



Cook Islands Visitor Survey Results

October - December 2015

Prepared for Cook Islands Tourism Corporation

by

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Executive Summary

This report focuses on the characteristics, expectations and expenditure patterns of tourists who visited the Cook Islands. The data presented is drawn from an online departure survey (<http://www.mycookislandsvisit.com>). The survey period covered in this report is 1 October to 31 December 2015. There were 1,291 individual respondents to the survey - representing a total of 2,833 adults and 355 children (this equates to 10% of all visitors during the period – based on the 2014 visitor arrival data for the October to December period from the Cook Islands Statistics Office).

The majority (64%) of visitors surveyed come from New Zealand, 19% come from Australia. Visitors are well educated (69% of visitors have some form of tertiary education) with a relatively high annual household income (49% earn over NZ\$100,000 per year). Just under half of the visitors (45%) travel with one companion. Solo travellers are relatively rare (8%).

Over half of the visitors surveyed (53%) are first time visitors to the Cook Islands, a further 26% have visited once or twice before. The main purpose of the visit is holiday-making (68%). The average length of stay in the Cook Islands is 8.8 nights. The majority (92%) of the visitors stay either one or two weeks. Twenty one percent of the visitors surveyed visited Aitutaki in addition to Rarotonga.

Visitor spend prior to arrival in the Cook Islands (\$2,092 per person) has increased from the 2014/15 annual average (\$2,000 per person). Spend on the island (per person per day) is \$144 which is higher than the 2014/15 annual average of \$112, and higher than the same quarter for the previous year (\$115 for October to December 2014).

The average local spend per visitor during the whole trip is \$1,267. If the pre-paid spend amount and the local spend are combined, it is estimated that each visitor brings \$2,104 to the Cook Islands economy (or approximately \$239 per day). This figure is higher than the \$1,756 average for 2014/15, and higher than the \$1,731 for the same quarter last year (October to December 2014).

Water-based activities are characterised by the strongest participation levels. Visitor satisfaction levels with activities and services are high. Cultural interactions and water based activities are characterised by the highest overall satisfaction ratings. The most appealing elements of the Cook Islands experience are the beautiful natural environment, the friendly local people, the activities and attractions on offer, the peacefulness and relaxing atmosphere of the islands, and entertainment and events. The least appealing elements of the Cook Islands experience are considered to be the lack of public services and facilities, the poor quality and value for money in terms of food and beverage, and environmental issues.

Overall satisfaction on the part of visitors is very high: 93% of those surveyed want to return to the Cook Islands, and 98% would recommend the Cook Islands to friends or family. The overall satisfaction level is consistent with the previous year.

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Introduction

The Cook Islands government, local businesses and communities require a clearer picture of the characteristics, expectations and expenditure patterns of visitors to the nation. This information is needed to enable the effective planning and development of the tourism industry and to highlight its crucial role within the broader Cook Island's economy. Visitors to the Cook Islands are asked to complete a web-based survey within two weeks of the completion of their visit. This web-based survey ran for 36 months during 2012-2015 with reporting on a quarterly and annual basis, and is continuing through 2015-2016.

This report presents the results from October to December 2015. Over this three month period, 4,560 visitors were contacted by email to take part in the survey, and 1291 responses were received: a conversion rate of 28.3%. These responses cover a total of 2,833 adults and 355 children. The conversion rate for this period is similar to the 2014/15 annual average (28%) and higher than the October to December 2014 quarter (26.4%).

The data presented includes detailed information on:

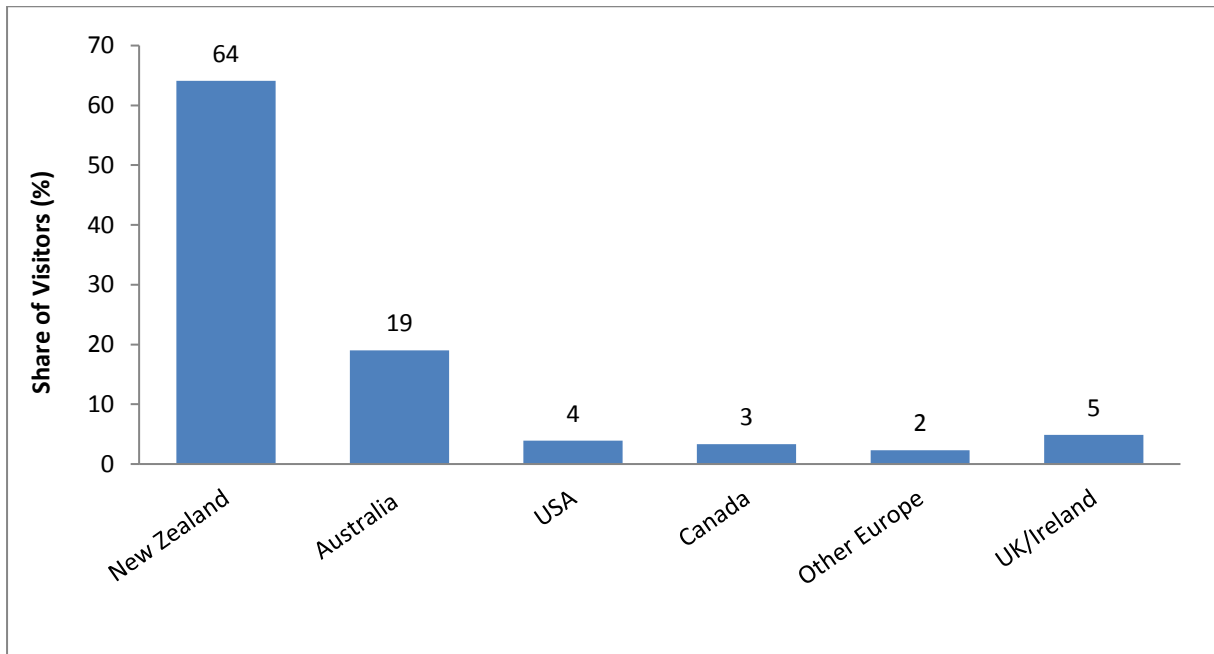
- The characteristics of visitors to the Cook Islands (age, gender, education, country of origin, income, purpose of visit, travelling companions, number of previous visits, length of stay, airline used, islands visited)
- Visitor expenditure (amount of money spent prior to arrival and while in the Cook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

