



# **The Cook Islands International Visitor Survey Report**

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**July – September 2019**

**Prepared for Cook Islands Tourism Corporation**

**by**

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Auckland University of Technology**

[www.nztri.org](http://www.nztri.org)

**December 2019**

## **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, Sam Li, Thao Trinh, and Dhaifan Akbar.

## Executive Summary

This report focuses on the characteristics, expectations and expenditure patterns of tourists who visited the Cook Islands between 1 July and 31 September 2019. The data presented is collected from an online departure survey (<http://www.mycookislandsvisit.com>). There are 915 individual respondents to the survey - representing a total of 1,819 adults and 425 children in the expenditure analysis (this equates to 7% of all visitors during the period – based on the same period of 2018 visitor arrival data from the Cook Islands Statistics Office).

Nearly two thirds (64%) of visitors surveyed come from New Zealand, 23% of respondents come from Australia. Visitors are well educated (74% of visitors have some form of tertiary education) with a relatively high annual household income (50% earn over NZ\$100,000 per year). Over one third of visitors (34%) travel with one companion. Solo travellers are less common (13%).

Over three in five (61%) of those surveyed are first time visitors to the Cook Islands, a further 23% have visited two or three times before. The main purpose of visit is holiday-making (82%). The average length of stay in the Cook Islands is 8.3 nights. The majority of visitors (96%) stay either one or two weeks. Over one in five visitors surveyed visited Aitutaki (21%).

Visitor spend prior to arrival in the Cook Islands (\$1,903 per person) has increased from the same quarter of 2018/19 (\$1,885) but is lower than the 2018/19 annual average (\$2,047 per person). Spend on the island (per person per day) is \$148. This spend is lower than both the 2018/19 annual average of \$162 and the same quarter for the previous year (\$165 for July to September 2018/19).

The average local spend per visitor during the entirety of their stay is \$1,228. When pre-paid spend and local spend are combined, it is estimated that each visitor brings \$1,989 to the Cook Islands economy (or approximately \$240 per day). This figure is lower than both the annual average for 2018/19 (\$2,189) and the July to September 2018/19 period (\$2,124).

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: 93% 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 has run since mid-2012 and is continuing through 2020.

This report presents the results from July to September 2019. Over this three-month period, 6,356 visitors were contacted by email to take part in the survey, and 915 responses were received: a conversion rate of 14%. The conversion rate for this period is lower than both the 2018/19 annual average (16%) and the July to September 2018/2019 quarter (19%). The 915 responses cover a total of 1,819 adults and 425 children when we examine visitor expenditure.

The data presented includes detailed information on:

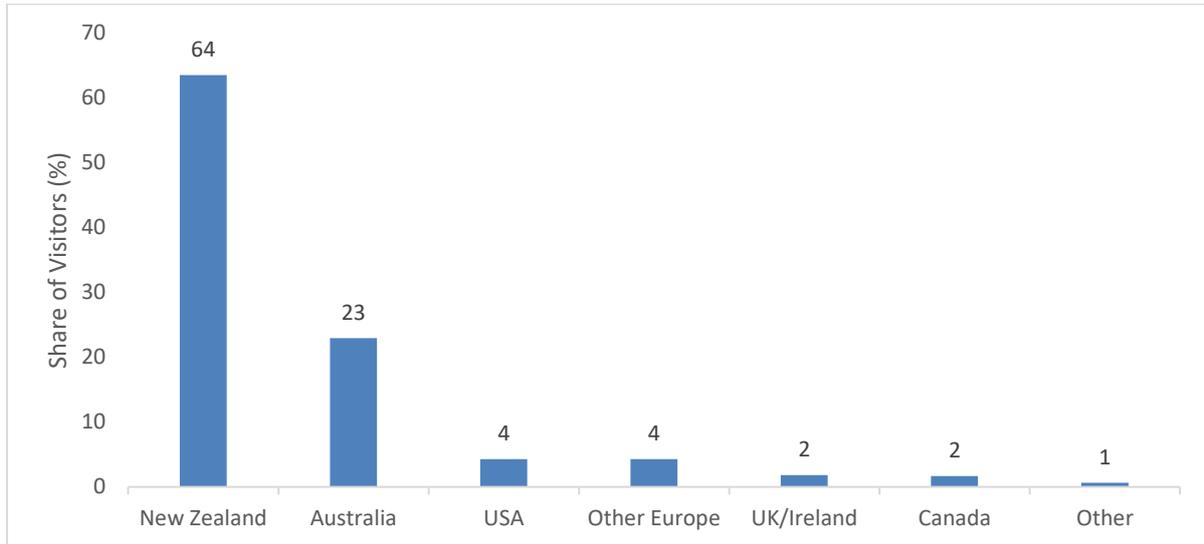
- The characteristics of visitors to the Cook Islands (age, gender, education, country of origin, income, purpose of visit, travelling companions, number of previous visits, length of stay, airline used, islands visited)
- Visitor information obtained about the Cook Islands, the factors influencing in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

## Visitor Characteristics

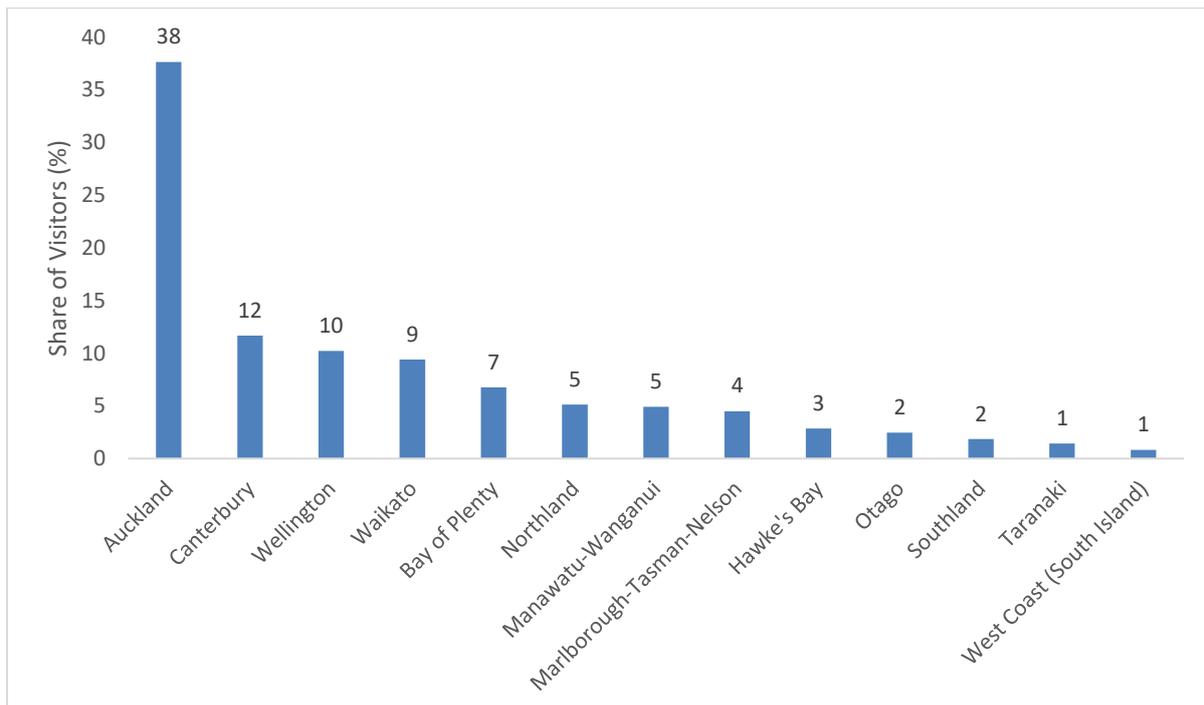
Nearly two thirds (64%) of the visitors surveyed come from New Zealand (Figure 1). The second largest visitor group is from Australia (23%). USA, Europe, and Canada represent the other main source markets.

**Figure 1: Country of origin (n = 771)**

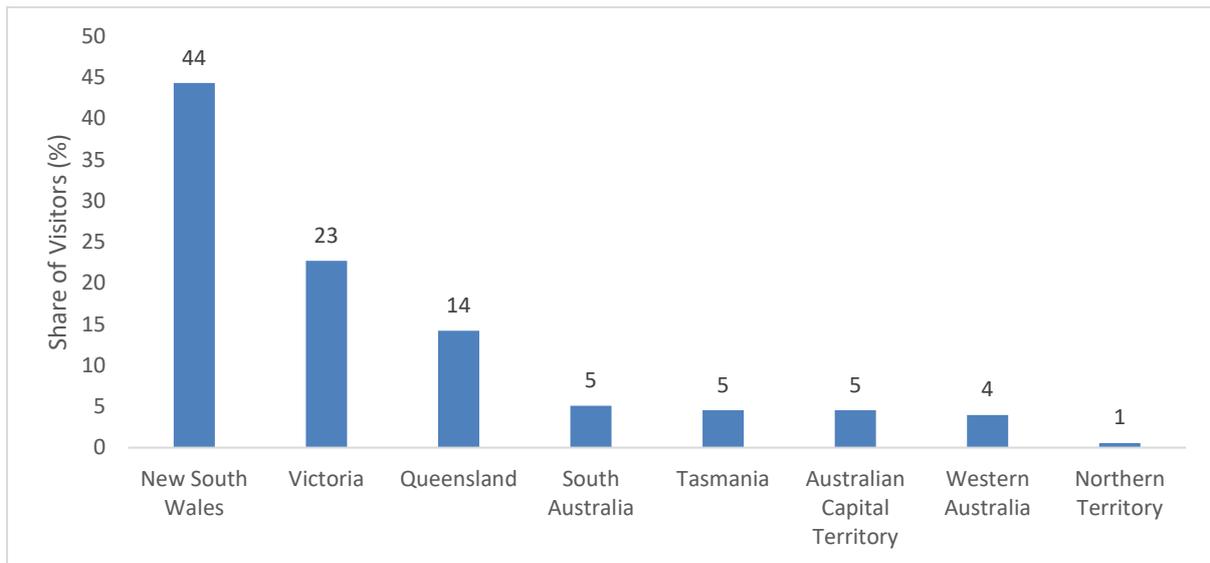


Auckland, Canterbury, Wellington, Waikato, and Bay of Plenty account for 76% of New Zealand visitors (Figure 2). For visitors from Australia, the regions of New South Wales, Victoria, and Queensland generate the highest numbers of arrivals (81%) (Figure 3).

**Figure 2: New Zealand visitors (n = 489)**

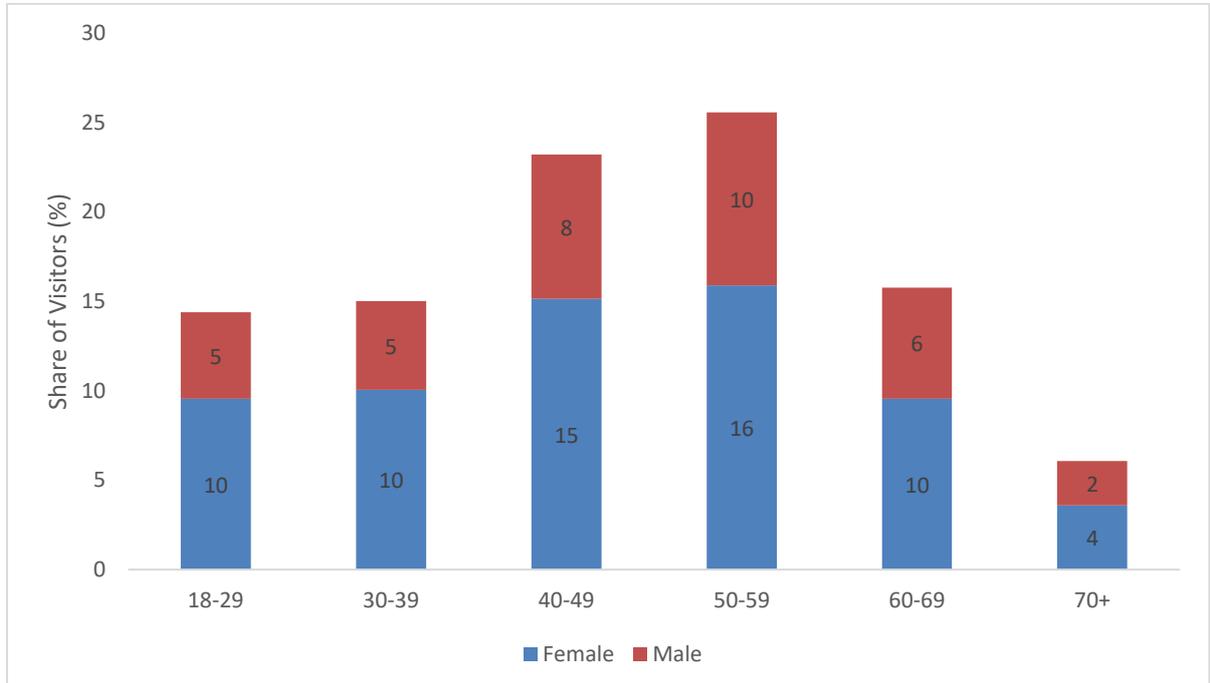


**Figure 3: Australia visitors (n = 176)**



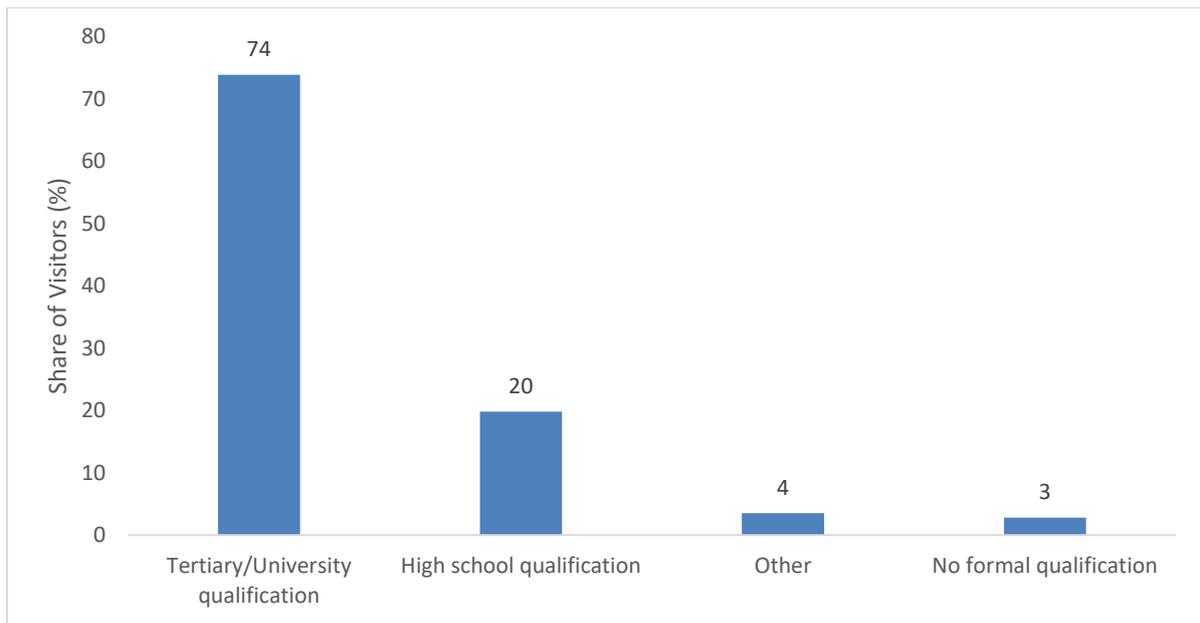
More women (64%) than men (36%) completed the survey (Figure 4). The most significant age categories are the 50 to 59 year (26%) grouping, the 40 to 49 year (23%) grouping, followed by those aged 60 to 69 (16%), 30 to 39 (15%), and 18 to 29 (15%). There are relatively few travellers in the 70 plus age bracket (6%).

