



The Cook Islands International Visitor Survey Report

July – August 2021

Prepared for Cook Islands Tourism Corporation

by

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www.nztri.org

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Executive Summary

This report focuses on the characteristics, expectations and expenditure patterns of visitors to the Cook Islands between 1 July and 16 August 2021. This is the second COVID international visitor survey (IVS) report and as such it represents an important barometer of the pandemic performance of the industry. The data that underpins the report is generated by an online departure survey (<http://www.mycookislandsvisit.com>). There are 503 individual respondents to the survey - representing a total of 917 adults and 200 children in the in-country expenditure analysis (this equates to 6% of all visitors during the period – based on the same period of 2021 visitor arrival data from the Cook Islands Statistics Office).

As a result of the border restrictions, nearly all (99%) of visitors surveyed come from New Zealand. Visitors are well educated (77% have some form of tertiary education) with a relatively high annual household income (62% earn over NZ\$100,000 per year). Over half (56%) of visitors travel with more than one companion, and solo travellers are less common (10%).

Two in five (40%) respondents surveyed are first time visitors to the Cook Islands. The main purpose of visit is holiday-making (90%). The average length of stay in the Cook Islands is 8.3 nights. The majority of visitors (85%) stay ten nights or less. Twenty seven percent of visitors surveyed visited Aitutaki.

Visitor spend prior to arrival in the Cook Islands (\$1,931 per person) increased slightly from the same quarter in 2019/20 (\$1,903), but decreased from the 2019/20 annual average (\$2,049 per person). Spend on the island (per person per day) is \$208. This spend is much higher than both the 2019/20 annual average of \$154 and also the same quarter for the previous year (\$148 for July to September 2019).

When pre-paid spend and local spend are combined, it is estimated that each visitor brings \$2,498 to the Cook Islands economy (or approximately \$301 per day). This figure is higher than the annual average for 2019/20 (\$2,129), and the July to September 2019 period (\$1,989).

Overall visitor satisfaction levels with services and experiences in the Cook Islands remain high (mean value 4.6 out of 5). The most appealing elements are environment, cleanliness and weather; friendly local people; activities, attractions, entertainment and events; and atmosphere. The least appealing elements are the lack of public services, facilities and infrastructure, price or quality of food and beverage, some of the businesses were not open or not ready to fully operation, price of goods and services, attractions and activities, stray animals and mosquitos, and accommodation.

In terms of the COVID-19 response in the Cook Islands, visitors are generally very satisfied with COVID related processes and requirements. All likert scale scores for questions related to satisfaction with COVID policies produced mean scores of at least above 4 out of 5.

The desire of visitors to return to Cook Islands in the future remain strong: 94% of those surveyed state that they would come back for another visit, and 97% say they would recommend the Cook Islands to friends or family.

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Introduction

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

Visitors to the Cook Islands are asked to complete a web-based survey within a few weeks of the completion of their visit. The Cook Islands online International Visitor Survey (IVS) has run since mid-2012 and is scheduled to continue running through 2022 and beyond.

From 17th May 2021 (NZ time), the first New Zealand and Cook Islands travel bubble commenced offering a Quarantine-Free Travel arrangement. This report focuses on visitors who travelled to the Cook Islands from 1st July to 16th August 2021 when the border closed again with the emergence of the Delta variant. Over this two-month period, 2,666 visitors were contacted by email to take part in the survey, and 503 responses were received: a conversion rate of 23%. The conversion rate for this period is considerably higher than the 2019/20 annual average (14%) and the July to September 2019 period (14%). These 503 responses cover a total of 917 adults and 200 children when we examine visitor expenditure. As the second COVID-period IVS report, this document, together with the first COVID report (May-June 2021 arrivals), represents an important barometer of the pandemic performance of the industry.

The data presented includes detailed information on:

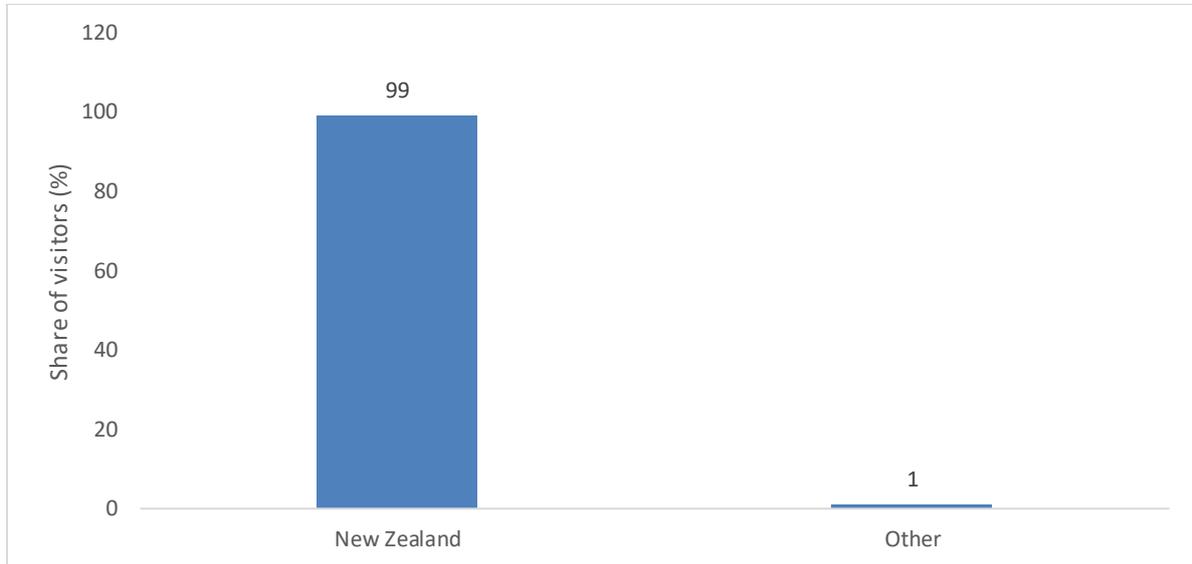
- The characteristics of visitors to the Cook Islands (age, gender, education, country of origin, income, purpose of visit, travelling companions, number of previous visits, length of stay, airline used, and islands visited)
- Visitor information obtained about the Cook Islands, factors influencing the travel decision making process, and booking information
- Visitor expenditure (amount of money spent prior to arrival and while in the Cook Islands, and items of spending)
- Visitor perceptions of COVID-19 impacts on travel and Cook Islands policies and processes
- Visitor satisfaction, including: most and least appealing elements of the visit, overall satisfaction and satisfaction with activities.

In key sections of the report we highlight important variations from the 2019/20 annual averages or the 2019/2020 July to September quarterly findings.

Visitor Characteristics

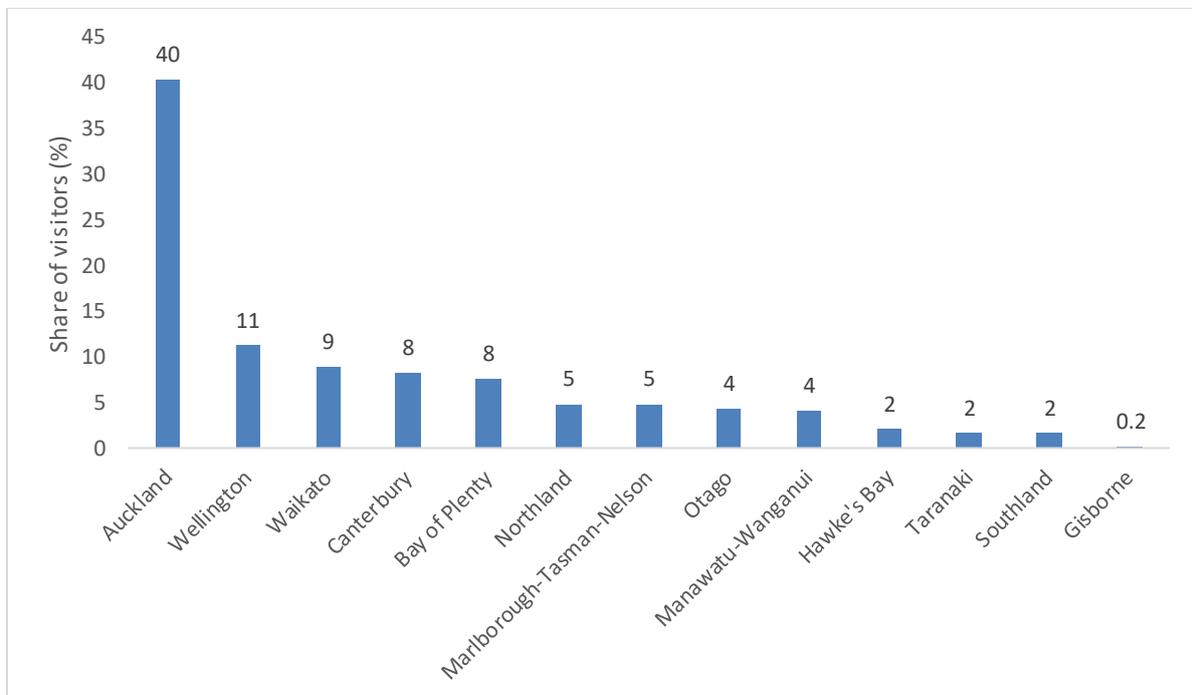
Virtually all (99%) of the visitors surveyed come from New Zealand (Figure 1). Fewer than 1% of the visitors originate from elsewhere (Australia, Europe, and North America).

Figure 1: Country of origin (n = 446)



Auckland and Wellington account for 51% of New Zealand visitors (Figure 2).

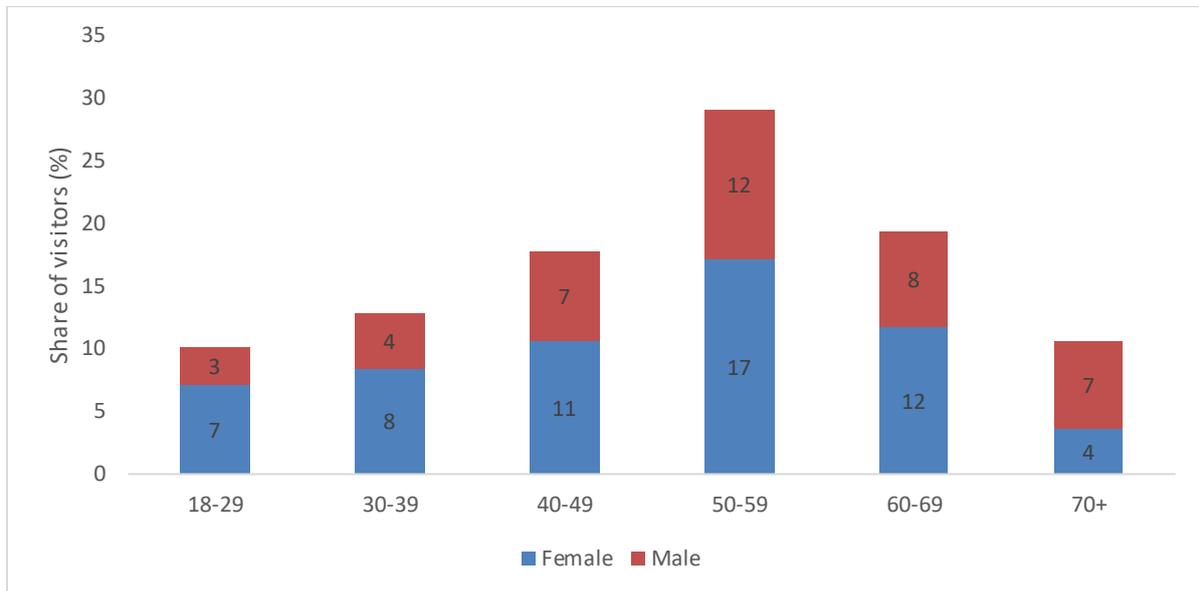
Figure 2: New Zealand visitors (n = 436)



More women (59%) than men (41%) completed the survey (Figure 3). The most significant age categories are the 50 to 59 (29%) and 60 to 69 age groups (20%), followed by those aged

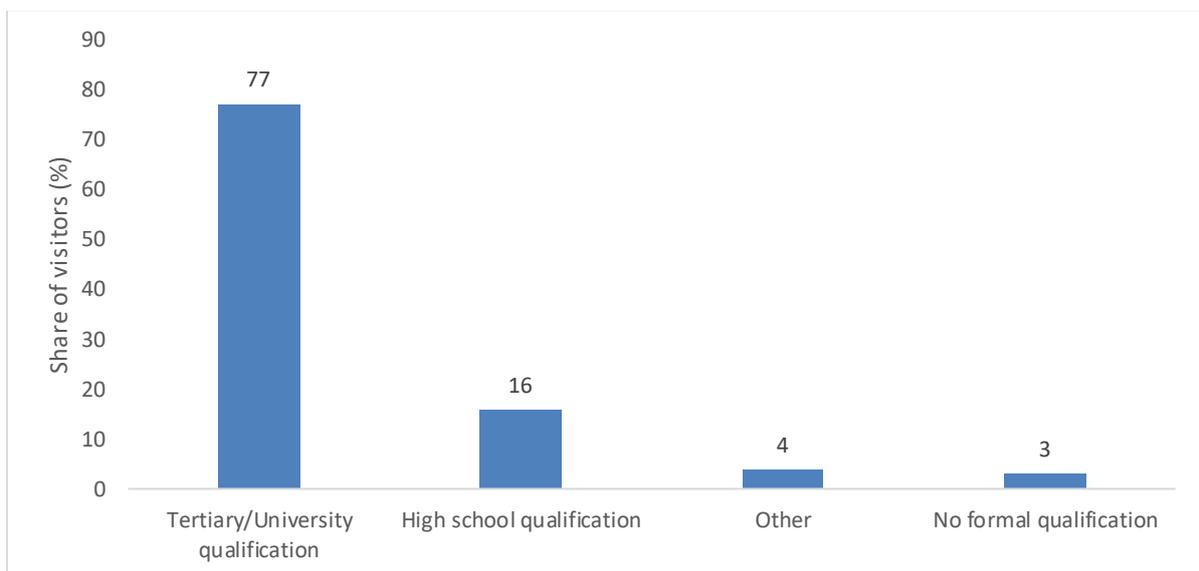
40 to 49 year (18%), 30 to 39 (12%), 70+ groups (11%), and 18 to 29 and (10%). Those under 18 are not surveyed for ethical reasons.

Figure 3: Distribution of age and gender (n = 451)



Visitors are well educated, with over three quarters (77%) of those surveyed having some form of tertiary qualification, and a further 16% having completed a high school education (Figure 4).

