

"Rarotonga gives the best opportunity for one to get a true break away from home. You can relax to your hearts content."

"Chilling out."

"Warm and relaxing place to relax and catch up on reading and watching some DVDs."

"The relaxed environment, we were traveling with a large family group and the holiday was enjoyed by everyone."

"The peace and quiet, the slower pace of life, the opportunity to catch your breath."

“Relaxed atmosphere; no hustle and bustle.”

“The casual atmosphere on the island resulting is a stress-free holiday.”

“The ability to just slow down and holiday at a leisurely pace, aided by only being able to drive slowly around the island! You just breathe and take time out!”

“Tranquility, uncomplicated & simple lifestyle.”

“The relaxed vibe of the island made me want to stay longer.”

“The calm, unhurried pace of life.”

Food and beverage

Food and beverage was also identified as a most appealing feature of their visit by some visitors. Over one in ten of respondents (11%) mentioned this. Their comments focused on the food variety, quality, and range of fresh food available in the Cook Islands. ‘Amazing’, ‘excellent’, ‘fresh’, ‘high standard/quality’, ‘local’, and ‘delicious’ were some frequent terms to describe the attraction of food for tourists. Many visitors mentioned the local sea food and fruit. Comments included:

“The range of restaurants/cafes/bars was very good, quite diverse selections to choose from.”

“Local produce, local fish.”

“Finding the right place to purchase fresh, delicious donuts on a daily basis.”

“...on the beach with and the restaurants and bars.”

“Loved the sand between our toes while we ate our meals at the resort restaurant.”

“Selection of food at store for vegan family member.”

“The abundance of fruit.”

“The fresh seafood.”

“Fish tacos were the best.”

“All the fresh tropical fruit.”

“Discovering some of the fast food outlets around the island.”

“Delicious fruit and fish, and great coffee.”

“The range of food outlets available in Muri.”

“The quality and accessibility of good food probably tops the list as well as eco

conscious practices.”

“Finding the right place to purchase fresh, delicious donuts on a daily basis.”

“The night market and local eateries.”

“We had some very good recommendations from a local of some places to eat. We tried them all and was very happy. They were all awesome and ones we had not tried before.”

“The food, the markets, ...oh and the best cream buns in the world...”

Convenience & Safety

The convenience and safety of the Cook Islands as a holiday destination were mentioned by 7% of respondents. They referred to safety, currency, proximity, ease of travel around the island, speed-limit, English speaking, and hassle-free services. Some tourists emphasised safety particularly feeling safe at night and with kids. Comments included:

“Safe environment for my family.”

“It's so safe for our young kids who absolutely love swimming and snorkelling at the beach.”

“Amazing place for children.”

“I always felt safe and respected.”

“Smallness, apparent lack of homeless & beggars, felt safe.”

“I felt very safe even walking about at night.”

“It was very safe. I travelled with my 5-year-old daughter by myself (I'm the mom) and I wasn't judged or harassed or felt in danger, unlike other places I've been to. My husband could not join us so he will, next time!”

“NZ\$, safety - slow speed limits.”

“Limited time in the air. English speaking. NZ\$.”

“Accessibility of multiple beaches and safe swimming spots.”

“Very easy to get all around the island on a scooter enabling us to sample other resorts, beaches, and restaurants on a daily basis.”

“Opportunity to stay right on the beach, but also that a short walk would get us in to town. This meant that we didn't feel trapped in the resort, it was easy to get out and explore the island.”

“Great to wake up in a rural setting and yet be 10-minute walk to beautiful beach.”

“Ease of getting around.”

“No one is in a rush and the 50-kilometre speed limit.”

“No homeless.”

“Less Loose Dogs on Roads and Beach.”

“Ability to travel easily around the Island to other restaurants and shops.”

“Great restaurants with sea views, prices are better than Fiji as is the feeling of safety when you visit. Using New Zealand dollars is great.”