**Figure 4: Distribution of age and gender (n = 806)**



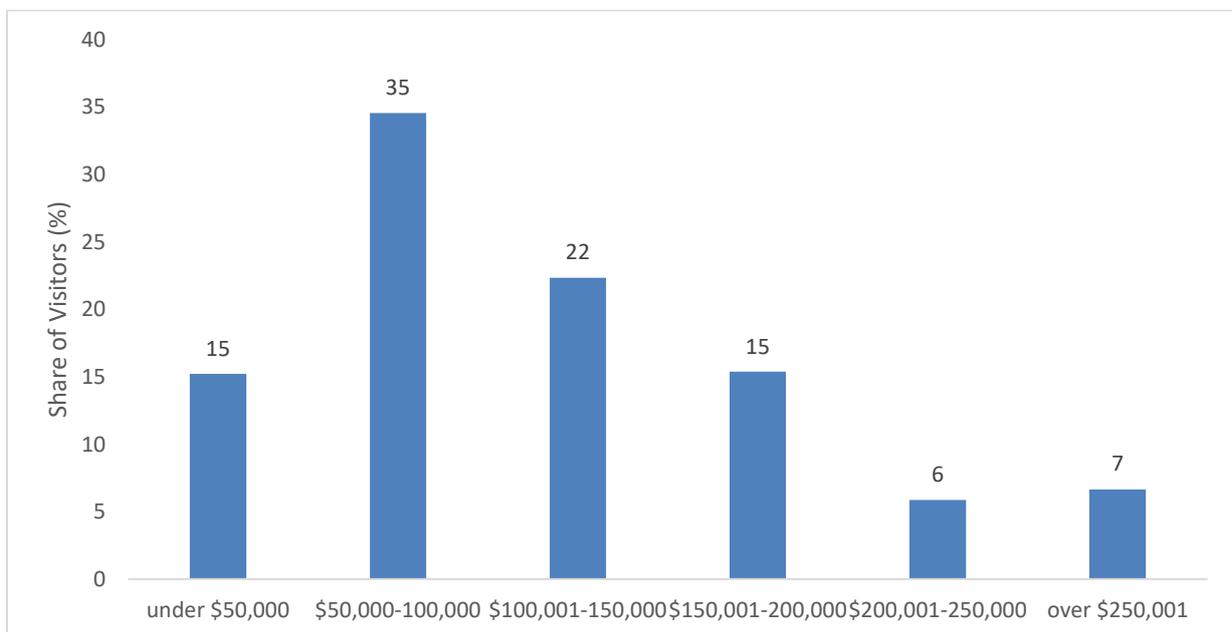
Visitors are well educated with nearly three quarters (74%) of those surveyed having some form of tertiary qualification, and a further 20% having completed a high school education (Figure 5).

**Figure 5: Highest qualification (n = 809)**



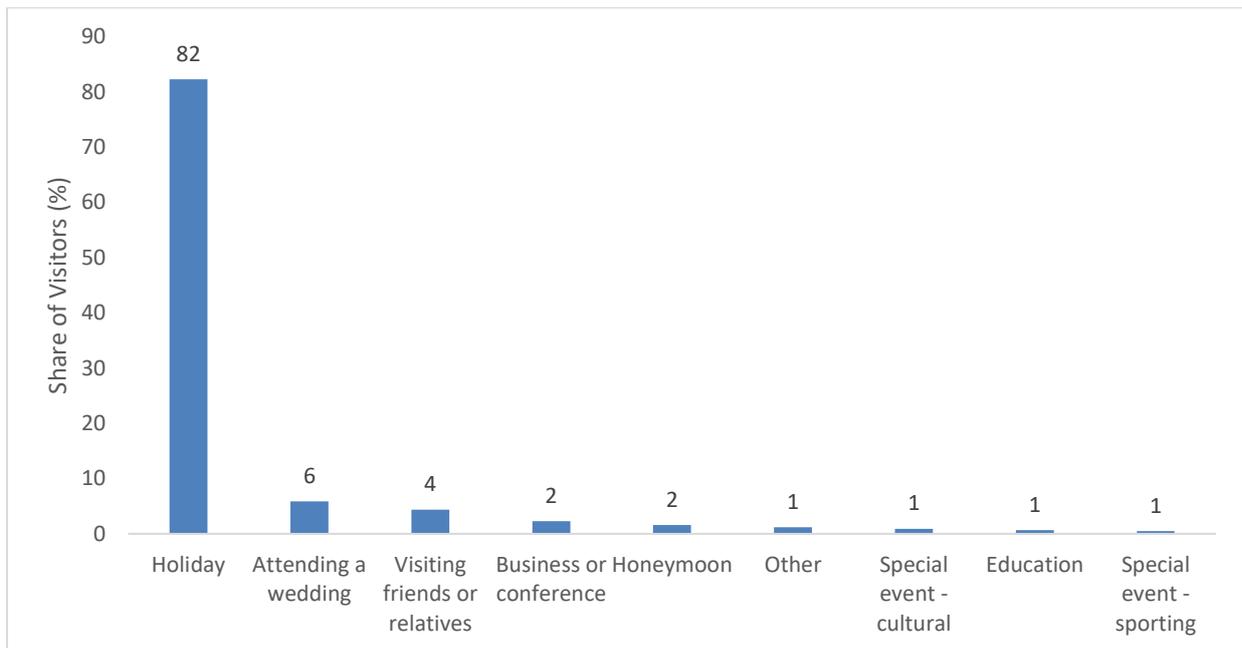
Over a third of visitors (35%) have an annual household income of between NZ\$50,001 and NZ\$100,000. Over one fifth (22%) of those surveyed earn between NZ\$100,001 and NZ\$150,000. A further 28% of respondents have a household income of over NZ\$150,000 per year (Figure 6).

**Figure 6: Annual household income in NZD (n = 631)**



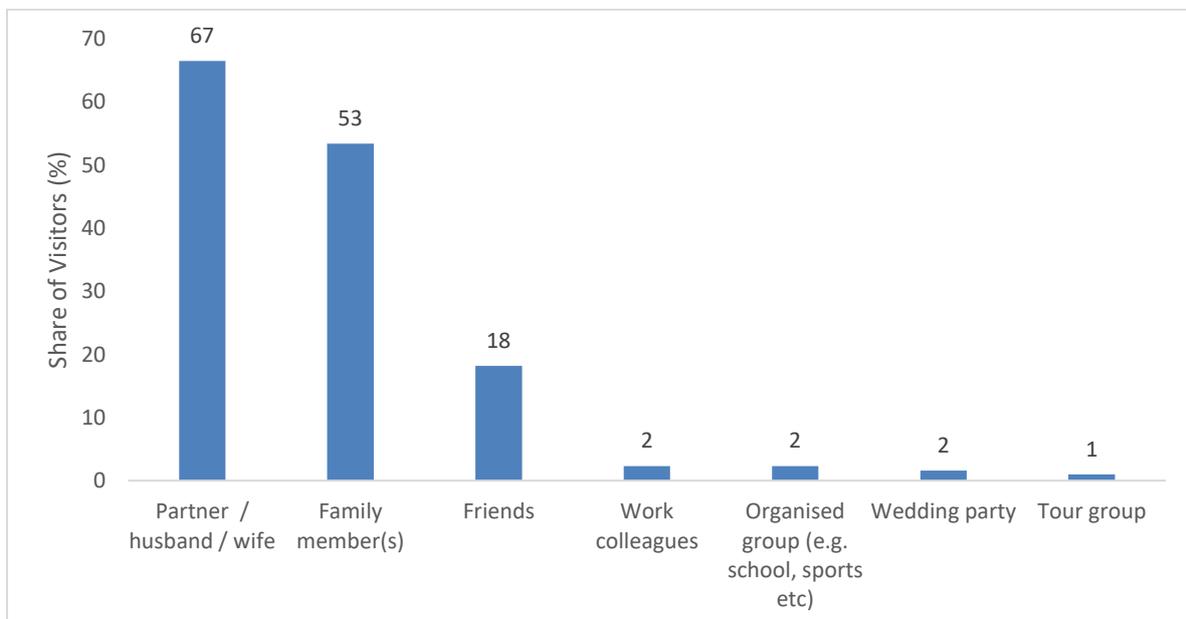
Over four in five (82%) respondents come to the Cook Islands for a holiday. Other reasons given include attending a wedding (6%), visiting friends or relatives (4%), business and conference (2%), a honeymoon (2%), other (1%), special cultural event (1%), education (1%), and special sporting event (1%).

**Figure 7: Main purpose of visit (n = 915)**



The majority (87%) of visitors travel with one or more companions. Among this group, most (67%) travel to the Cook Islands with a partner or spouse. Visitors also travel with other family members (53%), or with friends (18%). Those travelling with work colleagues, in an organised group, as part of a wedding party, or in a tour group, represent smaller shares of the sample (Figure 8).

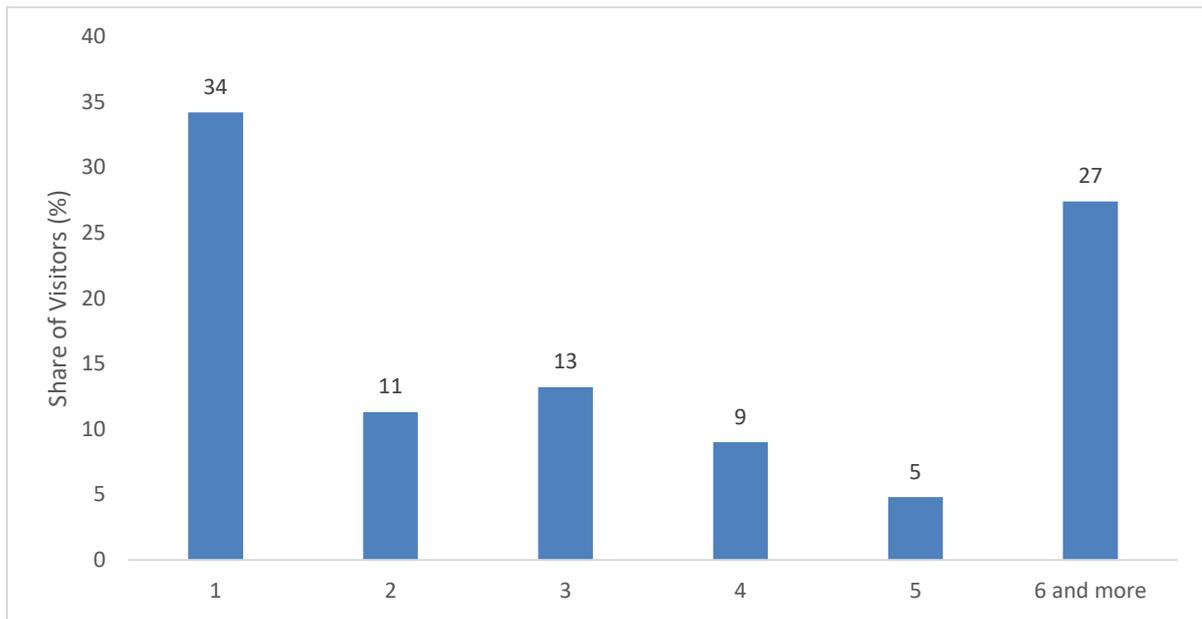
**Figure 8: Travelling with whom? (n = 798)**



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

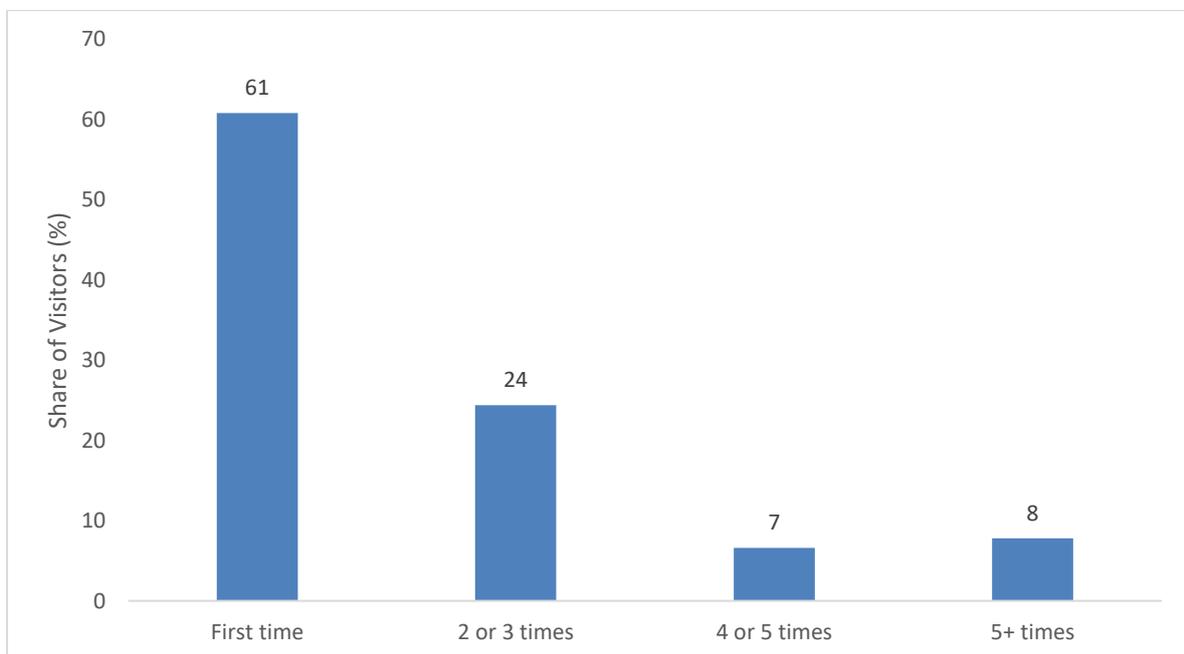
If we exclude those travelling alone over a third of visitors (34%) travelled with one companion on their visit to the Cook Islands (Figure 9), and over a quarter of visitors (27%) travelled with more than six people.