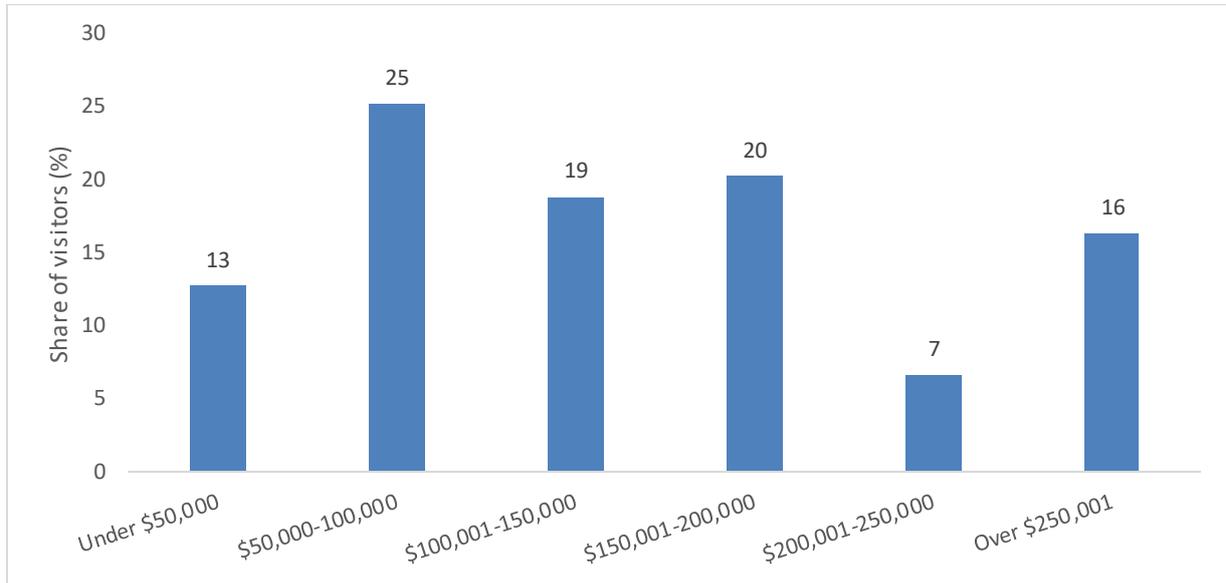
Figure 4: Highest qualification (n = 450)



The average household income is NZ\$172,942. By way of contrast the average household income in July to September 2019 was NZ\$127,651. A quarter of visitors have an annual household income of between NZ\$50,000 and NZ\$100,000. Nearly one in five (19%)

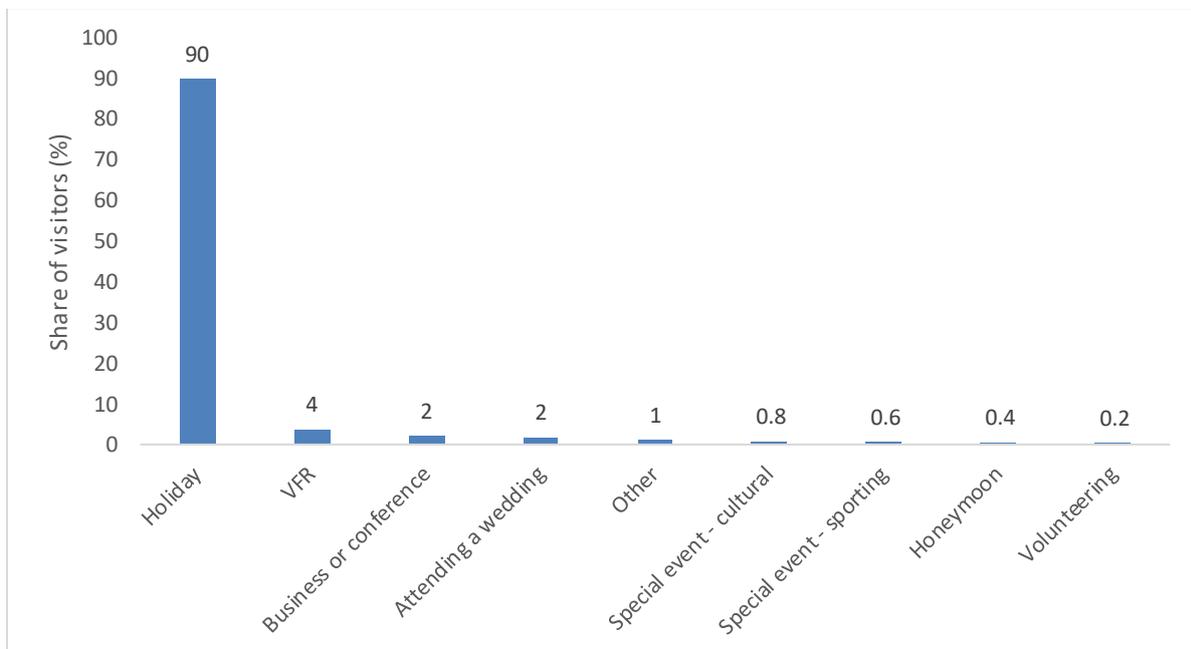
respondents surveyed earn between NZ\$100,001 and NZ\$150,000. A further 43% of respondents have a household income of over NZ\$150,000 per year (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Annual household income in NZD (n = 361)



The predominant purpose of visit to the Cook Islands is a holiday (90%) (Figure 6). Other reasons given include visiting friends or relatives (4%), for business and conference (2%), and attending a wedding (2%).

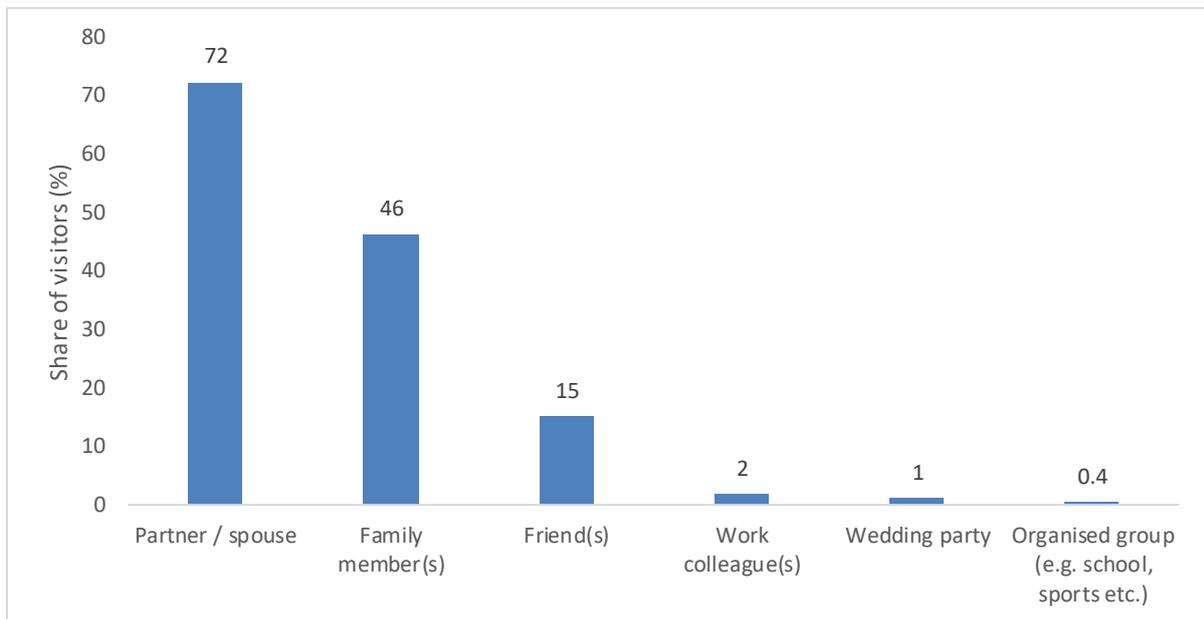
Figure 6: Main purpose of visit (n = 503)



The majority (90%) of visitors travel with one or more companions. Among this group, most travel to the Cook Islands with a partner or spouse (72%). Visitors also travel with other family members (46%), with friends (15%), or with colleagues (2%). Those travelling in an organised

group, with work colleagues, or as part of a wedding party represent smaller shares of the sample (Figure 7).

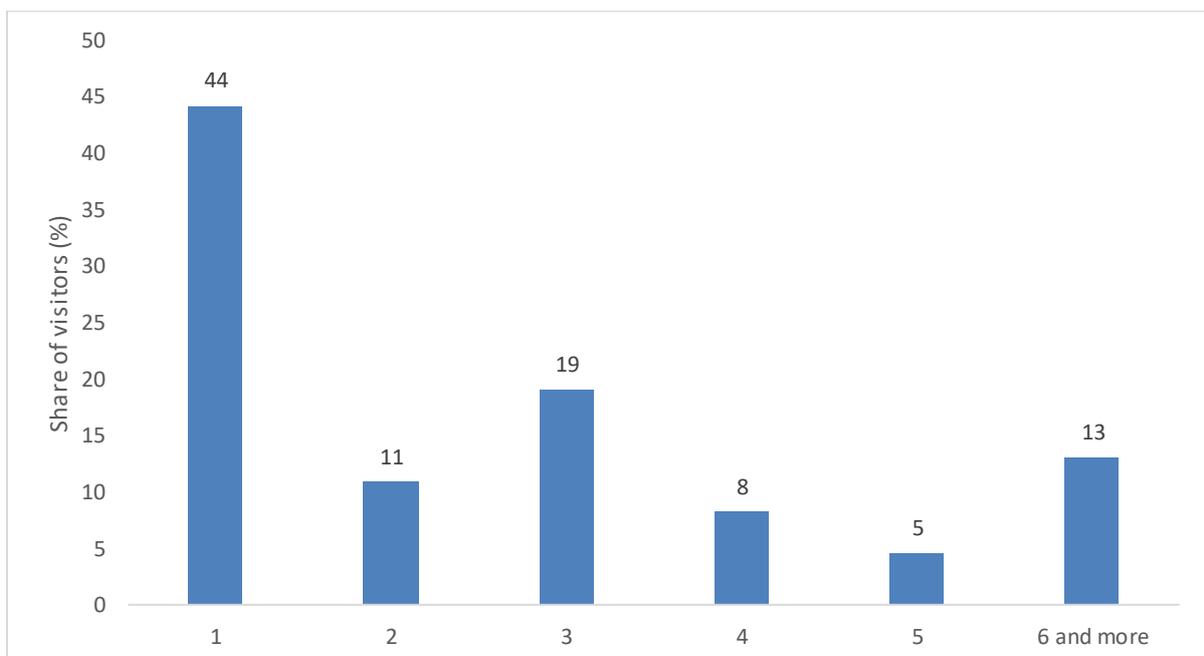
Figure 7: Travelling with whom? (n = 455)



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

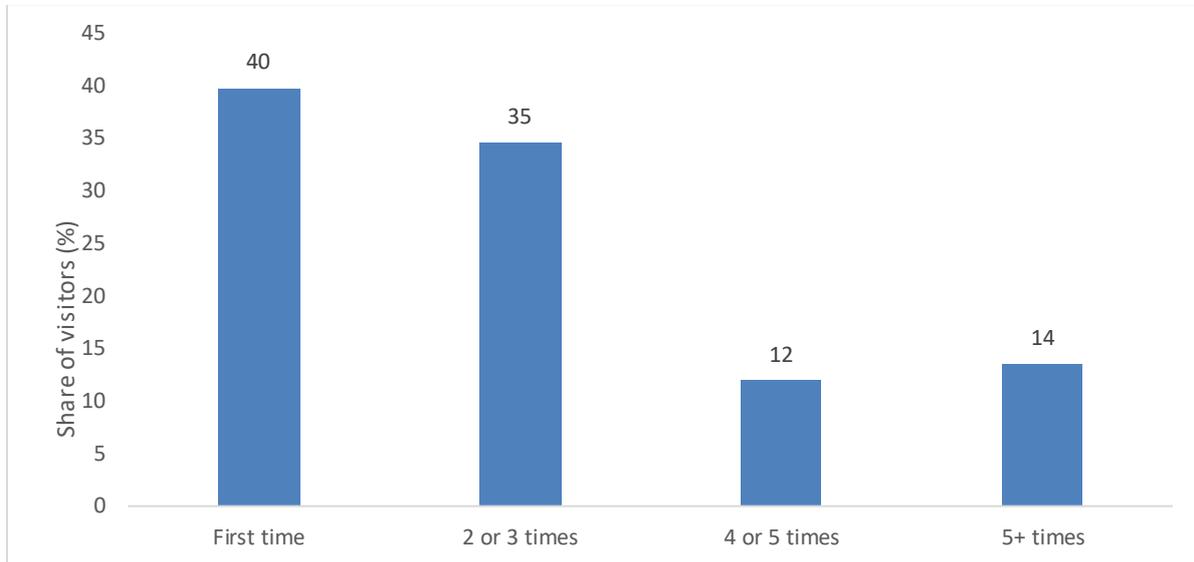
If we exclude those travelling alone, nearly half of visitors (44%) travelled with one companion on their visit to the Cook Islands (Figure 8), and over a third of visitors (38%) travelled with two to four people.

Figure 8: Number of companions on trip (excluding those travelling alone) (n = 414)



Two in five visitors (40%) are on their first visit to the Cook Islands. A further 35% have been to the Cook Islands two or three times before. Over a quarter (26%) have visited four or more times (Figure 9).

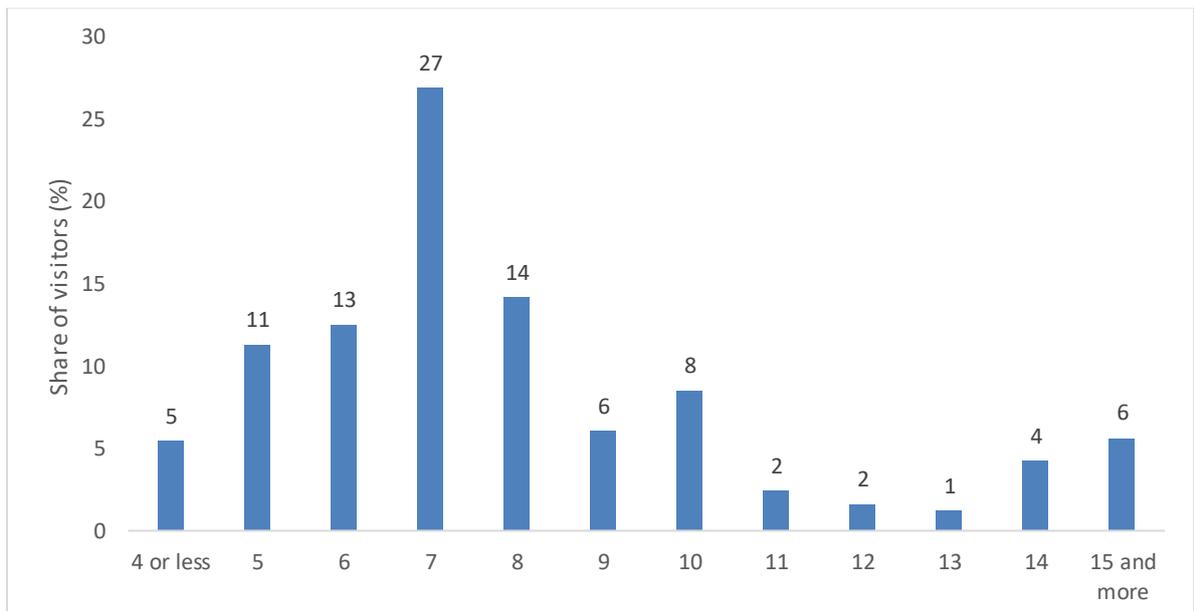
Figure 9: Number of visits to the Cook Islands (n = 442)



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

The average length of stay in the Cook Islands is 8.3 nights (median 7.0) with 85% of visitors spending ten or fewer nights in the country (Figure 10).

Figure 10: Length of stay in nights (n = 427)

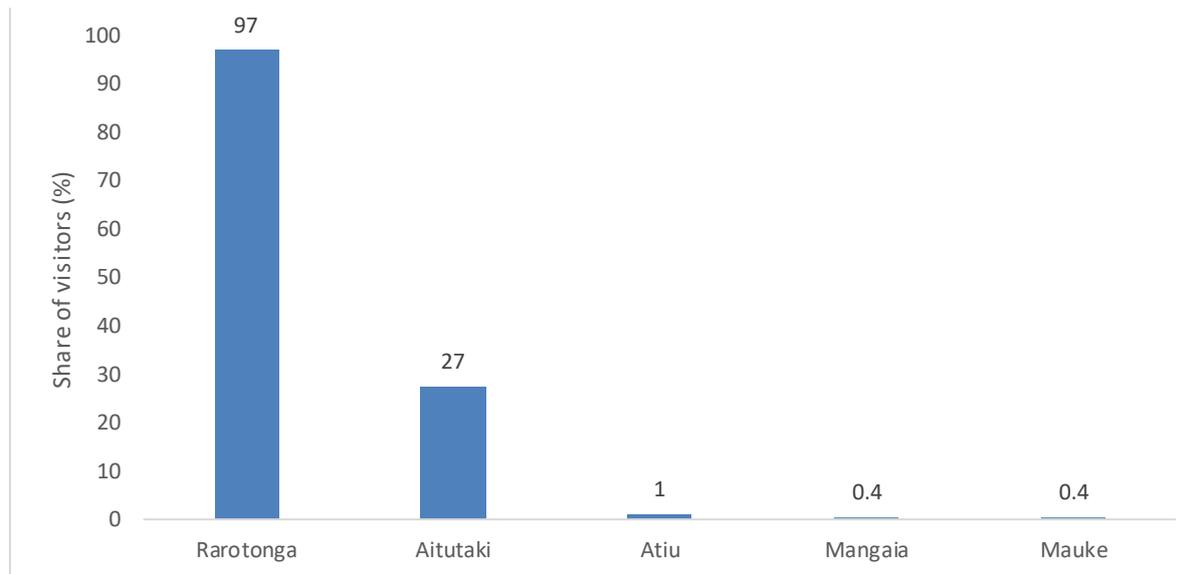


Note: Due to the decimal carry, total does not add up to 100%

Nearly all of visitors (99.8%) travelled to/from the Cook Islands with Air New Zealand.

The vast majority (97%) of visitors to the Cook Islands spend time on Rarotonga, with Aitutaki being the second most visited island (27%). The percentage of visitors travelling to Aitutaki is higher than in the corresponding period of July to September 2019 (21%) and the 2019/20 annual average (20%). Far fewer visitors spend time on Atiu (1%), and other outer islands (less than 1%) (Figure 11).

