

**School of Hospitality and Tourism**  
Te Kura Taurimatanga me te Mahi Tāpoi



Culinary Arts



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# The Cook Islands International Visitor Survey Report

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**October – December 2022**

**Prepared for Cook Islands Tourism Corporation**

**by**

**Pacific Tourism Data Initiative  
Auckland University of Technology**

[Pacific Tourism Data Initiative - AUT](#)

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## **Acknowledgements**

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## Executive Summary

This report focuses on the characteristics, expectations, and expenditure patterns of visitors to the Cook Islands between 1<sup>st</sup> October and 31<sup>st</sup> December 2022. This is the sixth international visitor survey (IVS) report presented since the gradual reopening of borders in 2021/2022 and as such it represents an important barometer of industry performance.

The data that underpins the report is generated by an online departure survey <http://www.mycookislandsvisit.com>. There are 598 individual respondents to the survey - representing a total of 1,264 adults and 171 children in the visitor expenditure analysis (this is estimated to be approximately 5% of all visitors during the period – based on October to December 2022 visitor arrival data from the Cook Islands Statistics Office). In the report, we draw comparisons between all visitors in the October to December 2019 survey period. No IVS data in October to December 2021 period due to the border being closed temporarily.

As a result of the gradual return of longer-haul international travel, the majority (75%) of visitors surveyed come from New Zealand. Visitors are well educated (67% have some form of tertiary education) with a relatively high annual household income: 58% earn over NZ\$100,000 per year, 18% over \$200,000. Over two thirds (64%) of visitors travel with more than one companion, solo travellers are far less common (9%).

For over four in ten (46%) visitors surveyed, this was their first trip to the Cook Islands. The main purpose of the visit is holidaymaking (80%). The average length of stay in the Cook Islands is 8.7 nights. Most (81%) visitors stay ten nights or less. Thirty percent of visitors surveyed visited Aitutaki.

Visitor spend prior to arrival in the Cook Islands is \$2,555 per person, which is 2% higher than visitors during the October to December period in 2019 (\$2,064 per person). Spend while on the Cook Islands (per person per day) is \$201. This spend is 35% higher than visitors' local spend from October to December 2019 (\$149).

When pre-paid spend and local spend are combined, it is estimated that each visitor brings \$2,771 to the Cook Islands economy (or approximately \$318 per day). This figure is 32% higher than visitors during the October to December 2019 period (\$2,093).

Overall, visitor satisfaction levels with services and experiences in the Cook Islands remain high (mean value 4.8 out of 5). The most appealing elements are beautiful natural environment, cleanliness and weather; friendly local people; activities, attractions, entertainment and events; and atmosphere. The least appealing elements are issues with public services, facilities and infrastructure (especially the length of the waiting time at the airport), price and quality of the food and beverage, price of goods and services stray, rubbish and care for the natural environment, and stray animals and mosquitos. In terms of the

COVID-19 response in the Cook Islands, over a third (35%) of respondents show no concerns re COVID-19, and visitors are generally satisfied with related processes and requirements.

The desire of visitors to return to Cook Islands in the future remains strong: 95% of those surveyed state that they would come back for another visit, and 98% say they would recommend the Cook Islands to friends or family. These rates are higher than visitors during the same quarter in 2019 (93% and 97% respectively).

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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 an online survey within a few weeks of the completion of their visit. The Cook Islands online International Visitor Survey (IVS) has run since mid-2012.

This report focuses on visitors who travelled to the Cook Islands from 1<sup>st</sup> October to 31<sup>st</sup> December 2022. Over this three-month period, 2,399 visitors were contacted by email to take part in the survey, and 598 responses were received: a conversion rate of 25%. The conversion rate for this period is higher than the same period in 2019 (16%). These 598 responses cover a total of 1,264 adults and 171 children when we examine visitor expenditure. As the sixth IVS report produced since mid-2021, these documents provide an important barometer of industry performance during the pandemic.

This IVS report presents detailed information on:

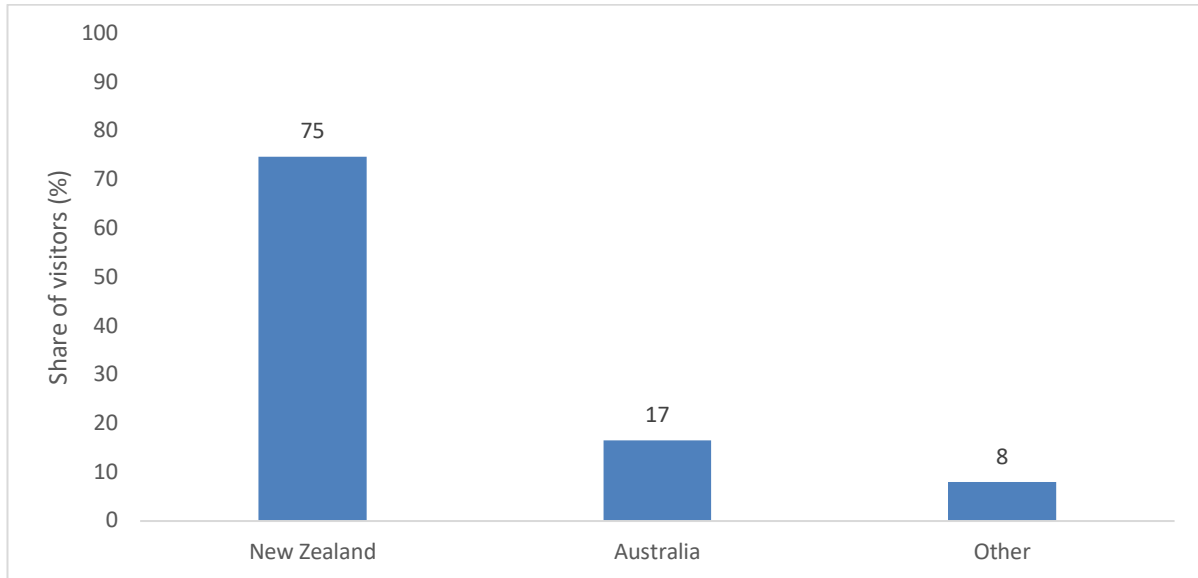
- The characteristics of visitors to the Cook Islands (age, gender, education, country of origin, income, purpose of visit, travelling companions, number of previous visits, length of stay, airline used, and islands visited)
- Information used by visitors to learn about the Cook Islands, factors influencing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

Key sections of the report highlight important variations between the October-December 2022 figures and the October-December 2019 (pre COVID-19) findings.

## Visitor Characteristics

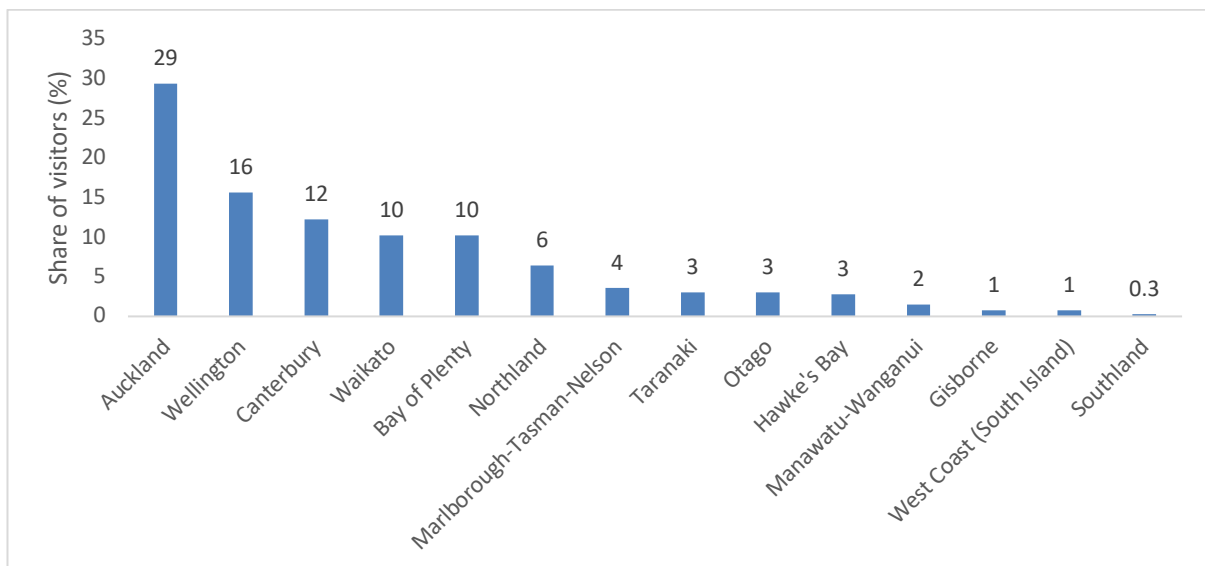
Three quarters of the visitors surveyed come from New Zealand, followed by 17% of respondents from Australia (Figure 1). The remaining visitors originated primarily from USA, Canada, and Europe.

**Figure 1: Country of origin (n = 525)**



For the New Zealand market, nearly a third (29%) of visitors are from Auckland. Wellington, Canterbury, Waikato, and Bay of Plenty account for a further 48% of New Zealand visitors (Figure 2).

**Figure 2: New Zealand visitors (n = 391)**

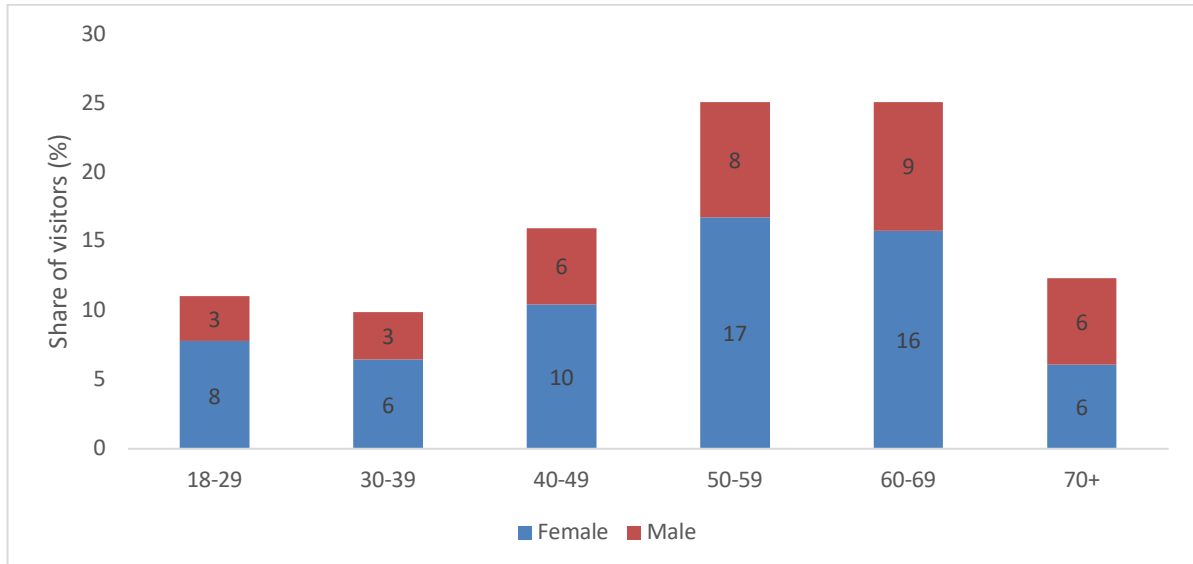


More women (63%) than men (36%) completed the survey reflecting an ongoing tendency for women to complete surveys more readily than men, with 1% of respondents identified them



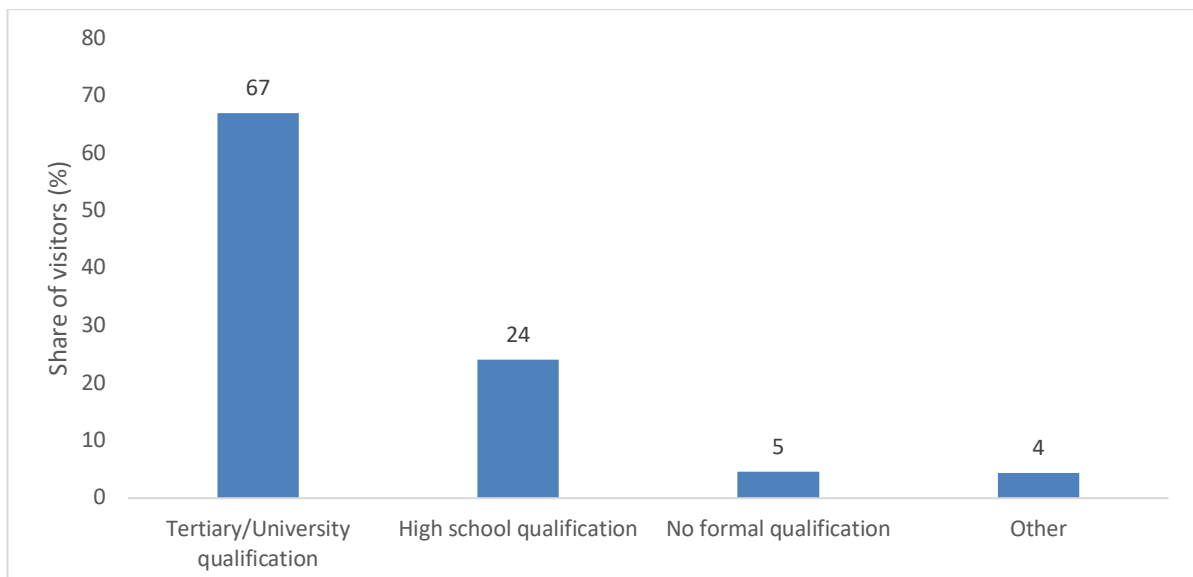
as other. The most significant age categories are the 50 to 59 (25%) and 60 to 69 age groups (25%), followed by those aged 40 to 49 year (16%), 70+ (12%), 18 to 29 year (11%), and 30 to 39 year (9%) (Figure 3). Those under 18 are not surveyed for ethical reasons.

**Figure 3: Distribution of age and gender (n = 526)**



Visitors are well educated, with over two thirds (67%) of those surveyed having tertiary/university qualification, and a further 24% visitors having completed a high school education (Figure 4).