Wherever there are significant and/or notable variations from the 2014/15 annual averages or the 2014/15 October – December quarterly figures these are highlighted in the discussion below.

Visitor Characteristics

The majority (64%) of the visitors surveyed come from New Zealand (Figure 1). The second largest visitor group is from Australia, with 19% of respondents. USA, Canada, Europe and Great Britain represent the other main source markets.

Figure 1: Country of origin (n=1195)



Auckland, Wellington, Canterbury, and Waikato account for 71% of the New Zealand visitors. For visitors from Australia, the regions of New Wales, Queensland, and Victoria generate the largest numbers of visitor arrivals (89%) (Figure 2-3).

Figure 2: New Zealand visitors (n=765)

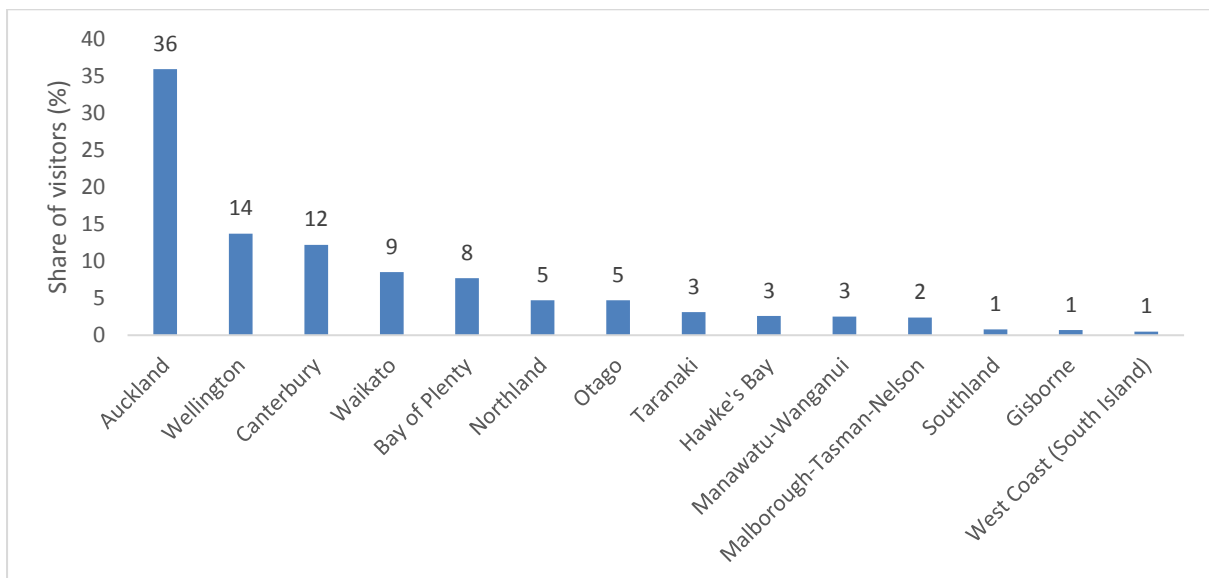
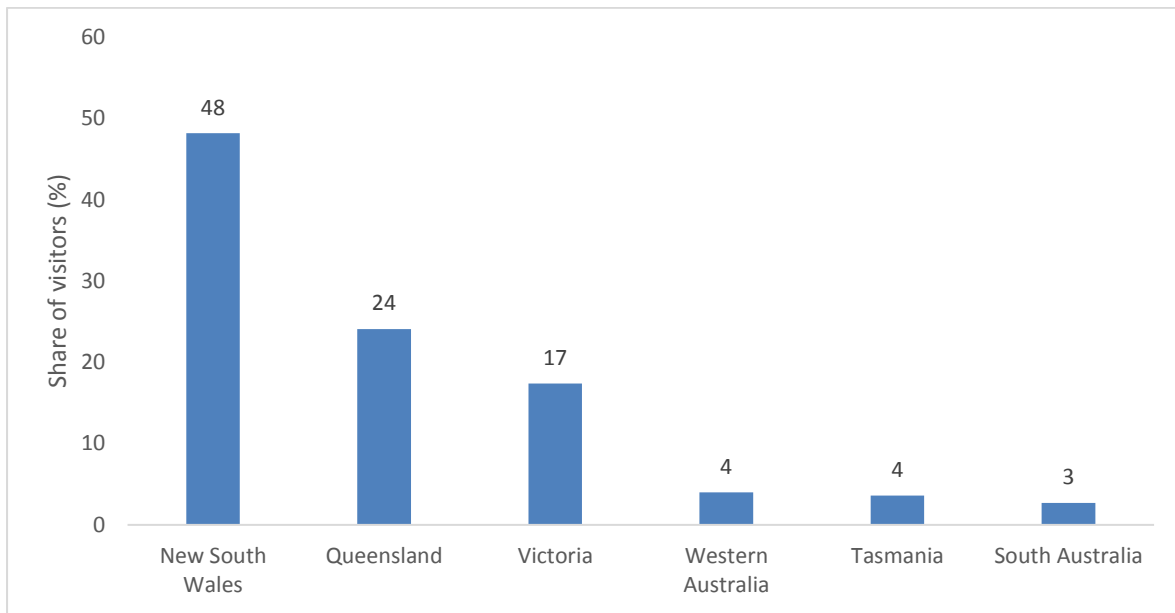
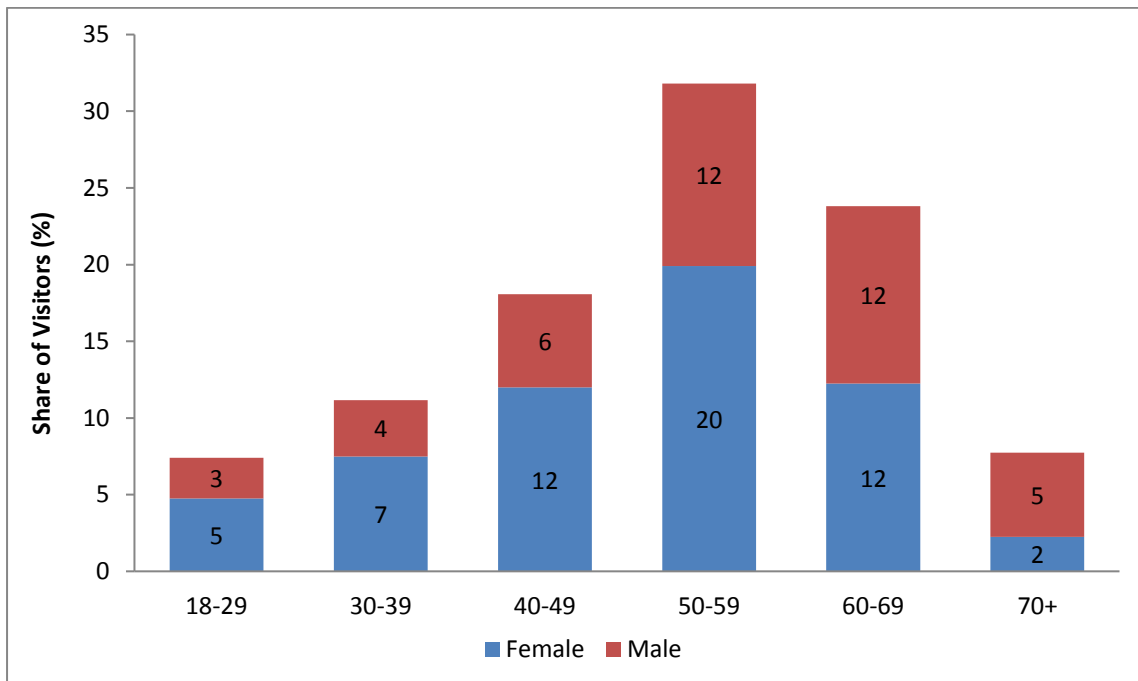