Accommodation

Six percent (6%) of respondents noted that the accommodation they stayed in was an appealing aspect of their visit to the Cook Islands, often referring to the location, environment, luxury, and in-house restaurant and cafes, and the friendly and supportive staff. Comments included:

“Wonderful accommodations.”

“Accommodations at very reasonable prices.”

“Our resort was beautiful! Exactly how it looked online, only better.”

“We loved staying at the bungalows and it was great that our kids could hang out with their mokopuna. We took all the kids to the mini putt and they really enjoyed that.”

“We loved the privacy of where we stayed and the beach we were on.”

“I loved the fact our resort didn't have a bunch of activities and/or music going on all the time.”

“The peace and quiet and the relaxed atmosphere of our accommodation it was exactly the holiday we were after.”

“We stayed at an Airbnb. Really appreciated the acts of hospitality.”

“The amazing resort.”

“the property was very efficient in their email correspondence and booking.”

“Location of our accommodation on Muri Beach.”

“A child free resort.”

“The friendly people at the villas.”

"Location and best room at the resort."

Not too commercialised

Four percent (4%) of the survey participants mentioned that the lack of commercial development found in the Cook Islands is one of the most appealing features for them. They welcomed the rustic, undeveloped, and secluded ambience of the Cook Islands. Comments included:

"I love that everything is locally owned, there are no big brand names"

"No large groups of pushy obnoxious tourists."

"Lack of a tourist feel."

"Hadn't been spoilt, very natural with just the right amount of tourist help."

"It is just as beautiful and accommodating as some bigger Polynesian islands, but it is much less crowded and much less busy."

"It's been 14 years since I last visited the Cook Island - I have to say that nothing has changed - and that is the beauty of the Cook Islands - it hasn't been overtaken by the tourist demands - it's still as beautiful as what it was 15 years ago. I loved it."

"The island isn't too commercial like Fiji."

"Rarotonga is the perfect size - big enough to do different things and small enough that it's not busy or crowded."

"On Aitutaki it was so quiet. It almost felt like we were the only tourists there."

"Not too touristy."

"I loved that there was no McDonalds, KFC or big corporate influence on Rarotonga."

"The lack of over-crowding is a plus! Must keep this island paradise a secret from the rest of the population please!!"

"Seclusion and the fact that it is a hidden gem meant that it wouldn't be bustling and overrun with tourists."

"The beauty of the place and how it is still mainly unaffected by modern life."

"Nothing has changed in the last 10 years pretty much which is reason we keep coming back."

Overall good experience

Four percent (4%) of visitors surveyed focused on their overall experience when discussing appealing factors. Comments such as ‘everything’, ‘wholeness’ and ‘it was all so amazing’ demonstrated their focus on their overall experiences. Comments included:

“Everything. It's our little slice of heaven and every moment spent there is special. I would never leave it if that was possible.”

“This was the best holiday I have ever had. Loved it all, the culture, people, experience. Would be back there now if I could.”

“The most recent trip was our third visit. We love the people, the culture, the restaurants, the Muri lagoon, snorkelling, kayaking and swimming. We made friends with locals, staff at resort and other people we see often on our visits. Other visits been to Aitutaki, church, progressive island dinners etc. We love our visits to the Cook Islands.”

“We had a wonderful time.”

“Everything was great. People friendly, Eating choices great. Lots to do if you wanted to or not.”

“We just love the whole island, it was our 3rd trip there and we have already booked a 4th.”

“We love everything about the Cook Islands, the people, the surroundings and this is our 4th year holidaying there and will hopefully be back again next year.”

“Everything about the Cook Islands. I want to live there! I found my mana there. I cried when I had to get back on that Air NZ flight. Three months later my heart still hurts as I want to go back. ... We were never bored. Wherever we went the locals were friendly, life is simpler, the golden oldies rugby tournament was a highlight, the bus service...Everything was just great... Thank you!”

“Loved everything about the Cook Islands, since then been to other Pacific Islands and they don't compare to the Cook Islands.”