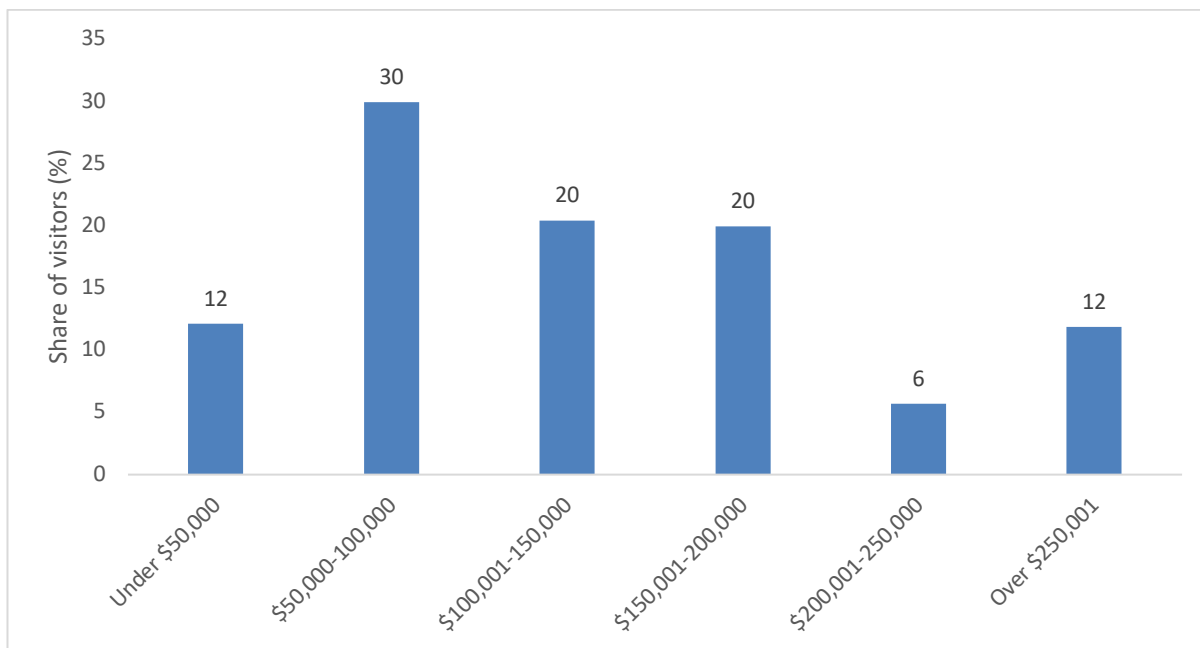
**Figure 4: Highest qualification (n = 527)**



Nearly a third (30%) of visitors have an annual household income of between NZ\$50,000 and NZ\$100,000. One in four (20%) respondents surveyed earn between NZ\$100,001 and NZ\$150,000. Over a third of respondents have a household income of over NZ\$150,000 per year (Figure 5). The average household income in October-December 2022 is NZ\$148,051. By

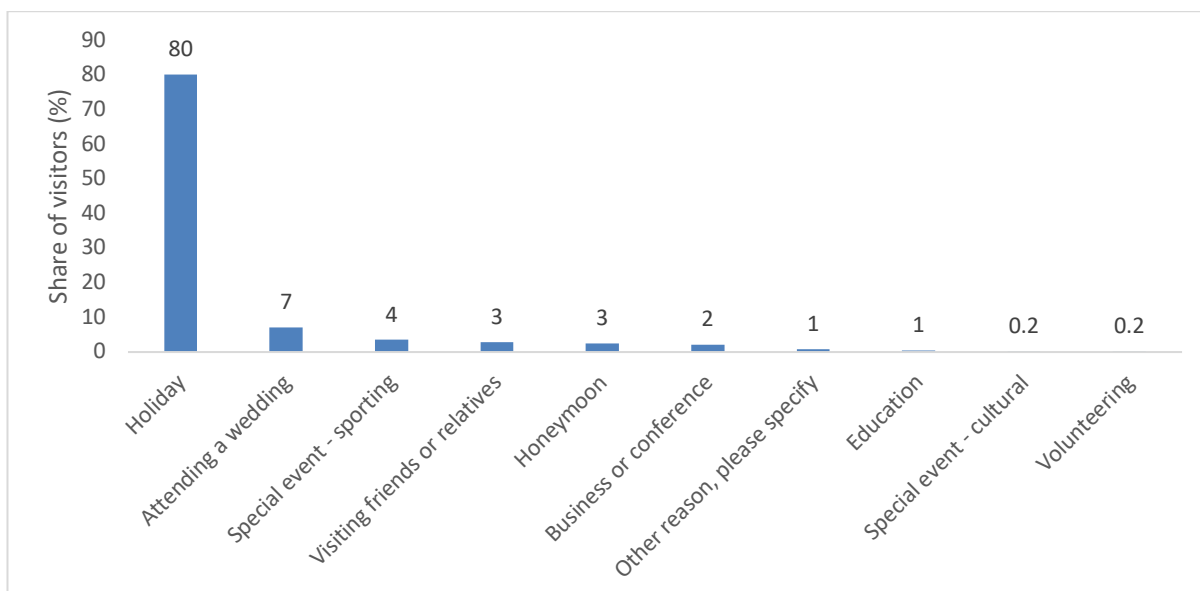
way of contrast, the average household income in October to December 2019 was considerably lower at NZ\$133,061.

**Figure 5: Annual household income in NZD (n = 421)**



The predominant purpose of visit to the Cook Islands is for a holiday (80%) (Figure 6). Other reasons given include attending a wedding (7%), Special event – sporting (4%), and visiting friends or relatives (3%) respectively.

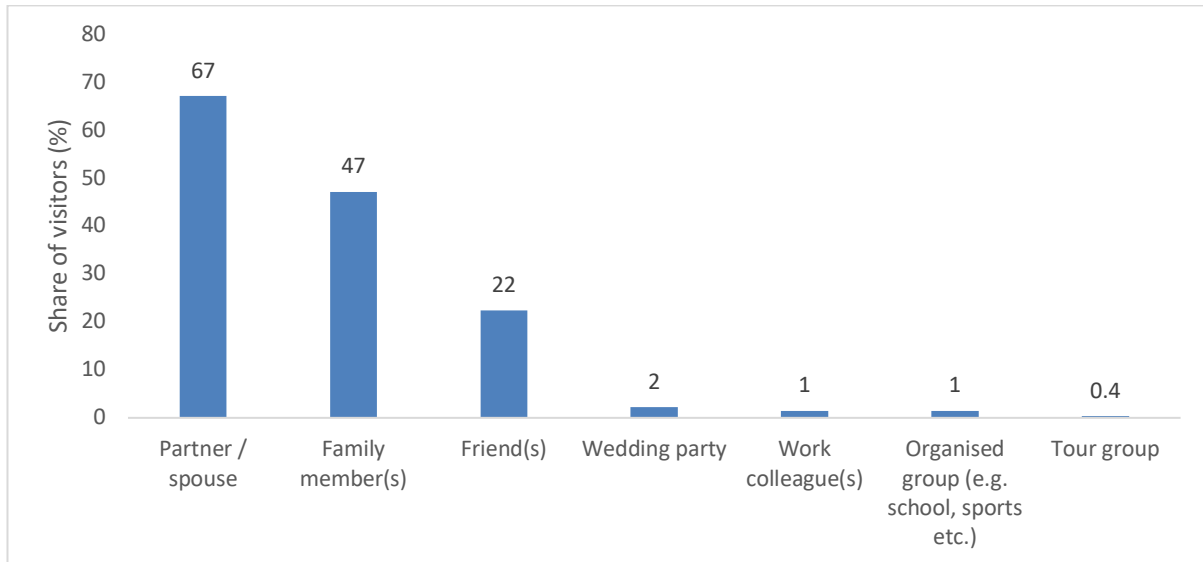
**Figure 6: Main purpose of visit (n = 597)**



The majority (91%) of visitors travel with one or more companions. Among this group, most travel to the Cook Islands with a partner or spouse (67%). Visitors also travel with other family members (47%), with friends (22%), or with wedding party (2%). Those travelling with work

colleague(s), in an organised group, or as part of a tour group represent smaller shares of the sample (Figure 7). Wedding party visitation increases into the same level of pre-pandemic levels (2% of visitors in 2019).

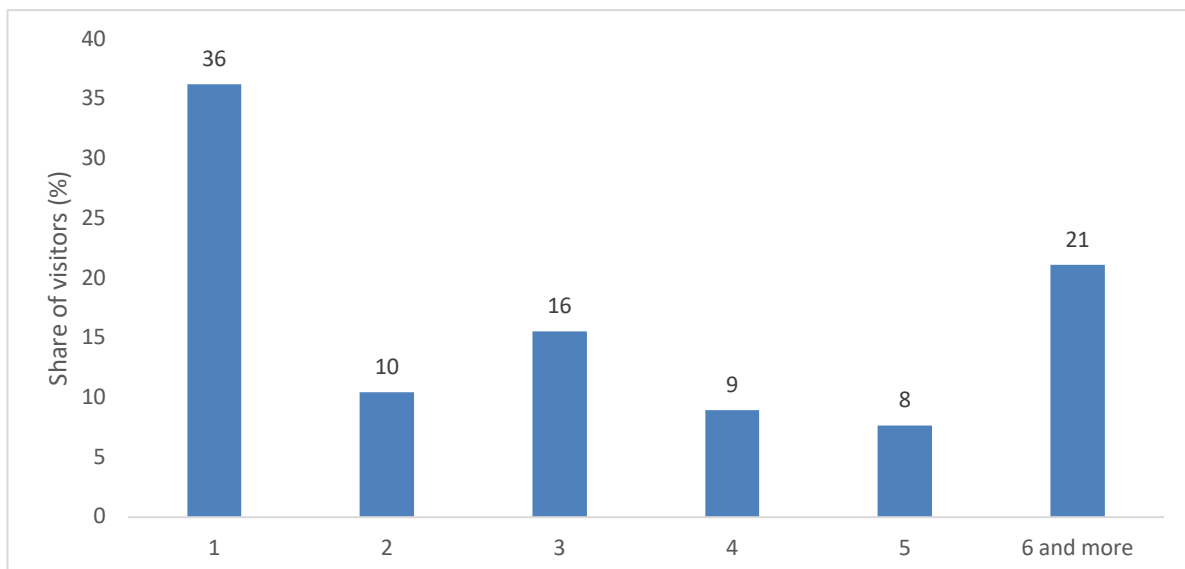
**Figure 7: Travelling with whom? (n = 540)**



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

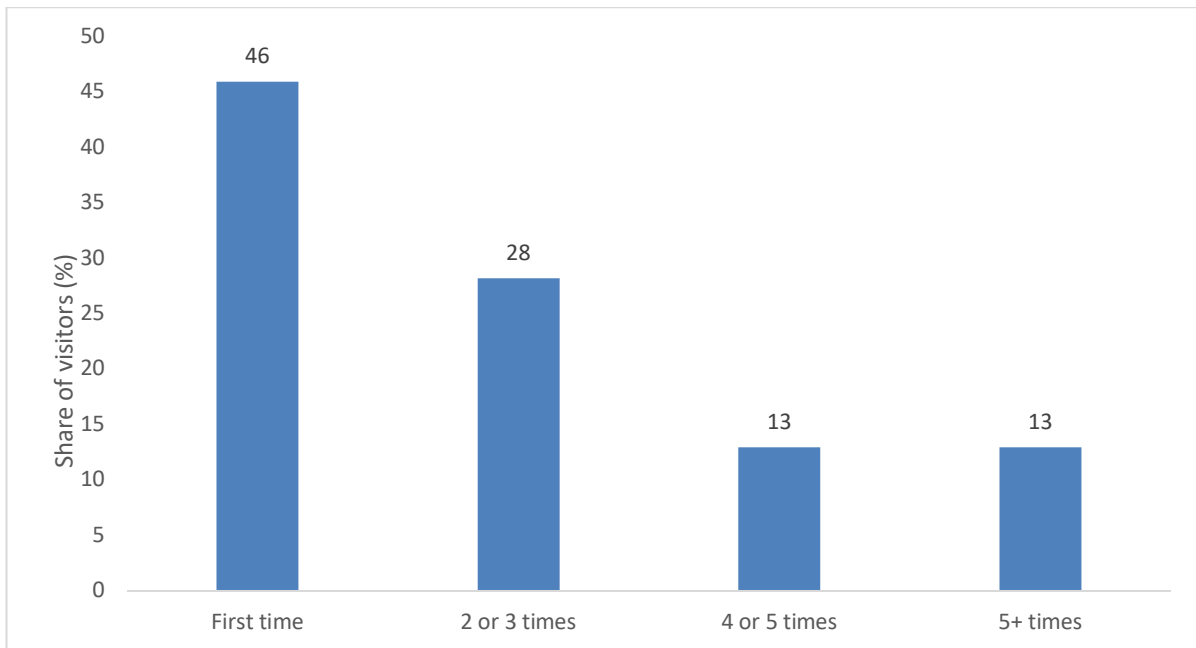
Breaking this down further, if we exclude those travelling alone, over one third of visitors (36%) travelled with one companion on their visit to the Cook Islands (Figure 8), and over a third of visitors (36%) travelled with two to four people.

**Figure 8: Number of companions on trip (excluding those travelling alone) (n = 469)**



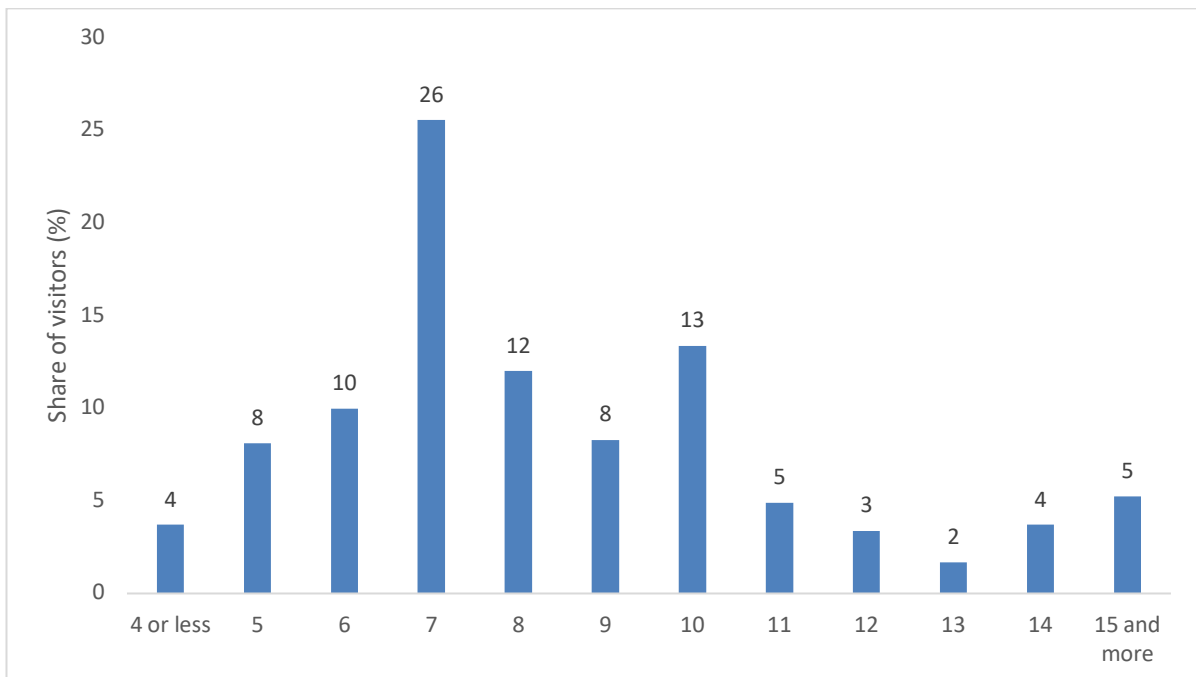
Nearly half of visitors (46%) are on their first visit to the Cook Islands. A further 28% have been to the Cook Islands two or three times before. Over a quarter of those surveyed (26%) have visited four or more times (Figure 9).

**Figure 9: Number of visits to the Cook Islands (n = 518)**



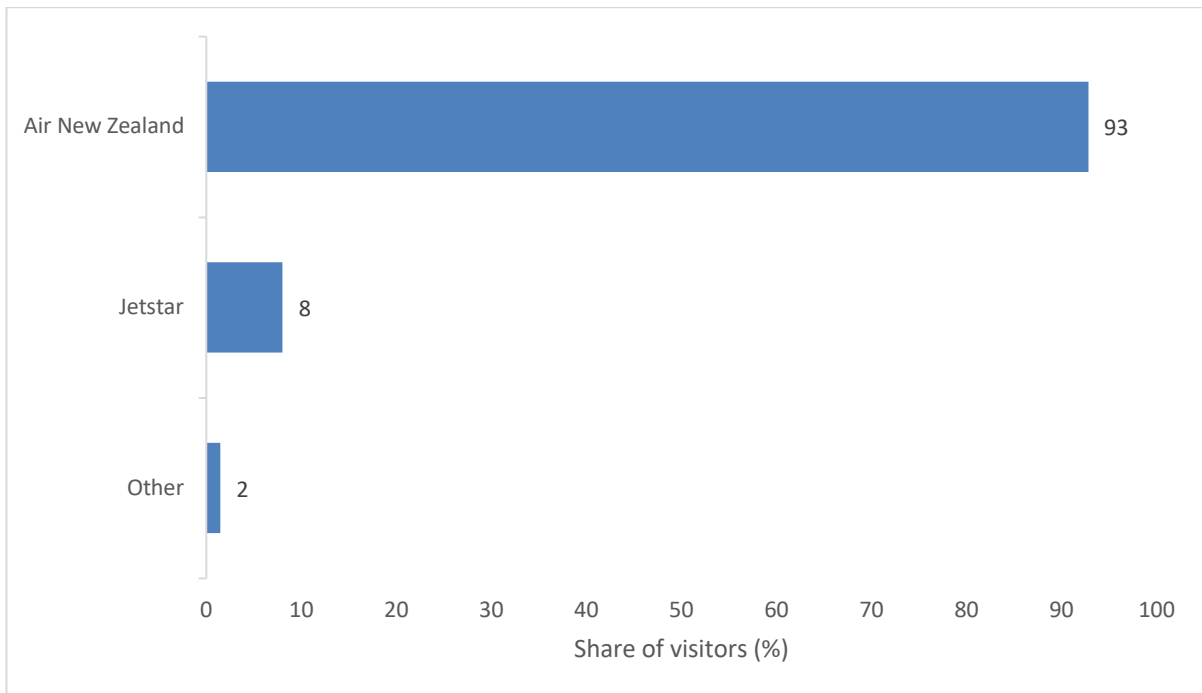
The average length of stay in the Cook Islands is 8.7 nights (median 8.0) with 81% of visitors spending ten or fewer nights in the country (Figure 10).