Figure 3: Australia visitors (n=224)



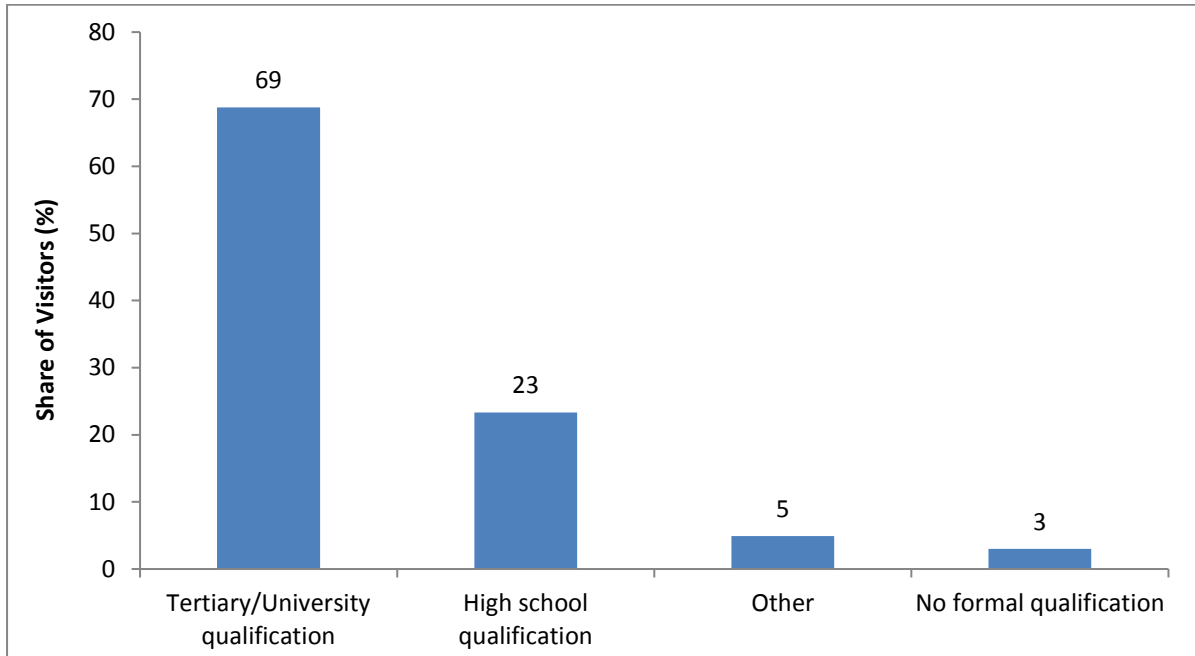
More women (62%) than men (38%) completed the survey (Figure 4). The most significant age group categories are the 50 to 59 year (32%) grouping, followed by those aged 60 to 69 (24%) and the 40 to 49 age group (18%). There are relatively few travellers in the 70 plus age bracket (7%).