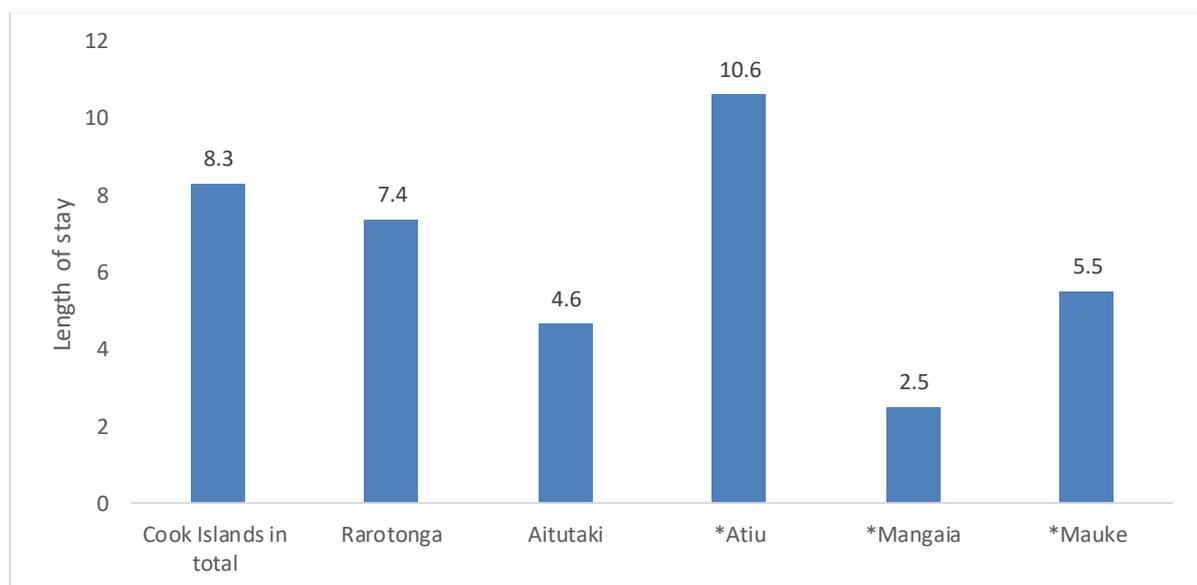
Figure 11: Visited Islands (n = 501)



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

Figure 12: Average length of stay in the Cook Islands and on each island (n = 2-478)

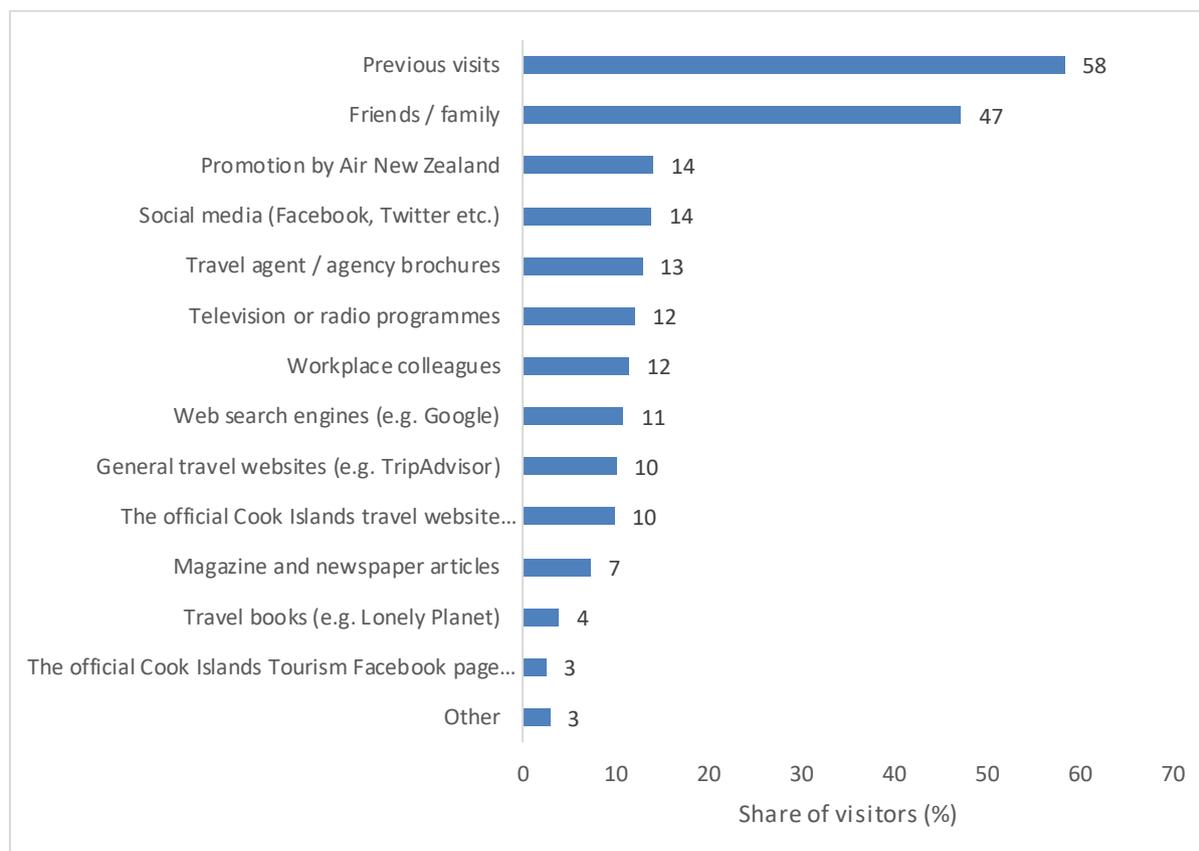


*Note: *n<10*

Information Sources and Purchasing Behaviour

Participants were asked how they found out about the Cook Islands as a holiday destination (Figure 13). Over half (58%) of respondents ranked their previous visit as the most important influence, followed by word of mouth from friends and family members, previous experience (47%), Air NZ promotion (14%), social media (Facebook, Twitter etc) (14%), travel agent/agency brochures (13%), television or radio programmes (12%), workplace colleagues (12%), web search engines (e.g. Google) (11%), general travel websites (e.g. TripAdvisor) (10%), and the official Cook Islands travel website (10%).

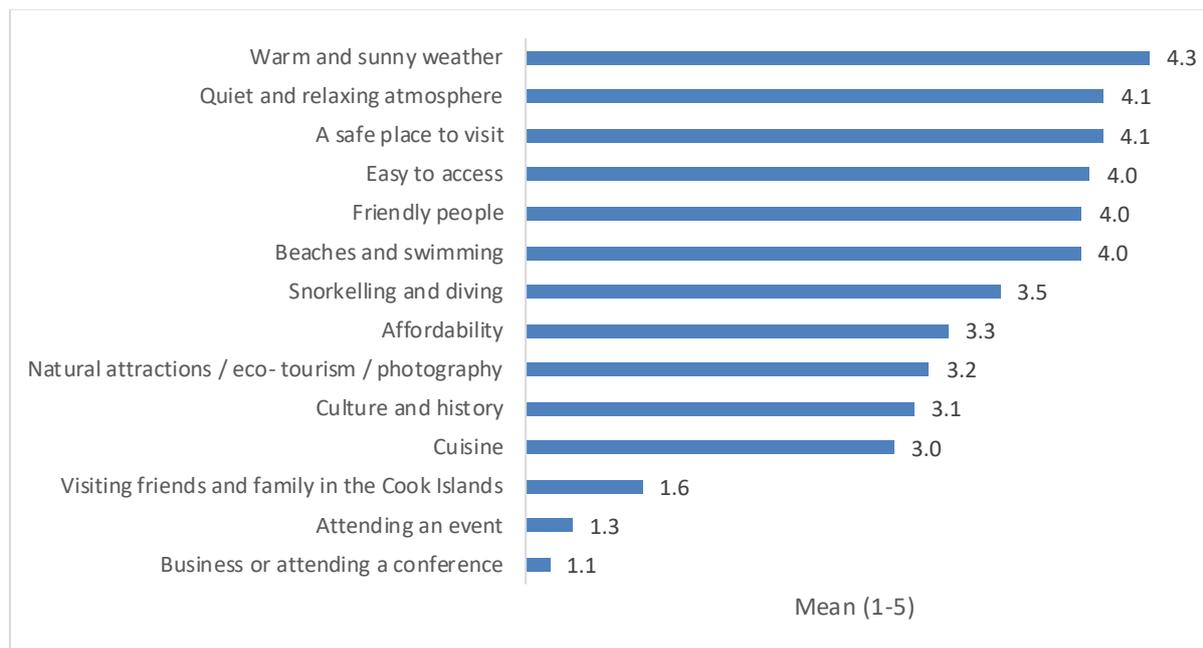
Figure 13: How did you find out about Cook Islands as a destination (n = 503)



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

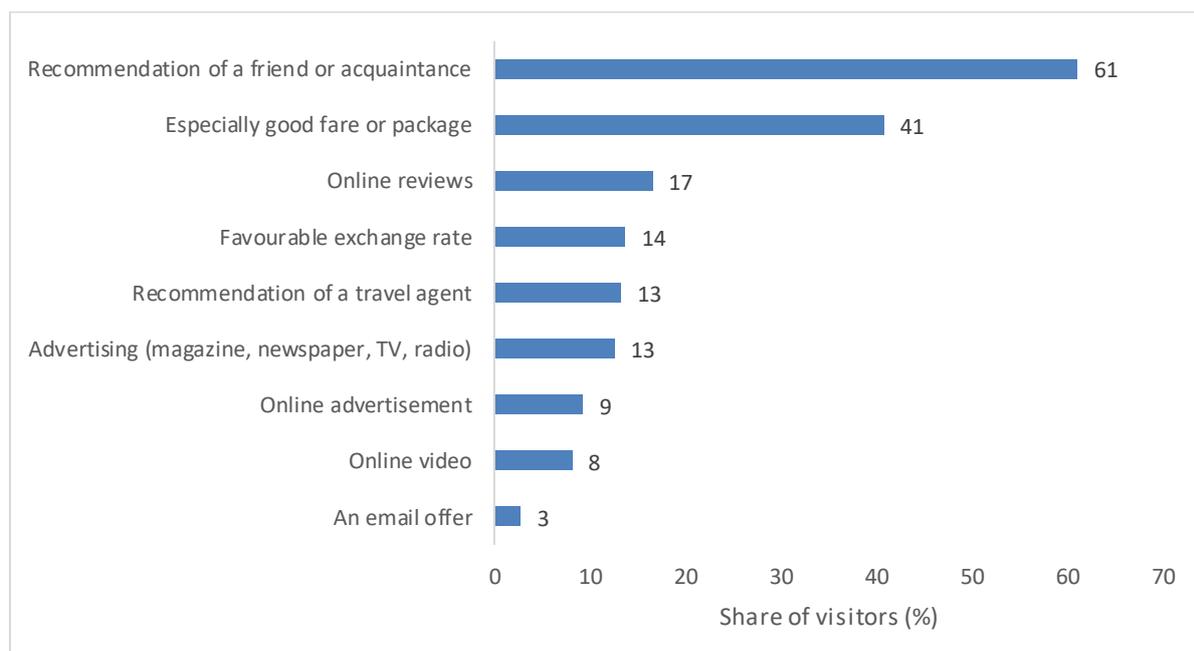
Visitors were asked to think about ‘the influential factors’ that led them to choose the Cook Islands. Warm and sunny weather is ranked as the most influential factor (4.3 out of 5), followed by a quiet and relaxing atmosphere (4.1), safe place to visit (4.1), ease of access (4.0), friendly people (4.0), beaches and swimming (4.0), snorkelling and diving (3.5), and affordability (3.3). Visiting friends and relatives (1.6), attending an event (1.3), and business or conference (1.1) were the least influential factors overall (Figure 14).

Figure 14: Influences on the decision to choose the Cook Islands (n = 453-495)



When it comes to the factors that led to the purchase of the trip to the Cook Islands, nearly two thirds (61%) of visitors mentioned ‘recommendation of a friend or acquaintance’ as the most important factor (Figure 15). Over two in five of those surveyed (41%) indicate that an ‘especially good fare or package’ is important for them in selecting the Cook Islands, followed by online reviews (17%), favourable exchange rates (14%), the recommendation of an agent (13%), traditional advertising (magazine, newspaper, TV, radio) (13%), online advertisements (9%), online videos (8%), and email offers (3%).

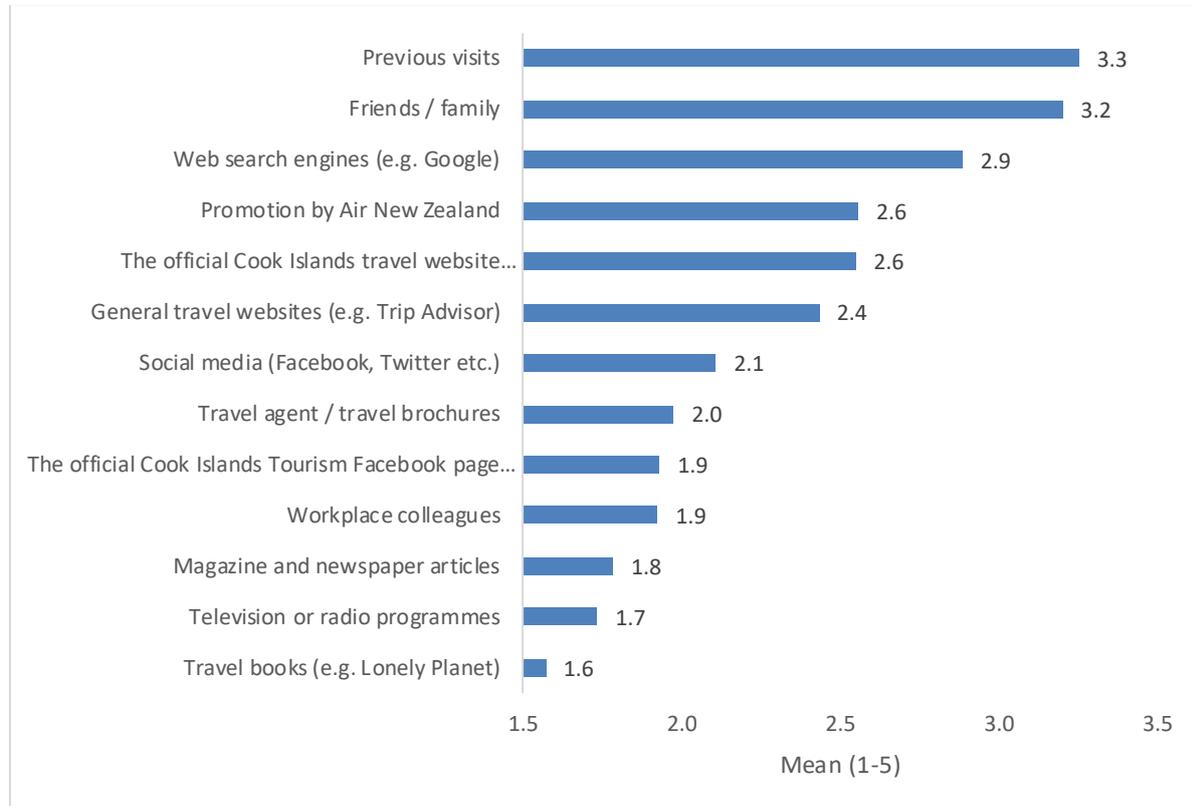
Figure 15: Which factors influenced your selection of the Cook Islands? (n = 429)



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

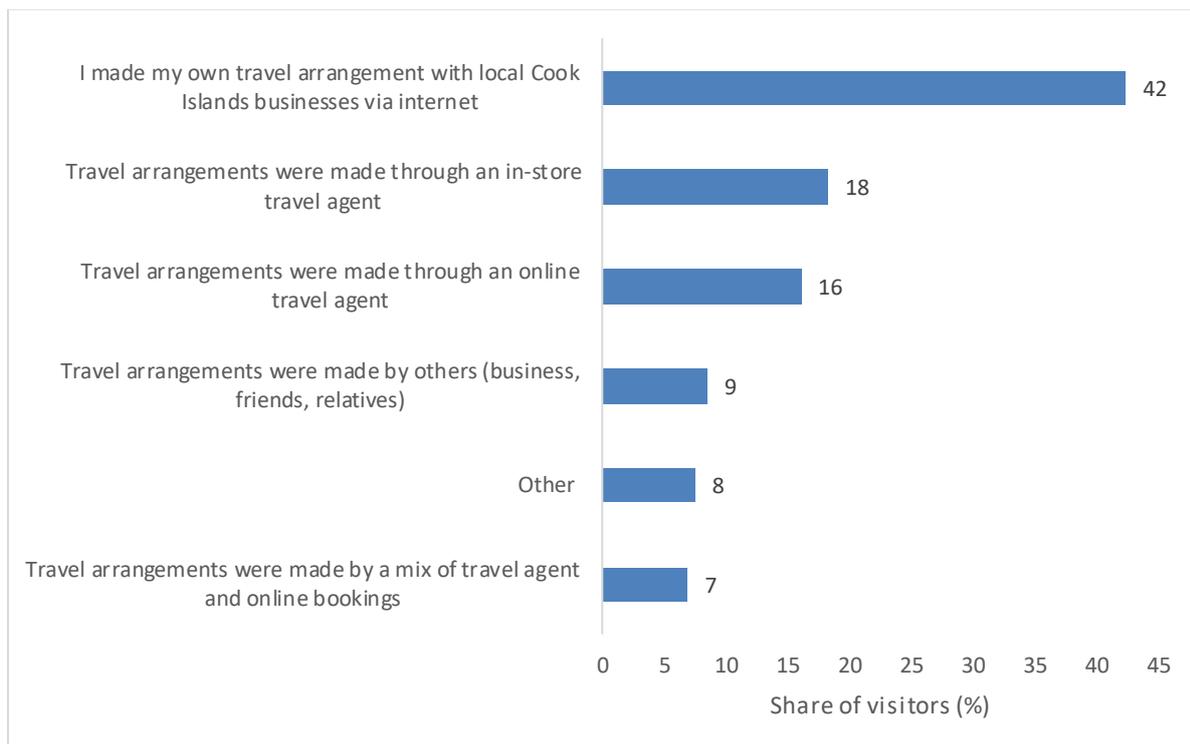
When visitors were asked to rate the importance of the listed information sources used to plan their trip. Previous visits ranked as the most important source (3.3), closely followed by friends and family members (3.2) web search engines (e.g. Google) (2.9) (Figure 16).