Culture

The island's unique local culture was mentioned by three percent (3%) of the respondents as an appealing aspect of their Cook Islands visit. The art, sacraments, religion and other cultural aspects shape lives of the local indigenous community of the islands. The unique music and their culture is something that appeals:

“I really appreciated the pride they showed in their culture.”

"It was a dream to be on such a majestic island with such a beautiful humble culture"

"Experiencing the cultural music."

"Loved all the music."

"How the traditional funeral is in the Cook Islands."

"My Sunday visit to church will stay in my memory forever."

"The people and their willingness to share their culture and make me feel welcome."

"Has maintained island culture despite being reasonably well developed."

"It was good to be in Rarotonga and feel the pride of culture and place."

"The local history."

"The island maintains its roots and local customs."

"It was a dream to be on such a majestic island with such a beautiful humble culture."

Level of service

Three percent (3%) of visitors commented on the service they experienced while travelling in the Cook Islands. Respondents had positive comments about the local hospitality they experienced. Respondents appreciated the 'friendly', 'amazing' and 'hospitality' local staff. The quality of service at the accommodations, restaurants, and resort won high recognition from some visitors. Comments included:

"The accommodation was amazing, great service and very helpful and friendly"

"The staff at the resort were fantastic!! If we were to return, we would visit them again."

"How family friendly everywhere was we went - cafes to museums."

"...our reception with garlands to the kindness of the hotel staff at our very early morning departure."

"The friendliness and welcoming hospitality of the islanders! Amazing! Their dedication to all guests.... in ensuring all is made perfect! In this paradise!"

"Service was just...wow! Thank you for such an amazing trip!"

"Very informative and friendly staff."

Family and friends

Two percent of respondents (2%) commented on links being developed with family and friends in the Cook Islands. Comments included:

"We made friends with locals, staff at resort and owner of the boats in the fleet and other people we see often on our visits."

"Company of resident friends".

"Family, Friends."

"Seeing my family."

"Catching up with old friend."

Price of goods and services

One percent of respondents (1%) expressed the value for money and good price of goods and services within the Cook Islands. Comments included:

"Value for money at the Night Market"

"Kai was cheap and fresh."

"Value for money."

"Cheap to get to."

"Good value for money for quick trip with grand kids in the holidays."

Emotional connection

A few respondents (1%) gave a feedback regarding the emotional connection they feel with the destination. Comments included:

"Rarotanga brings my family closer together."

"Its home."

"Showing the kids where we got married and my Dads family come from."

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, poor weather, price of goods and services, stray animals and mosquitos, accommodation, rubbish and natural environment care through to disappointment with aspects of safety, local people, and law and legislation.

Table 4: Least appealing aspects of the Cook Islands (n=969)

Themes	Share of respondents (%)*
Public services, facilities and infrastructure	18%
Poor weather	13%
Price of goods and services	13%
Stray animals and mosquitos	13%
Accommodation	8%
Rubbish and natural environment care	7%
Food and beverage	6%
Attractions and activities	5%
Customer service	5%
Lack of information	4%
Flight related issues	4%
Too touristy	3%
Rental cars or scooters	3%
Safety	2%
Local people	2%
Law and legislation	2%

* 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

Nearly one in five of respondents (18%) considered the destination’s public services and facilities to be the least appealing aspects of their Cook Islands experience. Most comments focused on road conditions, limited public transport, poor internet connection, ATM availability, and toilets facilities. Comments included:

“The lack of safe areas to walk to places - footpaths.”

“...it’s just getting too run down and lack of maintenance and investment.”

“The roading itself needs a lot of improvement especially around the west side of the island. We stayed in Arorangi and ventured on that road every day. It was quite bumpy all the way from Avarua, to Arorangi and all the way to Muri. We got caught out in heavy rains a couple of times and it was evident then why the roads had so many potholes - the water from the rain has nowhere to drain away.”

"Narrow roads with pot holes and lack of street lights."