**Figure 9: Number of companions on trip (excludes those travelling alone) (n = 726)**



Nearly two thirds of visitors (61%) are on their first visit to the Cook Islands. A further 24% have been to the Cook Islands two or three times before. A smaller group (15%) have visited four or more times (Figure 10).

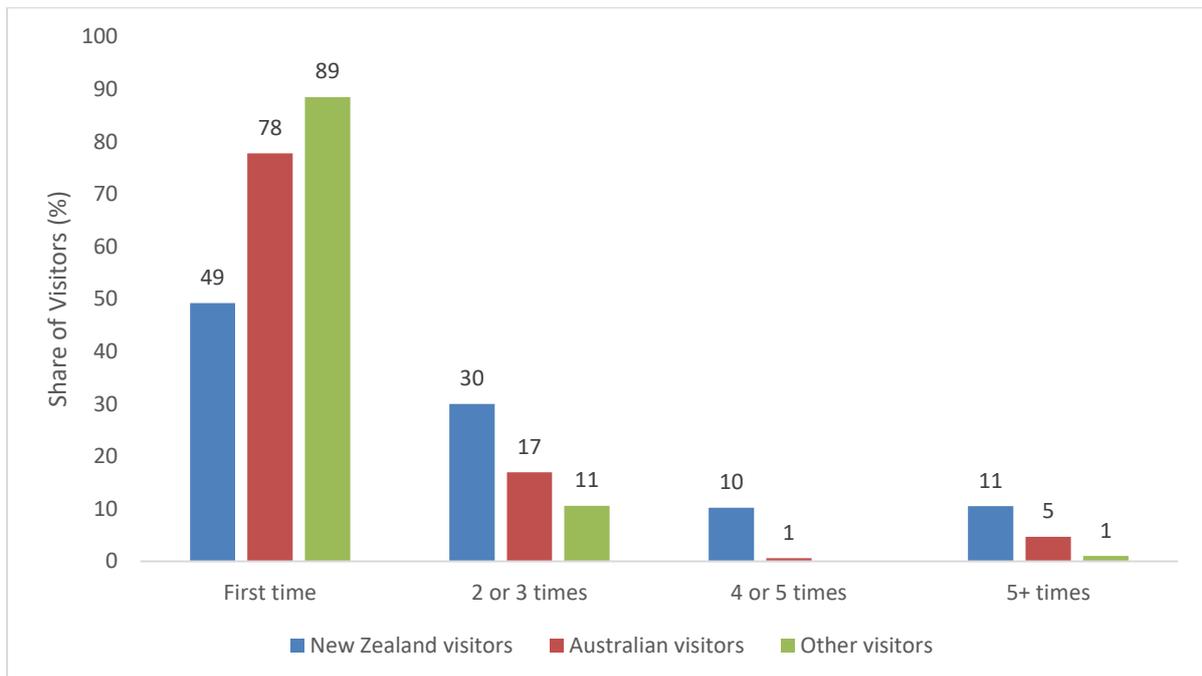
**Figure 10: Number of visits to the Cook Islands (n = 807)**



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

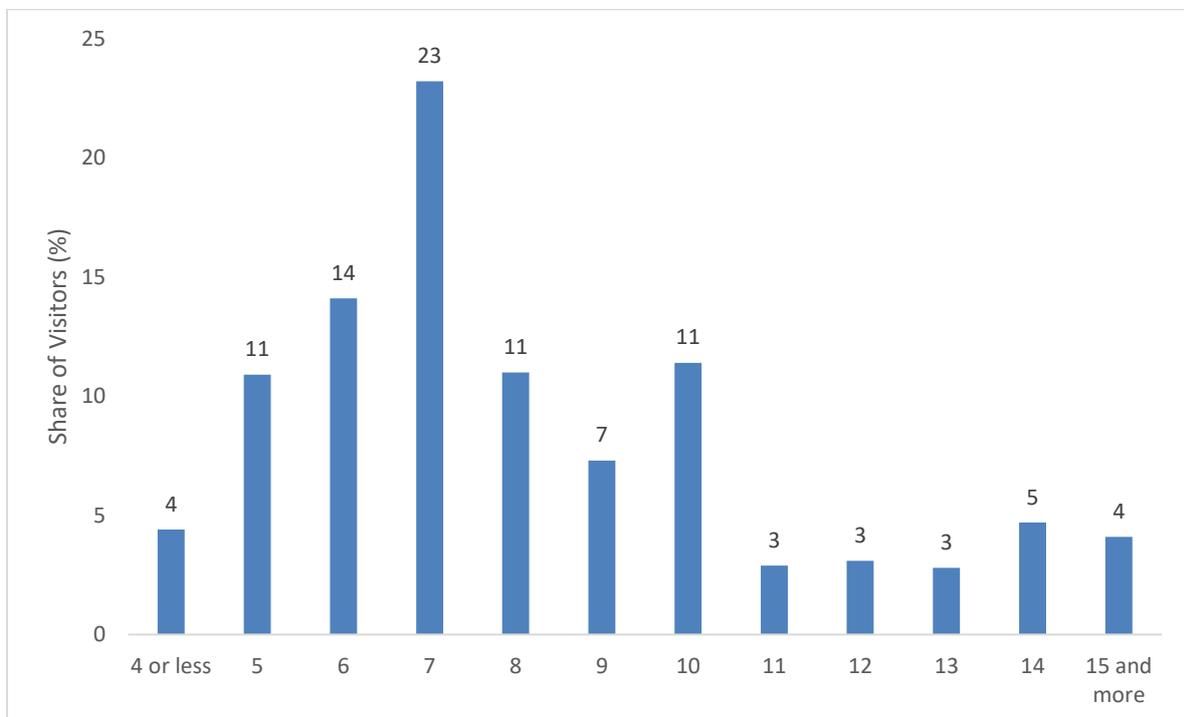
New Zealanders are more likely to be repeat visitors than those from other source markets (Figure 11). Over half of the surveyed visitors from New Zealand (51%) have visited the Cook Islands before compared to only 22% of visitors from Australia and 11% from other countries.

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



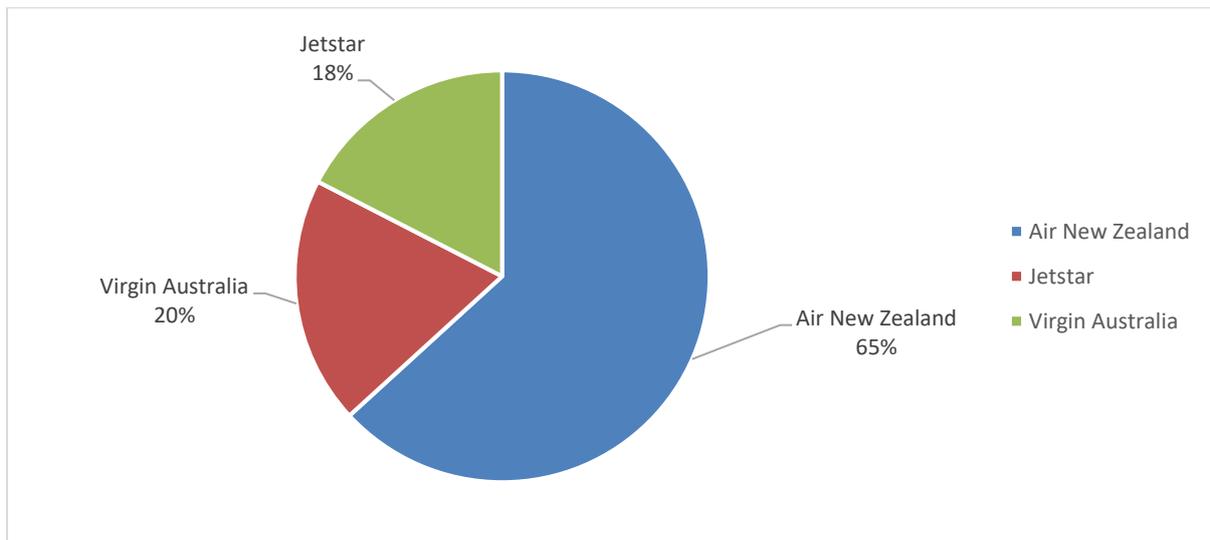
The average length of stay in the Cook Islands is 8.3 nights with 82% of visitors spending 10 or fewer nights in the country (Figure 12).

**Figure 12: Length of stay in nights (n = 900)**



Nearly two thirds of visitors (65%) travel to/from the Cook Islands with Air New Zealand, a further 20% of visitors fly with Virgin Australia, followed by 18% of visitors travelling with Jetstar (Figure 13).

**Figure 13: Mode of transport (n = 913)**

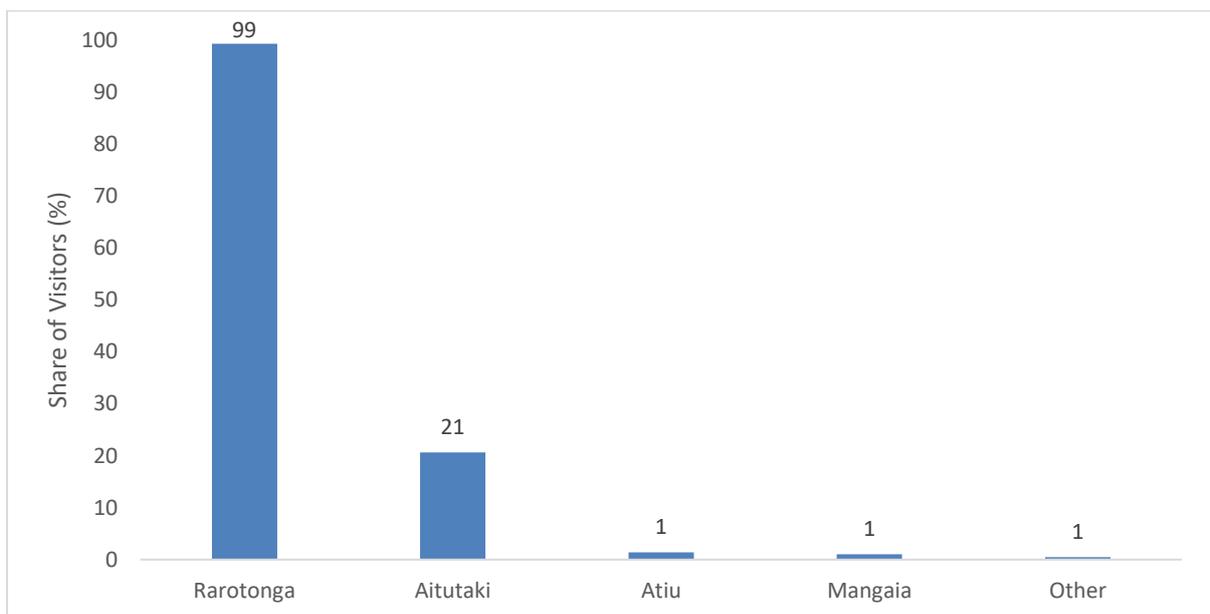


Note: Multiple responses, therefore total does not add up to 100%

For 88% of visitors, the Cook Islands is the sole destination for their trip. For 12% 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 (78%), followed by travel to Australia (27%), Asian countries (10%), other Pacific countries (12%), United States of America (5%), and Europe (2%).

The vast majority (99%) of visitors to the Cook Islands spend time on Rarotonga, with Aitutaki being the second most visited island (21%). Far fewer visitors spend time on Atiu (1%), Mangaia (1%), and other islands (1%) (Figure 14).