**Figure 10: Length of stay in nights (n = 591)**



Most visitors (93%) travelled to/from the Cook Islands with Air New Zealand. A further 8% of visitors travelled with Jetstar (Figure 11).

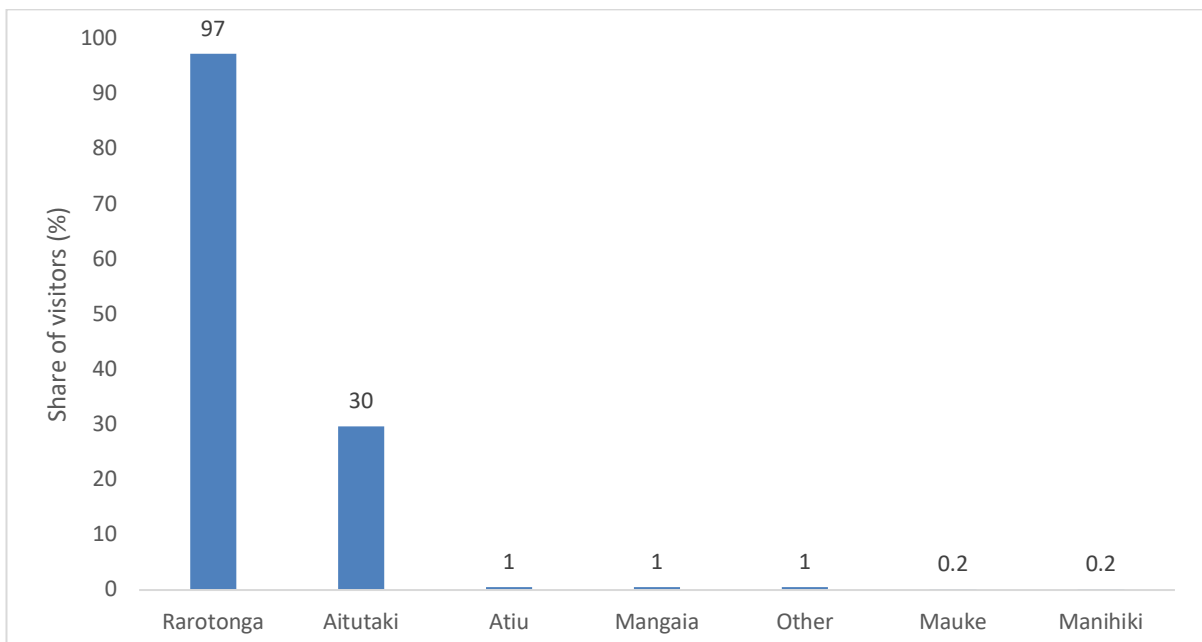
**Figure 11: Mode of transport (n = 597)**



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

The vast majority (97%) of visitors to the Cook Islands spent time on Rarotonga, with Aitutaki being the second most visited outer island (30%). A small number of visitors spend time on Atiu (1%) and other outer islands, e.g. Mangaia (1%) (Figure 12).

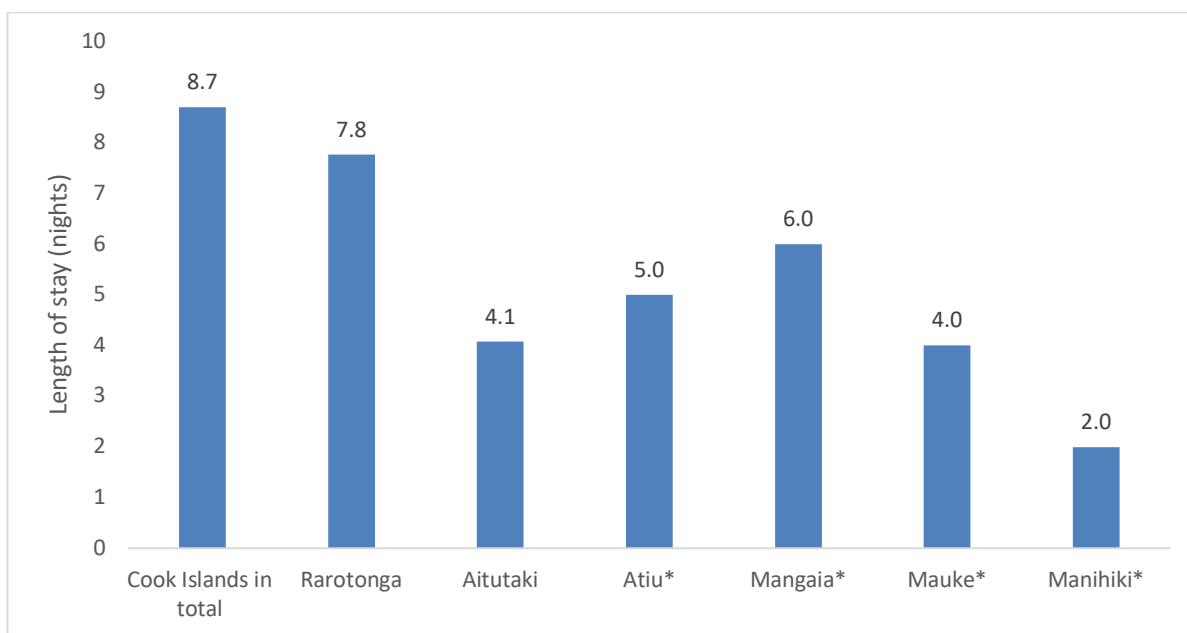
**Figure 12: Visited Islands (n = 597)**



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

The average length of stay on Rarotonga is 7.8 nights (Figure 13). For the visitors that went to Aitutaki, the average number of nights spent on the Island itself is 4.1.

**Figure 13: Average length of stay in the Cook Islands and on each island (n = 1-597)**

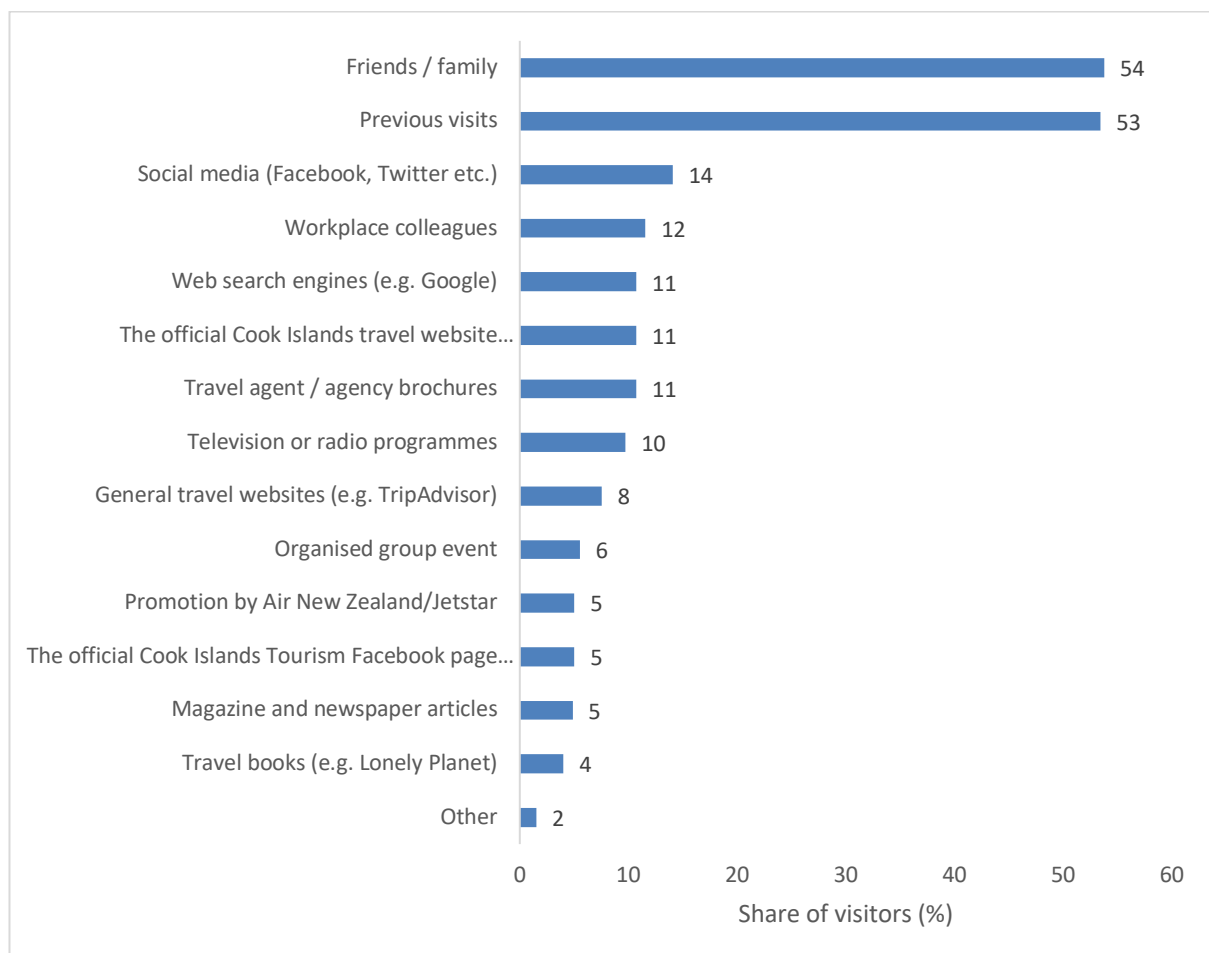


\*: n<=2

## Information Sources and Purchasing Behaviour

Participants were asked how they found out about the Cook Islands as a holiday destination (Figure 14). Over half (54%) of respondents ranked word of mouth from friends and family members as the most important influence, followed by their previous visits (53%), social media (e.g. Facebook, Twitter) (14%), workplace colleagues (12%). Other information sources include web search engines (e.g., Google) (11%), the official Cook Islands travel website (11%), and travel agent/agency brochures (11%).

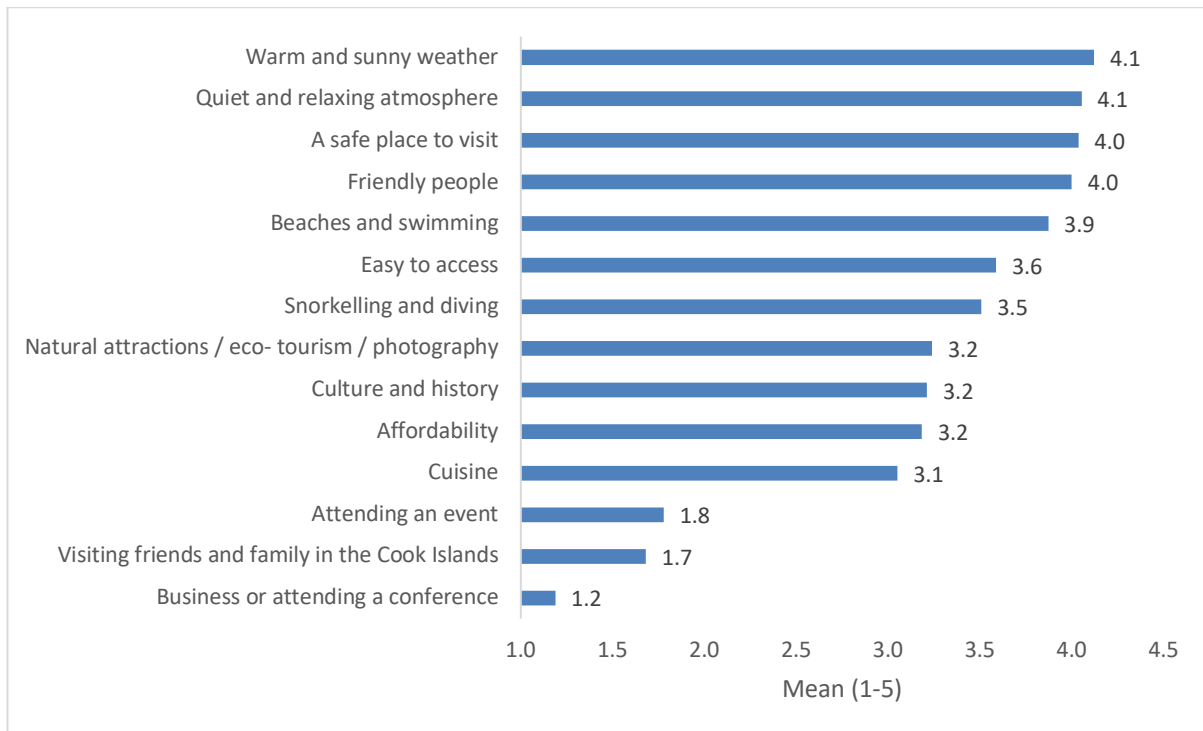
**Figure 14: How did you find out about Cook Islands as a destination (n = 597)**



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

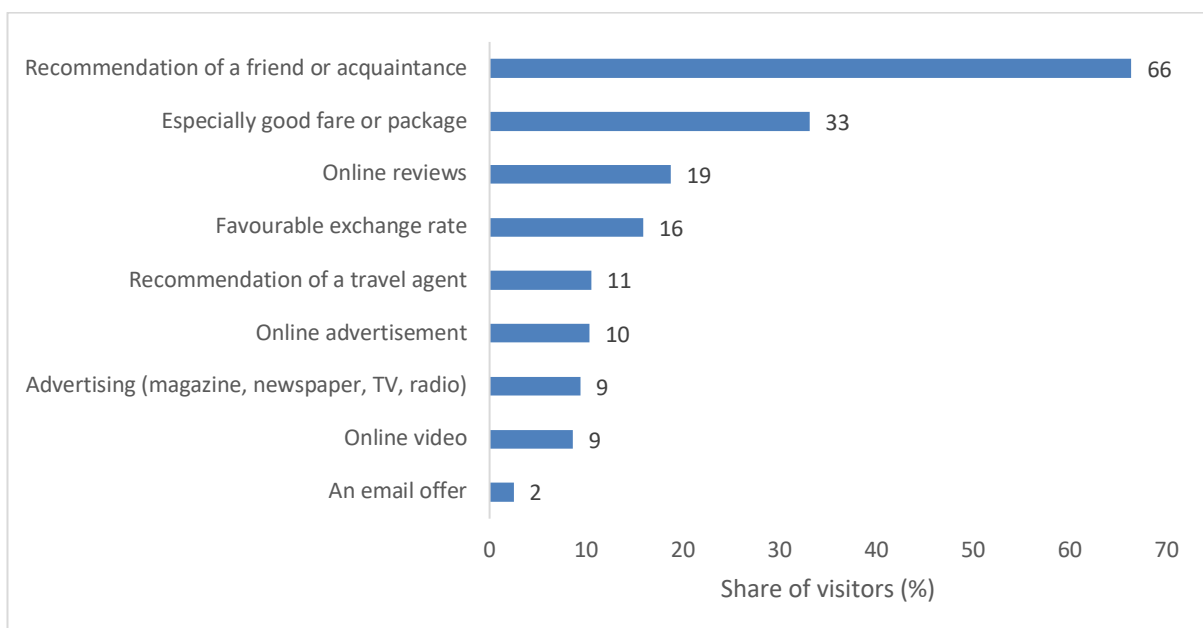
Visitors were asked to highlight ‘influential factors’ that led them to choose the Cook Islands as a travel destination. Warm and sunny weather and quiet and relaxing atmosphere are ranked as the most influential factor (4.1 out of 5.0), closely followed by a safe place to visit (4.0), and friendly people (4.0). Other influential factors include the beaches and swimming (3.9), ease of access (3.6), and snorkelling and diving (3.5). Attending an event (1.8), visiting friends and relatives (1.7), and business or conference (1.2) are the least influential factors overall (Figure 15).

**Figure 15: Influences on the decision to choose the Cook Islands (n = 534-585)**



Nearly two thirds (66%) of visitors mentioned ‘recommendation of a friend or acquaintance’ as the most important factor influencing their visit (Figure 16). Nearly one in three respondents (33%) indicate that an ‘especially good fare or package’ is important for them when selecting the Cook Islands, followed by online reviews (19%), favourable exchange rates (16%), and the recommendation of a travel agent (11%).