"My husband is in a wheelchair and not having footpaths in lots of places was difficult and the footpaths that were there were not always wheelchair friendly."

"The sewage infrastructure doesn't seem able to handle either heavy rainfall/heavy loads."

"Quality of the roads very dangerous."

"Unlit areas of road worrisome when cycling in the evening."

"Not enough car parks in town and the traffic in town."

"I feel to keep competitive with our Island destinations. The Rarotonga needs to keep their facilities up to scratch to the highest possible standard."

"Public transport is not reliable, especially on market days."

"The limited bus services."

"One bus broke down while we were on it."

"Probably how intermittent the mobile data was, the internet dropped out all the time so it made it occasional hard to use internet when not at the accommodation."

"Internet is terrible and expensive."

"ATM locations."

"The toilets in town should be open in the evening."

"Low standard of cleanliness of public toilets."

"Facilities for visiting public beaches -- washrooms/change rooms were unusable."

Poor weather

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

"It rained virtually our entire visit :(but that's nature I suppose."

"Weather... it rained for 3 days straight."

"We had really bad weather, rarely had nice weather and our day trip to Aitutaki was cancelled."

"The constant wind every time we went to the beach it was blowing. We couldn't really swim/snorkel. When we booked a lovely table on the beach for dinner, we couldn't take it because of the very strong wind blowing directly onto us."

"Unpredictable weather."

"It rained 90% of the time we were there with hectic winds."

"High humidity!"

"The heat, half the time."

"Unfortunately the weather was not great - this caused the lagoon to be a brown colour."

"We were disappointed in the weather as it stopped us doing some activities but understand that was nobody's fault."

"This is in no one control and we knew this when we booked the trip, but we went at the tail end of monsoon season and there were three days of rain."

Price of goods and service

Thirteen percent of the respondents stated that the least appealing part of their visit was the price of goods and services with comments regarding the cost of food, accommodation, internet, transportation. Key words that dominated the responses included 'costly', 'expensive', and 'overpriced'. Comments included:

"Cost of food, even in the local stores, difficulty of finding cheap places to eat."

"The price rises of everything, e.g. charging to go to the waterfall!"

"Market shopping was very expensive."

"High grocery & alcohol prices."

"The taxi trip a few hundred metres that cost \$20."

"Prices in supermarkets are so costly!"

"The difficulty and cost of getting a licence to rent a scooter."

"High cost of tickets between islands."

"The price of renting a house."

"It's way too expensive for a tourist sim. You can't even top up the sim card and if you run out, you have to buy a whole new sim card."

“Watermelon priced AT \$35.00 LACK OF local produce.”

“Expensive shuttle transport from airport.”

Stray animals and mosquitos

Stray animals, noisy roosters, chickens, mosquitoes/insects, and sea cucumbers were mentioned by thirteen percent of respondents. In particular, they complained that the dogs roaming on the streets, mosquitoes and that roosters made their trip unpleasant at times. Respondents used a variety of words to describe dogs including ‘annoying’, ‘noisy’ and ‘aggressive’. Comments included:

“All the stray dogs running around.”

“The local dogs roaming freely everywhere. Five dogs staring at you while you eat, trailing after you when you go for a walk on the shoreline.”

“Animal welfare issues.”

“Too many dogs on the beaches leaving messes on the sand. Chickens and roosters noisy in area we stayed. Not very restful.”

“Some of dogs were very aggressive... usually towards other dogs as we were walking on beach or past homes.... did make us feel a bit nervous.”

“The amount of smelly dogs hanging around places to eat. Also found them a little intimidating at times when they were in packs.”

“Didn't like the roosters waking us up so early, and so many of them.”

“Going to Wigmores Falls and not knowing about the mosquitos - EXTREME LACK OF SIGNAGE 'WARNING MOSQUITOS' before walking up.”

“Stinging jelly fish.”