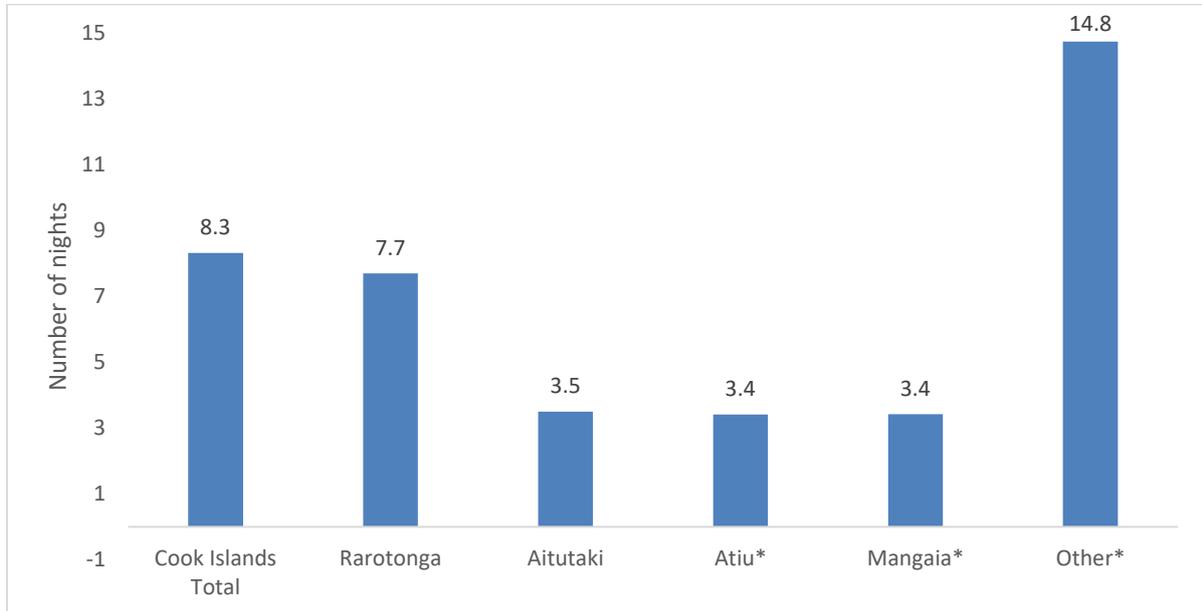
**Figure 14: Visited Islands (n = 912)**



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 7.7 nights (Figure 15). For the visitors that went to Aitutaki, the average number of nights spent on the island itself is 3.5. 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 = 4-897)**

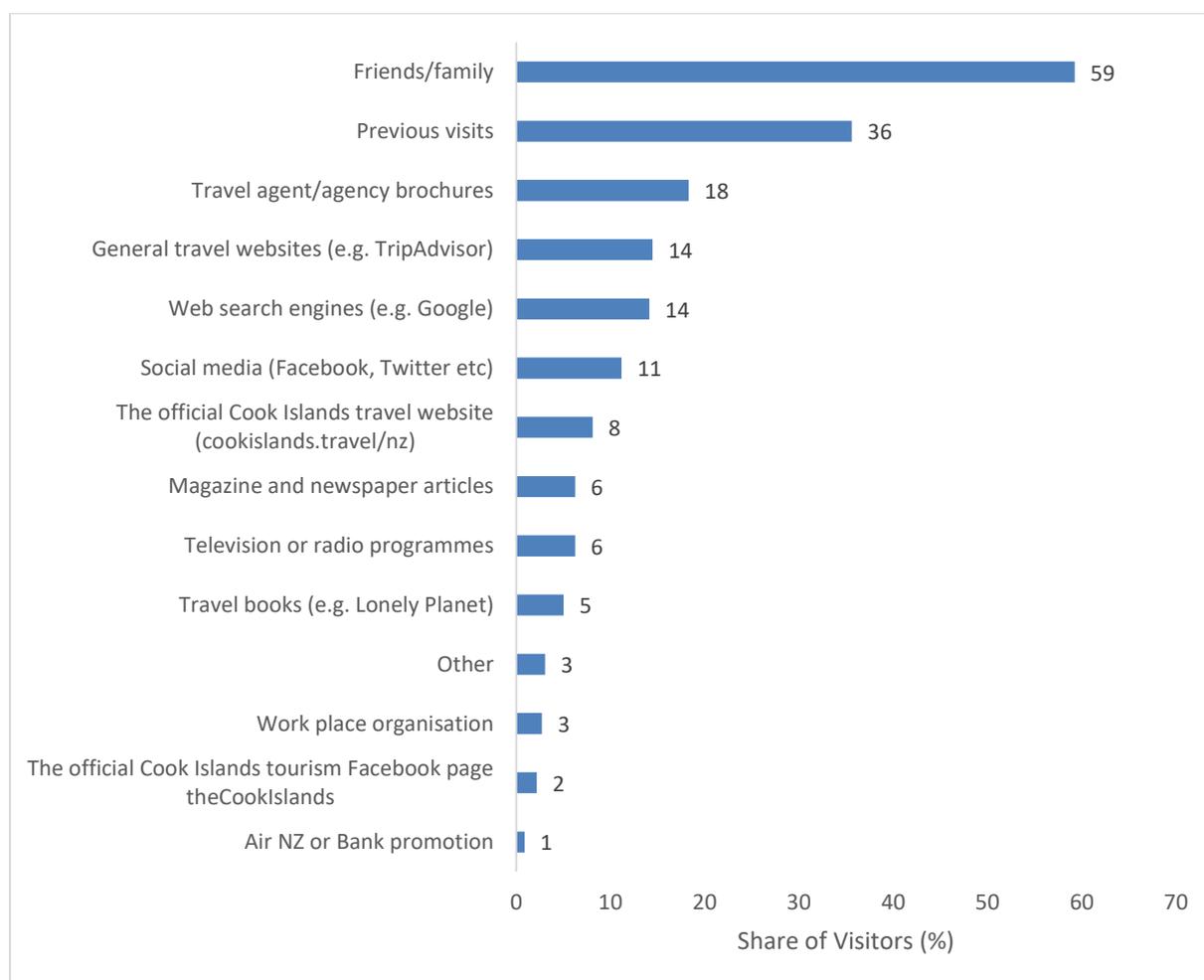


Note: \*n≤12

## 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 (59%) 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 (18%), general travel websites (e.g. TripAdvisor) (14%), web search engines (e.g. Google) (14%), social media (Facebook, Twitter etc) (11%), and the official Cook Islands travel website (8%) played less significant roles.

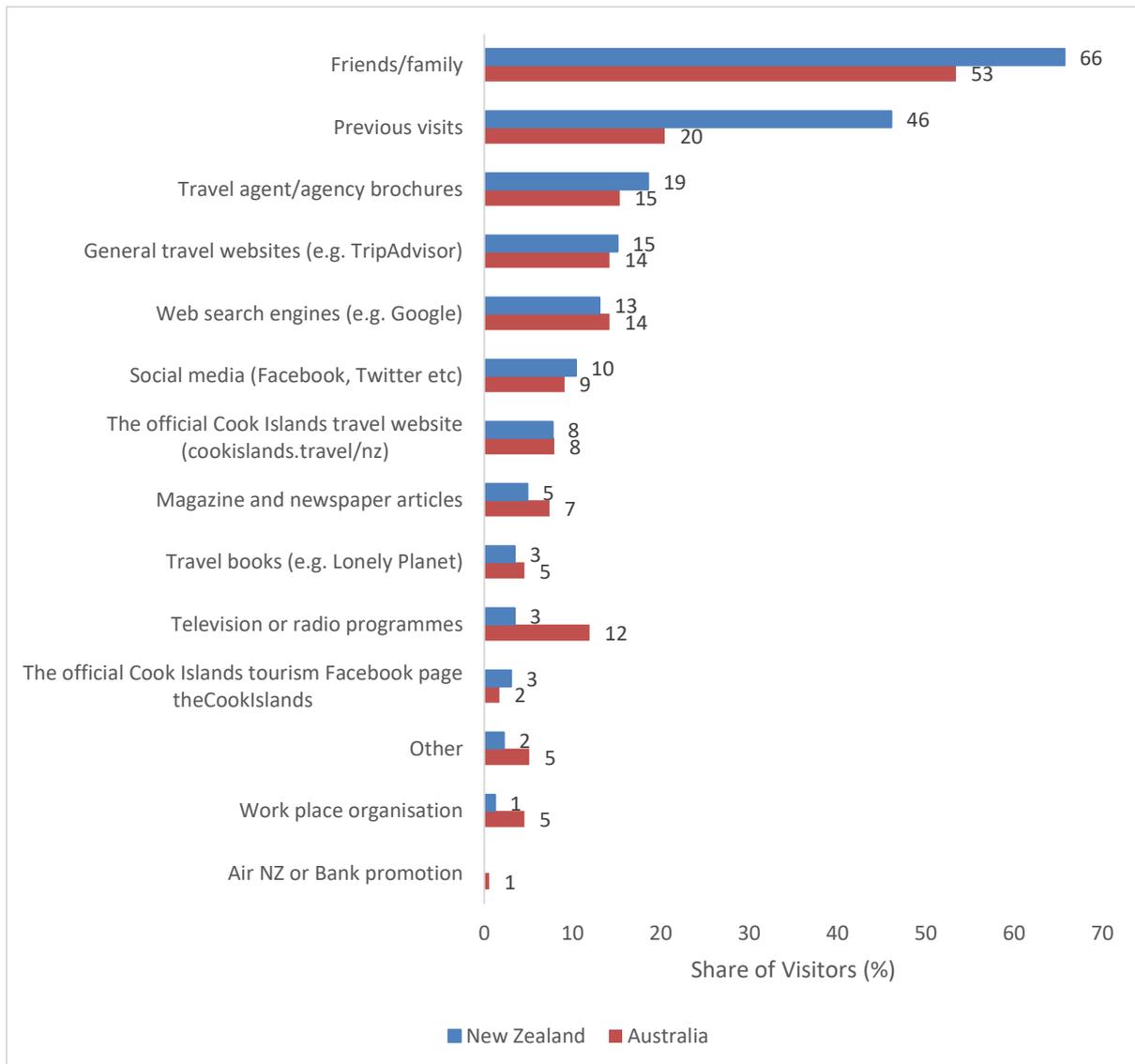
**Figure 16: How did you find out about Cook Islands as a destination (n = 913)**



*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 (66%). There are more repeat visitors from New Zealand than Australia and this is reflected by the fact that half of visitors from New Zealand (46%) ranked their previous visits as the most important information source (Australian visitors 20%). Australian visitors are more likely than their New Zealand counterparts to rank television or radio programmes, work place organisation, magazine and newspaper articles, web search engines (e.g. Google), travel books (e.g. Lonely Planet), and other sources as the most important influence.

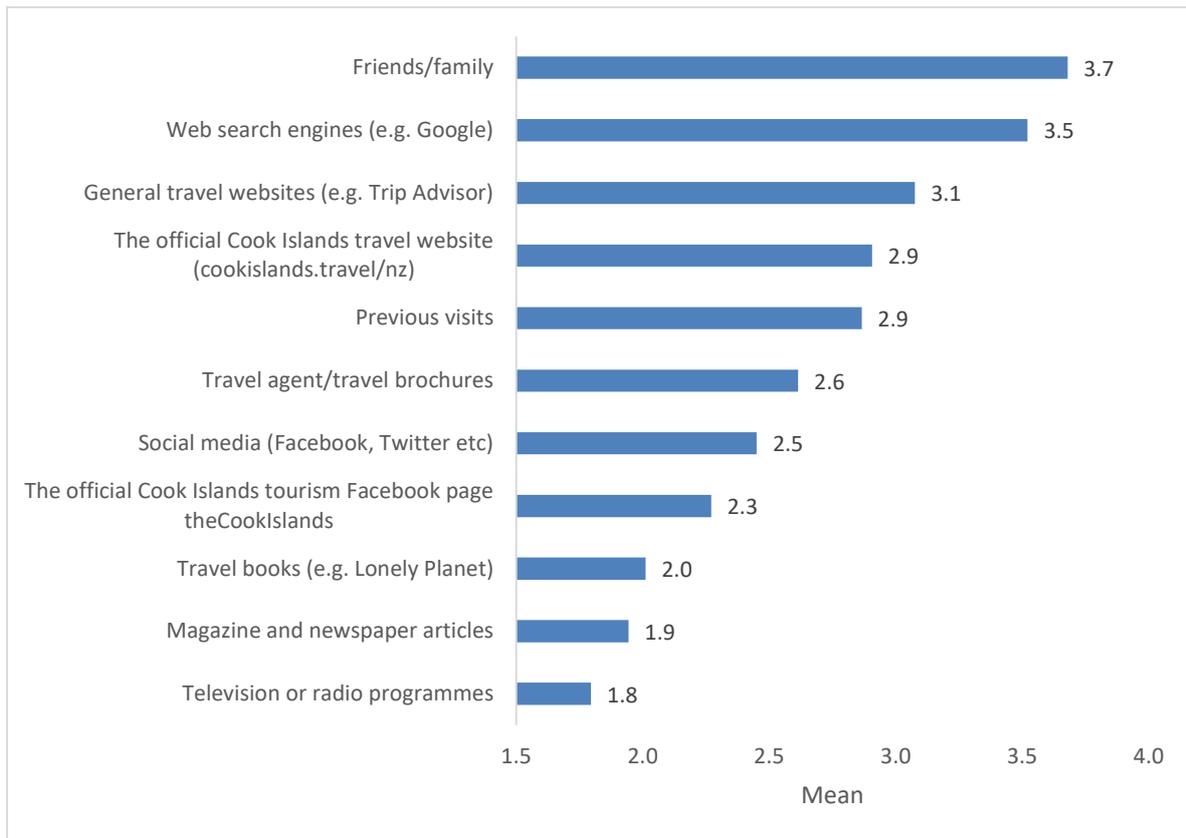
**Figure 17: How did you find out about Cook Islands as a destination – country breakdown**



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

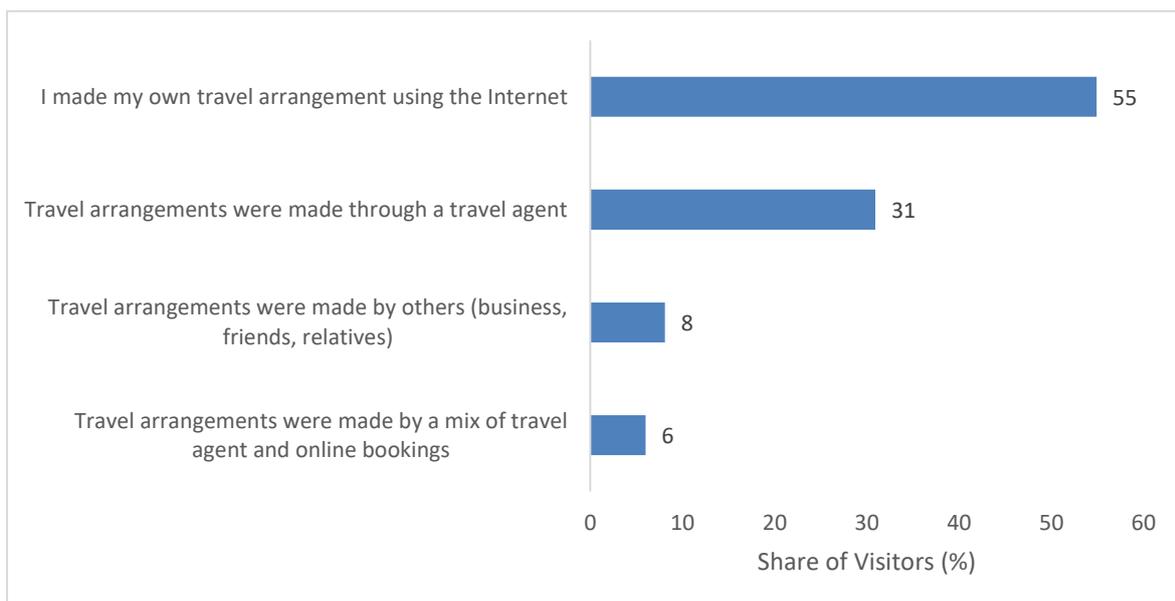
When visitors were asked to rank the importance of the listed information sources used to plan their trip, friends and family members (3.7) ranked as the most important source, closely followed by web search engines (e.g. Google) (3.5) (Figure 18). Other important information sources are general travel websites (e.g. Trip Advisor) (3.1), the official Cooks Island travel website (cookislands.travel/nz) (2.9), and previous visits (2.9).