Figure 4: Distribution of age and gender (n=1201)



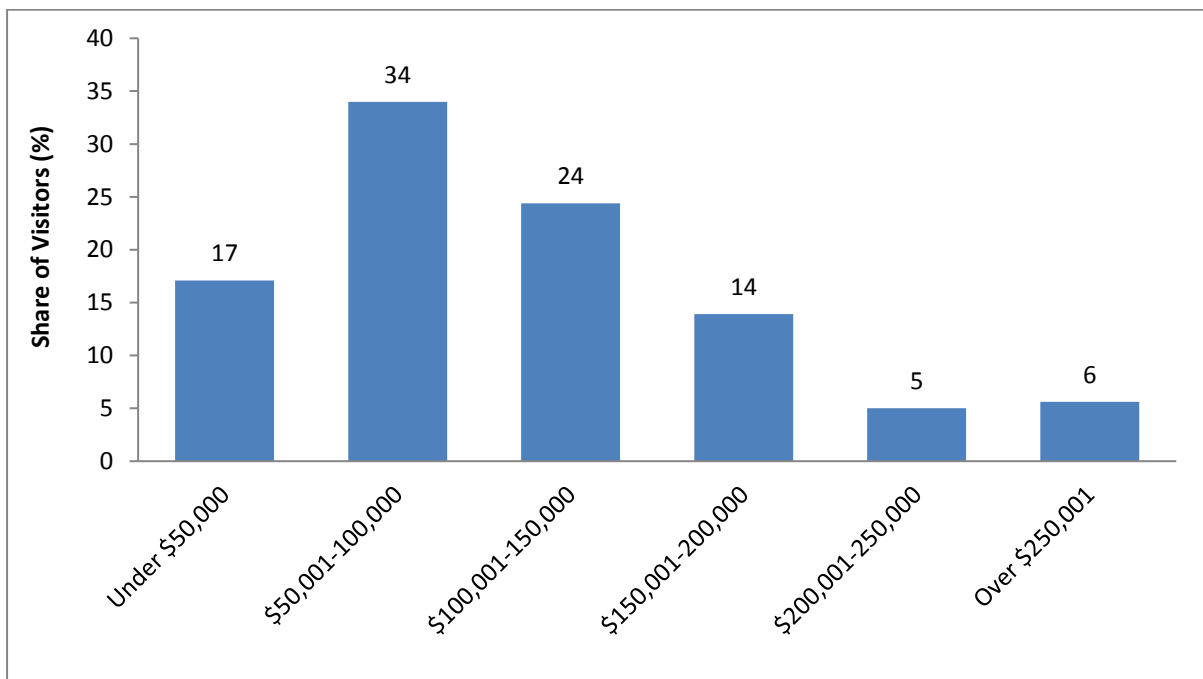
Visitors are well educated: more than two-thirds (69%) of those surveyed have some form of tertiary qualification, with a further 23% having completed a high school education (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Highest qualification (n=1202)



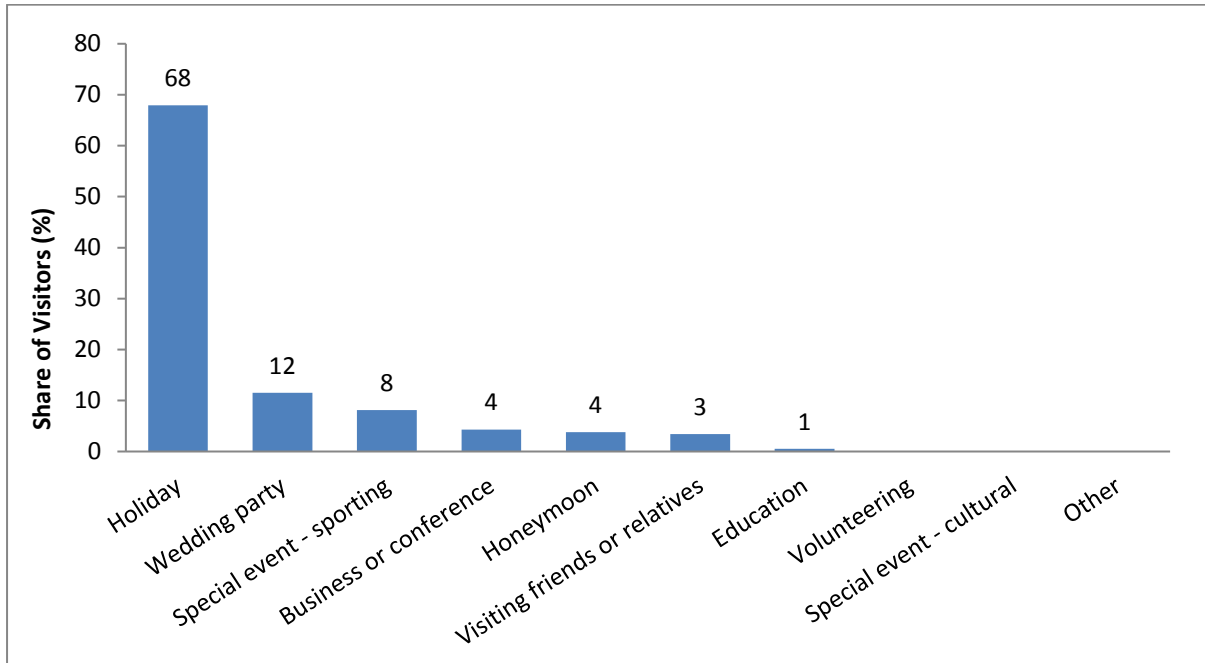
Over a third of visitors (34%) have an annual household income of between NZ\$50,001 and NZ\$100,000. Nearly a quarter (24%) of those surveyed earn between NZ\$100,001 and NZ\$150,000. A further 25% of respondents have a household income of over NZ\$150,000 per year (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Annual household income in NZD (n=1032)