Accommodation

Eight percent of visitors surveyed mentioned their accommodation while in the Cook Islands. Visitors rated the cost of accommodation as expensive for the value received, and some also pointed out that some accommodation need an upgrade of facilities and service. Comments included:

“Our accommodation at the rate we paid was very unsatisfactory.”

“Our room looked a bit outdated.”

“Quality and maintenance on villas had slipped from our prior 2 stays but cost had risen.”

"The resort has been left to go downhill and staff not as happy and welcoming as the rest of the island."

"Accommodation was overbooked and not communicated immediately. Arrived at 1am with sleepy kids to be told we were staying somewhere else."

"The experience with the management of our hotel accommodation."

"The maintenance on the property we rented was lacking - lovely property but pretty tired looking."

"Noisy bar across from our Villa."

"No free WiFi at hotel."

"We paid a lot for accommodation where the washing machine and air condition had to be fixed while we were there. They advertised a kids club but I'm not sure there was one, and if there was, we didn't see or hear of it during our stay."

"Our host supposed to arrange for transport on arrival - didn't happen, we were almost stranded also house brochure said someone would light clean every 3 days (we were there 8 nights) didn't happen."

Rubbish and natural environment care

Rubbish and natural environment care were mentioned by seven percent of respondents as the least appealing elements of their visit to the Cook Islands. Comments mostly focused on the degradation of coral reefs, the amount of rubbish and its burning, poor condition of the lagoons and beaches, especially Muri Lagoon, plastic waste, recycling, and threatened marine life. Comments included:

"Some of the coral reef was being treated poorly by tourists. We saw people standing on the coral and not being careful around it."

"I was sad about the lack of life within the corals."

"Rugged bottom of the lagoon at the resort."

"Since my holiday 3 years ago, we found the place very dirty and littered with rubbish. We all thought the coral was darker and less lively when we were snorkelling out the front of Edgewater."

"The clear indication that the quality of the environment has been eroding: Beaches, shallow water, loads of coral, murkiness of the water, silt."

"Lagoon becoming polluted and yet building carries on without controls."

"The deserted resort should be taken away and made into gardens?"

"The burning of rubbish by locals. A lot of glass and rubbish on a visit to the edge water resort. It's such an amazing island. I felt the burning and litter offensive in what should be a pristine paradise."

"Very untidy standards on the island slipping a lot of rubbish bins not being emptied often enough always full."

"The beach was littered with broken glass! Every day we would return with a large quantity of glass for the rubbish."

"Lack of sandy beaches, wasn't expecting it."

"The think that concerns me most is that the Island is managed properly from an environment front. I don't want to see the beautiful Island ruined with pollution and rubbish."

"Little fires people seemed to be burning everywhere, not a little tired of the smell of smoke."

"Like anywhere - pollution! Picked up many bags of plastics and rubbish on a walk around the island. This is serious so close to reef and ocean. I would like to see less commercial sun screens as the water is definitely affected. Perhaps Cook Islands could produce a product that is environmentally friendly and see at airport! Ban the dangerous ones! Would ban plastics! Use local materials and cotton bags! Worrying about what will happen to old cars - they are too a risk to environment just left to rot or buried."

"Lack of recycling, rubbish."

"The extensive weed that is taking over the Natural bush and Palm trees in both Islands. It is choking and hiding the natural beauty of the Islands. Give Land owners to have it removed, with working bee help."

Food and beverage

Six 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 food hygiene, the lack of local produce (especially fresh fruit, veggies and fish), the high prices, and limited food choices. Comments included:

"Service of many people, restaurants and sometimes arrogance and refusal to do a simpler drink than offered (basically if an ice coffee full of ice-cream costs 14 NZD and without it 13.5 NZD which was just made up by the bar owner, that is sad...it shows me disrespect as a customer and visitor and how he/she considers me just a sheep giving money away...I don't mind paying, but the attitude. And the product is not tasty at all in the end...we had couple of issues of such with meals, too, but that did not damage our great feeling given by Rarotonga environment."