**Figure 18: Importance of information source used when planning your trip (n = 653-818)**



Over half of visitors surveyed (55%) made their own travel arrangements through online websites (Figure 19). Nearly a third of visitors surveyed (31%) 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 = 913)**

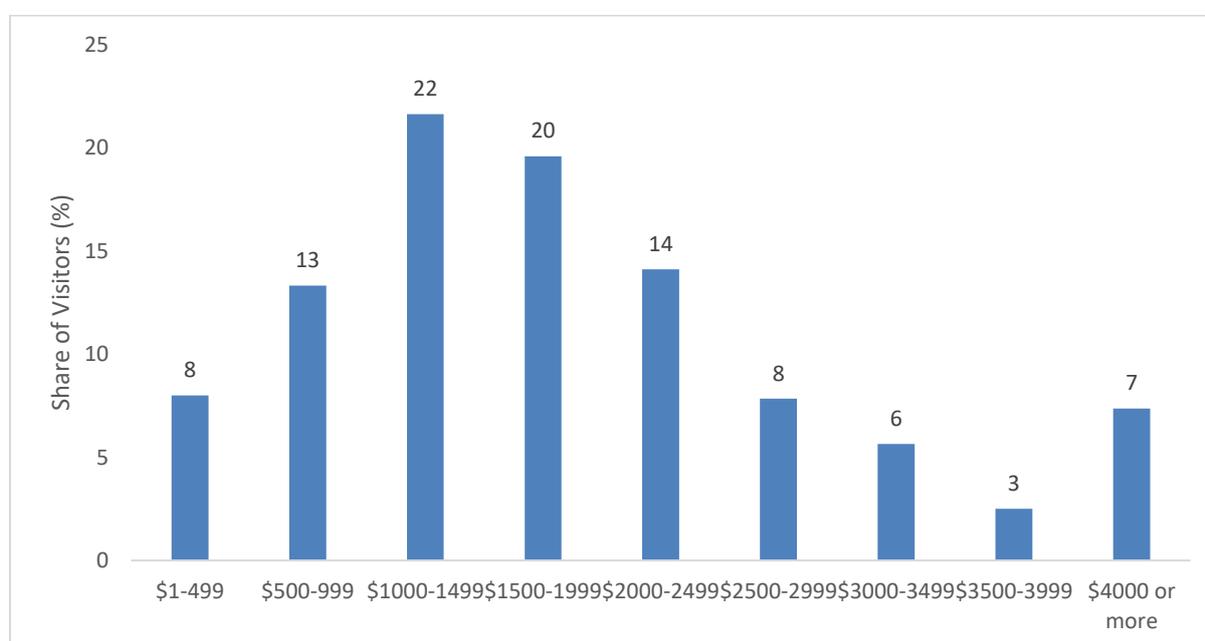


## Visitor Expenditure

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: 2,244 people comprising 1,819 adults and 425 children.

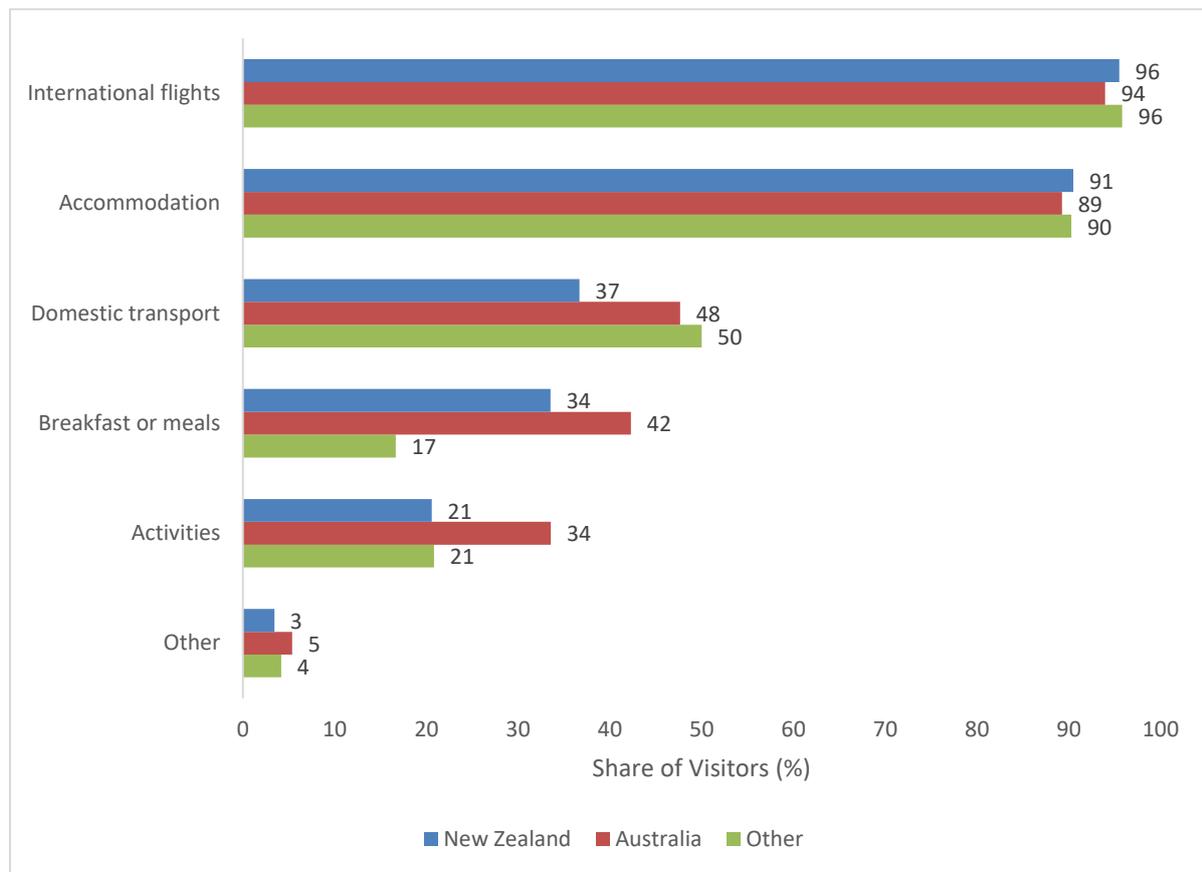
On average, visitors to the Cook Islands spend NZ\$1,903 per person prior to arrival. Over half (56%) of the visitors spend between NZ\$1,000 and NZ\$2,499 prior to arrival (Figure 20). The prepaid figure per person is higher than the same quarter for 2018/19 (NZ\$1,885) but lower than the previous year (average prepaid spend of NZ\$2,047 for 2018/19).

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



In addition to international flights and domestic transport, spending prior to arrival usually includes accommodation: in 91% of the cases for New Zealand visitors, 89% for Australian visitors, and 90% of visitors from other countries (Figure 21). Around one third of visitors prepaid for breakfast and meals prior to arrival (34% New Zealand visitors; 42% Australian visitors, 17% 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\$92 and for the average total visit is NZ\$761 (8.3 nights).

The total spend per visitor per day while in the Cook Islands (excluding any pre-paid expenditure) is NZ\$148 (Table 1). This figure is lower than both the overall spend figure for 2018/19 (NZ\$162) and the same 1<sup>st</sup> IVS survey quarter in 2018/19 (NZ\$165). The majority of money spent locally is on accommodation (39%), restaurants, cafes and bars (22%), and activities (8%). These per person expenditure figures are based on 915 survey responses covering a total of 2,099 people (1,728 adults and 371 children).

By multiplying daily in-country spend by the average stay (8.3 nights) we can see that spend per person per visit to the Cook Islands is on average NZ\$1,228. The total figure of what is spent locally and what flows back to the Cook Islands from pre-paid expenses is therefore NZ\$240 per visitor per day (\$148 + \$92), or NZ\$1,989 (\$1,228 + \$761) for each visitor.

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

<b>Expenditure Items</b>	<b>n = 915</b>	
	<i>Mean (NZ\$)</i>	(% of spend)
Accommodation	58	39
Restaurant, cafes and bar	33	22
Activities	12	8
Other	11	7
Vehicle rental	10	7
Domestic flights	9	6
Shopping	8	5
Groceries	2	2
Cruising	2	1
Internet cost	2	1
Petrol	2	1
Public transportation	1	0
<b>Total Expenditure</b>	<b>148</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 2 provides an overview of the in-country expenditure by the visitor's country of origin. Visitors from Europe have the highest average spend per person per day at NZ\$180. Australian visitors spend on average at NZ\$171 per day, followed by United States of America/Canada visitors (NZ\$148 per day). The New Zealand visitors during this period spent the least at NZ\$138 per day.

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

<b>Expenditure Items</b>	<b>n = 124</b>	<b>n = 384</b>	<b>n = 1,417</b>	<b>n = 81</b>
	<b>USA/ Canada</b>	<b>Australia</b>	<b>New Zealand</b>	<b>Europe</b>
Accommodation	59	64	55	72
Restaurant, cafes and bar	29	39	31	30
Vehicle rental	9	9	10	6
Activities	11	19	10	14
Other	12	13	10	21
Shopping	6	8	8	7
Domestic flights	15	10	7	14
Cruising	2	2	2	3
Petrol	2	2	2	1
Groceries	2	3	2	6
Internet cost	2	1	2	3
Public transportation	1	1	1	1
<b>Total spend (NZ\$)</b>	<b>148</b>	<b>171</b>	<b>138</b>	<b>180</b>

European visitors spend at NZ\$180 per person per day is considerably higher than both the same quarter in the previous year (NZ\$124) and the average for 2018/19 of NZ\$141. Average

Australian spend per person for this quarter (NZ\$171) is higher compared to the same quarter in 2018/19 (NZ\$166) but slightly lower than the 2018/19 average of NZ\$174. The average spend of NZ\$148 for visitors from the United States of America/Canada for this period is significantly lower than both the same quarter in 2018/19 (NZ\$183) and the 2018/19 average of NZ\$158. New Zealanders' spend of NZ\$138 per person per day is lower than both the same quarter in the previous year (NZ\$141) and the average of \$148 for 2018/19.

## 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 (65%) 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 = 810)**

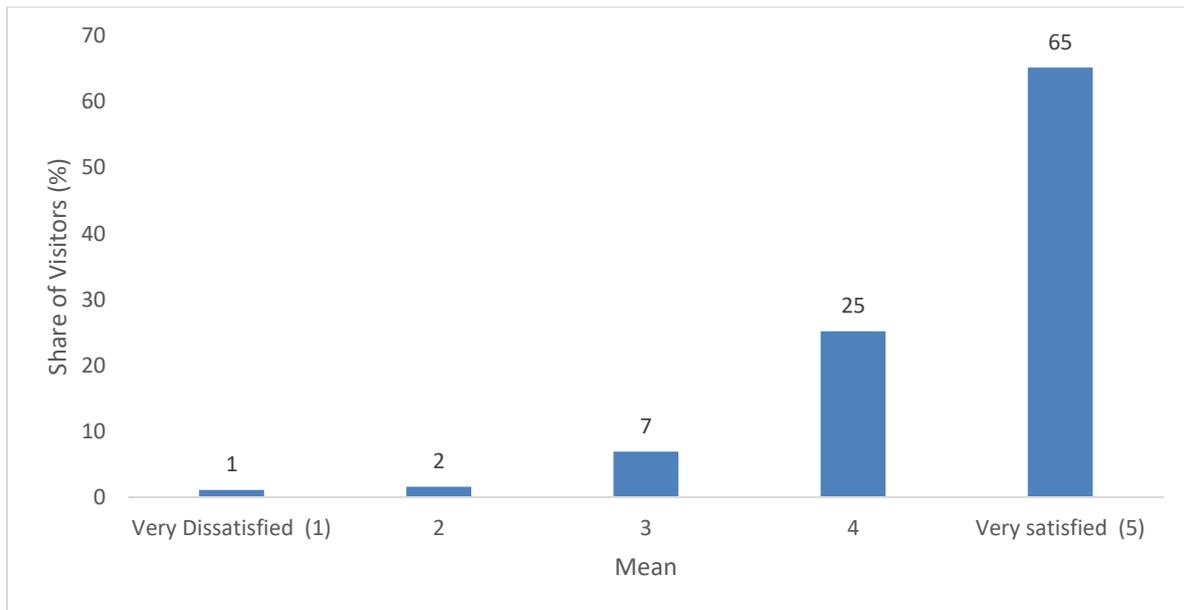
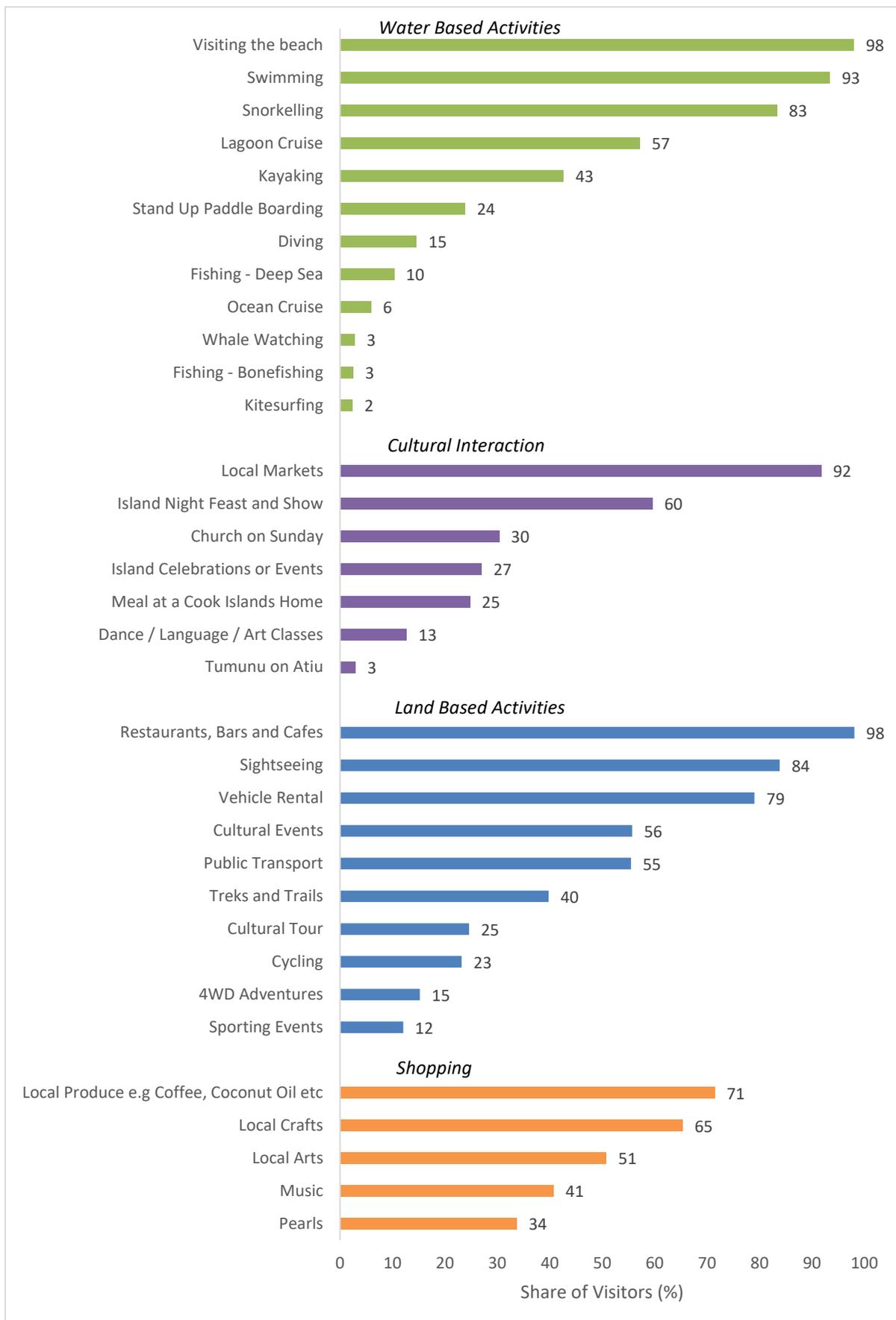