**Figure 16: Which factors influenced your selection of the Cook Islands? (n = 523)**

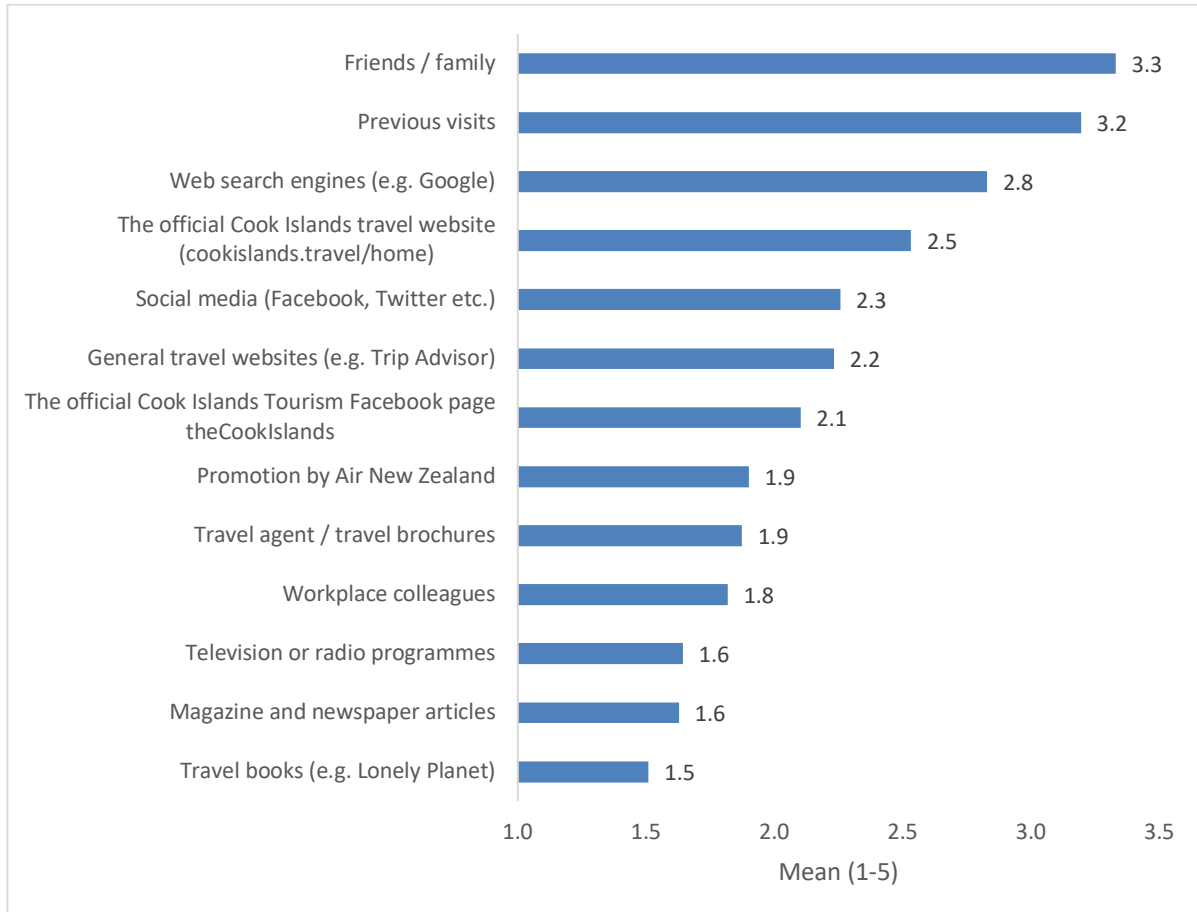


*Note: Multiple responses, therefore total does not add up to 100%*



Visitors were asked to rate the importance of the listed information sources used to plan their trip on a scale from 1 to 5. Friends and family members are ranked as the most important sources (3.2), followed by previous visits (3.2), web search engines (e.g., Google) (2.8), and the official Cook Islands travel website (2.5) (Figure 17).

**Figure 17: Importance of information source used when planning your trip (n = 532-566)**



Over half of travellers surveyed (53%) made their own travel arrangements directly with an airline (Figure 18). A considerable share of visitors surveyed purchased a pre-paid trip either through an in-store travel agent (27%) or directly with accommodation providers (21%). Nearly a quarter (24%) of visitors purchased a pre-paid trip through an online travel website/app. A further 10% of those surveyed indicated that travel arrangements were made by others on their behalf (business, friends, relatives).

**Figure 18: How did you make your travel arrangements for the Cook Islands (n = 596)**



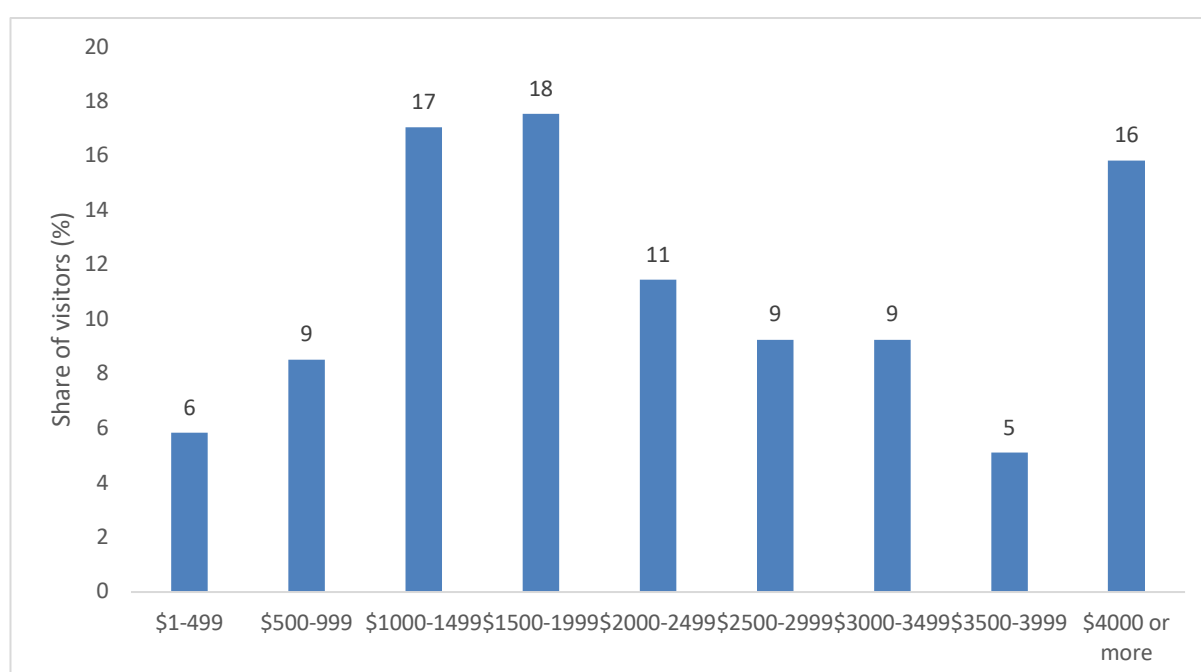
*Note: Multiple responses, therefore total does not add up to 100%*

## 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: 1,374 people comprising 1,218 adults and 156 children.

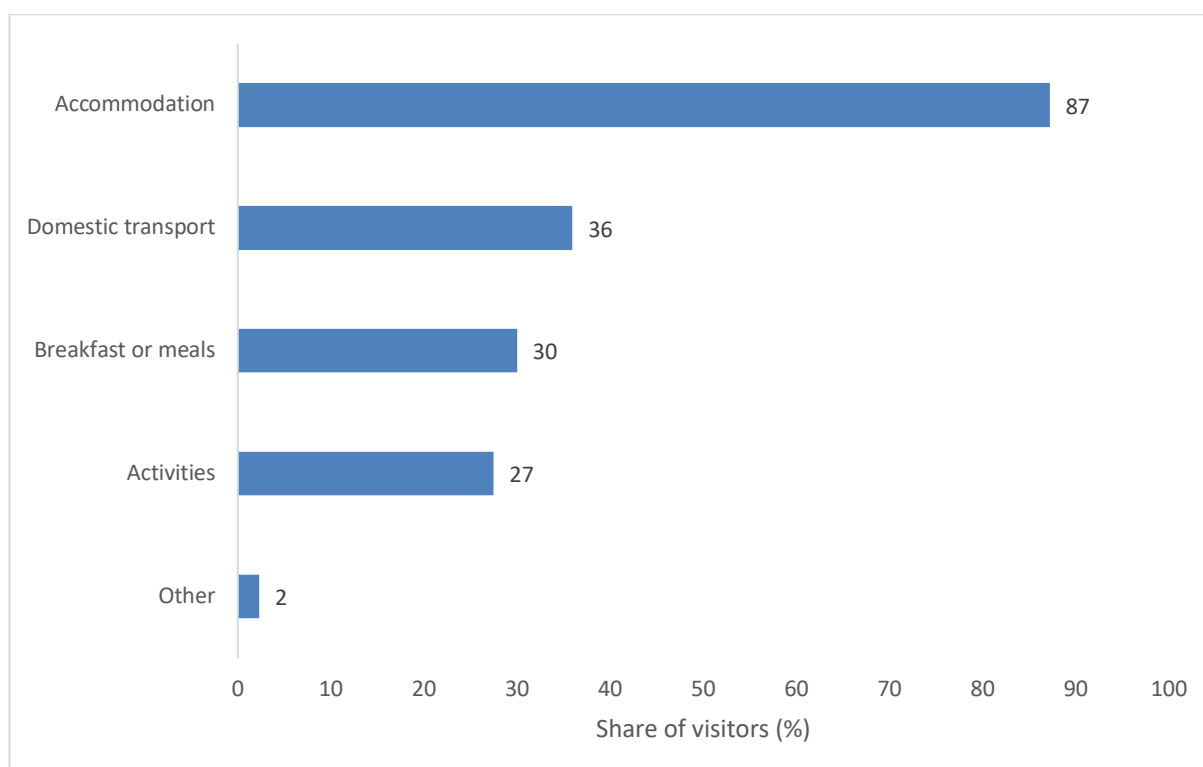
On average, visitors to the Cook Islands spend NZ\$2,555 per person prior to arrival. Nearly half (46%) of visitors spent between NZ\$1,000 and NZ\$2,499 prior to arrival (Figure 19). The prepaid figure per person is 24% higher than visitors' average prepaid spend (NZ\$2,064) in the October to December 2019 period.

**Figure 19: Amount of money spent per person prior to arrival (n = 410)**



In addition to international flights, spending prior to arrival includes accommodation (87% of respondents), domestic transport and airport transfers (36%), meals and breakfast (30%), and activities (27%) (Figure 20). The 'other' category (2%) mainly includes items such as travel insurance.

**Figure 20: Items included in money spent prior to arrival (n = 439)**



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

The following local expenditure section is based on 1,435 people covering 1,264 adults and 171 children. The total spend per visitor per day while in the Cook Islands (excluding any pre-paid expenditure) is NZ\$201 (Table 1). This figure is 35% higher than visitors in the same quarter survey period in 2019 (NZ\$149). Compared with survey period after the border re-opened, this figure is virtually the same as July to September 2022 (NZ\$200) and April to June 2022 (NZ\$199), 3% lower than July to August 2021 (NZ\$208).

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

Expenditure Items	n = 1,435	
	Mean (NZ\$)	(% of spend)
Accommodation	89	44
Restaurant/Café/Bar	41	20
Shopping	16	8
Vehicle rental	12	6
Domestic Flights	10	5
Groceries	10	5
Water-based Activities	9	4
Land-based Activities	6	3
Other	3	2
Petrol	2	1
Internet	2	1
Public Transport	1	0.4
<b>Total spend (NZ\$)</b>	<b>201</b>	<b>100%</b>

Most money spent locally is on accommodation related services (44%) and restaurants, cafés, and bars (20%). Shopping (8%) and vehicle rental (6%) also feature along with domestic flights and groceries (5%) respectively.

It is difficult to estimate accurately the proportion of the pre-paid spend that flows to the Cook Islands. For the purposes of this research, we conservatively estimate that 50% of the pre-paid spend is allocated to airfares. Of the remaining 50% of the pre-paid spend we estimate that 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\$117 and for the average total visit is NZ\$1,022 (8.7 nights).

By multiplying daily in-country spend by the average stay (8.7 nights) we can see that spend per person per visit while in the Cook Islands is on average NZ\$1,749. The total figure (what is spent locally and what flows back to the Cook Islands from pre-paid expenses) is therefore NZ\$318 per visitor per day (\$201 + \$117), or NZ\$2,771 (\$1,749 + \$1,022) for each visitor. Table 2 shows that October to December 2022 visitors contributed 32% more to the local economy than visitors who came during the October to December 2019 period.

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

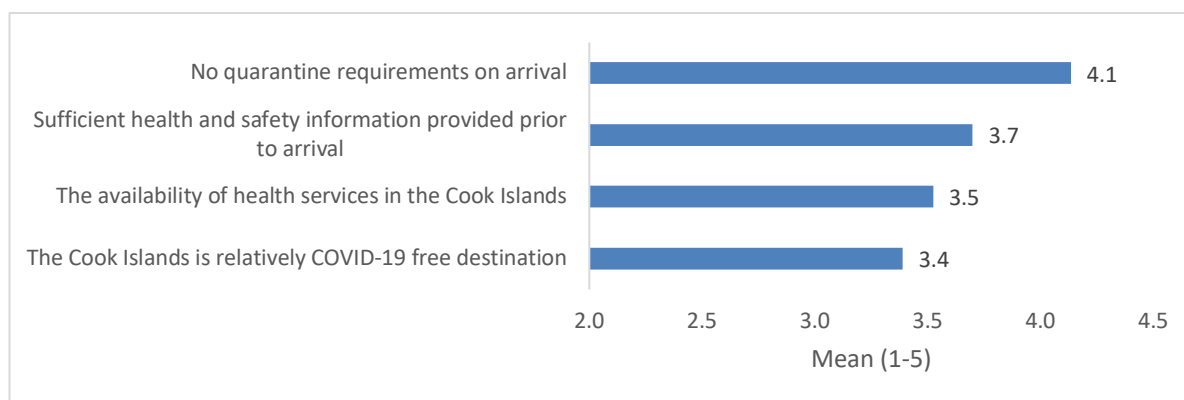
	Oct-Dec 2022 All visitors	Oct-Dec 2019 All visitors
<b>Average Spend Prior to arrival (NZ\$)</b>		
Per Person Per Trip	\$2,555	\$2,064
<b>Flowing into local economy rate – estimated 40%</b>		
Per Person Per Trip	\$1,022	\$826
Per Person per Day	\$117	\$97
Length of stay (nights)	8.7	8.5
<b>Average Local Spend</b>		
Per Person Per Trip	\$1,749	\$1,267
Per Person per Day	\$201	\$149
Total Economic Impact-Per Trip	\$2,771	\$2,093
Total Economic Impact-Per Day	\$318	\$246

## Perception of COVID-19 - Impacts and Responses

The gradual reopening of the Cook Islands to visitors was subject to a set of criteria including airline and airport preparedness, necessary protocols and frameworks. Several questions related to COVID-19 impacts and responses were inserted into the IVS from May 2021 to enable a better understand visitor perceptions of the pandemic’s impact and related destination responses.

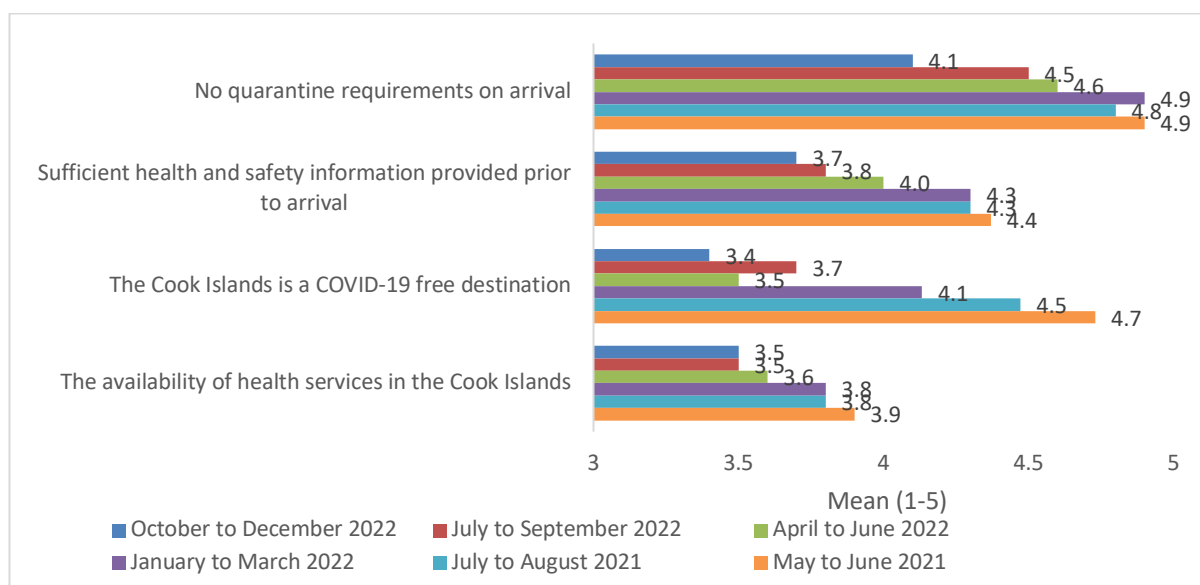
When visitors were asked about the importance of COVID-19 related factors in influencing their decision to travel to the Cook Islands, “no quarantine requirement on arrival” ranked the highest (4.1 out of 5), followed by “sufficient health and safety information provided prior to arrival” (3.7) (Figure 21).