"Difficult to cater for our two coeliac children which is why we didn't eat out in restaurants."

"I also found the fruit selection to be very disappointing as there only seemed to be soft watermelon and tinned two fruits at all breakfast and buffets we went to. Perhaps we have been spoiled in Australia and my expectations were too high."

"The food is still quite bad."

"Very 'pub' style food."

"Maybe the lack of fresh simple foods... there seemed to be a lot of fried foods."

"The odd eatery was a bit overpriced for the quality of food."

"Groceries where very expensive and there was not much choice in what you could buy."

"It would be great to see more traditional Cook Island food retailers at the Muri night markets and other places."

"Most food retailers are carb heavy burgers and pizza, constantly felt bloated."

"Lack of restaurant choices."

"Food The quality of the cocktails - most were just plain alcohol rather than beautiful flavours. Choices are limiting."

"Food at expensive resorts was really underwhelming. Not many places had vegetarian options."

Attractions and activities

Five percent of respondents mentioned attractions and activities as the least appealing aspect of their Cook Islands visit. Their concerns related to the limited attractions and activities available, in particular the lack of cultural experiences and limited quality of snorkelling, swimming and fishing. Some comments focused on the poor selection of shops and the fact that markets and stores close very early. Comments included:

"Limited evening/night places to go."

"It would have been great to have a few more activities for younger children. Very little available."

"We went on a fishing charter trip and the experience was not good at all. Nobody on the boat talked to us, and some of them were not very friendly. We ended up sick that night which I think was from the sandwiches on the boat. But not 100% sure on that. This however did not ruin our trip at all, the overall experience of the ocean was great!"

"Sometimes attractions were not open even when the internet or brochures said they would. We found this a bit frustrating when planning our days."

"The waterfall visit, it was quite disappointing."

"I wanted a Rarotongan feast like we do in NZ e.g. Hangi."

"Wish we would have had more than one opportunity to visit Pananga Nui market."

"Visiting tourist places that should have been open but were shut for various reasons."

"Muri markets were a huge disappointment. All sold out by 6.30 pm!"

"Party bus... took us to a spot where some of the locals caused a stir. Felt uncomfortable."

Customer service

Five 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 'slow service', 'long waits', 'rude', 'poor attitude' to describe the services. Comments included:

"Customer service is slow."

"People at resort rather rude, especially the women."

"Operating in the 1980 with 2019 prices."

"Staff seemed tired and a bit 'over it'. It was really busy around Easter and there were times where I felt staff were reluctant to engage or go the extra mile. Totally understandable though. We had to come back several times as we were on standby and it was almost as if staff didn't even notice or didn't care."

"Used public bus and found drivers made fun of tourists behind their backs. Some businesses would not even wait on us."

"The standout was the lack of hospitality and service at restaurants."

"I find the service is not that friendly."

"Custom staff at the airport on arrival were unfriendly and rude."

Lack of information

A lack of available information was mentioned by four percent of visitors surveyed. Areas where information was lacking included signages, events, information update, and directional information. Comments included:

"Signage posts."

"Information on walks contradicted each other. The woman at tourist information centre was clueless on track distances (i.e. to pinnacles) very frustrating."

"It's difficult to know whether restaurants will be open or make bookings."

"The lack of information on things to do - This is possibly due to it been Easter and reduced staff."

"Sometimes attractions were not open even when the internet or brochures said they would. We found this a bit frustrating when planning our days."

"More local information on bus schedules available at the airport would be helpful."

"Took too long to figure out where to rent an airport locker."

"No signs warning about the amount of mosquitos at the water falls."

Flight related issues

Four percent of respondents mentioned flight related issues as the least appealing aspect of their visit to the Cook Islands. Visitors mentioned poor frequency, arrival and departure times, delays or cancellations, and airport facilities. Comments included:

"Flight delays for family especially Jetstar."