Figure 16: Importance of information source used when planning your trip (n = 445-482)



Forty-two percent of travellers surveyed made their own travel arrangements with local Cook Islands businesses through online channels (Figure 17). Nearly one in five visitors surveyed (18%) purchased a pre-paid trip through an in-store travel agent, followed by 16% of visitors whose travel arrangements were made by online travel agent. For 9% of visitors travel arrangements were made by others (9%). A further 9% of those surveyed used a mix of travel agent and online bookings. Other (8%) arrangements included online bookings through Air NZ website, or other channels.

Figure 17: How did you make your travel arrangements for the Cook Islands (n = 502)

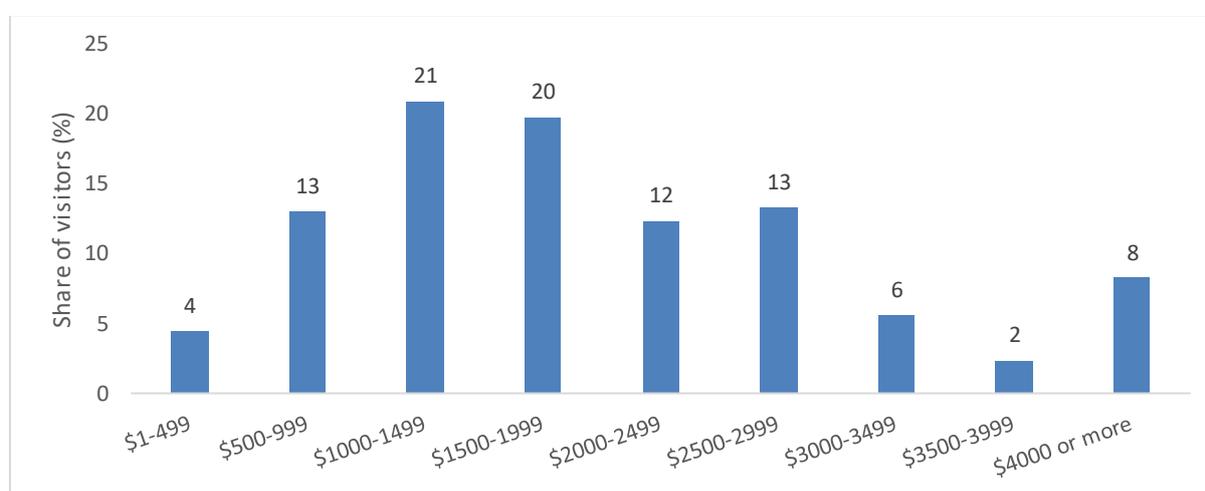


Visitor Expenditure

The IVS asks a range of questions about visitor expenditure, both prior to arrival and while in the Cook Islands. All the figures below are based on respondent estimates of their own spending and any others they spent money on (e.g. spouse, children etc.). The following pre-paid expenditure section is based on the number of adults and children that respondents included in their cost estimates: 1,010 people comprising 829 adults and 181 children.

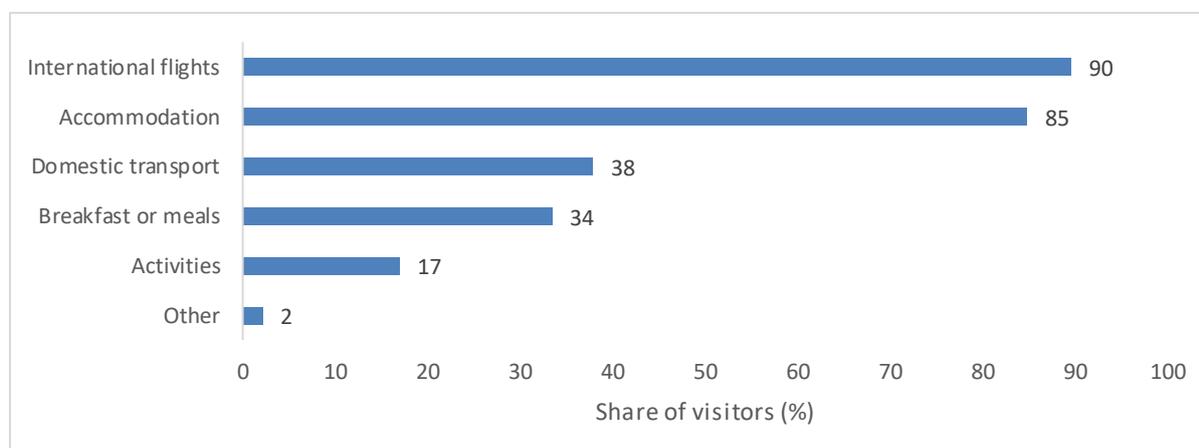
On average, visitors to the Cook Islands spend NZ\$1,931 per person prior to arrival. Over half (53%) of the visitors spend between NZ\$1,000 and NZ\$2,499 prior to arrival (Figure 18). The prepaid figure per person is close to the July to September 2019/20 figure (NZ\$1,903), and slightly lower than the previous full year (average prepaid spend of NZ\$2,049 for 2019/20).

Figure 18: Amount of money spent per person prior to arrival (n = 339)



In addition to international flights, spending prior to arrival includes: accommodation (85%), domestic transport and airport transfers (38%), and meals and breakfast (34%) (Figure 19). Activities are far less likely to be included in pre-paid expenses (17%).

Figure 19: Items included in money spent prior to arrival (n = 358)



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

The total spend per visitor per day while in the Cook Islands (excluding any pre-paid expenditure) is NZ\$208 (Table 1). This figure is 35% higher than both the overall spend figure for 2019/20 (NZ\$154) and 40% higher than the same 1st quarter IVS survey period in 2019/20 (NZ\$148).

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

Expenditure Items	n = 1,117	
	<i>Mean (NZ\$)</i>	<i>(% of spend)</i>
Accommodation	94	45
Restaurant/Café/Bar	48	23
Shopping	12	6
Vehicle rental	12	6
Water-based Activities	10	5
Groceries	9	4.3
Domestic Flights	9	4.3
Land-based Activities	5	2
Other	4	2
Petrol	2	1
Internet	2	1
Public Transport	1	0.4
Total spend (NZ\$)	208	100%

The majority of money spent locally is on accommodation related services (45%), restaurants, cafes and bars (23%), shopping (6%), and vehicle rental (6%). These per person expenditure figures are based on 503 survey responses covering a total of 1,117 people (917 adults and 200 children).

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% 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\$93 and for the average total visit is NZ\$772 (8.3 nights).

By multiplying daily in-country spend by the average stay (8.3 nights) we can see that spend per person per visit while in the Cook Islands is on average NZ\$1,726. The total figure of what is spent locally and what flows back to the Cook Islands from pre-paid expenses is therefore NZ\$301 per visitor per day (\$208 + \$93), or NZ\$2,498 (\$1,726 + \$772) for each visitor. Table 2 shows that 2021 visitors contribute considerably more to the local economy compared with the 2019/20 annual and July to September (1st Qtr) 2019/20 periods.

Table 2: Visitor spend flowing back to the Cook Islands' local economy

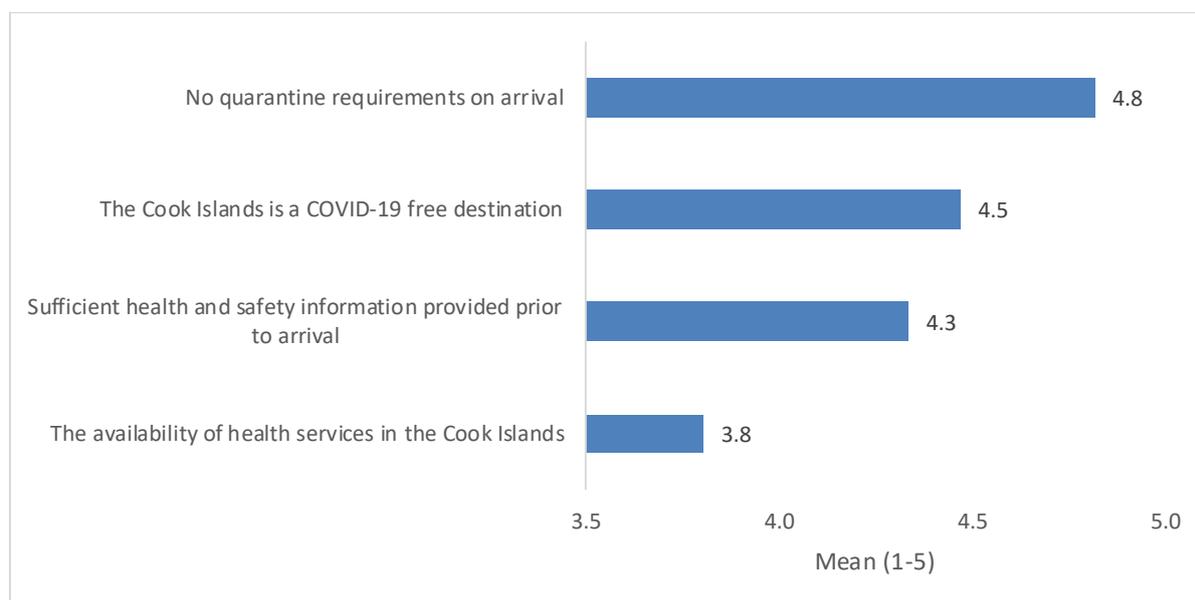
	Jul-Aug 2021	2019-20 Annual	Jul-Sep 2019
Average Spend Prior to arrival (NZ\$)			
Per Person Per Trip	\$1,931	\$2,049	\$1,903
Flowing into local economy rate – estimated 40%			
Per Person Per Trip	\$772	\$820	\$761
Per Person per Day	\$93	\$96	\$92
Length of stay (nights)	8.3	8.5	8.3
Average Local Spend			
Per Person Per Trip	\$1,726	\$1,309	\$1,228
Per Person per Day	\$208	\$154	\$148
Total Economic Impact-Per Trip	\$2,498	\$2,129	\$1,989
Total Economic Impact-Per Day	\$301	\$250	\$240

Perception of COVID-19 Impact and Responses

The travel bubble between the Cook Islands and New Zealand is subject to a set of criteria including airline and airport preparedness, necessary protocols and frameworks. In order to understand visitor perceptions of the pandemic’s impact and related responses in the Cook Islands, several questions related to COVID-19 impacts and responses were inserted for the first time into the International Visitor Survey in 2021.

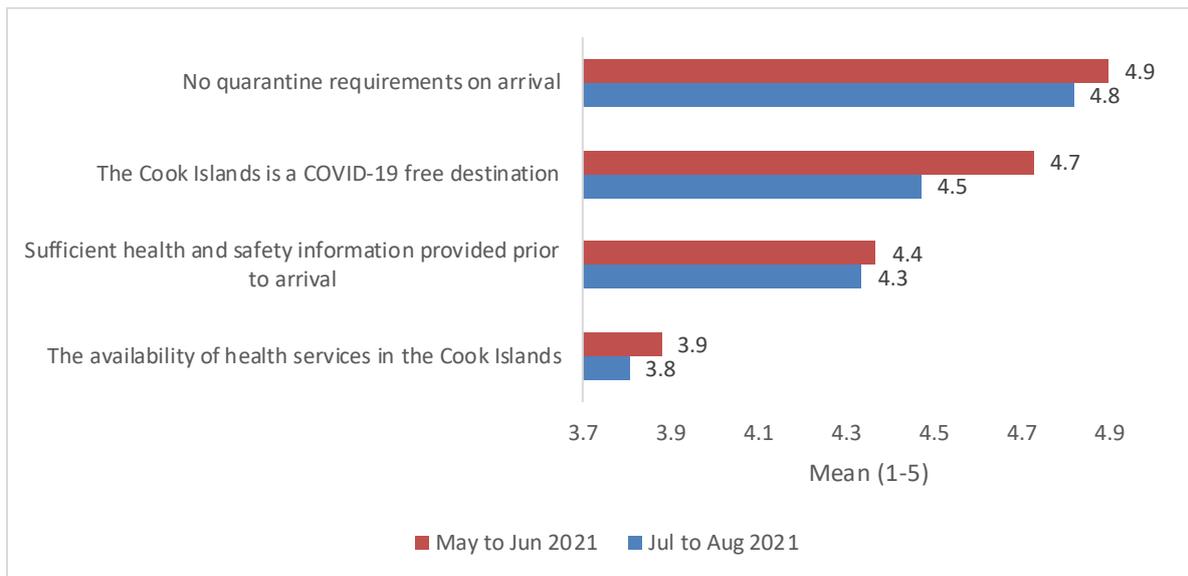
When asked about the important COVID-19 related factors influencing the decision to travel to the Cook Islands, “no quarantine requirement on arrival” was ranked as the most important factor, followed by “the Cook Islands is a COVID-19 free destination” (Figure 20).

Figure 20: The important factors in your decision to travel to the Cook Islands (n=425-453)



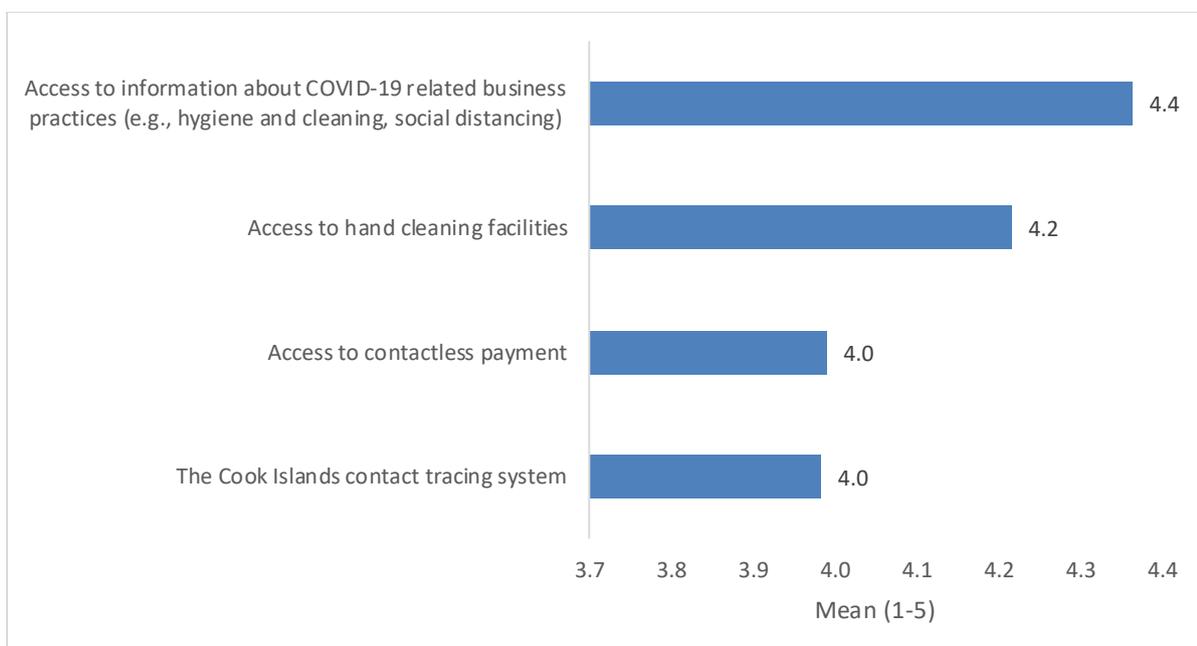
We can see that all factors listed are rated as slightly less important by the July to August visitors (Figure 21) than their May to June 2021 counterparts.