**Figure 21: The important factors in your decision to travel to the Cook Islands (n = 489-512)**



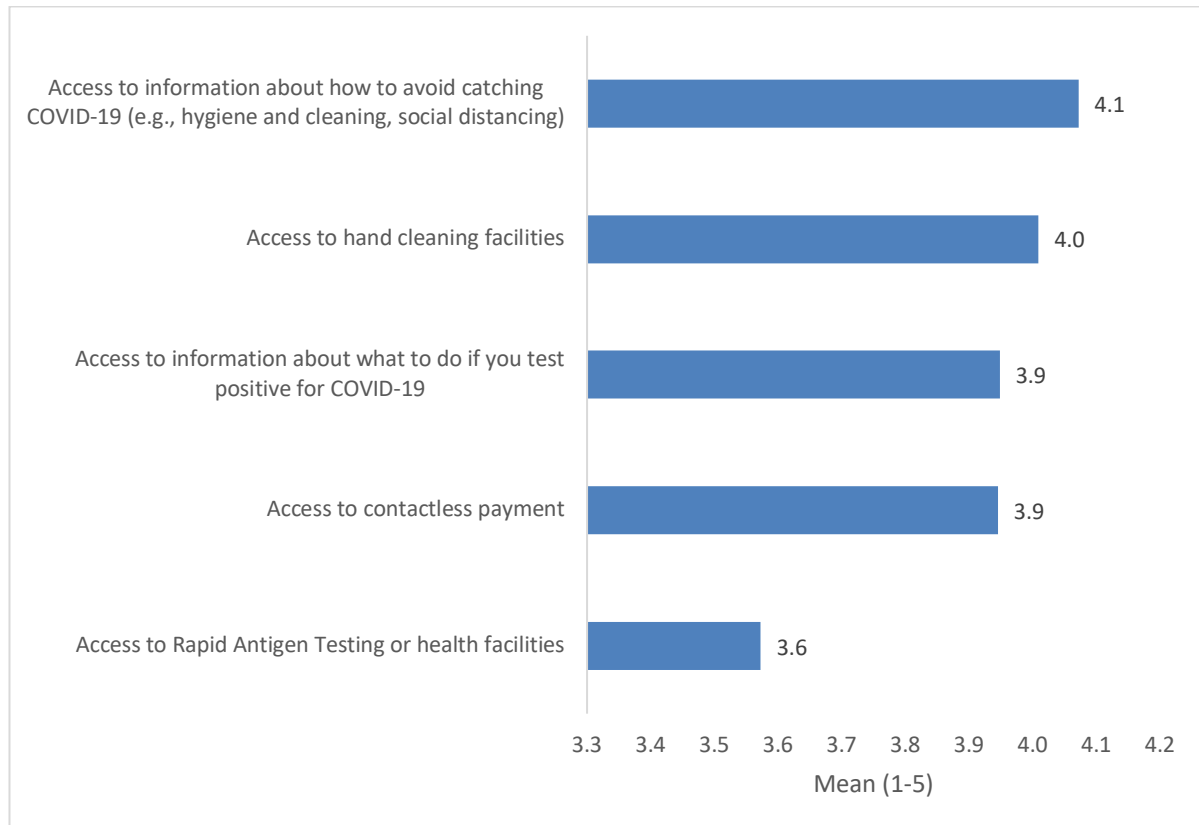
We can see that all factors listed are rated as less important by the October to December 2022 visitors when compared to the five other survey periods since 2021 (Figure 22).

**Figure 22: The importance of factors in influencing your decision to travel to the Cook Islands – time series**



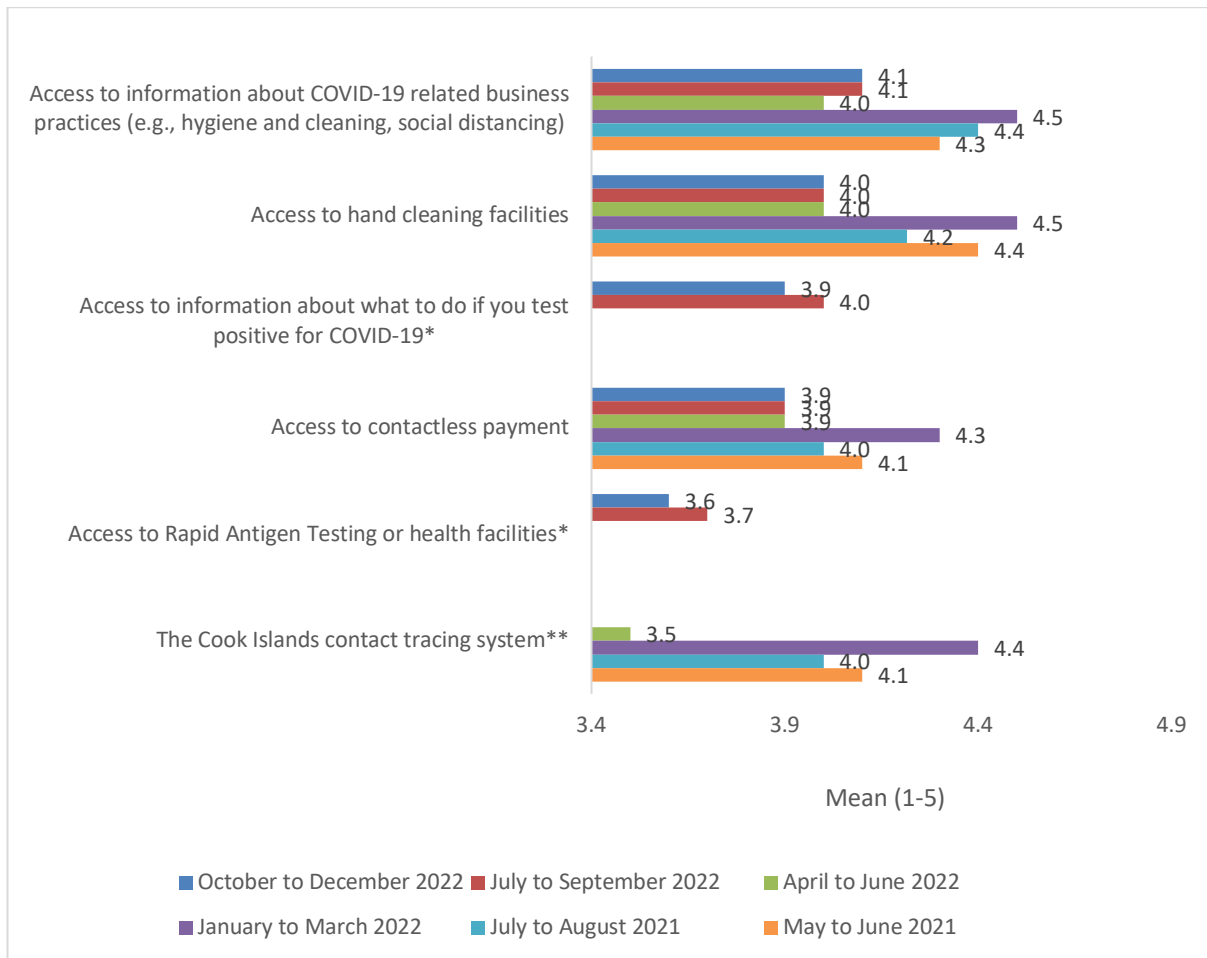
In terms of the COVID-19 responses in the Cook Islands (Figure 23), visitors feel satisfied with access to information about how to avoid catching COVID-19 (4.1 out of 5), access to hand cleaning facilities (4.0), and they also appreciate easy access to information about what to do if you test positive for COVID-19 (3.9) as well as access to contactless payment (3.9). Visitors expressed a relatively lower level of satisfaction with the access to Rapid Antigen Testing or health facilities (3.6).

**Figure 23: Degree of satisfaction with COVID-19 responses (n = 302-454)**



October to December 2022 visitors show similar levels of satisfaction across most variables when compared to July to September 2022: except “Access to information about COVID-19 related business practices” and “Access to Rapid Antigen Testing or health facilities” which ranks a bit higher in July to September 2022 period. October to December 2022 visitors feel less satisfied across all variables previous IVS reports since 2021 (Figure 24).

**Figure 24: Degree of satisfaction with COVID-19 responses – time series**

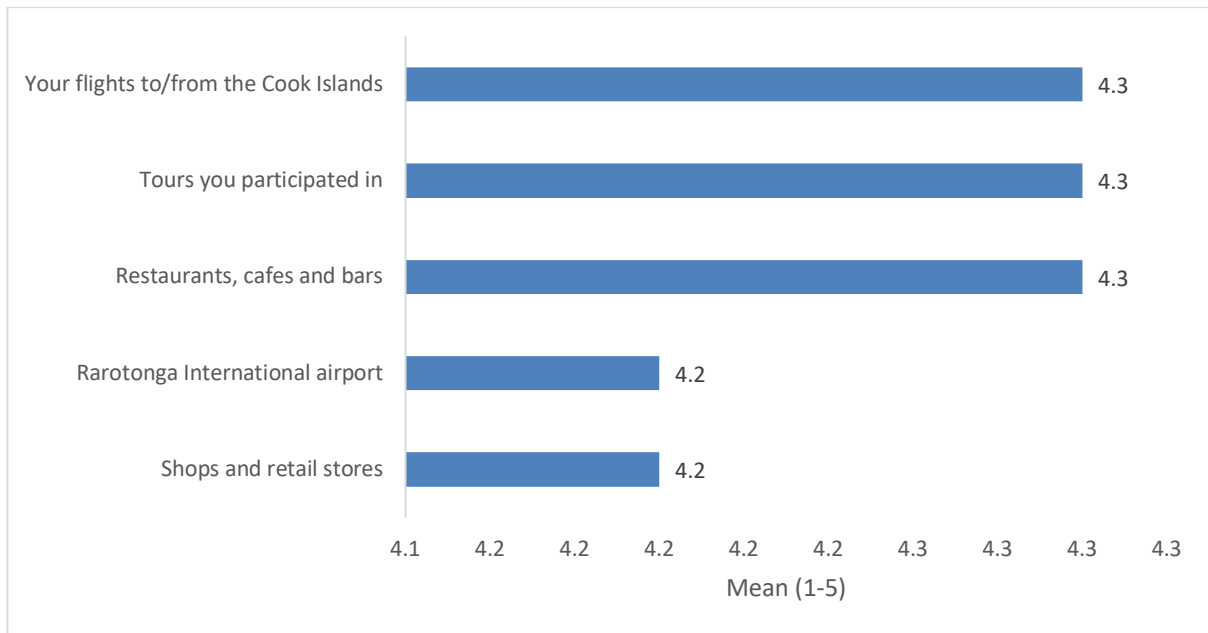


Note: \* New variables from July to September 2022; \*\* Removed variables from July to September 2022

Visitors were asked to rate their level of satisfaction with health and safety measures during their trip to the Cook Islands (Figure 25). Overall, respondents give high satisfaction scores (all above 4 out of 5) across a range of activities and sectors. The health and safety aspects of “Rarotonga International Airport” and “shops and retail stores” received the lowest score (4.2 respectively).

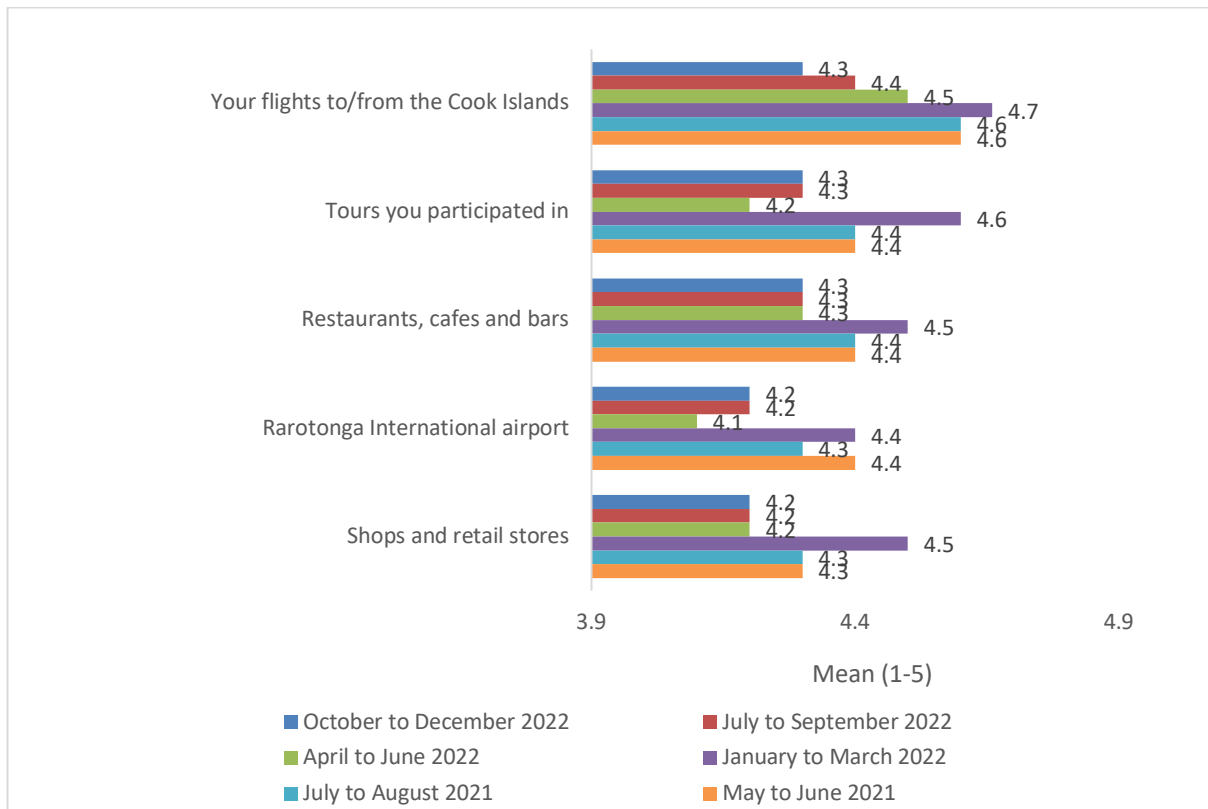


**Figure 25: Degree of satisfaction with health and safety measures (n = 371-506)**



October to December 2022 visitors feel less satisfied across most variables when compared to their counterparts who visited in 2021 and 2022 (Figure 26). The exception is the health and safety aspects of “tours you participated in” and “Rarotonga International Airport” which are slightly higher than the April to June 2022 findings.