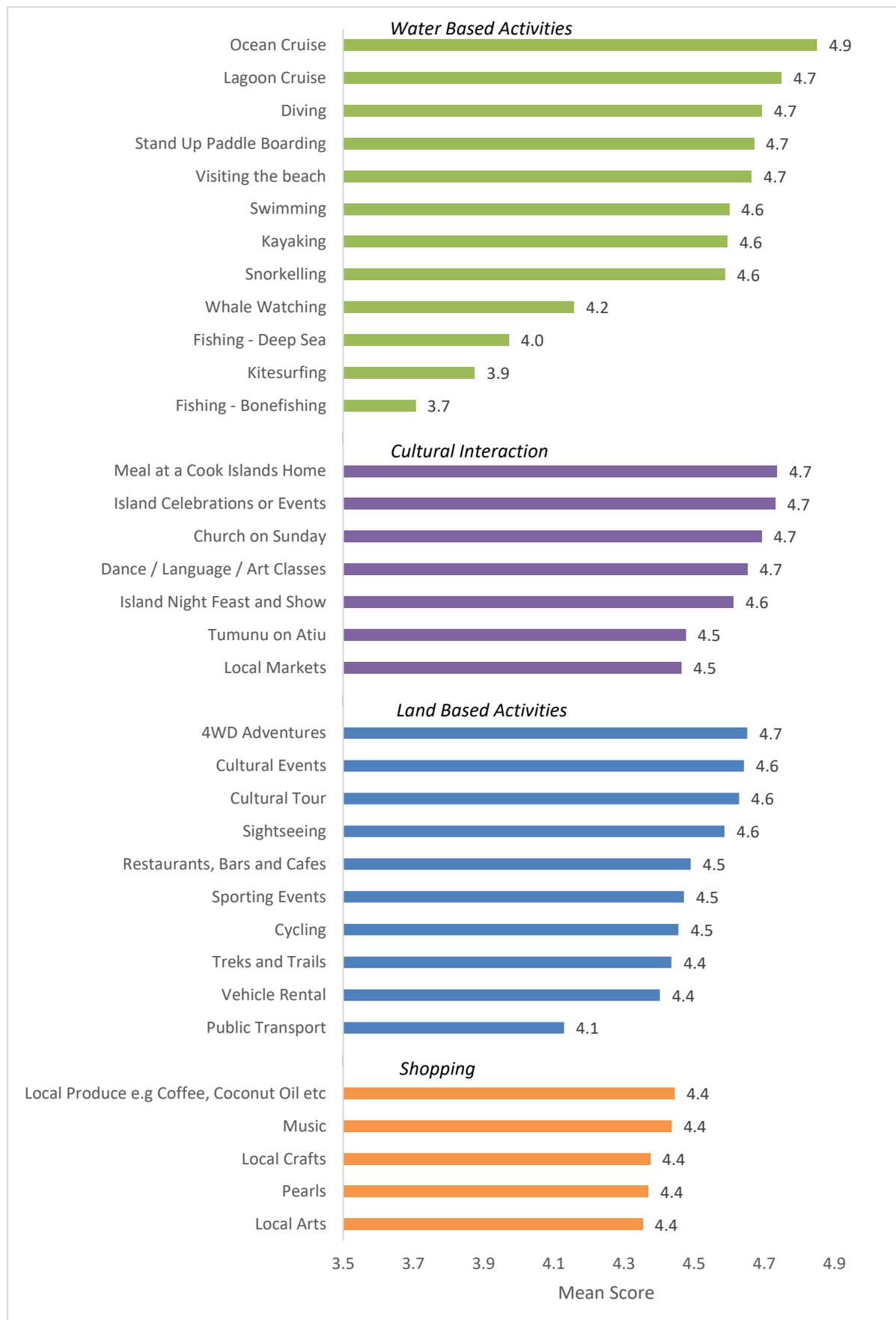
Figure 23 shows the percentage of respondents who undertook specific activities while on their visit to the Cook Islands. Almost all visitors visited a beach (98%) and visit at least one restaurant or café (98%) during their trip. Most of the respondents either go swimming (93%) or visit a local market (92%), and 60% 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 (4.4), and water-based experiences (4.4). It should be noted that whale watching and bonefishing are characterised by relatively low numbers of participants (n = 16-17).

**Figure 23: Degree of participation in activities (n range = 16-887)**



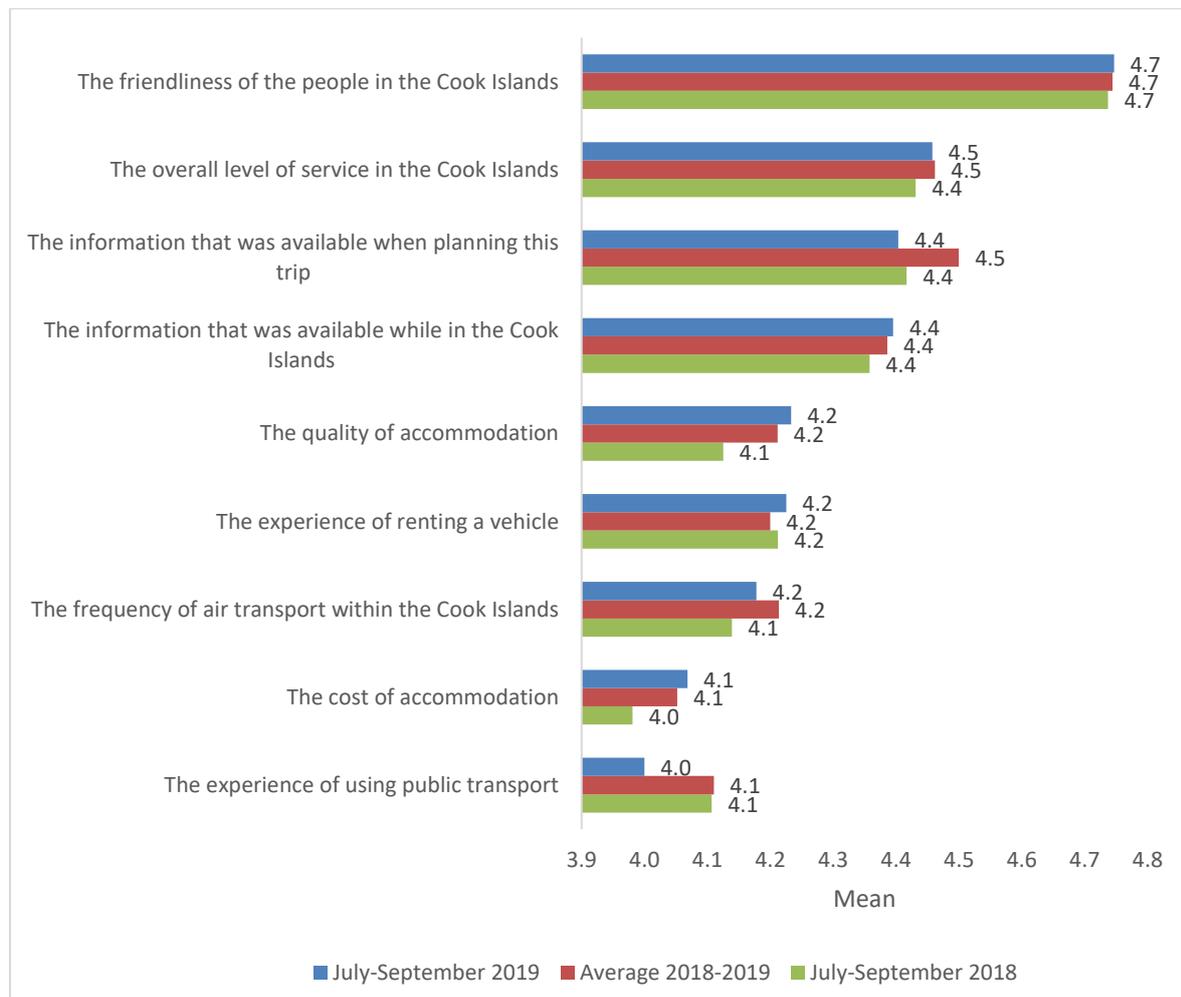
**Figure 24: Degree of satisfaction with activities participated in (mean score out of 5)**



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 July to September 2019 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 friendliness of the people in the Cook Islands, the information that was available while in the Cook Islands, and the experience of renting a vehicle are similar to both the same quarter for 2018/19 and the average for 2018/19. The degree of satisfaction with the overall level of service in the Cook Islands, the quality of accommodation, the frequency of air transport within the Cook Islands, and the cost of accommodation are the same as the annual average for 2018/19 and slightly higher than the same quarter for 2018/19. Visitor satisfaction with the information that was available when planning their trip remains same as the 1<sup>st</sup> quarter in 2018/19 while a little bit lower than the average for 2018/19. Respondent satisfaction with the experience of using public transport is slightly lower than both the average for 2018/19 and the same quarter for 2018/19.

**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 natural environment (49%), the friendly and welcoming local people (42%), the tourist attractions and activities on offer (28%), the peacefulness and relaxing atmosphere of the islands (26%). Smaller numbers of visitors mentioned aspects such as food and beverage (14%), the convenience and safety (10%), culture (6%), level of service (5%), accommodation (5%), un-commercial (4%), overall good experience (3%), emotional connection (2%), family friends (2%) as well as price goods and services (1%).

**Table 3: Most appealing aspects of the Cook Islands (n=838)**

Themes	Share of respondents (%)
Environment, cleanliness & weather	49%
Local people	42%
Activities, attractions and entertainment, events	28%
Atmosphere	26%
Food and beverage	14%
Convenience and safety	10%
Culture	6%
Level of service	5%
Accommodation	5%
Un-commercial	4%
Overall good experience	3%
Emotional connection	2%
Family friends	2%
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, clear water, the beaches, and temperature in the Cook Islands were mentioned by almost half of the respondents (49%) as the most appealing aspects for their visits. Words like ‘beautiful’, ‘clean’, ‘paradise’, ‘clear’, 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, sea or water and the landscapes of the islands in general. Comments included:

*“Beautiful beaches plus I loved how clean the country appeared.”*

*“The perfect balance between development and keeping the island feel of paradise.”*

*“The beautiful seascape and hills.”*

*“The beauty of the lagoon and the whole island.”*

*"There's mountains to climb, and beaches for swimming. Perfection."*

*"Unspoiled compared to other Pacific islands . . ."*

*"The most attractive were sunset, such a romantic event. I also like beach, ocean, nature."*

*"The lagoons are full of beautiful fish, it's like swimming in an aquarium and the water and beaches are so clean."*

*"How pristine and clean the island and water was and how awesome it was to swim with turtles and GT's. A relatively untouched little paradise."*

*"The mountainous landscape in the middle of the island."*

*"Beaches and water are perfectly clean and well maintained, absolutely beautiful."*

*"The natural beauty of the islands and the sights to see while there."*

*"The environment, cleanliness of the beaches, the quietness of beaches, the weather."*

### **Local people**

The second most significant attraction for the visitors is their interaction with local people in the Cook Islands. Over forty percent of respondents (42%) expressed that friendly nature of local people was an important factor of having a positive travel experience. Key words that dominated the responses included 'friendly', 'welcoming', 'helpful', 'lovely', 'amazing', 'happy', 'kind', 'relaxed', 'humble', and 'genuine'. Comments included:

*"Friendly and welcoming locals."*

*"Exceeding friendliness of the Cook Islanders."*

*"The local people are awesome, friendly and accommodating."*

*"The friendliness and politeness was awesome and how open people are."*

*"The local people made us feel very welcome, could not do enough for us and were very friendly. We felt honoured that they wished to share their most beautiful home with us."*

*"I really enjoyed how the Cook Islands communities welcomes their visitors from the moment you land."*

*"The Cook Island people are the warmest and friendly people I have come across. More than happy to welcome you and help you."*

*"Lovely to be picked up by locals while waiting for the bus that didn't come... "*

*“Also my sister got sick and people were so good and we got her to the Doctor who was so helpful and she got the medicine she needed and had a great holiday.”*

*“The people - the locals were incredibly friendly and so helpful with our baby.”*

### **Activities, attractions, entertainment & events**

Activities, attractions, entertainment, and events were mentioned by twenty-eight percent (28%) of respondents as the third most appealing element of their visit to the destination. The availability of water related activities including snorkelling, swimming, cruise, diving, and fishing was the most frequently mentioned attractions. In addition, land-based activities like hiking, tracking, cross island walking, cycling, and markets were also mentioned by respondents. Moreover, cultural shows and food markets were also mentioned frequently by visitors. Comments included:

*“The snorkelling is some of the best in the world!”*

*“The Muri beach night market and the lagoon at muri beach.”*

*“The highlight was our day trip to Aitutaki.”*

*“There's mountains to climb, and beaches for swimming. Perfection.”*

*“Exploring Atiu by motorbike, the Aitutaki Lagoon Cruise, snorkeling in the lagoons, local markets.”*

*“The snorkelling is spectacular the lagoons are full of beautiful fish its like swimming in an aquarium and the water and beaches are so clean”*

*“I was surprised by the range of activities that were available, and how interesting it all was.”*

*“Hiking, Riding around on scooter and meeting so many lovely well looked after dogs.”*

*“Lagoon trip brilliant as was the Cultural night. Beach activities also brilliant due to the natural resources.”*

*“Relaxing and visiting markets also enjoyed lagoon cruise.”*

*“Food market at Muri beach in the evening was very good. Craft market on Saturday morning very good.”*

*“Loved the relative quietness of Aitukaki and the pristine water and blue shades of colour of the water.”*

*“Muri beach is my favourite spot and a few of the restaurants (The tamarind house was amazing). The night markets in Muri were great too.”*

*“The cultural shows on the nights celebrating the Cook Islands' Independence.”*

### **Atmosphere**

The Cook Islands was described as a very peaceful, relaxing, and laid-back destination by respondents and this atmosphere is an appealing factor for twenty six of those surveyed (26%). Visitors love the slower pace of local life, which mostly refer as island pace. Some of the words used to describe the atmosphere in Cook Islands are ‘relaxing’, ‘calm’, ‘chilled’, ‘tranquillity’, and ‘laid back’. The notion of ‘island pace’ and the ‘laid back vibe’ were also mentioned. Comments included:

*“The fact we could just chill out and do our own thing without being made to feel we had to do things.”*

*“A beautiful reef surrounded island that was quiet with no city hustle and bustle.”*

*“Super friendly relaxed environment.”*

*“We needed a rest to refresh our souls and that is what we received.”*

*“The vibe of the country. It's the perfect place to relax.”*

*“The relaxed friendly culture & getting away from hustle and bustle.”*

*“The laid back pace of life.”*

*“The relaxing atmosphere of the whole island, laid back and chilled.”*

*“The ability to relax and be away from the hassles of life.”*

*“The friendliness and the casualness of the life style. Very relaxing.”*

*“Island time. No rush.”*

### **Food and beverage**

Food and beverages was also identified as an appealing aspect by nine percent of respondents. Their comments focused on the food and beverage variety, quality, and range of fresh food available in the Cook Islands. ‘fantastic’, ‘amazing’, ‘great’, ‘delicious’, ‘local’ and ‘fresh’ were some frequent terms to describe the attraction of food for tourists. Many visitors mentioned the local sea food and fruits. Comments included:

*“Great fresh fish. Good food.”*

*“The food was fantastic.”*

*“Food options when travelling with young children and babies.”*

*“As well as a truly amazing food experience. We lived on fantastic fish and seafood”*

*dishes the whole week.”*

*“Amazing fresh food (coconuts, vegies and fish). A chance to have a cocktail on the beach and sit in the sun.”*

*“Great food and service. Amazingly fresh produce and seafood . . . ”*

*“The variety of eateries/cafes. Sitting by the ocean with a coffee/wine was fantastic.”*

*“Good food choices from fancy through to cheap and cheerful.”*

*“The fresh produce of food throughout the cafes & restaurants around the island.”*

*“The food was also very organic and soooo yummy!”*

### **Convenience & Safety**

The convenience and safety of the Cook Islands as a holiday destination were mentioned by 10% of respondents. They referred to safety with currency, proximity, ease of travel around the islands, easy access, safe speed-limits, and hassle. Some tourists emphasised safety particularly feeling safe at night. Comments included:

*“Safety of travelling. We were able to leave thongs/ snorkelling gear/ bike helmets and nothing was taken.”*

*“The ease of access to attractions.”*

*“Same currency as New Zealand.”*

*“Easy to get around the island.”*

*“It was very easy to travel with our one year old daughter.”*

*“It was also easy to get there, just one plane trip without a break. Similarly it was easy to get around the island using public transport.”*

*“Easy access to the beach and not too crowded.”*

*“Very easy to get around. I walked a lot and felt very safe.”*

*“. . . not being hassled to buy things.”*

*“That everything was so accessible, you could walk across the island or take a bus around it.”*

*“New Zealand currency, no exchange, excellent English.”*

## **Culture**

Six percent (6%) of the respondents considered Cook Islands unique culture as one of the most appealing aspects of their visit. The art, traditions, religion and other cultural aspects shape lives of the local indigenous community of the islands. The unique local people and their culture is something that appeals:

*“Cultural aspects, sightseeing activities.”*

*“Everywhere you went, and the pride they took about their culture.”*

*“. . . the vibrant culture: going to an Easter church Sunday and hearing the Maori chanting was amazing.”*

*“The Culture and History.”*

*“Maori music at Hula bar and Road side.”*

*“The feel and culture. We were made to feel at home.”*

*“I was very impressed with their music and dance. Their depth of religious faith was particularly impressive as was Their love of family.”*

*“The serene and welcoming culture. The island were beautiful, but staying in an island where everyone was happy, and we felt safe and welcome, made the trip next level.”*

## **Level of service**

Five percent (5%) of visitors commented on the service they experienced while travelling in the Cook Islands. Respondents provided positive comments about the local hospitality they experienced. Respondents indicated an appreciation of ‘friendly’, ‘professionalism’ and ‘hospitality’ of local staff. The quality of service at the accommodations, restaurants, and resort also won recognition from some visitors. Comments included:

*“The service and the great attitude of everyone there.”*

*“The dive centre next to Edgewater was very accessible and had an awesome bunch of staff. They were very clear when giving out instructions and made the dives (8 in total) very interesting!!! LOVED IT!”*

*“Friendly hostess and conversations about the challenges for Cook Islanders.”*

*“We had young children with us and found that often we were moved to front of queues and served first in restaurants, we really appreciated this.”*

*“Fantastic to be greeted with singing at the airport!”*

*“Level of service and friendliness has stepped up since our last visit 5-6 years ago.”*

## **Accommodation**

Five percent (5%) 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, cafes and other facilities, and the friendly and supportive staff. Comments included:

*"The accommodation was excellent."*

*"The Rarotonga backpackers was amazing accommodation, people who work there are so nice and helpful."*

*"The villas at The Edgewater are a really good option for a family holiday with teenagers."*

*"Rarotonga's only farm stay was AMAZING! We had such a good time there (13 nights) and believe that we got to know more about the local culture and ways of life this way."*

*"Quality accommodation and activities."*

*"We loved our accommodation and the hosts. Have stayed at resorts on previous trips but we found Nikau Beach Bungalows just perfect for us. The location is great. It's quite. And Albie is just wonderful. Will definitely stay here on any future trips to Rarotonga."*

## **Not too commercialised**

Three percent (4%) of the survey participants mentioned that the lack of commercial development on the Cook Islands is 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 was the salient characteristic of the destination. Comments included:

*"Authenticity--unlike Hawaii, Rarotonga did not feel like a tourist trap or built up--it felt more like an actual Polynesian Island unspoiled by catering mainly to tourists."*

*"The remoteness. The welcoming laid back island vibe... please don't ever get too commercialized."*

*"We enjoyed how non-commercialized the Island is."*

*"No noticeable exploitation of the environment or people (tourists and locals)."*

*"We enjoyed our time at Atiu as it was less commercialism."*

*"How small and un-touristy it felt."*

*"I liked that it's unknown because it's so much more authentic."*

*“Relaxed non-commercial environment.”*

### **Overall good experience**

Two percent (2%) 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 their focus on their overall experiences. Comments included:

*“Everything was amazing and had a great time in Cook Island 😊.”*

*“The overall experience of a real down to earth experience in a beautiful country.”*

*“Basically everything!”*

*“The beaches and island life in general.”*

*“The beautiful sight seeing in every aspect.”*

*“Everything! Loved every minute!”*

*“I can say that staying in Cook Islands was amazing, I enjoyed so much.”*

### **Emotional Connection**

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

*“I call it my second home. Love it.”*

*“We visit every year and got married over there this visit. My husband is half cook islander.”*

*“we just love the place - this was our 7th visit since 2010”.*

*“Hard to say, we just love the place - this was our 7th visit since 2010.”*

### **Family and friends**

Two percent of the respondents commented on links being strengthened with family and friends in the Cook Islands. Comments included:

*“Seeing old friends, and being on the island again.”*

*“The friends we have made over our last 5 trips.”*

*“Re-connecting with special friends.”*

### **Price of goods and services**

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

*“Good price food options, I’d staying away from tourist restaurants, well stocked supermarkets.”*

*“Good value for money.”*

*“Affordability of activities.”*

## 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?”. Nearly one fifth (19%) of the visitors surveyed, found “nothing” unattractive, with more than one person saying “not a thing I can say that I found unattractive about the Cook Islands” and “having to leave” was considered the least appealing aspect. Table 4 summarizes key themes respondents felt were least appealing. Comments ranged from issues with public services, facilities and infrastructures, attractions and activities, price of goods and services, stray animals and mosquitos, accommodation, poor weather, rubbish and natural environment care, food, customer service, rental cars and scooters through to disappointment with law and legislation, flight-related issues, local people, safety and too touristy.

**Table 4: Least appealing aspects of the Cook Islands (n=776)**

Themes	Share of respondents (%)*
Public services, facilities and infrastructure	17
Price of goods and services	12
Stray animals and mosquitos	10
Accommodation	9
Poor weather	8
Rubbish and care of the natural environment	7
Food and beverage	7
Customer service	7
Attractions and activities	6
Rental cars and scooters	4
Law and legislation	3
Flight-related issues	2
Local people	2
Safety	2
Too touristy	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***

Seventeen 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 condition, poor internet connection and the long waiting time at the airport and its facilities. Comments included:

*“Unreliability of the public transport. Bus did not turn up on Saturday morning so we could get to the markets. Bus did not arrive anywhere close to the time shown even allowing for all the stops.”*

*“Public bus around the island wasn’t frequent enough. Especially on the public holidays over Easter and ANZAC Day. The place was full of tourists who had to queue*

*for hours and stand up all the way home. There should have been 3 buses an hour to cater for all the tourists. Especially on market day.”*

*“The street or the roads are very dark at night, was so hard for us to look for our accomodation coz every place they look the same in the dark.”*

*“As previously mentioned, we have been to Raro several times and always loved it, but this time, I admit really noticing the disrepair - (inner) roads with massive potholes, house roofs with rocks on them. The feeling of disrepair leads to feelings of neglect and the island begins to lose a little of it's paradise feeling.”*

*“The roads were in a very poor condition (hard on a scooter).”*

*“The walk tracks were hard to find, even with a map and even harder to walk.”*

*“Difficulty getting into internet.”*

*“Lack of Wi-Fi.”*

*“Cost of telephone service for international calling.”*

*“Limited signage around the island for specific activities.”*

*“Not enough information regarding health risks (dengue fever) available.”*

*“Lack of foot paths to walk on. We found the maps a bit inaccurate or hard to follow.”*

*“International airport facilities and staffing need improvement.”*

*“Queues at airport.”*

*“Slow processing on arrival at airport.”*

### **Price of goods and service**

Twelve 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 ‘expensive’ and ‘overpriced’. Comments included:

*“The cost of everything.”*

*“Very expensive mobile data.”*

*“Food was expensive and very average quality.”*

*“Expensive prices in supermarket; expensive internet.”*

*“Cost of transport blew us away.”*

*“High prices.”*

*“Prices for accommodation in local housing is way too expensive for what you get compared to resorts I have stayed in.”*

*“Ridiculously expensive fresh vegetables + fruit with very little variety.”*

*“Food is overpriced at the resorts and not much variety.”*

*“Expensive shopping.”*

*“Prices about food and rental materials.”*

*“The cost for internet was insane, especially because I had university assignments I needed to complete while in Rarotonga, this price was very high.”*

### **Stray animals and mosquitos**

Stray animals, noisy roosters, chickens and mosquitoes/insects were mentioned by ten percent of respondents. In particular, visitors complained about dogs roaming the streets. Respondents were also concerned about animal welfare issues in the destination. Comments included:

*“Too many stray dogs on the beaches.”*

*“Dogs being annoying, chickens throughout the night.”*

*“The stray dogs. It was hideous. My daughter got bitten by one. I went out walking another day and got chased by one, made me feel terrified like I didn't want to be out exploring. And as there's very few other ways to get around it was very off-putting.”*

*“The stray dog problem, scary with toddlers on the beach and having a beach meal. I love dogs but found the neglected strays very upsetting.”*

*“Stray dogs and loud annoying roosters.”*

*“Roosters crowing early in the morning could make it hard to sleep.”*

*“The enjoyment of a really good vacation for it to come to an end. Seriously, the mosquitos, dogs & roosters.”*

*“Felt quite sorry for the tied-up animals.”*

*“The goats I saw at the abandoned Sheridan hotel, they needed some love and care. Their udders were so swollen I could not believe it. They would have been in so much pain.”*

*“The dogs and cats' welfare.”*

## **Accommodation**

Nine percent of visitors surveyed mentioned their accommodation while in the Cook Islands as being a least appealing aspect of their stay. 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:

*"The resort had no oven, microwave or kitchen sink in our room."*

*"A good portion of the infrastructure and the resort are getting dated and in need of maintenance."*

*"The resort needs some serious work doing they need to shut down the older buildings for a year and replace them or give them a massive overhaul. For its size it needs another much bigger pool - one for families and one for 16+. They need at least 8 solid quality adult size tennis racquets and some decent tennis balls for 2 courts - even if you need to pay a \$10 per court charge."*

*"Our accommodation was extremely poor, dilapidated and in need of repairs and updating, for almost \$1000 per week it was a rip-off. I notice you do not have this place on your list of accommodation. Is it running below the radar? All cooking stuff looking like was out of a charity shop in 1964! Bathroom fan not working and no window in the bathroom."*

*"Our swimming pool was very cold and uncomfortable. I had to wear wet suit top to withstand the cold."*

*"The hot water kept running out in our accommodation."*

*"Some resorts were a little run down - we noticed this when stopping off at their restaurants for a bite. Water was a bit cold - but that's just the time of year not something that can be fixed."*