"The least appealing was the return flight from Rarotonga to Auckland, which landed at 1.30am. We camped at terminal until plane departed Auckland for Brisbane at 6.45am. We lay on airport hard bench seats, it was very cold, no pillow, no blanket = no sleep."

"The delays at the airport and lost luggage."

"Not having a direct flight from Melbourne but also understand why."

"airline travel - we missed one night's accommodation and had to book with another airline to get there when they cancelled our flight."

"Direct flights from the US are only once per week, so the flight schedule dictated how long we could stay. I ultimately wanted to stay longer, but the flights wouldn't work out."

"The airport arrival lounge and queues."

Too touristy

Three percent of respondents mentioned the Cook Islands as being 'too touristy', commercialised, and busy with traffic and overdeveloped. Visitors also mentioned some negative behaviours on the part of other visitors. Comments included:

“Over crowded no local food, all imported, very expensive previously visited the Cook Islands 10 times in the 1980s and 1990s and it was fabulous but now overcrowded so many cars, the whole place is very run down even the hotels were appalling and looked grubby, while place needs a revamp.”

“Rarotonga, when a cruise ship is in. Too busy for us.”

“Rarotonga is over-developed: one resort beside the next and (impossible!) in between historic Village cemeteries. Conservation of local artefacts such as maraes is low.”

“Rarotonga felt more like a Tourist machine.”

“Beach cramped and water dirty.”

“Some rude foreign guests I encountered.”

Rental cars or scooters

Three 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 unreliable service. Comments included:

“Car rental standards of vehicle. Not road worthy.”

“The car hire surcharge after surcharge. The price quoted should be the price. No fine print- be upfront and honest at the start!”

“The rental car office was unmanned when we left, so we weren't sure what to do.”

“The cost of hiring a scooter, which was a totally dangerous and unsafe.”

“Quality of rental car for the price was really bad and it broke down too.”

“Hired a car that continually leaked in rain sitting on wet car seats, rental company were not interested and wouldn't change car or compensate us. Very disappointed.”

Safety

A very small percentage of visitors surveyed (2%) mentioned safety in the Cook Islands as a least appealing factor. In particular, this group referred to thefts, poor safety while on the road and problems relating to illnesses. Comments included:

“We had clothes stolen off our line, this was tough because our luggage was lost in NZ before we got to Rarotonga. “

“Broken glass on beaches.”

“The amount of unleashed dogs making strolling down some streets/public ways

dangerous or at the very least uncomfortable.”

“Local people speeding, the condition of the roads very dangerous and theft of tourists.”

“Locals driving bikes without helmets.”

“The dogs, (local ones) they were everywhere, and I got bitten by one on the beach, several times that I had to go to Hospital and get a tetanus shot and antibiotics. I don't blame the dog as I was flying a drone taking promotion pics and was not informed how they may act until after.”

Local people

A small group (2%) 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 find the service is not that friendly - it appears locals are resentful of visitors unless you know someone from there - we went with locals and it was a different experience from our first visit which was disappointing as I felt the service was average and at times just plain rude.”

“Grumpy locals.”

“On a serious note I thought at times the service culture was pretty average compared to previous visits, locals didn't seem quite as enthusiastic in interactions with them and at times were off hand in their responses.”

“Some locals were extremely rude, especially at the resort.”

“The people were less than friendly unless from another country. I.e. New Zealand. That was the most disappointing.”

Law and Legislation

A few visitors (2%) surveyed simply stated that their whole experience was disappointing due largely to societal factors not controlled by laws and regulations. Comments included:

“No helmets when driving a scooter.”

“Tourists smoking anywhere and everywhere. Very unappealing.”

“Can't buy alcohol on Sunday.”

“Locals on low wages within the hotel sector.”