**Figure 26: Degree of satisfaction with health and safety measures – time series**



A total of 88 respondents provided further comments about their perceptions of COVID-19 related management during their time in the Cook Islands. Over a third (35%) of the comments include visitors stating that they had no concerns regarding COVID-19, and nearly one in five (17%) respondents show that they had nothing to say regarding COVID-19. Comments include:

*"Have had no concerns during our entire visit."*

*"I'm not too concerned with covid and there wasn't much happening with regards covid outbreaks when we visited."*

*"None at all."*

A quarter (25%) of the comments provided were positive in nature, including: feel safe; a relaxed attitude; well-managed, no issues; face masks; restrictions eased or dropped; open air venues & open places; and hand wash or sanitizer. Positive comments include:

#### **Feel safe**

*"Felt very safe."*

*"We both had 4 Covid shots. Myself 5. And a flu shot before we came to Cook Islands, we felt safe."*

#### **A relaxed attitude**

*"It was great to be somewhere where it was taken seriously but not constantly in your face. It was great to have a bit of normal life back."*

*"Everyone was related about covid which was good."*

#### **Well-managed, no issues**

*"All the places visited were conversant with COVID-19 procedures & the actions to take in an emergency situation."*

*"No issues."*

#### **Face masks**

*"Pleased airport staff all wore masks setting a good example."*

#### **Restrictions eased or dropped**

*"Just so glad restrictions were finally dropped. That is why we came back."*

*"Covid was not really top of my priorities, as the restrictions had eased considerably and I was fully vaccinated."*

### **Open air venues & open places**

*"We found most of the activity we did were open air venues with plenty of space between tables and spaces between people to allow good ventilation we used a rental car and most places had all the doors and windows open as is so warm we felt very comfortable and safe we had masks on the flights."*

### **Hand wash or sanitizer**

*"Had my own masks & hand sanitizer which was always on display & available for public use in all cafes & restaurants."*

Fourteen percentage of comments were negative in nature, including: caught COVID-19 in or after Cooks trip; arrival or departure experience; face masks; poor protocols, confusion over regulations; hand wash or sanitizer; flight concerns with sick people around; lack of distancing; and requirement for employment. Negative comments included:

### **Got COVID-19 in or after Cooks trip**

*"We got covid on the flight from Cook Islands."*

*"Unfortunately, 2 of our party did contact Covid while away. It did not affect me, so I am not sure about the covid health questions above. It spread through the unit, and 2 more of the party contracted it after their return to Auckland. We all were eating out, and 6 members did experience the 'Party Bus'."*

### **Face masks**

*"No one was wearing masks. But we didn't catch covid so that was ok, but very scary."*

*"...no masks worn."*

### **Arrival or departure experience**

*"No social distancing in airport."*

*"Staying with friend on the island but only travelled to get her back to Australia as from different states and both of us have our luggage delayed/lost."*

### **Poor protocols, confusion, concern**

*"COVID safe measures weren't obvious in any setting."*

### **Hand wash or sanitizer**

*"Did not see many hand sanitisers around the resort."*

### **Flight**

*“Flight is rated low because very few people were wearing masks on board. I would support a mask mandate for air travel.”*

**Distance**

*“No social distancing in airport.”*

**Requirement for employment**

*“I’m disappointed it is a requirement for employment. I would otherwise be looking to find work there in my refrigeration trade.”*

Nearly one in five (18%) comments provided suggestions around COVID, including: improve the awareness, the use of face masks, safety measures, observations that it was just time to get on with life, more communication, and others. Comments include:

*“Very little awareness of it generally.”*

*“I took RATs and masks with me. Bought travel insurance.”*

*“As a nurse and husband who travels in the Cook Islands was informed re covid prevention measures. Had own PPE, equipment and RAT tests. No general precautions in place in Rarotonga.”*

*“We wore masks when on the buses. Sometimes they were full. I support wearing of masks on public transport.”*

*“Wore mask on planes and in closed in areas in airports.”*

*“Government website needs a date displayed to be very clear about up to date requirements for entry to Cook Islands.”*

*“Don’t care about Covid. Get on with life.”*

*“More hand sanitising and distance between seats at restaurants.”*

## Visitor Satisfaction

Visitors were asked to indicate their overall satisfaction with their Cook Islands experience on a scale from 1 'very dissatisfied' to 5 'very satisfied' (Figure 27). Nearly four in five (79%) visitors surveyed were 'very satisfied' with their overall experience of the Cook Islands. Very few visitors (0.6%) were unsatisfied with their visit (i.e., providing a score of 2 out of 5 or lower). The percentage of visitors saying they are 'very satisfied' in October to December 2022 is much higher than visitors who came during the same period in 2019 (69%). The average overall satisfaction score is 4.8 which is higher than visitors who came during the same period in 2019 (4.6).

**Figure 27: Overall satisfaction with experience of the Cook Islands (n = 529)**

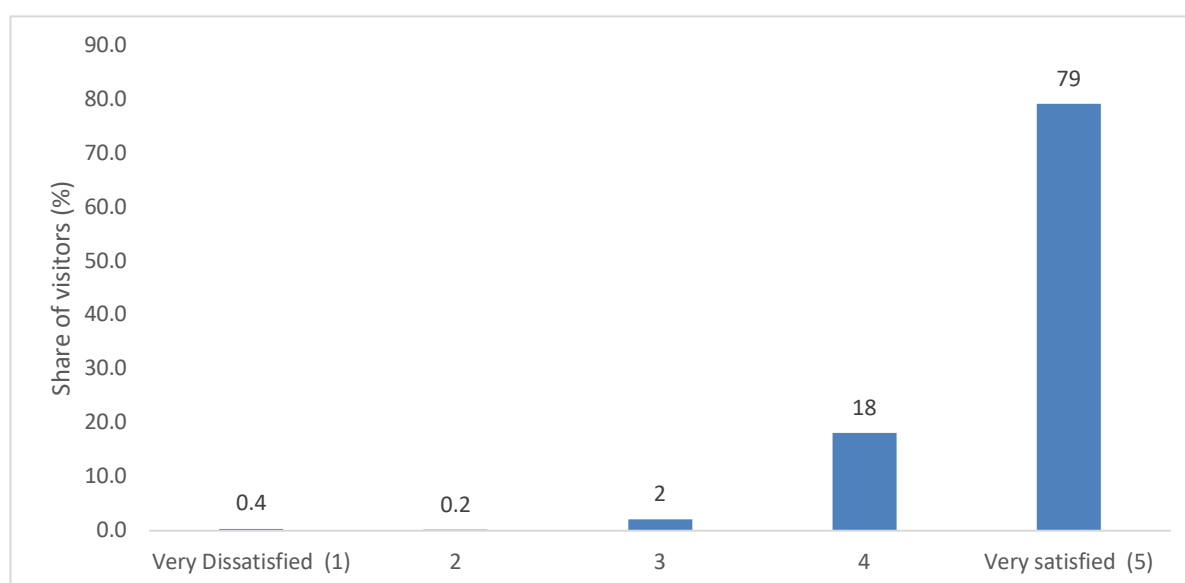
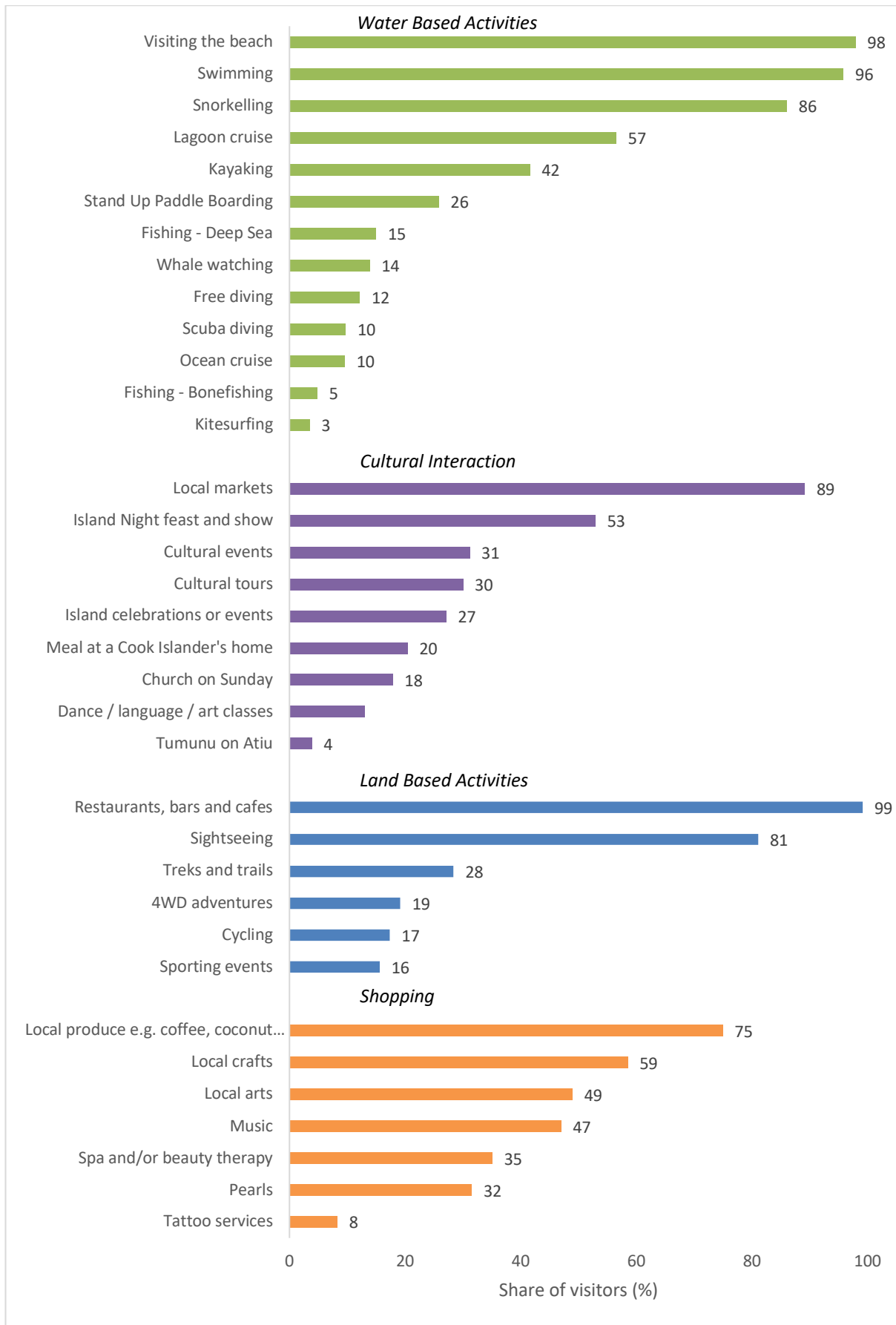


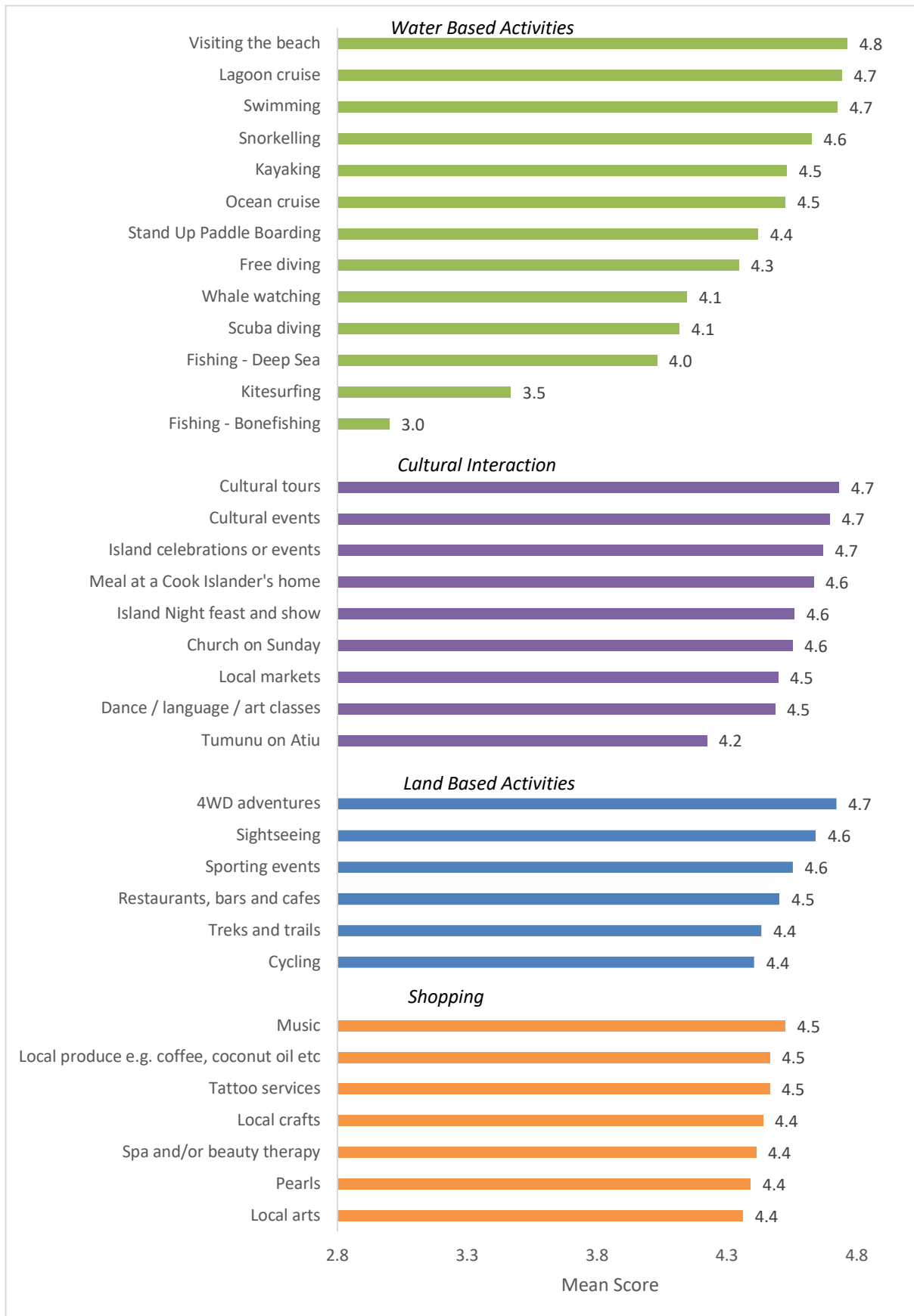
Figure 28 shows the percentage of respondents who undertook specific activities during their visit to the Cook Islands. Almost all visitors frequented at least one restaurant or café (99%) and went to a beach (98%) during their trip. Most of the respondents either go swimming (96%) or visit a local market (89%), and 86% of visitors state that they also tried snorkelling. Rates of participation in shopping are relatively low when compared to other activities.

Visitor satisfaction is generally high with activities undertaken, almost all activities receive a rating greater than 4 out of 5 except kitesurfing with 3.5 and bonefishing with 3.0 (Figure 29). Activities involving cultural interaction (4.6), land-based products (4.5), and shopping (4.4) are generally rated higher than water-based experiences (4.3).

**Figure 28: Degree of participation in activities (n = 15-572)**

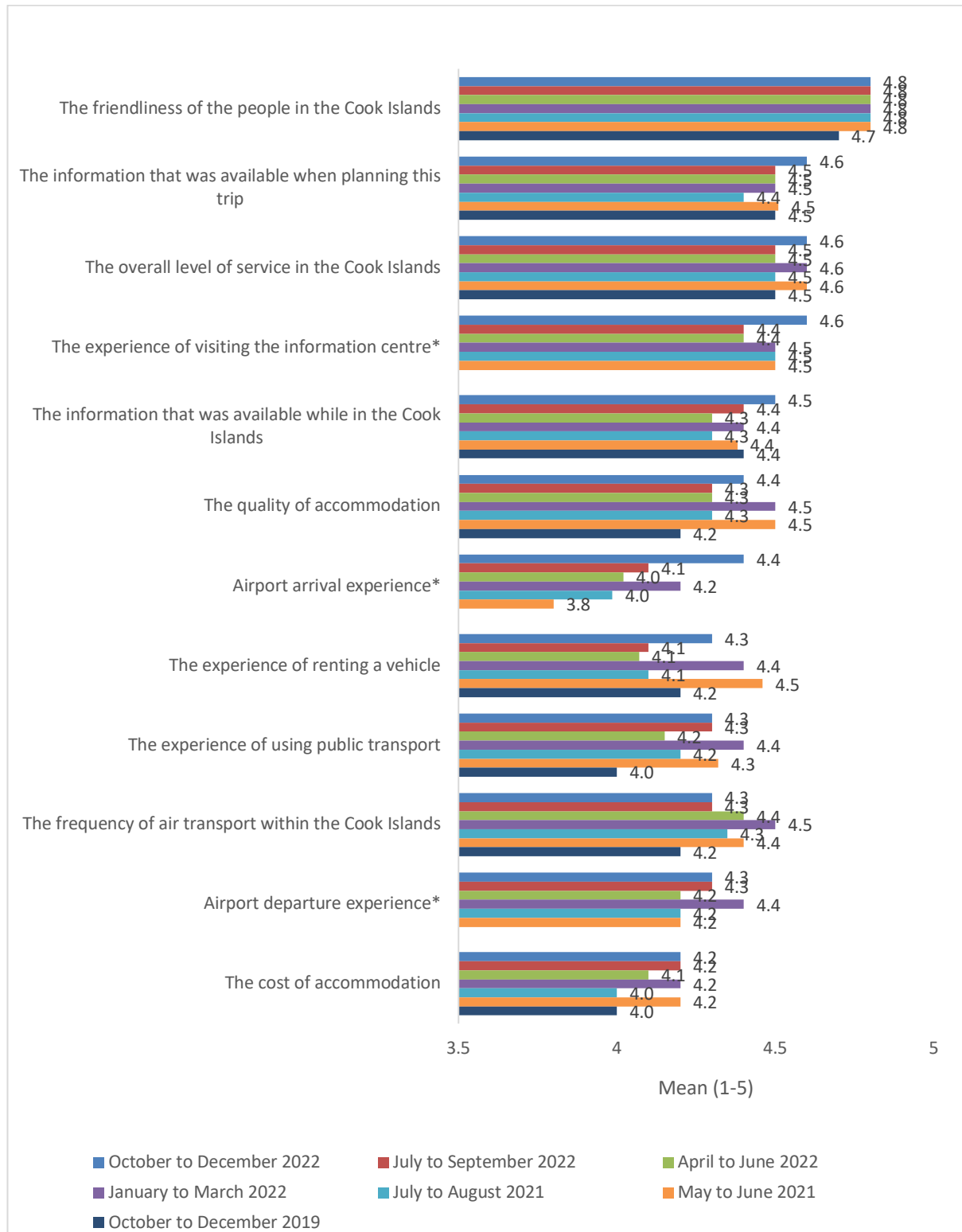


**Figure 29: Degree of satisfaction with activities participated in**



Visitors were asked to rate their level of satisfaction with nine different statements relating to their most recent visit. Responses from the period October to December 2022 are compared to the visitors since May to June 2021 period, and visitors in the same quarter of 2019 (Figure 30).