*"The freezing hotel pool was a shock - it isn't heated at all."*

## **Poor weather**

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

*"Weather, mostly raining."*

*"Rain meant we were unable to do some of our planned walks."*

*"Unfortunately, the weather. Periods of rain and windy every day. Unable to do many activities we would otherwise have done."*

*"We unfortunately had a lot of rain."*

*"The weather - was too windy to snorkel on the days we wanted to and it rained for days when we wanted to do the cross island walk - just means we have go back again!"*

*"Shame about the wind but that is nothing you can change!"*

*"The weather wasn't great. Cloudy and windy."*

*"The weather... It was very wet with flooding in Muri, meaning the run-off went into the Lagoon and made the water very dirty for several days. It was also unpleasantly windy for most of the time we were there. Next time we would go back to our preferred time of year to visit (July/August) when hopefully the weather is more settled."*

### **Rubbish and natural environment care**

Rubbish and natural environment care were mentioned by seven 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 and its burning, poor condition of the lagoons and beaches, especially Muri Lagoon, broken glasses, and threatened marine life. Comments included:

*"The runoff and pollution in muri lagoon."*

*"I was disappointed with the sustainability in the islands. They really need to start using more of solar energy and less disposable plastic items. We found so much rubbish on the beach - lots of broken glass and plastic! We used to carry a little bag with us every time we would go for walks on the beach and pick rubbish. The bag would always end up full. Especially in the area from Aroa beach going towards the city centre."*

*"The amount of dead coral in the lagoon. Apparently poisoned by roundup and gramoxone washing off the farms. Very sad to see such destruction in an otherwise idyllic island paradise."*

*"rubbish in the street and beaches."*

*"Degraded lagoon at Rarotonga."*

*"Rubbish burning."*

*"Plastic rubbish on beach near Aitutaki airport."*

*"The impact of tourism on the environment was disturbing."*

*"Destruction to coral and litter."*

*"The smell of sewage at night. So smelly."*

*"The clearly bleached and dying coral reefs due to sunblock and people standing and smothering them. We were at Rarotonga in Muri beach previously 6 years prior and the coral was much more alive and abundant then. Alongside the popular destination for snorkelling on the island was all dead coral with barely any left and as I previously said, last time we visited it was abundant. It is extremely sad to see."*

## **Food**

Seven 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 fish), the high prices, and limited food choices. Comments included:

*"The availability of fresh fruit and vegetable and also everything a bit expensive - but that's understandable given circumstances -you have to import items and only limited agricultural area. Otherwise no issues."*

*"Food was expensive and very average quality."*

*"would like to have more fresh fish varieties."*

*"Food options and prices."*

*"Too little locally produced fresh fruit and vegetables."*

*"Cost of food and availability of vegetables."*

*"No gluten free options in supermarkets and when eating out."*

*"Sadly the children who eat the wrong types of food and are very overweight, as are many adults. Most shops on Aitutaki favour the sweetened options of drink and foods available and there are few sugar free food items that in the past would not have had sugar at all.."*

*"We went to the main fish shop in Avarua for fresh fish - hard to find elsewhere in restaurants etc. I worried about the dogs running all over the place - in danger of getting run over."*

*"Food is overpriced at the resorts and not much variety."*

*"The price of food was ridiculous. I don't eat meat, but my friend bought a couple of steaks for a BBQ and it was \$35! I'm vegan and found the lack of options very challenging. and basic food you take for granted in Australia wasn't available. The whole week we were there you couldn't buy a cucumber, and capsicums were \$6 each. No wonder people seem to eat really unhealthily there!"*

*"We only ate out once at a burger place for lunch which was nice, but no other real eat out options that appealed. It was hard to find something simple like a decent coffee. On Day 5 I actually found sourdough. VERY exciting. We brought a lot of food*

*from Australia as we had been told how expensive it is there, and I'm so glad I listened. We ate a lot of peanut butter sandwiches!"*

### **Customer service**

Seven 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. Some respondents also mentioned booking-related issues which made their trips less appealing. Comments included:

*"Locals seemed disinterested in us as visitors; waiting times for service were much too long; little communication from wait staff; too few waitstaff; lack of information/unhelpfulness from some locals."*

*"Many of the local staff are not friendly, even when greeted by guests - this lets down the Cook Islands' reputation for hospitality. They seem unhappy to be in the tourist business - I know its hard work, but people have paid a lot of money to come on holiday, so they don't want to face grumpy sulky staff. The car rental place was a shocker for service - no cars, back in "5 minutes" (make that 30 minutes), and inflexible pricing when you just want a car for a couple of hours not 6 hours."*

*"I disliked a lot that on public holidays many services of the hotel were closed (including the kiddy club) - hospitality should still be working. We found that we spent a lot to get to a place with services which were then not offered. Did raise this with the hotel, they apologised but didn't offer any compensation."*

*"Sometimes staff do not know the answers of questions that tourists expect them too. "Where is the best place to go snorkelling?". Customer service was not very good, people not that friendly in a lot of places."*

*"The Airport, unfriendly staff, people who deal with internet not friendly at all, and the car rentals cars were unreliable and not well maintained at all."*

*"Some of the shop assistants don't want to be there and are dismissive of tourists. Some are very good, but the negative ones don't do the islands any favours."*

*"We had issues with the driver not picking us up at the correct accommodation for the Aitutaki day trip. We waited 45 minutes before we hitch hiked to the airport thanks to a lovely gentleman, and just caught the flight with a matter of minutes to spare. We did follow up with a complaint to the company but did not receive any compensation or anything else."*

*"Our host cancelled our booking one hour before our flight, so we had to find another accommodation at higher price."*

*"I don't like "island time" when it is used as an excuse for bad manners and poor*

*service.”*

### **Attractions and activities**

Six percent of respondents mentioned attractions and activities as the least appealing aspect of their Cook Islands visit. Their concerns regarded the limited attractions and activities available, especially restaurant and food venues, 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:

*“Not much to do on land.”*

*“On Aitutaki there was not a lot of options or choice of activity outside of the bigger resorts.”*

*“Few restaurants at night.”*

*“We couldn't find so much restaurant offers.”*

*“nightlife.”*

*“Snorkelling on the side of the island we stayed wasn't great.”*

*“Medicinal walk was very strange.”*

*“Asking for money to go up to waterfall and having different rules for riding a scooter.”*

*“Expensive kitesurfing which my husband did and didn't even get to get up on the board after 6 hours!”*

*“Retail (Souvenir) options especially for locally made items are fairly limited. Most items are fairly cheap, made in China, etc.”*

*“Very difficult to buy locally made beer, too much imported stuff.”*

*“It was a little challenging to find things that were open--the whole island seemed to close down on Sunday/Easter monday (although I understand why!).”*

### **Rental cars or scooters**

Four 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:

*“Cars had flat tires 2X, wasted a day dealing with them. Overcharged by \$100 and got back only \$40. Totally disreputable.”*

*“Our rental car company made us pay for a puncture because they said it was because it was a non-Standard puncture. This cost is \$200 and was not due to any driving we did.”*

*“We rented a car, and when we had minor damage, they made us come in and get an estimate and pay for the repair during our vacation, rather than waiting until we turned it in at the end of our stay. They are holding our credit card, so I don't see why it couldn't have waited.”*

*“The car rentals cars were unreliable and not well maintained at all.”*

*“Rental vehicle and roads.”*

### **Law and Legislation**

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

*“Vehicle rental opening hours were restrictive and the process of getting a licence and police station opening hours meant I ran out of time to rent a vehicle. This was very frustrating.”*

*“Obtaining a motor bike licence.”*

*“The slow process of getting a scooter licence, and that you can get a licence at 16 but then won't rent you a scooter until you are 18. Waste of a morning.”*

*“Why tourist have to wear helmets on scooters, and locals don't. It was very slow going through customs when we arrived.”*

*“Poor drink driving prevention.”*

*“The age limits to most activities.”*

### **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 poor frequency, arrival and departure times, delays or cancellations, and lost baggage. Comments included:

*“Dealing with Jetstar who completely screwed up our departure and cost us a small fortune. No compensation for the costs incurred with Qantas, who we were supposed to connect with and missed. Will NEVER fly with them again. Sadly, it ruined an otherwise wonderful time.”*

*“Air flight times - very difficult to get to from Australia. Many hours spent at Auckland airport overnight with everything shut!”*

*“Jetstar losing our bags.”*

*“The late-night flight back. Had to sit and wait for hours but plane was delayed. Would be nice if there were a few options in terms of flights.”*

*“NZ airlines huge delays.”*

*“The flight times are really bad. The government should pressure the airlines to fly during the day instead of the middle of the night.”*

### **Local people and social issues**

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. Some visitors also felt sad about social issues in the Cook Islands. Comments included:

*“Locals seemed disinterested in us as visitors; waiting times for service were much too long; little communication from wait staff; too few waitstaff; lack of information/unhelpfulness from some locals.”*

*“How rude some locals were to my family.”*

*“Slight harassment by some locals when walking around the island.”*

*“Some very grumpy and rude people, particularly bus driver.”*

*“People were a bit rude.”*

*“I found the gap between the rich and the poor really sad. It seemed like a few people own most of the businesses there, and the rest are on the poverty line. I don't find that appealing. It puts me off supporting a country where the tourism money doesn't seem to actually get through to the people doing the hard yards.”*

*“seeing the level of poverty.”*

### **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 thefts, poor safety while on the road and problems about illnesses. Comments included:

*“We were happy there until we were robbed/home invasion while we were home. It was frightening & we were made aware that it happens a lot. We knew who it was as we saw the person & chased them off. The police attended but did nothing to help. No follow up & it made us afraid, so we moved to a secure hotel instead of a private rental.”*

*“Getting bag stolen - but the police did get it back! (minus cash).”*

*“The dengue outbreaks.”*

*“Our 1-year old son got dengue two days before we left the island. We had to go to the hospital, and we were really concerned about his health. He successfully recovered from it after a week.”*

*“I had booked a transfer with my hotel and then they told me I didn't have it, then I was sent into a taxi. But as a single female traveler, being sent into a taxi at 1am in a place I hadn't been before was slightly concerning...”*

### **Too touristy**

Two percent of respondents mentioned the Cook Islands as being ‘too touristy’. Visitors also mentioned some negative behaviour on the part of other visitors. Comments included:

*“too many tourists in rental cars.”*

*“some tourists are rude & ugly.”*

*“Getting too commercial.”*

*“Overcrowded with tourists, too many vehicles on the road going too fast. Cook Island itself is beautiful.”*

*“The arrogant tourists.”*

*“Seeing visitors walking on the reef and feeding fish.”*

## Suggestions for improvements

When asked if there was anything that could have improved their visit to the Cook Islands 35% of visitors made a comment. Suggestions mentioned by respondents focused on public services and infrastructure (25%), the need for more entertainment, activities, transport (15%), improvements to the environment, safety and animal care (14%), accommodation (12%), attitudes of locals and service levels (11%), better value for money (11%), the availability, quality, and price of food and drinks (8%), wanting to stay longer and visit more places (8%), weather (7%), flights (7%), the need for better information (6%). Comments on these themes included:

*"Better Internet connection and having shops open on Sundays would be nice."*

*"Capping the number of tourists. Turning the abandoned hotel into a university specialising in oceanography and marine biology. Charging the tourists an airport tax and then focusing on elite green eco holidays that focuses on the cook islands culture, flora and fauna."*

*"The roads are terrible and the shopping area in Avarua needs an update, some buildings needs paint and more shrubs or gardens to brighten up the place centerneeds."*

*"Hiking trails need to be marked out better on island map some stated are not maintained so unable to be walked which was a little disappointing."*

*"More local artist playing at different places--more music venues; the ability to get to other islands more cost effectively."*

*"Stop using poisons on the farms so that the reef and fish life can recover even the fish was too poisoned to eat."*

*"Seriously do something about those stray dogs. It ruined the relaxed feeling the Cook Islands gives you. Watch Stephen King's "Cujo" movie. That's what it felt like when my daughter was attacked and bitten while just going for a walk to the beach."*

*"The scooter hire company advised that our type of vehicle booked on line 6 months previous was not available we ended up paying double to get transport. What if we had not had the money to do that.?"*

*"Local bus drivers having improved customer relation training. One in particular was rude to tourists on a number of trips."*

*"Higher level of cleanliness and better amenities at accommodation."*

*"Better food handling practices - a cafe didn't have things chilled that should have been, and the server used their hands to put ice in our glasses. Hotel restaurant didn't keep everything in the buffet chilled/hot."*

*"More information about tours and activities to do (whales, routes mountain...)."*

## Reasons to return to the Cook Islands and recommend to others

The majority of visitors (93%) indicated that they would consider re-visiting the Cook Islands in the future. This figure is higher than the 2018/19 annual average (92%) and the identical quarter in 2018 (91%). 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 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 mentioned the lack of the infrastructure and service. Other factors given for not wishing to return included a lack of activities, long travel distance, and weather. Comments included:

*“It's way too far from central Europe. But what's worth it was (with french polynesia) best destination in pacific..”*

*“The rudeness of some locals ruined my experience greatly and the activities were too far away from where we were staying.”*

*“Reef was too degraded and too much history has been lost. The museum of cultural development was a farce. Very poor excuse for a museum.”*

*“Been twice so no reason to visit again unless went to Aitutaki but travel cost expensive so not likley.”*

*“Customer service was terrible.”*

*“It was too quiet for a family with teenagers, however, I am thinking I would like to return and stay in a resort and book activities in advances I don't miss out.”*

Nearly half (44%) of the visitors who said they would return stated that they would definitely include the outer islands in their next visit. A further 53% 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 (92%) 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, 21% of the respondents would like to visit Mauke. A small number of visitors mentioned Manihiki, Palmerston, and 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 (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 the high prices, Environmental degradation, no direct flights, and poor customer services.

## Final observations

This report shows that the Cook Islands tourism industry generally performed well during the survey period of July to September 2019. Overall visitor satisfaction levels, willingness to return, and the desire to recommend have remained very high, and it is clear that the destination is making a generally positive impression on visitors. To be more specific, 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.

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 poor customer service levels, the on-going issues around stray dogs, and price of goods and services.

Visitor expenditure decreased somewhat compared with the same period last year. This is a trend reflected elsewhere in the region as we see some impacts related to global economic uncertainty and caution. It is important to monitor this trend in coming reporting periods.

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.