Figure 21: The important factors in your decision to travel to the Cook Islands – COVID time series



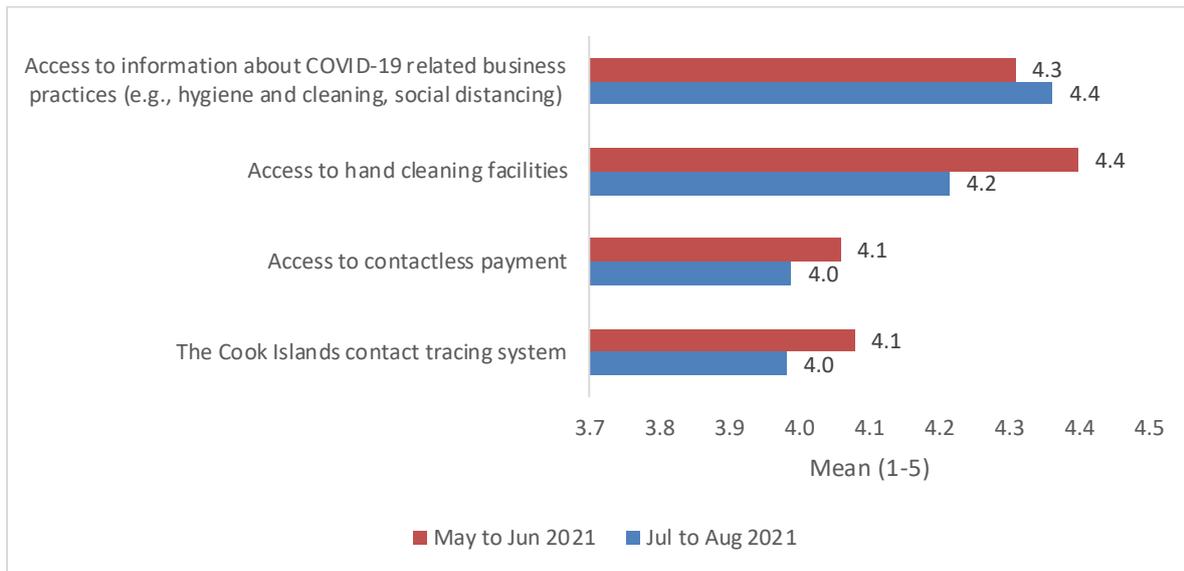
In terms of the COVID-19 responses in the Cook Islands (Figure 22), visitors feel satisfied with easy access to information about COVID-19 related business practices (4.4 out of 5), and access to hand and cleaning facilities (4.2). Visitors expressed a relatively lower level of satisfaction with access to contactless payment options and contact tracing system (both 4.0).

Figure 22: Degree of satisfaction with COVID-19 responses (n=404-435)



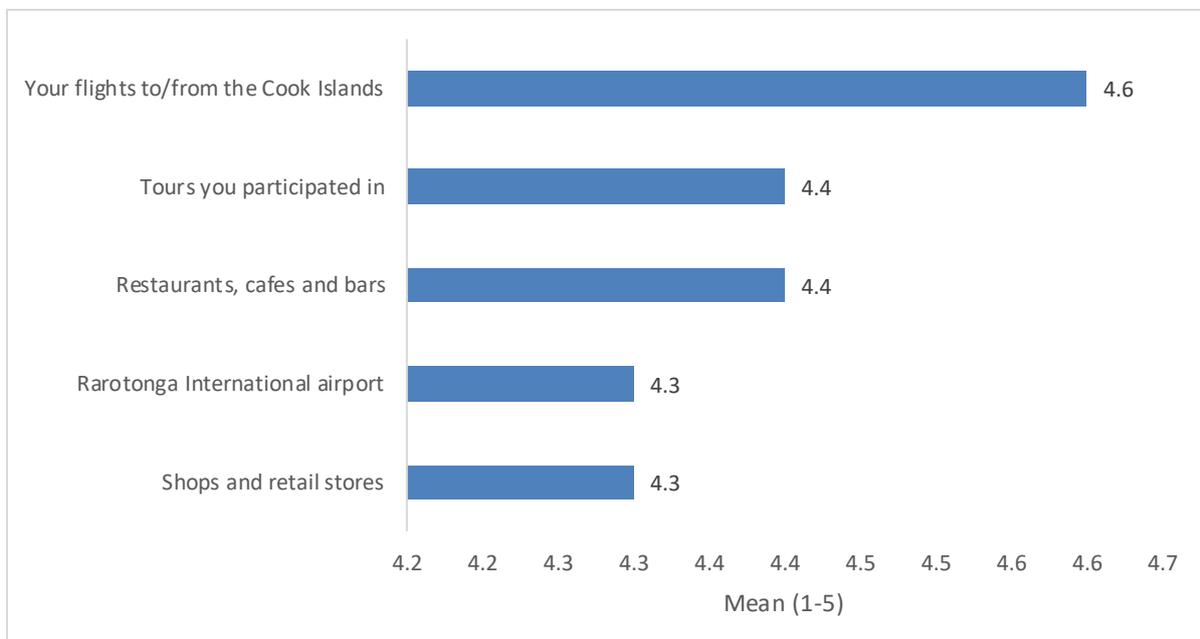
July to August visitors feel slightly more satisfied with the ability to access information about COVID-19 related business practices than their May/June counterparts. Across the other variables however we see a slight reduction in satisfaction. (Figure 23).

Figure 23: Degree of satisfaction with COVID-19 responses – COVID time series



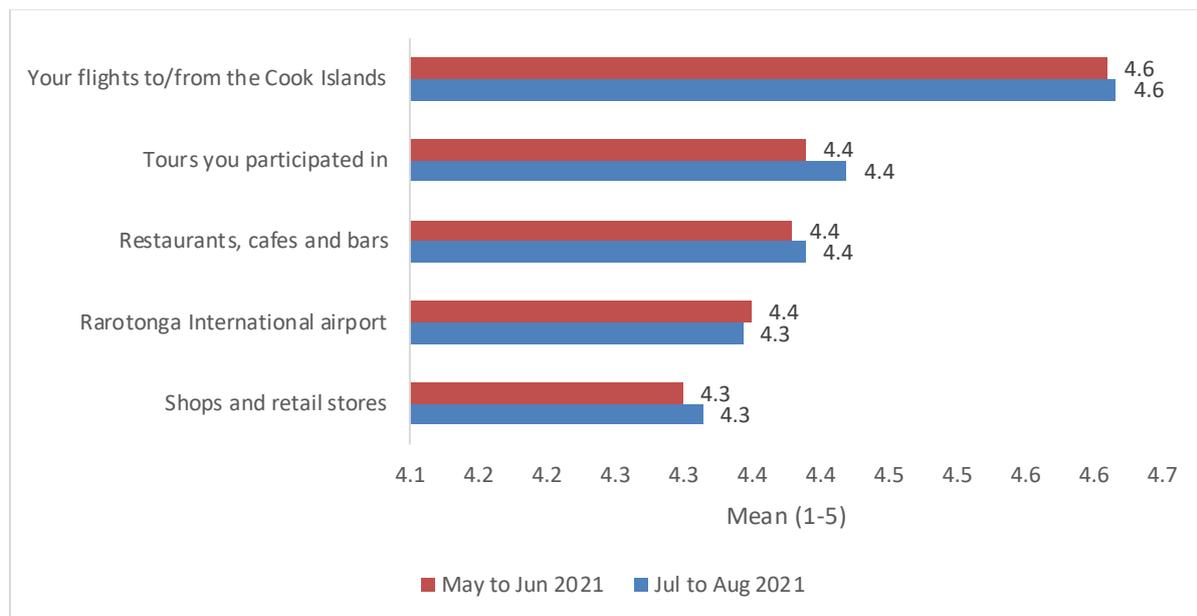
Visitors were asked to rate their level of satisfaction with health and safety measures during their trip to the Cook Islands (Figure 24). Overall, respondents give high scores (all above 4 out of 5) across a range of activities and sectors. Shops and retail stores received the lowest score.

Figure 24: Degree of satisfaction with health and safety measures (n=281-448)



July to August visitors shows almost identical levels of satisfaction with health and safety measures in the Cook Islands compared to their May/June counterparts (Figure 25).

Figure 25: Degree of satisfaction with health and safety measures – COVID time series



Some respondents provided further comments about their perceptions of COVID-19 and its management during their time in the Cook Islands. Among those comments, over half (52%) are positive in nature, including: appreciation of the well managed COVID-19 precaution system; amazement at the high vaccination rate among Cook Islanders, the ability to be able to travel to the Cook Islands easily and directly from NZ, and feeling safe to be in a COVID-free country.

Positive comments

“I was told everyone in Rarotonga had been vaccinated when we went there. So felt safe and the Cooksafe app was great.”

“Was very much under control and all I spoke to were very happy with how things had been handled on the rock.”

“We went to Raro because we didn’t have to isolate coming home but were pleasantly surprised... Definitely go back to try everything we missed.”

“I will be on the first plane back if you open in November. Already booked but had to defer because of NZ lockdown.”

“Was very important to us Rarotonga being Covid free but still practicing high Safety procedure.”

“Because the border had only just opened some things weren't operating, which we totally understand. The safety measures and contact tracing system were great.”

“We loved how relaxed the local people were. There was no hysteria, masks, crazy people, and you should encourage that. COVID will become endemic and the data

isn't really very scary at all. Some people just want to live their lives."

"It was safe and NZ is not too far away, do not imagine that CI health services could cope with an outbreak however the care and mitigation to be as safe as possible is evident."

"Raro was the ONLY warm place Aucklanders realistically could go to and come back from in July with no quarantine. This is how we chose the destination."

"The fact you were 95% vaccinated was a big part of our reason to visit you, not Australia at the time."

Over a third (36%) of comments were negative in nature and included: problems using the COVID-19 scanning card and APP, confusion or concerns over certain COVID-19 protocols, and long wait upon arrivals.

Negative comments

"The Tracer app didn't work in many of the shops we visited. We both use the app all the time in New Zealand and were looking to do our part in Rarotonga as well."

"Some people were scanning but not all. Not all facilities scanning machines were working."

"It took several days before we knew how the Rarotongan contact tracer app actually worked so not many tourists, including us, used it at all - and I was expecting to use it all the time."

"Health & Safety measures did not seem to be in place, except for being encouraged to use the Cook Islands tracking code."

"During our flight the man behind us had a very bad cough and his mask was below his nose. I believe the air hostesses should ask people to wear their masks properly."

"Was concerned about bringing Covid from New Zealand. Was aware that locals may have been apprehensive about tourists."

"Had to fill in forms on arrival that we had already filled in online. Could have given the forms to us while on the plane. Took ages to get through customs because of forms."

"There were passengers fainting in the heat waiting in the long line for immigration, with no water available."

A further 7% of comments gave constructive suggestions for possible improvements offered best wishes for the future.

Suggestions and best wishes for the future

"Need a bigger area / better queuing system on entry to airport, too crowded and no

proper instructions to arrivals.”

“Having individual air conditioning/unit is very important going forward.”

“It's a breath of fresh air to be in a country that has no virus. Just hope that this little paradise doesn't fall to the virus cause I don't know how the Cook Island people can handle it. The Island looks so beautiful and untouched.”

“Keep it COVID free. Open to NZ only for now. Fakaau lahi Rarotonga.”

Visitor Satisfaction

Visitors were asked to indicate their overall satisfaction with their experience of their visit to the Cook Islands on a scale from 1 'very dissatisfied' to 5 'very satisfied' (Figure 26). Seven in ten (70%) 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. The average overall satisfaction score is 4.6 which is slightly lower than May to June 2021 period (4.7). The percentage saying they are 'very satisfied' in July-August 2021 is higher than in July to September 2019 (65%) and the 2019/20 annual average (67%).

Figure 26: Overall satisfaction with experience of the Cook Islands (n = 458)

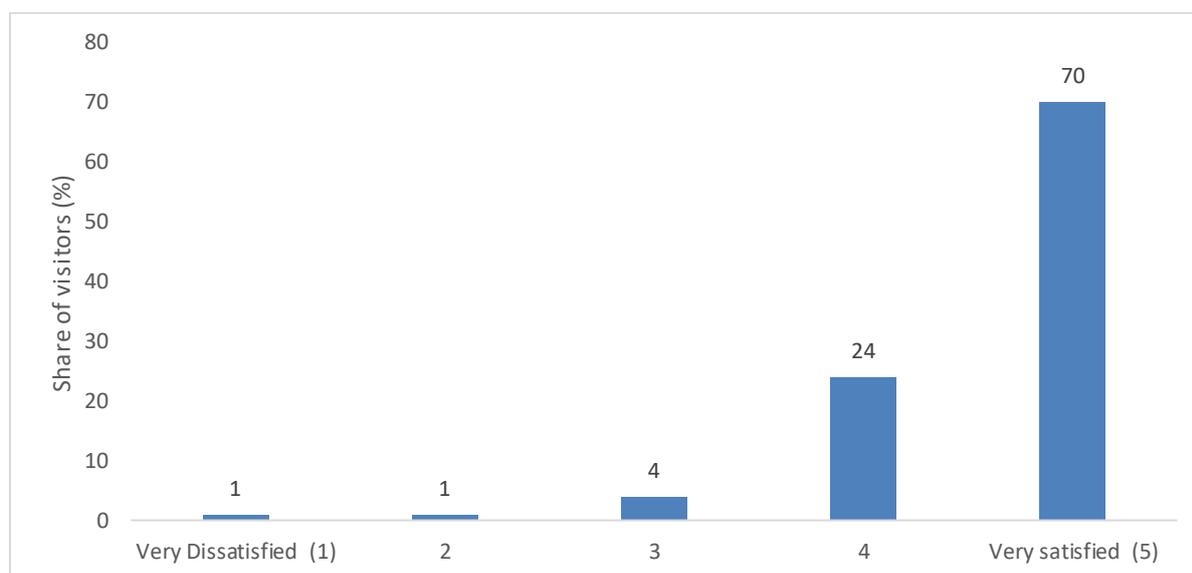


Figure 27 shows the percentage of respondents who undertook specific activities while on their visit to the Cook Islands. Almost all visitors visited a beach (98%) and frequented at least one restaurant or café (99%) during their trip. Most of the respondents either go swimming (95%) or visit a local market (84%), and 84% of visitors have also tried snorkelling.

Visitor satisfaction is generally high with all activities undertaken (almost all registering more than 4 out of a possible high of 5) (Figure 28). Activities involving cultural interaction (average satisfaction of 4.5) rank the highest, followed by land-based products (4.4), shopping (4.4), and water-based experiences (4.1). It should be noted here that Tumunu on Atiu, tattoo services, and bonefishing are characterised by relatively low numbers of participants (n = 8-19).