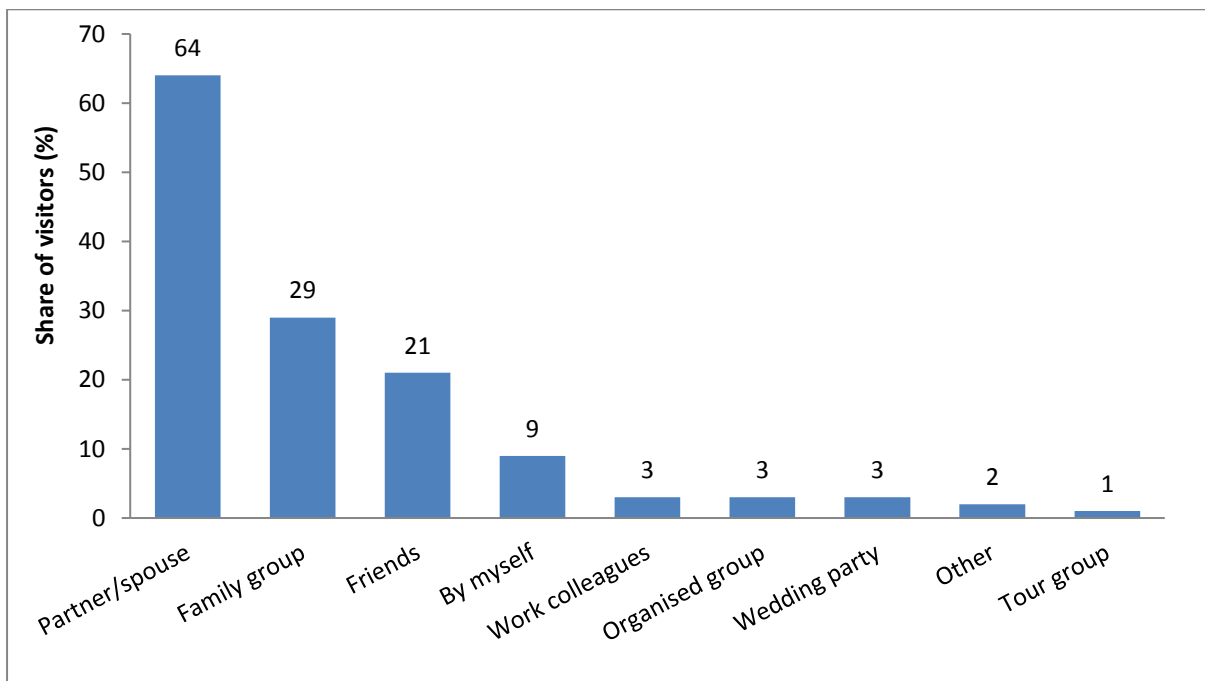
Just over three quarters of visitors surveyed come to the Cook Islands for a holiday (68%). Other reasons given include to attend a wedding (12%), a sport event (8%), for business and conference (4%), for a honeymoon (4%), and for visiting friends and relatives (3%) (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Main purpose of visit (n=1291)