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



Note: \* New variables from 2021



The degree of satisfaction with the majority of items in October to December 2022 is similar satisfaction with most of the items presented when compared with July to September 2022, April to June 2022, January to March 2022, July to August 2021, and May to June 2021 visitors (Figure 31). These are also similar or slightly higher than visitors during the same period in October to December 2019. October to December 2022 sees an increase in satisfaction with “the information that was available when planning this trip”, “the experience of visiting the information centre”, and “the information that was available while in the Cook Islands”.

## 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 for visitors are the natural environment, cleanliness and weather (46% of respondent comments), the friendly and welcoming local people (41%), the tourist attractions and activities on offer (35%), and the peacefulness and relaxing atmosphere of the country (22%). Smaller numbers of comments mentioned aspects such as food and beverage (15%), accommodation (8%), overall good experience (7%), and convenience and safety (6%).

**Table 3: Most appealing aspects of the Cook Islands (n = 553)**

Themes	Share of respondent comments (%)*
Environment, cleanliness & weather	46
Local people	41
Activities, attractions and entertainment, events	35
Atmosphere	22
Food and beverage	15
Accommodation	8
Overall good experience	7
Convenience and safety	6
Level of service	5
Culture	4
Non-commercial	2
Family friendly or safe destination	2
Family or friends	2
Friendly animals	1
Public services and facilities and infrastructure	1
Price of Goods and Services	1
Emotional connection	1

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

### ***Environment, cleanliness & weather***

The beautiful scenery, natural environment, the beaches and lagoons, and warm weather in the Cook Islands were mentioned by almost half (46%) of the respondents as the most appealing aspect of their trip. Words like ‘beautiful’, ‘warm’, ‘clean’, ‘perfect’, ‘tropical’, and ‘amazing’ are used to describe the attraction of the local environment. Comments included:

*“Beautiful Island to drive around, upkeep of everything lovely and amazing beaches.”*

*“Warm water, sun, warm temperatures.”*

*"Clarity of the water and snorkelling. And freedom to check out beaches all around the island."*

*"The clean oceans and beautiful scenery."*

*"The beautiful weather and beaches. The whole island was just beautiful!!"*

*"...everything was beautiful, the sea wonderful, everything really."*

*"The warmth of the weather."*

*"Lagoon and beaches."*

*"Natural beauty of the island and surrounding water."*

*"...blue waters."*

*"The calmness and beauty of Rarotonga."*

### **Local people**

Over two in five (41%) 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', 'helpful', 'kind', 'welcoming', 'lovely', and 'beautiful'. Comments included:

*"The people were very welcoming and very generous in sharing their culture."*

*"All people we interacted with were friendly."*

*"...and the lovely people from Rarotonga, they made our stay so much memorable. Loved interacting with them and learning from them."*

*"The friendly locals."*

*"I've been before many times, the service and friendliness of the local community was just as awesome as 14 years ago on my first visit."*

*"We loved the people - very kind and welcoming."*

*"The fun-loving generous nature of the people."*

*"The people were beautiful."*

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

Activities, attractions, entertainment, and events featured in more than one third (35%) of respondent comments as the most appealing aspect of their visit. Aitutaki day trip and its lagoon are highlighted by many comments. The accessibility of water-based activities

including snorkelling, swimming, lagoon cruise, fishing/bone fishing, whale watching, and swimming with turtles are mentioned frequently. Also, land-based activities like sightseeing/tours and biking/walking/scooter tours are mentioned by many respondents. Comments included:

*"Whale watching."*

*"...private islands (One Foot island), Mona's water taxi, Black Pearl fishing charter."*

*"Our day trip to Aitutaki."*

*"...nightlife is amazing. Nothing like scootering around in the sun and heading to the beach for a swim."*

*"The experiences provided by The Black pearl fishing charter. Daily snorkels in the lagoon in front of Motu villas."*

*"You could participate in as many adventures as you wished."*

*"Being there to watch Cook Islands games and Saturday markets."*

*"...great swimming and snorkelling, loved the markets and the sun."*

*"The beautiful Aqua Waters of Aitutaki."*

*"The Vaka Cruise on Aitutaki was the highlight of our trip. Aitutaki was amazing and the Lagoonarium was a great snorkelling spot."*

*"Cultural events with buffet meal."*

*"The fresh food, the beautiful weather and beaches to swim at. The party scene."*

*"Tamatua tours cultural night and walk-up mountain EXCELLENT."*

*"The Ariki Swim with Turtles was amazing. Incredible. Also, the 4 wheel quad bike trek was awesome."*

*"The Motu 2 Motu Aitutaki event!!! Poppy and Stephen Doherty are AMAZING to bring tourism and business to Aitutaki for this fantastic week of sports!"*

### **Atmosphere**

The Cook Islands is described as a very relaxing, peaceful, quiet, and laid-back destination with 22% of respondents finding this lifestyle as the most appealing factor. Most common words to describe the atmosphere in Cook Islands are 'relaxing', 'peaceful', 'quiet', 'slow', 'peace', 'Island time', and 'laid back'. Comments included:

*"Quiet and relaxing."*

*"The relaxing pace of life on the island."*

*"It was everything we expected. Laid back, relaxed."*

*"Great place to chill and really relax."*

*"...island lifestyle."*

*"The laid-back and slow island life especially on Aitutaki..."*

*"The peace and quiet and gentle pace of life."*

*"Such a relaxing enjoyable place to visit."*

*"How laid back it was. It's what we needed to recharge our batteries."*

### **Food and beverage**

Food and beverages were identified as an appealing aspect of the trip in 15% of respondent comments. Comments focused on the quality and variety of food and beverage, and fresh produce available in the Cook Islands. Visitors described the local food as 'amazing', 'delicious', 'yummy', 'tropical', 'quality', and 'fresh'. Many visitors mentioned their wonderful dining experiences in local restaurants. Comments included:

*"The progressive dinner was the best night on the island and is a must do for all tourists."*

*"Great restaurants, bars and cafes on the island so we were able to eat out every day."*

*"Restaurants in the island are fantastic. Fresh fish outstanding."*

*"...the food (especially the fish sandwiches)."*

*"...and the freshness and variety of food, which had improved out of sight since I last visited in 2008!"*

*"...the fresh fruit. Amazing."*

*"Also, most restaurants allow BYO which we found really good."*

### **Accommodation**

Eight percent of respondent comments featured the accommodation they stayed in referring to the level of service, facilities, location, dining, and the friendly and supportive staff. Comments included:

*"Location of our Airbnb and how helpful and lovely our host was!"*

*"...accommodation with beach and kayak access, also snorkel gear and bikes supplied."*

*"5 star accommodation in a 5 star setting."*

*"Had wonderful service at Pacific Resort."*

### **Overall good experience**

Visitors (7%) also commented on the 'overall experience' when discussing appealing factors of the Cook Islands. Comments such as 'everything' demonstrated the holistic nature of the positive experience the visitors had:

*"It was a nice, relaxing holiday."*

*"I love the size of the island, the sense of community, nightlife is amazing."*

*"Enjoying time in a beautiful place with family and friends. Spending as much time in and on the ocean was specifically enjoyable."*

*"Everything! Loved the relaxed environment. Will definitely be coming back."*

*"It's paradise I loved my days over at the Cook Islands would honestly go back there loved everything about it."*

*"Everything. Loved every single second."*

*"...everything was working perfectly well."*

### **Convenience and safety**

Six percent of respondent comments featured the safety and convenience of travelling to/around the Cook Islands. These usually referred to the currency, ease of travel around the islands, and accessibility from New Zealand. Comments included:

*"Same currency."*

*"Being able to travel around by scooter."*

*"Being able to get around the island in 45 minutes."*

*"When you needed something, you could get it. Nothing is too far away. Driving around in the rental car is easy."*

*"Family safe. NZ\$."*

*"...ease of work visa from NZ."*

### **Level of service**

Five percent of visitor comments emphasised the service and local hospitality they experienced as the most appealing aspect of their visit. The quality of service at the

accommodation, restaurants, and on the tours won recognition from some visitors. Comments included:

*"The service at Crown resort and Spa was excellent."*

*"...and the service of the bar and restaurant staff were great."*

*"I've been before many times, the service and friendliness of the local community was just as awesome as 14 years ago on my first visit."*

*"The staff at The Sanctuary were very friendly and helpful. They remembered our names and treated us like we were the most important people there."*

*"The service."*

### **Culture**

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

*"Polynesian culture."*

*"Maori culture and values."*

*"...cultural experience."*

*"...family culture."*

*"The wonderful culture..."*

*"...their Christian witness..."*

### **Non-commercial**

Two percent of the survey participants commented that the Cook Islands is appealing because it is not over-commercialised or 'too touristy'. Some visitors noted that the Cook Islands' environment and cleanliness had improved because of smaller number of tourists. Comments included:

*"That it's not overly commercialised,"*

*"Not overly affected by tourism."*

*"Pleased to see no international fast food chains."*

*"Aitutaki - brilliant resort and island - been before and would go again - provides everything fir a relaxing holiday without being commercialised."*

### **Family friendly or safe destination**

A small number of the respondents (2%) appreciate the family-friendly feature/service offered by accommodations and tour operators. Comments included:

*"Safe, beautiful place for the whole family."*

*"I have been many times before and love taking my toddler there to relax and unwind."*

*"Great place to take the Family."*

### **Family or friends**

Two percent of the respondents considered being able to visit their family and friends in the Cook Islands as one of the most appealing aspects of their visit. Comments included:

*"Rehab and chilling out at Muri, catching up with friends who live on the island."*

*"Seeing family and friends."*

*"Visiting long-time friends."*

### **Friendly animals**

A few comments (1%) is on the friendliness and well-controlled animals, especially the local dogs. Further comments included:

*"Other than the beautiful surroundings, it's the dogs. I come for the dogs. Particularly the street dogs. They are so friendly and loving."*

*"Loved seeing dogs and chooks roam the streets."*

*".love the roosters."*

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

A small number (1%) of the respondents commented on the price of goods and services in the Cook Islands as being one of the most appealing aspects of their visit. Such comments are:

*"...affordable for shopping."*

*"What was shown was what we paid."*

*"Groceries were a bit steep but understandable."*

### **Public services and facilities and infrastructure**

Another one percent of respondents expressed appreciation for the improvement of public services and facilities and infrastructure in the Cook Islands. Comments included:



*"The clockwise/anti-clockwise buses were excellent."*

*"The roads were in much better condition."*

### **Emotional Connection**

Some visitors (1%) who repeatedly come back to visit the Cook Islands expressed their emotional attachment to the destination, such as a 'feeling of home'. Comments included:

*"It's always like 'coming home'. Definitely my happy place."*

*"Got to visit my partners family and learn about descendants family history."*

## Least appealing aspects of the Cook Islands

Visitors were asked: “What did you find least attractive or appealing about the Cook Islands on your most recent visit?”. Table 4 summarizes key themes respondents felt were least appealing. Major themes to emerge included issues with public services and facilities and infrastructure (15%), food and beverage (9%), price of goods and services (9%), Rubbish and natural environment care (8%), stray animals and mosquitos (7%), attractions and activities (7%), and accommodation (6%) respectively.

**Table 4: Least appealing aspects of the Cook Islands (n = 510)**

Themes	Share of respondent comments (%)*
Public services and facilities and infrastructure	15
Food and beverage	9
Price of goods and services	9
Stray animals and mosquitos	8
Rubbish and the lack of care for the natural environment	7
Attractions and activities	7
Accommodation	6
Flight related issues	5
Not open or not ready to operate	4
Customer service	4
Rental cars or scooters	3
Poor weather	3
Local people	3
Labour shortage	1
Lack of information	1
COVID-19	1
Other tourists	1
Safety & Health	1

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

### ***Public services, facilities, and infrastructure***

Fifteen percent of respondent comments mentioned the destination’s public services, facilities, and infrastructure as being the least appealing aspects of their Cook Islands experience. The majority of comments focused on the arrival and departure process at the airport (e.g., the waiting time and poor organisation). Other comments focused on the conditions of the roads, the bus services, and internet access. Comments included:

*" The long queues at international arrivals."*

*"Time taken to process on and off at airports."*

*"The departure lounge."*

*"The Island Hopper Vacation transfer from Rarotonga airport when we arrived didn't collect us and the management was very rude when we tried to obtain a refund as we had to get a local taxi to our accommodation."*

*"Lack of Wi-Fi at some places."*

*" Rarotonga circle road - 1/2 not so great for cycling."*

*" Road surfaces- some parts were bumpy."*

*" The public transport was not really punctual."*

*" We tried to hike in Rarotonga (Ikurangi trail) but the trail was not well maintained and we had to give up half-way due to the lack of signs and directions."*

*"The lack of transport and time waiting for a bus."*

*" The cost of the internet and cellphone."*

### **Food and beverage**

Nine percent of respondent comments noted that food and beverage offerings in the Cook Islands were a least appealing aspect of their visit. Comments primarily focused on the *limited food choice* (particularly for dietary preferences like vegan/vegetarian), the lack of local produce (e.g., fresh fruit, fish), the price of food, and the limitation of healthy food options. Comments included:

*"Food - not enough usage of local ingredients, regular fish & chips and burgers were OK but I expected a culinary heaven in Paradise with all the fruits and fish given by nature."*

*" The limitations on healthy food options available."*

*" Availability of full menu at restaurants was a bit of an issue."*

*" Availability of food shopping."*

*" Restaurant options - Many closed."*

*"... hard to find good vegan food."*

*" And the price of food was pretty steep for what it was. Especially a trip to a restaurant was something of note that was overly priced and under delivered."*

*" Hard to find local fresh fruit and vegies for a more affordable price."*

*" Possibly the relative high cost of food relative to local wage and the lack of variety of cuisine "*

*"The food. Most places had westernised menus that were overpriced and lacked in quality. Very disappointed in general by most dining experiences."*

*"The food was a little disappointing, especially the range of local seafood."*

*"I'm gluten free and dairy free and there wasn't a lot of that type of food available..."*

*"Lack of fruit."*

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

Another nine percent of comments mentioned the price of goods and services as a least appealing part of the Cook Islands visit. Respondents mostly referred to the prices of *food*, but comments also mentioned the price of accommodation, taxis, and hiring scooters/bicycles. Comments included:

*"... cost of transport from airport to Edgewater - too expensive."*

*"... expensive internet access at resort."*

*" The price of fresh fruit and vege, but also understand why so expensive."*

*"... some cultural activities like the island nights were really expensive."*

*"The market prices were a little steeper than I thought they would as be the cost of food and the cost of WIFI was crazy high."*

*"Prices of flights."*

*"Accommodation is so expensive - there is no way I'd be able to visit unless it was funded by my government department."*

*"... groceries are expensive."*

### **Stray animals and mosquitoes**

Eight percent of respondent comments stated that the least appealing part of their visit was the presence of stray animals and mosquitoes. *Dogs* dominated the conversation, but *chickens*, *mosquitoes*, and *sea slugs* were also mentioned. Comments included:

*"Unfortunately, the noise of the roosters crowing all morning at the Edgewater."*

*"The dogs and chickens :-)."*

*"So many dogs ...even though most were friendly. The barking during the night meant little sleep on a couple of days."*

"Mosquitoes 🦟."

"The bugs (ants, cockroaches etc)."

"The roosters and dogs"

"The roosters!!!"

"Cockerels crowing very early in the morning."

"Sea slugs."