Figure 27: Degree of participation in activities (n = 8-494)

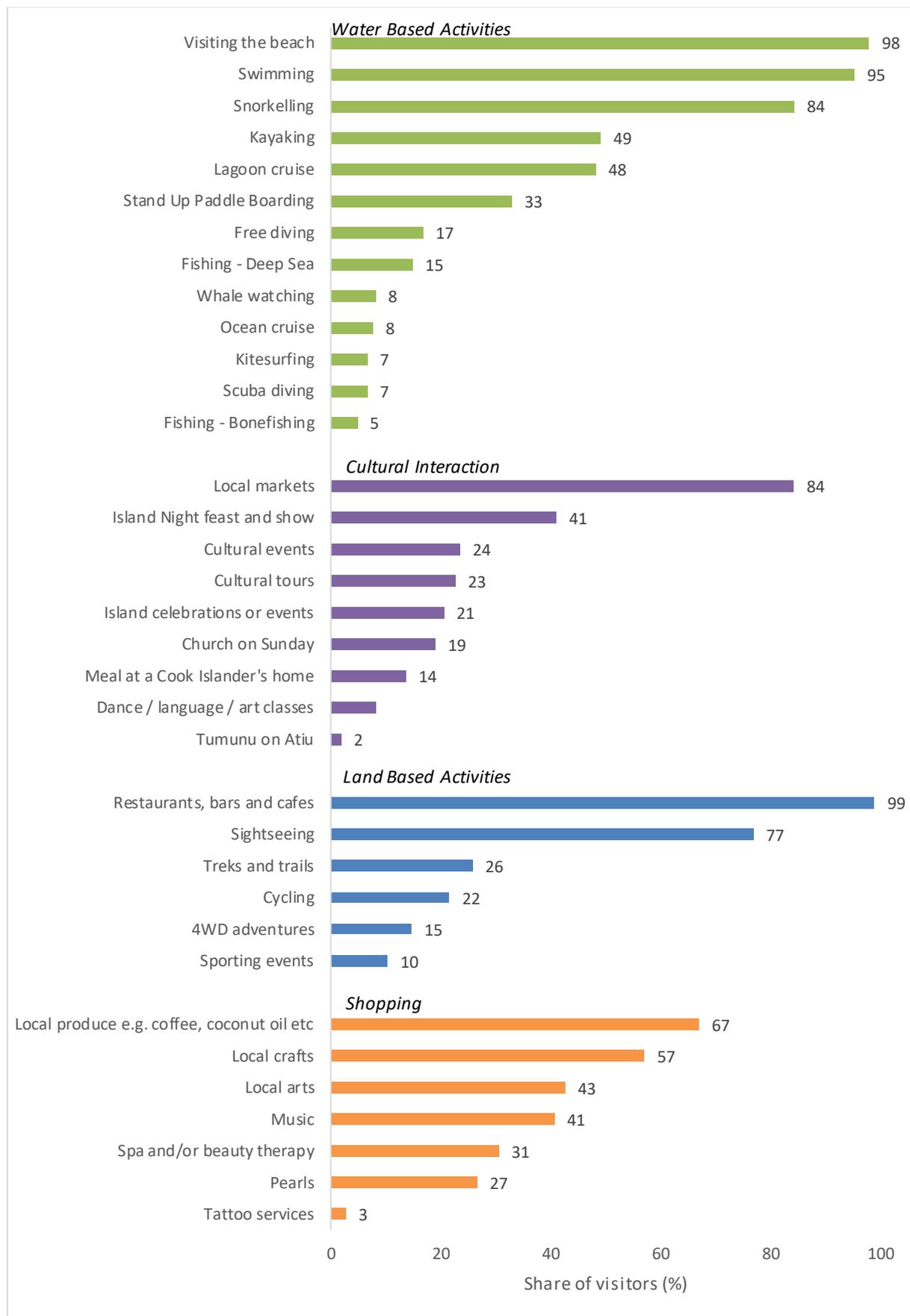
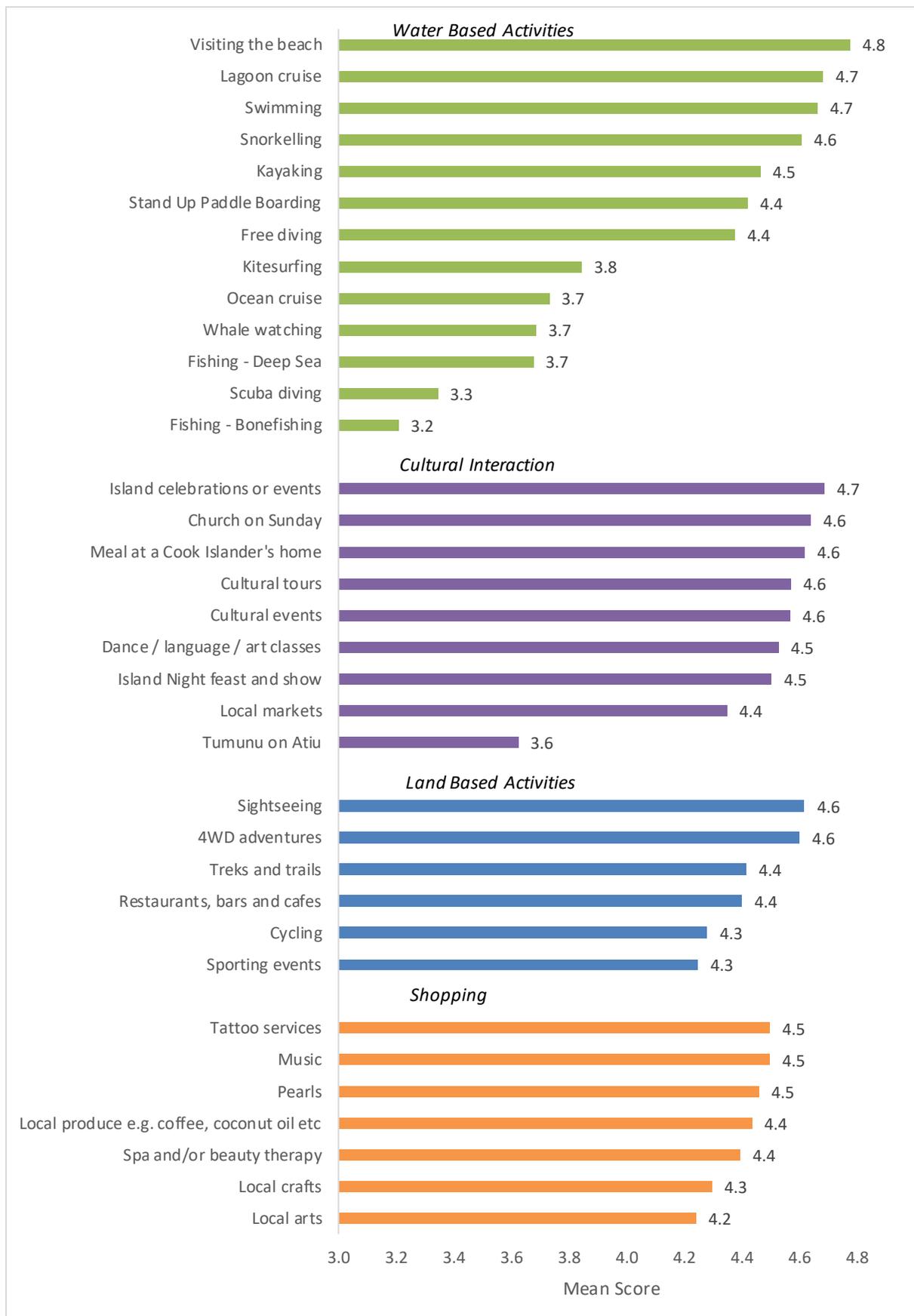


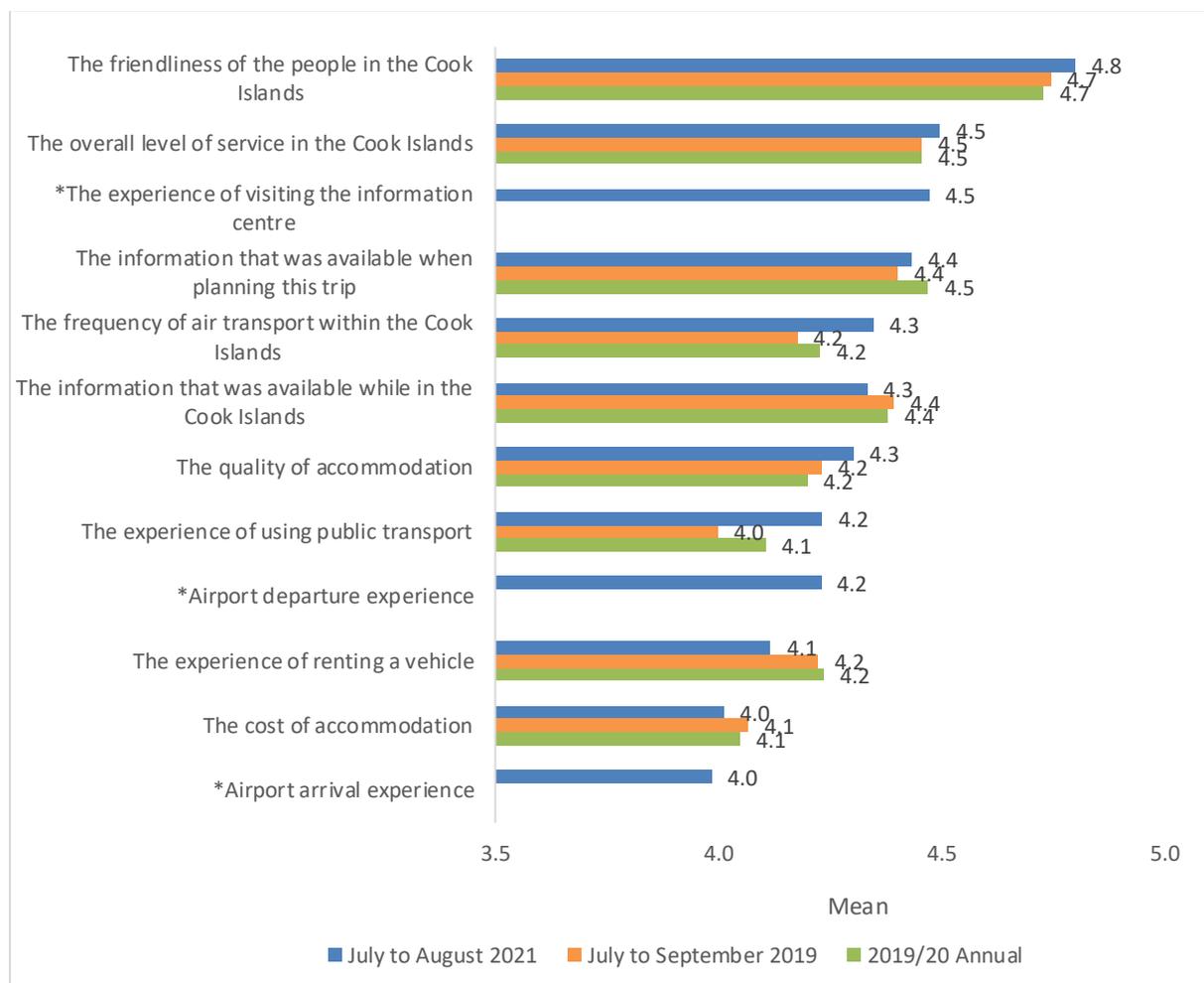
Figure 28: Degree of satisfaction with activities participated in



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 July to August 2021 are compared to the annual average for 2019/20, and the same quarter of 2019/20 (Figure 29).

Respondents consistently highlight the friendliness of the people in the Cook Islands. As can be seen from the figure below, the degree of satisfaction with the majority of items is higher in July-August 2021 than for July to September 2019/20 and the annual average for 2019/20. Satisfaction with the airport arrival and departure experience, and visiting the information centre are new items added from 2021.

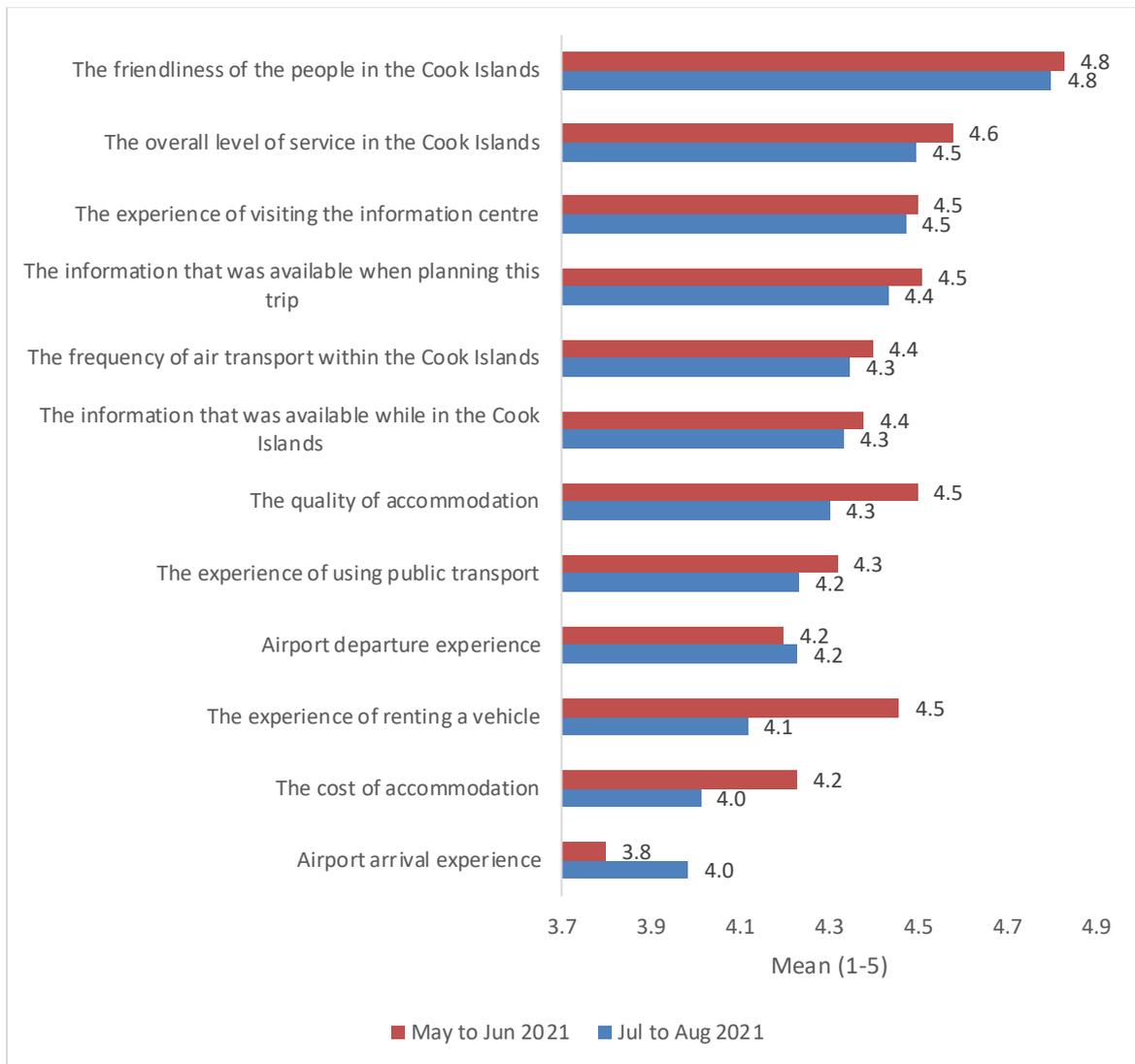
Figure 29: Degree of satisfaction with Cook Islands services – time series



Note: * New items from 2021

July to August 2021 visitors show lower levels of satisfaction with most of the items presented compared with May - June 2021 visitors (Figure 30). Satisfaction with the airport arrival and departure experience remain low, but slightly improved from the May to June period.

Figure 30: Degree of satisfaction with Cook Islands services – COVID time series



Most appealing aspects of the Cook Islands

Visitors were asked “What did you find most attractive or appealing about the Cook Islands on your most recent visit?” (Table 3). The most appealing elements of the Cook Islands experience are the natural environment (53%), the friendly and welcoming local people (35%), the tourist attractions and activities on offer (29%) and the peacefulness and relaxing atmosphere of the country (24%). Smaller numbers of comments focused on aspects such as food and beverage (15%), accommodation (7%), COVID-19 resilience and travel availability (5%), and level of service (4%).

Table 3: Most appealing aspects of the Cook Islands (n=469)

Themes	Share of respondent comments (%)*
Environment, cleanliness & weather	53
Local people	35
Activities, attractions and entertainment, events	29
Atmosphere	24
Food and beverage	15
Accommodation	7
COVID-19 resilience and travel availability	5
Level of service	4
Culture	3
Convenience	3
Being able to visit family or friends	2
Emotional connection	2
Family friendly or safe destination	2
Un-commercial or touristy	2
Overall good experience	1
Price of goods and services	1

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

Environment, cleanliness & weather

The beautiful scenery, natural environment, the beaches and lagoons, and warm weather in the Cook Islands were mentioned in over half of the respondent comments (53%) about the most appealing aspects of their trip. Words like ‘beautiful’, ‘tropical’, ‘fantastic’, ‘wonderful’, and ‘unique’ to describe the attraction of the local environment. Most comments here focused on the beauty and the cleanliness of the beaches and lagoons, the warm weather, and the beautiful scenery. Comments included:

“Idyllic beaches and clear lagoon waters with the added tropical weather.”

“The beaches and weather and accessibility from NZ.”

"Rarotonga is so beautiful and a very safe haven for tourists, as long as the tourists don't go disrespect the Cook Islanders hospitality."

"The peace and quite and warm weather."

"The scenery and sunsets."

"Enjoyed the local dogs and even the chickens and roosters...unique to the island."

"Wonderful weather and laidback experience - being able to have a rental vehicle to visit and sightsee all the different spots independently."

"It was cost effective for the wedding had amazing service and amazing landscapes to explore."

"So great to get a tropical island holiday again and return to the beautiful Cook Islands!"

"The beauty of the place, the beaches, the bush and the holiday atmosphere."

Local people

Over a third (35%) of comments expressed that the warmth and welcoming nature of local people was the most appealing aspect of their travel experience. Key words that dominated the responses include "friendly", "welcoming", "lovely", "beautiful", "helpful", "kind", and "wonderful". Comments included:

"The peaceful calm attitude everywhere that we went. Friendly people everywhere including other tourists who were obviously enjoying their break like us, without the hustle and bustle that often occurs when on holiday."

"I love the Cook Island and found a visit there very special. Great for relaxing and to recharge, wonderful people. A very special place and I hope to visit again very soon."

"Polite and friendly greetings from the locals."

"The people were so lovely and didn't hassle us."

"The island is very casual, the people are very good to deal with, in fact the whole experience was very satisfying and comfortable."