Suggestions for improvements

When asked if there was anything that could have improved their visit to the Cook Islands 42% of visitors made a comment. Of those that made suggestions many focused on public services and infrastructure (27%). Others emphasized: the weather (12%); the accommodation (12%), the availability, quality, and price of food and drinks (10%); the need for more entertainment, activities, transport (9%); improvements to the environment, safety and animal care (9%); making it easier to stay longer and visit more places (8%); the need for better information (8%); attitudes of locals and service levels (7%); flights (6%); better value for money (4%); others (2%); and law and legislation (1%). In addition, another three percent of respondents surveyed stated that things should be 'kept the way they are'. Comments on these themes included:

"I think the bus transport could be more regular and more on time!"

"Have free hotspots for WiFi. It soured the whole experience that the cost was ridiculous."

"Perhaps some information on the costs of ambulance and medical assistance and any other hidden costs."

"Possibly more road signage guiding entry points to attractions/beach access."

"The accommodation at the Rarontonga was a bit outdated and could have been nicer."

"The service and knowledge of attractions at the front desk of our accommodation could have been a lot better."

"More variety of food options independent from those connected with our accommodation."

"Easier access to the other islands. Aitutaki tours were fully booked."

"More activities for bad weather days."

"I guess maybe some animal control that would keep the amount of dogs in tolerable numbers."

"Some options to be more environmentally friendly toward the Cook Islands – e.g. information on how not to use single use water bottles."

"More welcoming shop keepers and friendly service would help make visiting happier and pleasant."

"Make travelling to outer islands more attractive cost and ease wise."

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 2017/18 annual average (93%) and the identical quarter in 2018 (92%). Of the eleven 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 of “had been there and seen it all”. 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 proposed that the lack of the infrastructure and service. Other factors given for not wishing to return included a lack of activities, distance, and weather. Comments included:

“Have seen it now, would prefer to go somewhere else for variety.”

“Will explore other islands.”

“I've visited multiple times till now, I think it's time I try somewhere new next sorry.”

“Too far from home (and expensive to arrive there) and like to experience more different area around the world.”

“Other places cost less and are beautiful, beaches very uncared for would prefer other Pacific islands or Bali or Thailand islands.”

“Quality of accommodation is now poor though lack of maintenance and investment, the approach has just got so casual that it's not good value for money.”

“Not enough to do and expensive.”

Nearly half (44%) of the visitors saying they would return stated that they would definitely include the outer islands in their next visit. A further 51% of visitors indicated they will ‘maybe’ visit outer islands next time. Of those who said they would or maybe visit outer islands next time, most (94%) mentioned they would like to include ‘Aitutaki’. ‘Atiu’ was the second most mentioned island at 30%; another 21% of visitors stated that they would like to visit Mangaia, 18% of the respondents would like to visit Mauke. A small number of visitors mentioned Manihiki, Palmerston, Penrhyn, Pukapuka. A few mentioned the high cost of visiting outer islands as a barrier to a return visit to the country.

Nearly all visitors surveyed (96%) said that they would recommend the destination to their family and friends which is consistent with previous survey periods. Only 4% of visitors would not recommend the Cook Islands to others and this is largely based on the high prices, a lack of information, low level of infrastructure and poor accommodation quality, low level of service, and a lack of environmental care.

Final observations

This report shows that the Cook Islands tourism industry generally performed well during the survey period of April to June 2019. Visitor satisfaction levels and the desire to recommend have remained very high, and it is clear that the destination is making a generally positive impression on visitors. There has been a slight increase in the level of visitor satisfaction with public services in the Cook Islands, and also in the quality and cost of accommodation and the level of information available.

Visitor expenditure remains relatively stable when compared to the same period last year and it will be important to see if this trend is sustained for the coming reporting period. While spend from some long haul markets declined we saw increases for the key New Zealand and Australia markets.

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 rubbish and natural environment care in the Cook Islands. There are also some concerns about lagoon degradation, poor weather, and price of goods and services.

Overall visitor satisfaction and willingness to return are high and the majority of respondents expressed an interest in visiting one of the outer islands next time. The willingness to return figure has fallen slightly from 2018 and this will be something to flag and monitor carefully in future reporting.

It is vital now 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 shows 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.