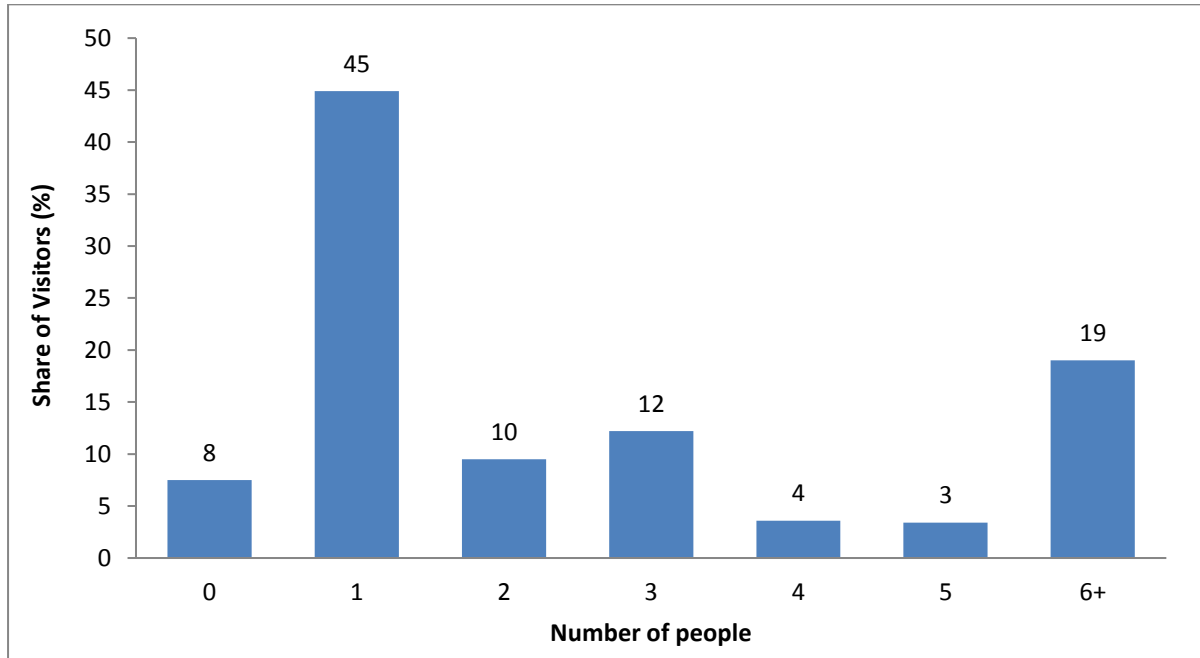
Most visitors (64%) surveyed travel to the Cook Islands with a partner or spouse. Visitors also often travel with other family members (29%) or friends (21%). Those travelling alone, with colleagues, in an organised group or as a part of a wedding party represent a smaller share of the sample (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Travelling with whom? (n=1291)



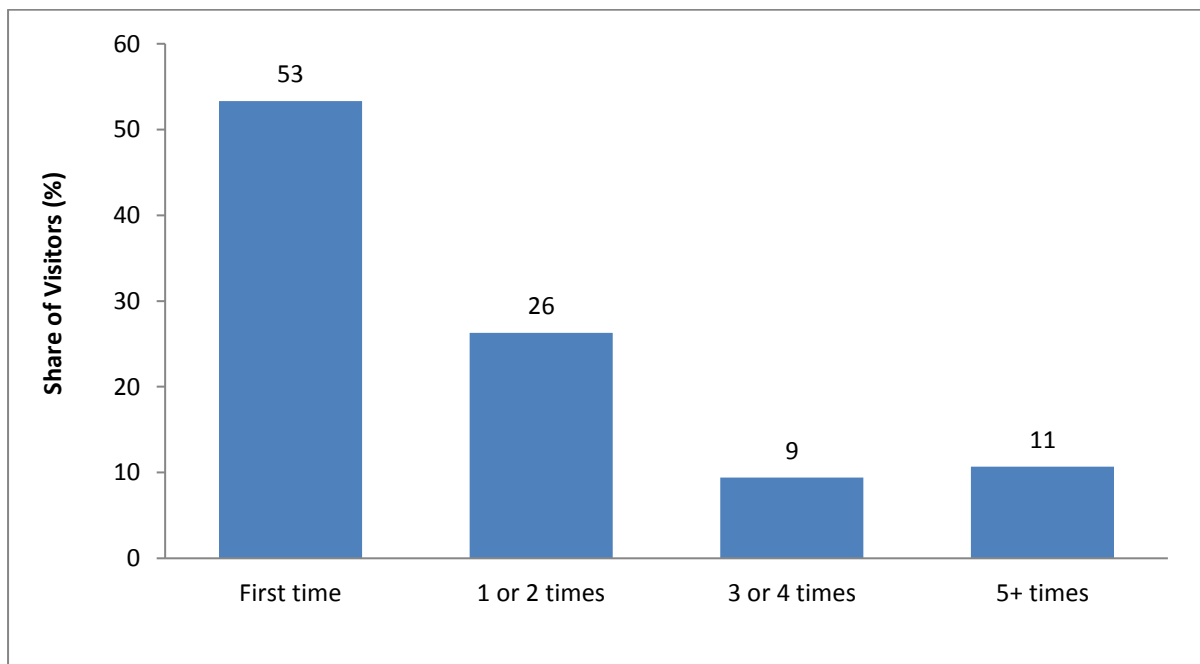
Nearly half of the visitors (45%) travelled with one companion on their visit to the Cook Islands (Figure 9). Travel groups larger than 4 people were not very common, with the exception of wedding parties.

Figure 9: Number of companions on trip (n=1275)