"Friendly enthusiastic locals. Anxious to help in any situation..."

"The locals were so friendly and couldn't do enough for us."

"People seemed pleased to have NZers back which was nice. Everyone was friendly and pleased to see us."

"The People! Always friendly, polite and helpful. The islands themselves...a true slice of paradise."

“Locals were happy to have visitors, very welcoming. Great.”

“The wonderful locals that I had the pleasure to meet and socialise with.”

Activities, attractions, entertainment & events

Activities, attractions, entertainment, and events featured in twenty-nine percent of respondent comments on the most appealing elements of their visit. The availability of water related activities including snorkelling, swimming, and lagoon cruise are mentioned frequently. In addition, land-based activities like cycling, 4WD adventure, and markets are also mentioned by many respondents. Aitutaki lagoon is the top attraction mentioned. Comments included:

“The fishing in the lagoon at Aitutaki was great.”

“The beach, weather and snorkelling... And the job done tidying up Wigmore's waterfall, it was ruined last time I visited.”

“Aitutaki lagoon with the different cruise on one foot island and atolls. Amazing food (ikamata), amazing snorkeling, people friendly, relax atmosphere.”

“First time in Rarotonga. I am absolutely glad we took a trip to Aitutaki and had taken the cruise to Tapuaeta'i. With family and then friends just made the trip more comfortable. Many people have passed great comments about Rarotonga over the years. Meitaki Maata!!”

“The quality of restaurants and entertainment. The scenery and sunsets. The snorkelling in the lagoon and on lagoon tour.”

“Snorkelling, swimming with turtles, stingray.”

“Beach, snorkelling, kayaking.”

“...we really loved cycling around the island (several times).”

“Have been to Raro about 15 times but this was first trip to Aitutaki which was very impressive.”

“Mum and I did the 4 WD adventure ‘Raro Safari tours’ which was excellent.”

“We enjoyed our snorkelling and a walk across Rarotonga. My husband and son great a great time deepsea fishing in Aitutaki. My son and daughter really enjoyed sailing in small boats in Aitukaki, and the owner was very helpful given that he wasn't fully up and running.”

“Enjoyed cycling around Atiu, drinking the coffee grown on the island and hearing the history of Atiu.”

“Aitutaki was simply amazing and the vaka cruises were amazing and have

recommended to others.”

“Lagoon activities family favorite, cultural night and Muri night market!”

“Safe and attractive beach/lagoon - easy access to snorkelling, reasonably easy to get around by public bus, good variety of low-cost activities for family.”

Atmosphere

The Cook Islands is described as a very peaceful, relaxing, and laid-back destination by respondents and this atmosphere is mentioned as an appealing factor in a quarter of the comments made. Some of the words used to describe the atmosphere in Cook Islands are “relaxing”, “peaceful”, “calm”, “unwind”, and “laid back”. Comments included:

“The relaxing atmosphere.”

“I’ve been to the Cook Islands many times and have done most of the activities available. I just wanted a relaxing holiday with my family.”

“The peaceful calm attitude everywhere that we went.”

“Enjoyed the laidback island time vibe.”

“The ability to do nothing but still get great coffee and food in the sun.”

“Just being able to relax - which is specifically why we went.”

“A very relaxing friendly place to visit with good food and very helpful people.”

“I love visiting the Cook Islands. Just wanted to relax and rest!”

“The quiet slow paced way of living and life.”

“Rarotonga is beautiful, relaxing and I feel a real connection to the island. I love how rarotonga smells.”

Food and beverage

Food and beverages were identified as an appealing aspect in fifteen percent of respondent comments. Comments focused on the quality and variety of food and beverage and fresh produce available in the Cook Islands. “Amazing”, “excellent”, “high standard/quality”, “fabulous”, “local” and “fresh” are some frequent terms to describe the attraction of food for tourists. Many visitors mentioned local sea food and fruit. Comments included:

“The restaurants and quality of food were outstanding and good value. Also wine and beer well priced.”

“The food that the locals cooked themselves, me and my friends enjoyed it.”

"Food was fresh and fabulous."

"The food was better than I expected..."

"Big variety of options for eating out."

"We were surprised it was a gastronomic experience. We had thought we'd be eating food truck food but no the restaurants were great."

"Coconut drink very yummy."

"High food quality at restaurants was unexpected pleasure."

Accommodation

Seven percent of respondent comments featured the accommodation they stayed in with people referring to the facilities, location, in-house restaurant and cafes, and the friendly and supportive staff. Comments included:

"The holiday home we stayed was excellent & owners we great to deal with. Going back to same place next year."

"The quality of our hotel accommodation including service and food."

"Our resort and in particular the location of our accommodation unit being able to step straight out onto the beach, how peaceful it was and how private it was."

"Our accommodation provided the majority of our needs...but was very sad to see the island and business struggling because of people leaving to find employment in NZ. It left the Cook Islands in a very vulnerable situation."

"At The Edgewater resort, my 7 year son loved the coconut kids club."

"Accommodation on Muri excellent."

COVID-19 resilience and appreciation of travel availability

Five percent of respondent comments expressed appreciation at being able to travel to the Cook Islands during the pandemic, and the efforts local people made for re-opening the country. Comments included:

"It was some place I could travel to from NZ without quarantine."

"With Covid-19 it was a perfect opportunity to visit and get away from the cold of NZ. Normally I would have travelled to other countries. But so glad I visited Cook Islands - its a beautiful place - especially Aitutaki!"

"We got to enjoy the Cook Islands during the travel bubble with NZ so there were many fewer tourists than usual."

“So great to get a tropical island holiday again and return to the beautiful Cook Islands!”

“Just being able to get out of New Zealand!!!”

“Relaxing and safe from COVID without any quarantine.”

“It is the perfect place to unwind and after Covid lockdowns we needed that.”

“We visit the Cook Islands each year and with Covid we were lucky enough to escape NZ when the borders opened. We had longed to return for a relaxing break away. As always it is the warmth of the people that we love the most about the Cook Islands. We were lucky enough to have amazing weather while visiting. As always the food was of such a high standard, even though supply was low due to Covid.”

“The country and people are wonderful, we hoped we were helping businesses and services get back on their feet following the pandemic measures.”

Level of service

Four percent of visitor comments emphasized the service and local hospitality they experienced as most appealing aspects. The quality of service at the accommodations, restaurants, and tours won recognition from some visitors. Comments included:

“Met at airport and travelled by private car with a friendly informative guide to our accommodation.”

“The Hotel where we stayed had lovely staff who were very helpful. The Information centre was very helpful although I wanted to do a yacht cruise that had been available last time I was on the island and wasn't this time.”

“My son and daughter really enjoyed sailing in small boats in Aitutaki, and the owner was very helpful given that he wasn't fully up and running.”

“The people and our accommodation staff at Paradise Cove on Aitutaki were amazing.”

“The awesome staff at Sunset Resort where we stayed for the first 3 nights then the wonderful hospitality of the owners of Onu Bay the holiday house we rented.”

“The huge level of experience, friendliness, and willingness to go above and beyond of the tour staff, as well as accommodation staff.”

“Fantastic service at Pacific resort and Muri Beachclub where we ate some days also.”

Culture

Three percent of respondent comments emphasized the Cook Island's unique culture as one of the most appealing aspects of their visit. Cultural shows, traditions, language and other cultural aspects shape lives of the local indigenous community of the islands. Comments included:

"...the Cook Island language and culture and music."

"...and culture that was evident when interacting with them."

"Culture - information from shows and locals."

"...drinking the coffee grown on the island and hearing the history of Atiu."

Convenience

The convenience of the Cook Islands as a holiday destination was mentioned a few times (3%). These comments usually referred to the currency, ease of travel around the islands, and accessibility from NZ. Comments included:

"...the convenience of how close everything on the island was."

"New Zealand Dollar."

"Easy to get around the island."

"The ease of visiting from NZ. It is great to have the same currency..."

Being able to visit family or friends

Two percent of the comments discussed links being strengthened with family and friends in the Cook Islands as a most appealing aspect of their visit, they especially expressed their happiness at being able to visit family members after the travel bubble opening. Comments included:

"Seeing our granddaughter in Raro..."

"Catching up with our friends."

"We got to catch up with family and friends after 2 years, mostly re COVID lock out."

"Just love it there go every year and have made lot of friends that we call family now."

Emotional Connection

Another two percent of comments provided feedback regarding the direct emotional connection visitors feel with the destination. Comments included:

“Honestly the people and how they live such loving and caring people will always have me coming back.”

“I made some friends with the locals and can't wait to go back to learn and see more.”

“Just love it there go every year and have made lot of friends that we call family now!”

Family friendly or safe destination

Another two percent of comments mentioned that the Cook Islands was a safe and family friendly destination. Comments included:

“A safe place to holidays with children. Nice beaches and easy snorkelling for the children.”

“Safe beach for children.”

“First time taking the kids, easy enjoyable experience for them.”

“Muri Beach is a wonderful safe area for families.”

Not too commercialised nor touristy

Three percent of the survey participants expressed the fact that the Cook Islands is appealing because it is not over-commercialised or too touristy. Some visitors especially expressed the joy of being able to visit the Cook Islands when there were fewer tourists around during this bubble period. Comments included:

“Not overly commercialized.”

“Low level development.”

“No Aussies or Americans!”

“We loved the lack of other tourists. The ease of getting around on a scooter with less traffic.”

“We got to enjoy the Cook Islands during the travel bubble with NZ so there were many fewer tourists than usual.”

“Great to hear they were also able to enjoy the period of time without tourists. Islands looked amazing!”

Overall good experience

A number of visitor comments focused on the ‘overall experience’ when discussing appealing factors. Comments such as “everything” demonstrated the holistic nature of the positive experience gained. Comments included:

“In fact the whole experience was very satisfying and comfortable.”

“...the overall experience amazing.”

“The whole place.”

“Everything!”

Price of goods and services

A small number of the respondent comments (1%) focused on the price of goods and services in the Cook Islands as being a most appealing aspect of their visit. Further comments included:

“It was cost effective for the wedding had amazing service and amazing landscapes to explore.”

“The grabseat deal - just couldn’t turn down, flights, 6 nights and breakfast for \$1100 per person.”

“Air NZ had an amazing school holiday deal.”

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?” and Table 4 summarizes key themes respondents felt were least appealing. Major themes emerging from the comments included: issues with public services, facilities and infrastructure (22%), food and beverage (13%), things not being open or not ready for full operation (10%), and price of good and services (10%). Attractions and activities, stray animals and mosquitos, accommodation, customer service also feature in the upper section of the list.

Table 4: Least appealing aspects of the Cook Islands (n=439)

Themes	Share of respondent comments (%)*
Public services and facilities and infrastructure	22
Food and beverage	13
Not open or not ready for full operation	10
Price of goods and services	10
Attractions and activities	9
Stray animals and mosquitos	8
Accommodation	8
Customer service	8
Rubbish and natural environment care	5
Poor weather	5
Rental cars or scooters	4
Labour shortage	3
Booking issues	3
Lack of information	2
Local people	1
Other tourists	1
Flight related issues	1

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

Public services, facilities, and infrastructure

Nearly one quarter (22%) of respondent comments mentioned the destination’s public services and facilities as being the least appealing aspects of their Cook Islands experience. Most comments focused on the lengthy waiting times at the airport. Other comments included the facilities at the airport, infrastructure - especially road conditions and water supplies, limited and unreliable public transport, and poor internet connection. Feedback included:

“It took well over an hour to get through customs on arrival.”

“We had a difficult experience when we arrived where a miscommunication had us sent to a different line, then in a very unfriendly way told to go to the back of the line,

which meant we were waiting for an extra hour +. This was a very, very offputting start to the trip. Once we stepped out it improved a huge amount."

"Arrivals terminal was an absolute mess - so many people all crammed in there and the whole process was very slow. It's a real negative aspect of arriving in the Cook Islands. Also - the arrivals card should've been given on the plane - not on the tarmac as you arrive - there is nowhere to stand to fill it out and when you have small children it's a pretty chaotic experience."

"The length of time to go through the arrivals. We had already done our online medical certification but it seemed this did not matter and had to do it all again. I think this needs to be looked at especially at peak time."

"Waiting on the bus that was running hourly not every 20 minutes as advertised."

"Nothing really except a bit of difficulty accessing the Internet in our resort and the expected hassles with the Covid requirements for our return to NZ."

"The wifi connection could be better and cheaper. It would be helpful to have some lighting on roads/streets at night."

"Danger to walk on the streets after dark because there's no lighting or side walk for pedestrians."

"We hired electric bikes and there were lots of pot holes on the road so I got a sore bum but that's not a big issue!!"

"Not enough public toilets while travelling around the island."

"Lack of proper water infrastructure (drinking, waste, and storm-water)."

Food and beverage

Thirteen percent of respondent comments 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 seafood shortage), limited food choices and the high prices. Comments included:

"The food didn't surprise me, I was expecting more fruits and vegetables. But maybe it was the time of the year."

"No proper food. Lack of island food. Not even coconuts!"

"The fish had run out on the whole island."

"The lack of fresh fish and the queue at the Ocean Fresh, it's embarrassing for CI, again understand considering COVID but the tourists would not understand. Not being able to order ika mata every meal and not having fresh fish available on most menus hardly ever was very disappointing."

“As a vegetarian there weren't too many food options, but that happens in a lot of places.”

“Surprising to have a fish shortage on an island.”

“Price of some food places. Some places were very expensive for a family.”

“Covid related issues around availability of supplies in restaurants. Limited number of stalls at night food market.”

Not open or not ready for full operation

Ten percent of respondent comments mentioned businesses/attractions in the Cook Islands being ‘not open’, even though they would like to spend more time/money, and some activities/services that were not available during their visit. Many visitors expressed that it was understandable because of the Covid impacts. Comments included:

“Some places weren't open, shortage of supplies and staff but of course that was to be expected with Covid and had no negative impact on our holiday.”

“We were a bit disappointed that some events such as local buffet night, etc. haven't had started yet when we were there, so didn't get to experience more local things.”

“No island shows were being performed at the time as tourism had only just restarted.”

“The lack of things to do.... most of your attractions were closed but were still advertised as being open... Half of the markets weren't happening either.”

“Still a number of places closed due to previous COVID lockdown and business struggling to find staff to re-open.”

“I could see the impact COVID was having on the islands - less open restaurants etc but it was completely understandable.”

“It was very sad that alot of things were closed and this is purely because of Covid - I hope things will start getting busy again.”

“...with the restaurant and bar being closed for a few nights, no music, no atmosphere.”

“Having businesses closed on some days so shortly after an economic downturn caused by the virus.”

“I was disappointed the bus wasn't running its usual times - understandable however due to covid.”

“Local people seemed stressed and almost angry we were there. We chose a resort so that we did not have to cook and the restaurant was closed when we got there- would have been good to know when we booked.”

Price of goods and services

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

“I also think that travelling to the Cook Islands is a little over priced. I can pay the same amount (usually) and spend 2+ weeks in Europe, not a week in the Cook Islands. If it was cheaper, I would go more regularly as it is so close and beautiful.”

“Expensive accommodation and food compared to the 5 other Pacific islands we have visited. Generally felt the tourists were taken for granted rather than valued and welcomed.”

“Was more expensive than I expected.”

“Some of the local restaurants were over priced.”

“Quite expensive for food and accommodation even though it was great.”

“Pricing not regulated for transport (I heard someone was charged \$100 for transport from Edgewater to the Airport when the trip should have been no more than \$20).”

“The price for a shuttle from the airport to the Edgewater and unfortunately when we got there had to use the ATM at the Edgewater which cost us a lot more money than we expected...”

“The wifi connection could be better and cheaper.”

“Telecommunications is the worst that I ever experienced, too costly they should allow another service provider for competition to offset the ridiculous costs.”

“The cost of internet. It's a modern world and internet is now like water and electricity - it should be readily accessible and free, as it is at most accommodation places in the world.”

“Rental vehicles in Aitutaki, not enough available and expensive.”

Attractions and activities

Nine percent of respondent comments mentioned attractions and activities as the least appealing aspect of their Cook Islands visit. Their concerns focused on the limited range of attractions and activities available, mainly due to the COVID-19, and poor activity experience (snorkelling, swimming, fishing, etc.). Comments included:

“Due to COVID there were a lot of places not yet open, so we were quite limited as far as restaurants and entertainments available if they weren't connected to a hotel.”

“COVID has had an impact on the local economy and that was evident with the Muri markets.”

“The snorkelling was disappointing. I find it a shame that the pictures and videos that show the 'amazing clear waters and sea life' aren't taken where the majority of people go to. You need to go out on the Aitutaki lagoon on a separate tour to see stunning marine life.”

“A lot of the tourist attractions outside of the resorts feel pretty makeshift.”

“Jet skis in the lagoon and trail bikes and jeeps speeding through the bush. Rarotonga is so beautiful this kind of mass tourist activity is not worth the damage it will do.”