### **Rubbish and the lack of care for the natural environment**

Rubbish and the lack of care for the natural environment were mentioned in seven percent of respondent comments. Comments mostly focused on the degradation of coral reefs, litter on the beaches but also in the streets, broken glass, and the presence of abandoned sites. A few comments also mentioned the absence of rubbish bins which made it hard to control litter. Comments included:

*"How there was very little variety of fish and coral that was there, esp. in the lagoon and the other areas around the island where you could snorkel. It seemed that there was also very little preservation. It wasn't advertised if there was preservation going on."*

*"No recycling, really put me off as it's such a small island. I was really shocked it is all just thrown in the land fill."*

*"Damage to corals was very sad."*

*"Rubbish collection at the side of a couple of outdoor restaurants was a bit smelly."*

*"Not a lot of fish life and coral life on the reef during snorkelling trip. No water at the waterfall."*

*"Waste at public beach parking spaces."*

*"Climate impact on the coral reef. There seemed to be less fish in the lagoon and lots more sea cucumbers. Not the locals fault though."*

*"There seemed to be quite a bit of broken glass on the beaches. We walked a lot and collected. Glass in bags. We travel the world, and it seems to be a similar situation in a lot of countries."*

*"... concern that quality of water in lagoons is deteriorating."*

### **Attractions and activities**

Seven percent of visitor comments included criticism/disappointment related to attractions and activities in the Cook Islands. Many comments mentioned activity cancellations caused by poor weather conditions. Other comments were centred around *markets, lack of nightly entertainment, fishing, and lagoons*, with a smaller amount focused on specific activities that were booked by visitors. Comments included:

*"Limited availability of some activities in Rarotonga - we were interested in a number of activities advertised on the Cook Island tourism website, but there was limited availability for the days we were on Rarotonga."*

*"Not much to do once you had been snorkelling and seen a culture show."*

*"The market did not seem to be on. Would be nice for a central space for local artists to display their work. In the resort there was very limited artwork available."*

*"...bakery shops etc closing early."*

*"Less local arts and crafts but understandable due to previous covid restrictions."*

*"Not much lifetime activity after 6.00 pm."*

*"Not much choice when it came to purchasing souvenirs."*

*"...the limited hours and days of some tours/attractions."*

### **Accommodation**

A further six percent of respondent comments included complaints about the standard of accommodation. Respondents emphasised that the *costs* of the resorts were too high, that some of the accommodation was run down and in need of maintenance. Visitors also commented that food at some accommodation was often unavailable/not what visitors were expecting, and that *service* and *communication* at some of the resorts were not up to standard. Comments included:

*"... accommodations do not clean enough and old."*

*"Breakfasts at the resort were the same every day - after 10 days they were boring."*

*"The poor front of house service at the resort."*

*"The ongoing renovations and lack of staff at the Rarotongan resort."*

*"Hot water and water pressure at resort."*

*"Very dated accommodation."*

*"The Resort over charged our accommodation and no one responses to our complaint."*

*"Tea towels and dishcloths needed a good cleanse."*

*"... accommodation was very poor. Self-catering. No gas for cooking obtained 24hrs later. After multiple requested Vai email, no answer to c/p. No hot water, I thought there wasn't any but turned out several days later when someone changed the towels that in a box outside a switch was turned off. Cooking equipment poor. Only knife was a giant bread knife. Fortunately, we had a pocketknife. We used a rock to stop the fridge door from leaking..."*

### ***Flight related issues***

Five percent of respondent comments mentioned flight related issues as the least appealing part of the visit. Comments mentioned prices of flights, flights delayed/cancellation and the lack of direct access from Australia. Comments included:

*"Our return flight was delayed by 10 hours and..."*

*"No direct flight from and from Sydney."*

*"Flight cancellation and delay."*

*"The delays in flights leaving Cook Islands and subsequent travel difficulties on arrival back in NZ."*

*"Prices of flights."*

*"...flights seem more expensive."*

*"The increase in air fares (our trip had been postponed due to COVID). Our flight over was delayed so didn't arrive until 0300 vs 0100 - which is still a late time to travel. On the way home we missed our Air NZ connecting flight AKL to NPL as delayed on the tarmac and long queues at customs, then couldn't get a flight or rental car the next day. This Air NZ connection is too tight as its the second time I have missed it coming back from Raro."*

*"Air NZ changed our direct flights between Sydney and Raro to flying through NZ with an overnight each way in AKL. We were travelling with a 1-year-old, and it was a nightmare. Much as we love the Cooks, we won't return until we can fly direct again - and we won't travel with Jetstar."*

### ***Not open or not ready to operate***

Four percent of comments mentioned that the businesses were "not open or not ready to operate" as one of the least appealing aspects of the Cook Islands visit. Many respondents did mention that they understood that this was often the result of staff shortages due to Covid. Comments included:

*" Not all restaurants open everyday."*

*" Restaurant options - Many closed."*

*" Shops cafes close to early."*

*" Everything is so laid back that even basic retail starts closing at 2:30ish and fully closed by 3:30ish even on a weekday. Even on a Friday the one and only liquor store was closed at 6:30pm."*

*"Figuring out what time things were open or shut."*

*"Also, there were a few shops we visited that were not open within the times they stated they were open on their websites, so we ended up missing them."*

*"Things closed on Sunday."*

*"Sad that quite a lot of t places closed or run down because & after COVID."*

### **Customer service**

Another four percent of respondent comments mentioned the poor standard of customer service they experienced as their least appealing aspect of their holiday. Comments often focused on customer service in restaurants, accommodation, car or scooter rentals, airport, and transport (e.g., bus, taxi). Comments included:

*"Service wasn't that great."*

*"One night's dinner, it was my son's 17th we booked a week ahead of time for 15 of us, we were the first there and the last to be served, I wouldn't recommend it!"*

*"The poor service, I understand there is a staff shortage and therefore long waits, but if there was a smile and polite staff waiting would be tolerated."*

*"Most were rude, they couldn't care, they gave us incorrect information about the Wi-Fi. The young male staff behind the desk were great but most of the women were rude. (I am a woman myself)."*

*"Some services by people at one hotel and the airport on departure."*

*"The service from one of the receptionists at our accommodation."*

### **Rental cars and scooters**

Three percent of respondent comments mentioned the experience of trying to rent a car or scooter as the least appealing aspect of their Cook Islands visit. Complaints mainly focused on the process of car renting, the availability of car renting etc. Comments included:



*"Getting the car from rental company, made us wait for 45 minutes then when car did arrive, the sales lady just sat down for a smoke, and we had to go find her to get the keys. Very poor, almost had one of our parties in tears."*

*"No helmets to go with hire scooters."*

*"The car renting took a long time, and we had a toddler and my 92-year-old grandmother with us so that was quite a long wait (over an hour)."*

*"The process of getting a Cook Island Driver License and renting a scooter."*

*"Vehicle rental in Aitutaki is not easy."*

*"Rental car was very old and much smaller than the medium car we thought we have hired but we weren't bothered as still reliable."*

### **Poor Weather**

Poor weather was mentioned in three percent of respondent comments. Even though many mentioned that this was out of their control, it still impacted on their holiday. Comments included:

*"The wind :)"*

*"The rain and cold."*

*"Wrong time of year for myself. It was too hot unfortunately."*

*"Perhaps the weather for part of our stay (too warm for our baby)."*

*"The weather -strong winds the whole holiday."*

### **Local people**

Another three percent of comments mentioned local people as the least appealing aspect of the Cook Islands visit. Comments included:

*"Some people in local shops unfriendly."*

*"Being yelled at by locals because we took a wrong turn."*

*"An aggressive bus driver!!"*

*"The fact that many police (and some locals) are unkind to the dogs."*

### **Labour shortage**

One percent of respondent comments highlighted the impacts of staff shortages. Comments included:

*"Lack of serving / waiting staff."*

*"The service was very slow in some of the food diners, but we realized there was a staff shortage."*

*"Less local people than before. Mostly imported staff working."*

### **Lack of information**

Few (one percent) respondent comments noted that the least appealing part of the visit was the lack of visitor information available e.g., opening hours for dining and shopping, local attractions and entertainment. Comments included:

*"There wasn't great info on easy bush walks to do."*

*"No brochures at the airport so we missed out on cultural night booking and Aitutaki experience as we weren't aware of it early enough."*

*"Total lack of Local event information."*

*"... need more information about places to go/eat."*

### **COVID-19**

Only one percent of comments mentioned issues related to COVID-19. These comments were mainly concerning visitors getting COVID while on holiday and places being short staffed or closed because of COVID. Comments included:

*"Got covid on the last day."*

*"Some places are now closed ...most probably due to Covid."*

*"I guess the impacts of Covid, because there seems to be fewer options available. We tried to book two activities which weren't running. However, we were so happy to be back it didn't matter."*

### **Other tourists**

A small amount (one percent) of respondent comments mentioned their encounter with some rude and unruly tourists as the least appealing aspect of the Cook Islands visit. Comments included:

*"The other tourists who were heard to be rude, complaining and demanding."*

*"Physically pushed around by locals (but I get it, tourists..)."*

### **Safety & Health**

Safety was a theme mentioned in one percent of the respondent comments. Comments included:

*"... worry about Dengue fever."*

*"...some aspects of health and safety non-existent, watching local parents drive cars with babies on their laps with no seat belts etc."*

## Suggestions for improvements

When asked if there was anything that could have improved their visit to the Cook Islands 31% of visitors took the time to make a comment. Suggestions focus on public services and infrastructure, many which highlighted arrival and departure experience (23%), flights (15%), the availability and quality of food and drinks (11%), accommodation (11%), entertainment, activities and transport (11%), environment, safety and animals (8%), the need for better information (7%), wanting to stay longer, visit more places (7%), car scooter or rental (5%), value for money (5%), local people, standards of service (3%), weather (2%), needing more staff (1%), booking prior to arrival (1%), business needing to be open or fully operational (1%), law and legislation (1%), and other (1%). Comments on these themes include:

*"Quality of roads. We noticed part of the ring road was very bumpy for scooters. It was good to see some recent resealing in places."*

*"Improve the arrival area at the airport. Very cramped and more immigration desks required to process passengers more quickly. A lack of space and poor air circulation can be stressful."*

*"Clear and more frequent information at the airport in Rarotonga."*

*"More automotive water machine on the island would help, bus can be electric and newer."*

*"Better phone and internet services."*

*"Better communication and more modern internet services."*

*"More accurate bus information. Bus app didn't detect all buses. Timetables and punctuality poor."*

*"Cost of flights - way overpriced with airlines trying to recoup Covid losses."*

*"A direct link to the islands from Christchurch."*

*"Direct flights from/to Australia."*

*"Getting there from Canada."*

*"Direct flight from Hawaii."*

*"Availability of fruit and veges."*

*"Cook fresh."*

*"Healthier meal options."*

*"More local and affordable venues to eat."*

*"Accommodation servicing."*

*"Different accommodation provider."*

*"Local Activity information."*

*"More nightlife and bars open until later than 9 or 10pm on more nights of the week."*

*"Markets or local items for sale in Aitutaki."*

*"...cleaning up beach front/traditional lands areas."*

*"Control of dogs."*

*"More day trip options to Aitutaki."*

*"More information available about where to see local art."*

*"Improve costs in general."*

*"The attitude the locals have towards tourists."*

*"More workers at Resorts."*

*"Arrangements pre-organised need to be supported."*

*"Hopefully the island will get back some if the places that have closed due to covid and have new tourist things to do for older people."*

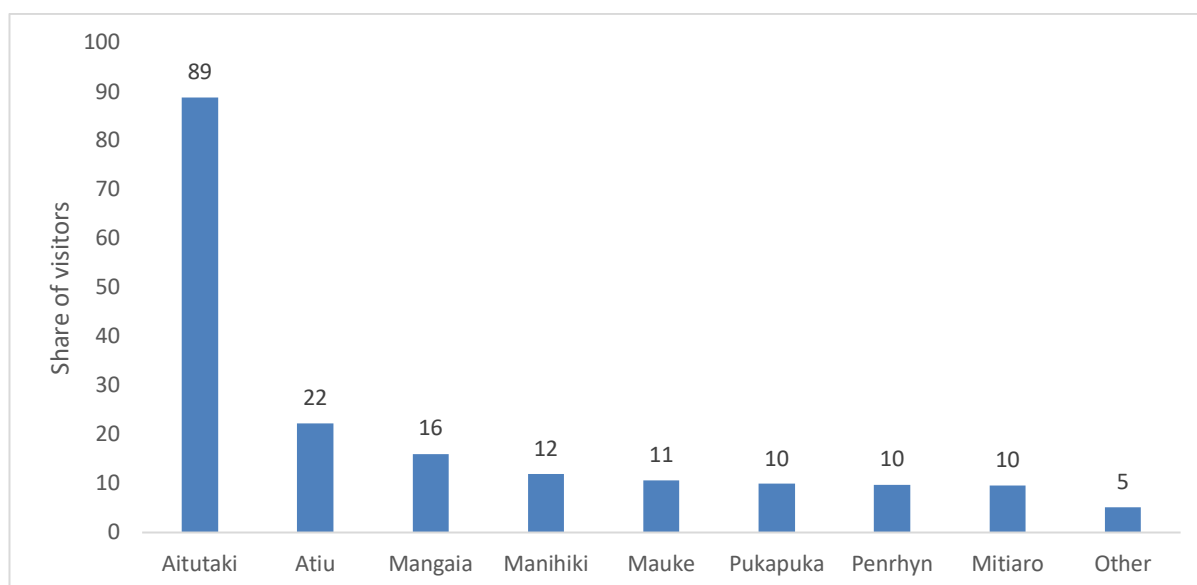
*"5 year license for regular visitors."*

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

Nearly all visitors (95%) indicated that they would consider re-visiting the Cook Islands in the future. This figure is slightly higher than visitors exhibited in the same quarter of 2019 (93%).

Nearly half (48%) of the visitors who said they would return stated that they would definitely include the outer islands on their next visit. A further 47% of visitors indicated they would “maybe” visit outer islands next time. Of those who said they may visit outer islands the next time, most (89%) mentioned they would like to include Aitutaki. Atiu was the second most mentioned island at 22% (Figure 31).

**Figure 31: Islands that visitors said they would include on their next visit (n = 461)**



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

Of the six percent of visitors who indicated they would not want to return to the Cook Islands, the majority stated it was because of the desire to explore more destinations in the future, the perceived poor value for money, distance, not enough to do for repeat visits, and lack of direct flights. Comments included:

*“Enjoyed it but would prefer to travel elsewhere in the world.”*

*“I’ve experienced what it has to offer and it’s time to explore elsewhere.”*

*“I would love to return but can only afford to visit each place I go to, once.”*

*“Too expensive to do twice but will recommend to others!”*

*“It’s too far from Canada - only went for a wedding.”*

*“It is too far away from UK.”*

*“Not enough to do for repeat visits.”*

*“Yes, but not until Air NZ restarts direct flights from Sydney.”*

*“But only if there are direct flights from Sydney.”*

*“Not enough to do for repeat visits.”*

Nearly all visitors surveyed (98%) said that they would recommend the destination to their family and friends which is consistent with previous survey periods. Only 2% of visitors would not recommend the Cook Islands to others. Comments included:

*“Yes, but not until direct flights from Australia are re-established.”*

*“Very pricey for travel and good accommodations.”*

*“Service was poor, attitude of resort staff was poor, food was below average, and everything was very expensive.”*

*“I would not recommend to my friends - it's too expensive.”*

## Final Observations

This report shows that the Cook Islands tourism industry performed extremely well during the survey period from October to December 2022. Overall, visitor satisfaction levels and the desire to recommend the destination to others have remained consistently high. Clearly, the destination is making a generally positive impression on visitors. Visitor spend remains higher than the same quarter of 2019 but is a bit lower than previous survey periods after the border reopened for international visitors from May 2021. This reflects the fact that some travellers are now switching to longer haul destinations or other travel options as the rest of the world is opening up again.

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. Activities open & events and arrival & departure service levels, for example, will require considerable attention if satisfaction and spend are to remain strong. It is also important for local government and businesses to provide timely and accurate information to the public and to provide 'on-site' updates and information for visitors.

In the wake of industry rebuilding, the areas that will require the greatest future attention will be the management of environmental quality, ensuring community readiness and buy-in to the industry, and ensuring that food and accommodation services really represent good value for money. It is critical that service levels meet visitor expectations, and it is clear that there are opportunities for improvement in this area.

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought significant challenges to both tourists and the local tourism industry. Visitors were generally impressed with COVID-19 protocols and procedures, which demonstrated by the % of positive comments is higher than % of negative comments. Nevertheless, the research highlights some issues. For example, there are many complaints about the long waiting times during the arrival process at the airport which has been a constant issue since the border re-opened in May 2021. Meanwhile, some visitors are very cautious about health guidelines, so businesses should continue to adopt best practice COVID-19 hygiene habits to guarantee the safety to their customers.

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 policymakers. 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.