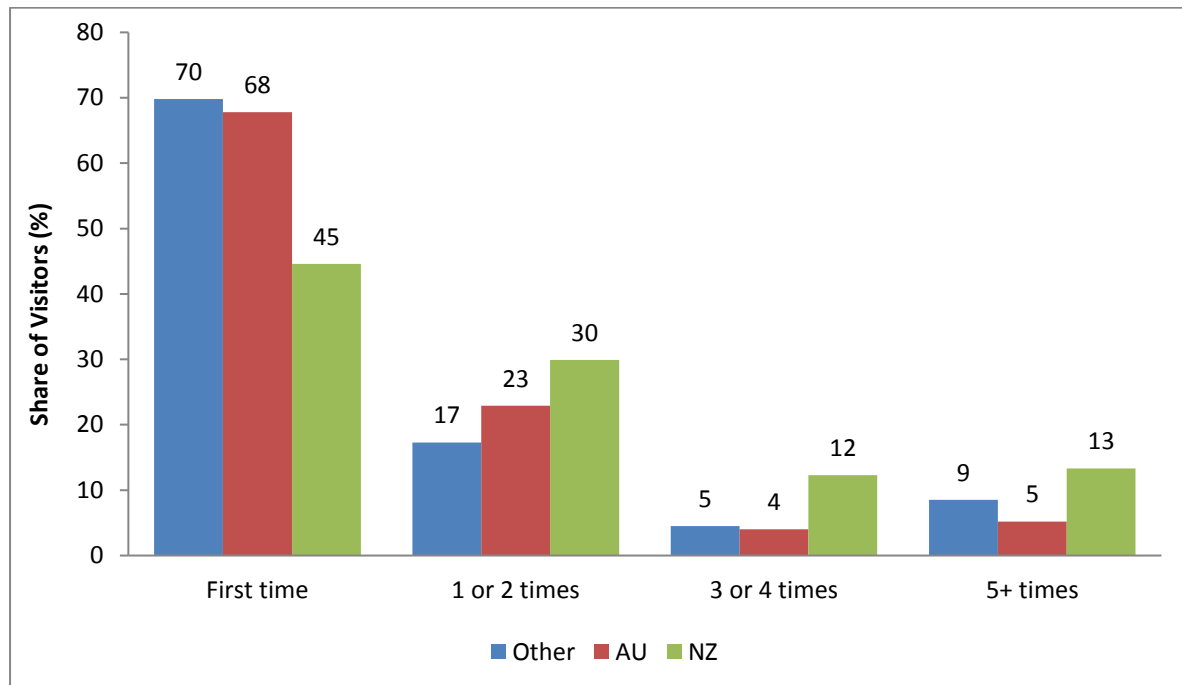
Just over half of the visitors (53%) are on their first visit to the Cook Islands. A further 23% have been to the Cook Islands once or twice before. A smaller group (16%) have visited three or more times (Figure 10).

Figure 10: Number of visits to the Cook Islands (n=1202)



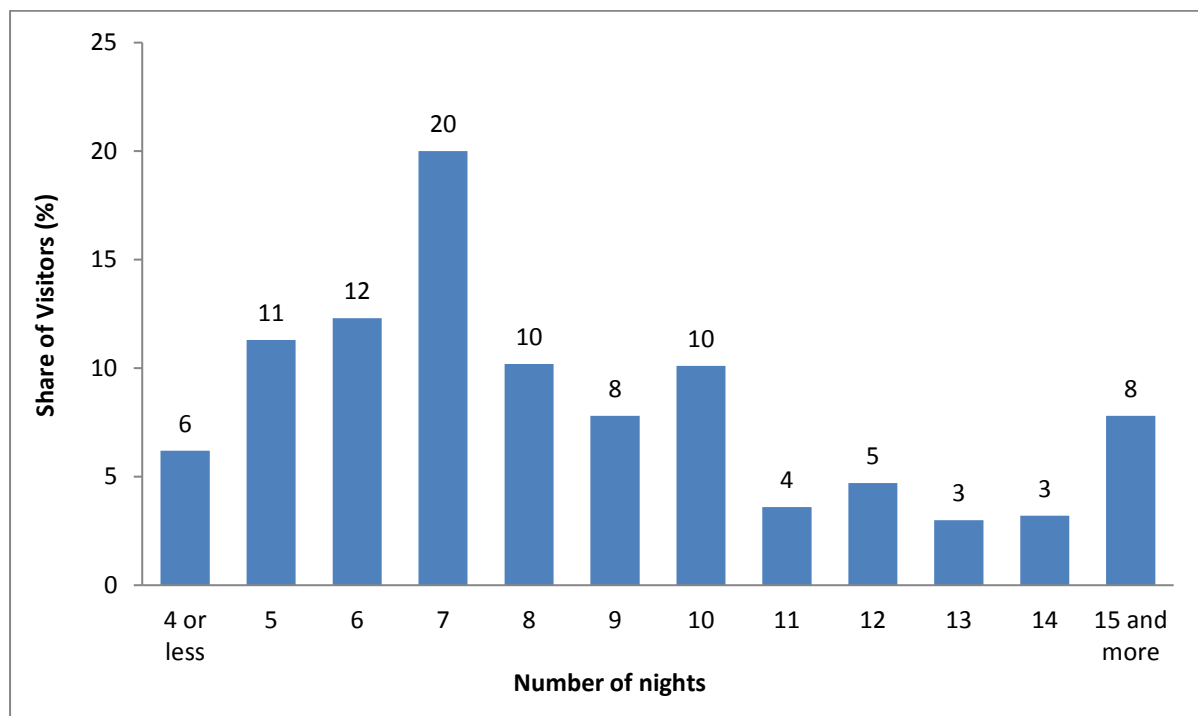
New Zealanders are more likely to be repeat visitors than those from other source markets (Figure 11). Over half of visitors from New Zealand (55%) have visited the Cook Islands before compared to only 32% of visitors from Australia.