“Lagoon cruises are exactly the same experience from the 2 companies. Variation would be good.”

“Difficult to sort out activities on Aitutaki as there weren't many tourists around. It was just before the school holidays and the COVID factor had slowed things down.”

“It would have been good to have known about some attractions in the middle of the island as we didn't know about this until we took the scooter back. It would be good for hire companies to give a map to every visitor when first hiring a vehicle.”

“The fishing trip we went on was the biggest waste of money. Not because we didn't catch any fish, or the fact that it was choppy- all of this would have been fine if it weren't for the non-existent level of involvement the crew had with us, they stayed up top and didn't speak to us until we got off the boat. \$800 is a lot of money to spend for 4 hours of nothing but puking and being ignored.”

“We were a bit disappointed that some events such as local buffet night, etc. haven't had started yet when we were there, so didn't get to experience more local things.”

“Did go to see the chocolate place, very interesting if not a lot primitive but that's what makes it all authentic Cook Islands.”

“The costs of everything had gone up and we couldn't get into restaurants or go on tours/cruises as they were all booked out for days in advance...”

Stray animals and mosquitos

Stray animals, noisy roosters, chickens and mosquitoes/insects were mentioned in eight percent of respondent comments. Dogs tended to dominate. Comments included:

“Too many dogs barking and running after you. Some dogs even followed me snorkeling and scratched my back.”

“Aggressive dogs. Rarotonga needs to decide if it wants to keep so many nasty and unrestrained dogs as pets, or they want higher end spending tourists. They wont get

both (note: I was bitten by an unrestrained dog without provocation)."

"DOGS. This would have to be the most obnoxious thing about the Cook Islands. We were even chased by these diseased uncared for animals. Night times are just a cacophony of barking. These starving badly treated dogs even in eateries are a bad reflection on all Cook Islanders."

"The dogs. But they weren't as bad as stories online had made them out to be and were a lot less scary than in Tonga."

"Mosquitos & aggressive loose dogs. I love animals but the dogs could cause serious accidents on the road."

"Condition of animals particularly the cows, goats and pigs. Poor treatment/keeping."

"Roosters crowing at all hours of the night."

"Sea slugs."

Accommodation

Eight percent of visitor comments mentioned their accommodation while in the Cook Islands as being a least appealing aspect of their stay. Comments include the cost of accommodation, bad customer services, and some also pointed out that some accommodation needed an upgrade of facilities and/or services. Comments included:

"Price of accommodation is still very high for what you get. I've visited a lot of Caribbean islands and the service and standard of accommodation is higher for similar or cheaper prices."

"Accommodation rooms were soooo small for the money charged."

"Some of the accommodation was overpriced and run down."

"Accommodation needing updating - especially bathroom."

"It surprised me that the resorts had not taken advantage of the lock-down to undertake maintenance such as painting the pool..."

"The flight not being able to land and the accommodation we initially booked charging us even though we couldn't stay as a result, through no fault of our own (Sanctuary). We ended up changing accommodation because of that when we finally managed to get a flight that landed."

"Expensive accommodation is over-rated. I looked at much lower cost options and they were great."

"Quality of food has dropped in the resort, breakfast was nothing fresh all tinned fruit."

“Our hotel was very run down. We paid for the best waterfront rooms. The floors were dirty. The back of the bathroom door was filthy. The paint was actually black where years of dirty hands had touched it. The spa bath was broken. Tiles were broken. Paint was peeling...”

“I wasn't really happy with our accommodation. The customer service was bad and the food wasn't very nice. The quality of the furniture was bad. a lot of stuff was broken and not a lot of care is taken when presenting the hotel. I won't stay there again. I will choose somewhere different next trip.”

“Not enough family accommodations. It is set up for honeymooners and need more accommodations with ability to accommodate 4 people in a room. The family next to us had same problems and it kept us from spending more time in Aitutaki as no reasonable accommodations for a family.”

Customer service

A further eight percent of respondent comments mentioned customer service as a least appealing aspect of their holiday in the Cook Islands. Their comments often focused on customer service at the restaurants, accommodation and transport. Comments included:

“Although the general staff at our hotel were wonderful and friendly, the staff at the front desk were not great, things that we had booked didn't go through (massage) and as we were on the flight that wasn't able to land on the 25th of June and wanted to extend our booking (as we missed 2 days), we thought we had booked it (by phone call from NZ), but when we came to pay for it, there was no such booking and we had to really fight for the price that we had been quoted, and the attitude was a bit of a ‘oh well, that's just the way it is’.”

“Spent hours waiting to book night entertainment.”

“A low level of hospitality in one restaurant (we didn't go back).”

“Also the pre-booked rental car on Aitutake didn't have a current warrant of fitness - the service was slack, and we didn't get a replacement.”

“The reluctance/resentment of staff to provide good service.”

“Some restaurant staff had poor service e.g., staff seemed in a bad mood or took a long time to satisfy small tasks, but we know many places were overrun due to tourists returning to the island post Covid so can empathise with these issues.”

“Waitresses not trained properly on efficient service - but not a big issue.”

“Lack of training of staff barman couldn't make cocktail of the day!”

“The lady at the motor bike rental place was rude and unhelpful.”

“You were very busy as Rarotonga had just opened up to NZ and you had lost a lot of

staff, therefore unfortunately we went to some recommended restaurants and had very bad service."

Poor weather

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

"Unfortunately it was windy the whole time - but that can't be helped."

"The weather. Rained 5 days out of the 6 and was over cast the last day - water was luke warm."

"Unfortunately the weather was stormy and very windy - we had a fantastic pilot who managed to land but we would have had a totally different holiday if we had been able to swim and enjoy the beach and pool. There is nothing you could do to influence this, it was just our experience."

"Previous experience told me that June is not an ideal month to visit - rain and wind."

"The unpredictability of the weather but that is obviously beyond anyone's control!"

Rubbish and natural environment care

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

"Plastic and rubbish on the back of the islands on the seaward side of the Muri lagoon outer islands."

"The poor state of the lagoon, dead coral, algae and not as many fish as I had seen on previous visits."

"The declining health of the coral and the lack of advice given to some tourists who were helping destroy the coral."

"The discovery of the full refuse tip. Shocking to understand that we, the tourists have created this problem. It would be wonderful to see no plastic and take away cups used."

"Some of the lagoon looked polluted and we heard it was worse before COVID lockdowns."

"Rarotonga appeared less clean than on my previous visit."

“Always find there is a lot of rubbish lying around in streams etc.”

“...rubbish dumping.”

“some buildings left to rot on the land.”

Rental cars or scooters

Four percent of comments mentioned rental cars and scooters as least appealing aspects of the Cook Islands visit. Respondents referred to the quality and the availability of rental vehicles. Comments included:

“There were not enough scooters to hire on Aitutaki so for many days we could not get one.”

“The first hire car was dangerous (no brake lights) and I had to go through the process of hiring another one which took time. At the time of our visit there did seem to be a shortage of hire cars available so hopefully that has been sorted..”

“Not being able to rent a vehicle due to massive battery problems.”

“Vehicle rental condition.”

“... was pretty difficult to rent a scooter or a car at the time.”

“Lack of being able to hire a car, as my wife was not keen on going on the back of a scooter. This became a new experience and we then enjoyed the day travelling.”

“Rental vehicles in Aitutaki, not enough available and expensive.”

Labour shortage

Three percent of comments mentioned labour shortage as a least appealing aspect of the Cook Islands visit. Respondents mentioned the quality of the services were largely affected by staff shortages. Comments included:

“Lack of staff meant that service was often slow.”

“... lack of service workers due to covid.”

“It was clear that there was a lack of staff due to COVID border closures. It was an understandable situation.”

“Dinner at a local restaurant - very very slow service and ok meal - we were told that the owners understaffed their restaurant - even before COVID.”

“The pandemic had some effect on some businesses, for example affecting availability of staff. Everyone was working so hard though and more than made up for any lack.”

Booking issues

Booking issues were mentioned by three percent of visitor comments. Respondents referred to the availability of rental vehicles, restaurants, activities, and the unreliable services with booking. Comments included:

"We couldn't get into restaurants or go on tours/cruises as they were all booked out for days in advance..."

"Very hard to get bookings for rentals, restaurants and massages once we arrived, so we missed out a lot.."

"Very hard to eat out, had to book 2-3 nights in advance. Rarotonga did not seem prepared to have tourists back."

"Everything was booked out so we couldn't do any trips or tourists attractions. If we had known would've booked before we left."

"We didn't realise that you're supposed to book ahead for restaurants - last time I visited you just turned up."

"...it was difficult to secure a rental vehicle or scooter. I would encourage Cook Islands tourist based businesses to have a robust online presence so that tourists can make bookings in advance, as many things were fully booked or difficult to find when we arrived."

"Booking mistakes and lack of concern."

Lack of information

A lack of available information was mentioned in two percent of visitor comments. Areas discussed included: transportation, activities and safety signs. Comments included:

"Hard to find things to do and know what they are about."

"A lot of the online and brochure information for events, locations etc was out of date. Some events we thought would be on were no longer running."

"Misinformation - different people told us different things."

Other tourists

One percent of comments mentioned other tourists as the least appealing aspect of the visit to the Cook Islands. Visitors mentioned the bad behaviour of the other tourists disturbing their visit. Comments included:

"The behaviour of other tourists."

"The declining health of the coral and the lack of advice given to some tourists who

were helping destroy the coral.”

“Other tourists :-)”

Flight related issues

A further one percent of comments mentioned flight related issues as the least appealing aspect of the visit to the Cook Islands. Visitors mentioned the cost and lack of capacities. Comments included:

“No direct flights from Christchurch.”

“Only one flight per month to the outer islands.”

Local people

A small group (1%) of respondent comments noted that the least appealing part of the visit was the reaction of local people in the Cook Islands to the return of visitors. Comments included:

“Most locals were excellent, but a couple were rude.”

“Local people seemed stressed and almost angry we were there.”

“People were unfriendly...”

Suggestions for improvements

When asked if there was anything that could have improved their visit to the Cook Islands 41% of visitors took the time to make a comment. Suggestions mentioned by respondents in this group focused on the public services and infrastructure mainly airport arrival and departure processes (30%), the need for more entertainment, activities, transport (18%), availability, quality and price of food & drinks (13%), accommodation (9%), improvements to the environment, safety and animal care (5%), the need for better information (5%), better weather (5%), the attitudes of locals and customer services (5%), better value for money (5%), suggestions on booking prior to arrival (4%), businesses open or full operation (4%), and flights (1%). Comments on these themes included:

“Quicker processing of passengers arriving from flights.”

“Baby changing facilities in more public restrooms and at the airport.”

“Internet needs to be improved especially in the big resorts. We are business people as well.”

“More street lighting at nights...Hard driving sometimes.”

“More nature walks and maintained tracks.”

“Better information about the around the island busses (for people who have never visited before!). Would have been good to know that it actually stops at the airport.”

“The roads need repairing they are shocking and dangerous. My husband fell over and smashed his face when he tripped in a pothole!”

“More access to vehicles or motorcycles.”

“More options for transport would be ideal (e.g. tuktuk type thing like Thailand would be cool).”

“More staff in the office where you booked trips and rental cars etc, pretty busy.”

“Connecting flights between Air NZ flights from NZ and the internal flights to Aitutaki. More information about the activities and prices of them on Aitutaki would be great.”

“Better food choices using local ingredients not imported food.”

“More 5 star accommodation for families with smaller children. Lots of places only take over 18s or over 12s.”

“More reasonable pricing particularly for accommodation.”

“Sadly the official government website appears extremely unprofessional. Information is lacking and contradicting. It looks like a relict from the 90s. The font

makes it very hard to read."

"Maybe you could have one designated day for fires to be burnt so there isn't always smoke around."

"Have a dog sanctuary as too many dogs on the road nearly caused me to crash on my scooter."

"The Taxis were too expensive to use - per person charge not per trip!"

Reasons to return to the Cook Islands and recommend to others

The majority of visitors (94%) indicated that they would consider re-visiting the Cook Islands in the future. This figure is higher than the 2019/20 annual average (92%), and the identical quarter in 2019/2020 (93%). Of the six 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 the perceived poor value for money. Comments included:

“Would rather go where the food and service are better. However, this was the only tropical island that was Covid free.”

“We were pretty disappointed with the trip. Paid a lot and the experience didn't match the cost.”

“Not at this time, given the cost and low quality of accommodation, I would spend more on flights and get cheaper & better accommodation and experiences.”

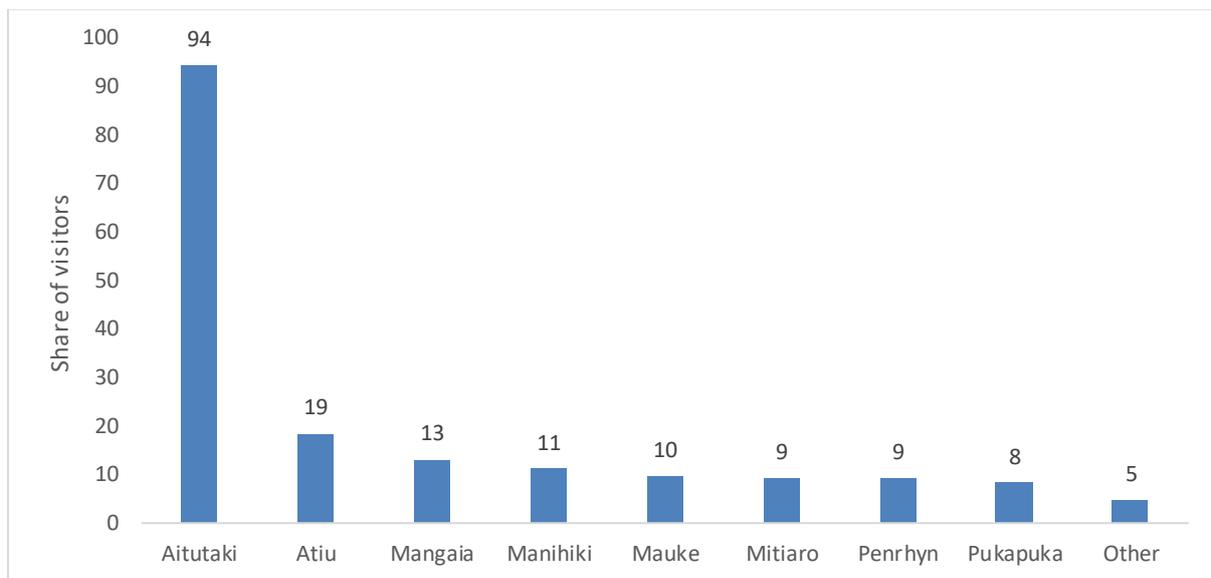
“Honestly it felt like we were unwelcome there. The locals seemed unhappy to have tourists back after lockdown. I saved so long and hard to afford this holiday and I feel like it was a waste of my money because of how we were treated.”

“...just hope the testing for covid stops for fully vaccinated people, \$300 a test each is too expensive.”

“The DOGS attacking people. This problem must be dealt with.”

Over half (54%) of the visitors among those who said they would return stated that they would definitely include the outer islands in their next visit. A further 43% of visitors indicated they would “maybe” visit outer islands next time. Of those who said they may visit outer islands the next time, most (94%) mentioned they would like to include Aitutaki. Atiu was the second most mentioned island at 19% (Figure 31).

Figure 31: Islands that visitors who said they would return would include next time (n=410)



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

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 poor value for money, and negative experiences. Comments include:

“We didn't enjoy it - expensive with poor service.”

“Not until you have staff back and facilities open.”

“Didn't really enjoy our time there, weather, food and internet poor.”

“Food and service not so good. Expensive for what we got.”

“Not if they like exciting destinations, yes if they want a small beach holiday.”

Final Observations

This report shows that the Cook Islands tourism industry performed well during the survey period of July to August 2021. Overall visitor satisfaction levels and the desire to recommend the destination to others have remained consistently high, and it is clear that the destination is making a generally positive impression on visitors.

Despite the overall positive performance, this report highlights that there is room to enhance the visitor experience and to increase the economic yield and broader community benefits associated with tourism. As the second report after the travel bubble opened to NZ, there is a consistent message that the visitors felt generally pleased to visit the Cook Islands and were impressed with the high coverage of COVID-19 vaccination. However, this research highlights some issues, for example, the long waiting times during the arrival process due to the new health requirements, some businesses not being open, and the shortage of supplies and staff.

It is clear that the tourism industry makes a vital, and undoubtedly undervalued, contribution to the Cook Islands economy. The report shows that the visitor spend in-country is considerably higher than the pre-COVID period, and is consistent with the results of the May-June 2021 report.

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 now find ways to build on and develop the visitor experience in a manner that enhances local economic linkages.

This 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 will be able to explore in more detail on the characteristics of different market segments as they return to the Cook islands and the overall impacts and performance of the industry.