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



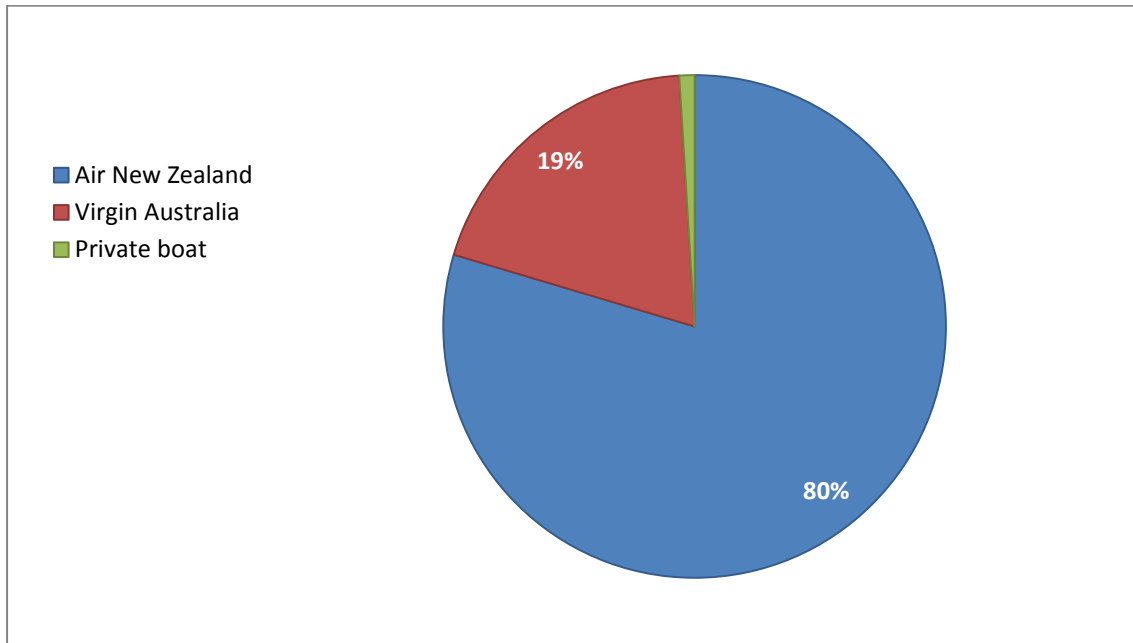
The average length of stay in the Cook Islands is 8.8 nights with 78% of visitors spending 10 or fewer nights in the country (Figure 12).

Figure 12: Length of stay in nights (n=1288)



The majority of visitors (80%) travel to/from the Cook Islands with Air New Zealand, a further 19% visitors fly with Virgin Australia (Figure 13). One percent of visitors arrived by private vessel.

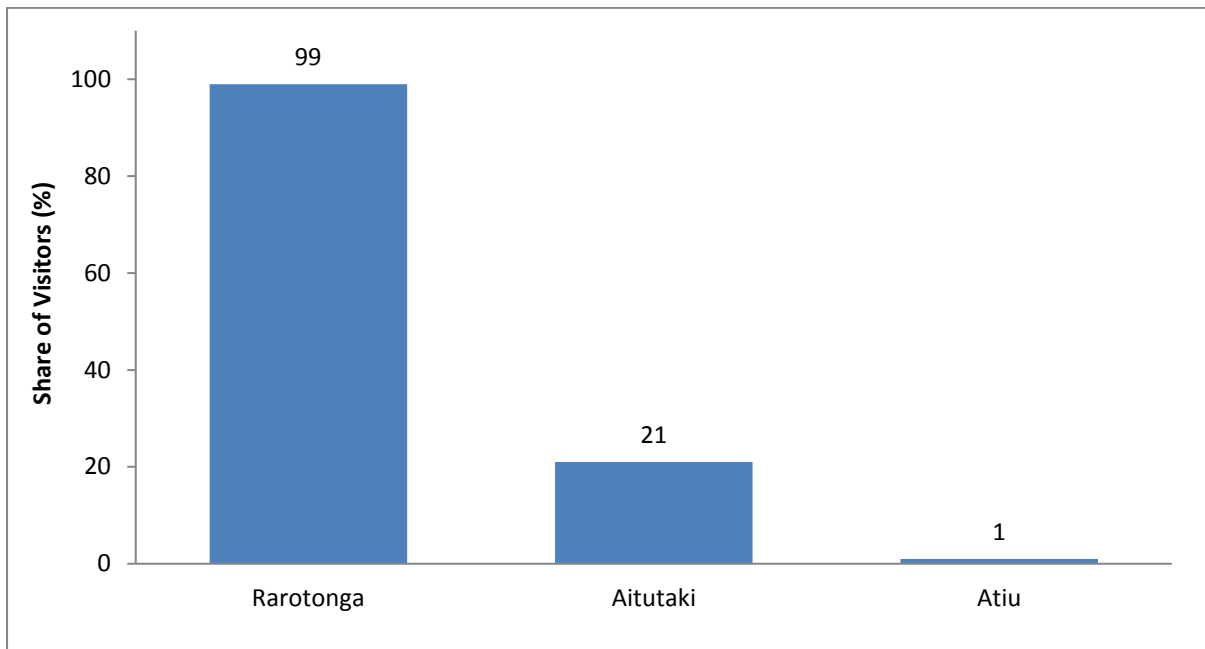
Figure 13: Mode of transport (n=1282)



For 88% of visitors, the Cook Islands is the sole destination for their trip. For 12% of the visitors surveyed during the October to December 2015 period the Cook Islands is part of a larger journey, including some visitors who are on an around-the-world trip. For those travelling to other countries as part of their recent trip, the top destination mentioned was New Zealand (65%), followed by travel to Australia (31%), North America (22%), Asian countries (20%), and other pacific countries (19%).

The vast majority (99%) of visitors to the Cook Islands spend time on Rarotonga, with Aitutaki being the second most visited island (21%) (Figure 14). Other islands are rarely featured in the survey responses, with Atiu for example only receiving 1% of visitors.

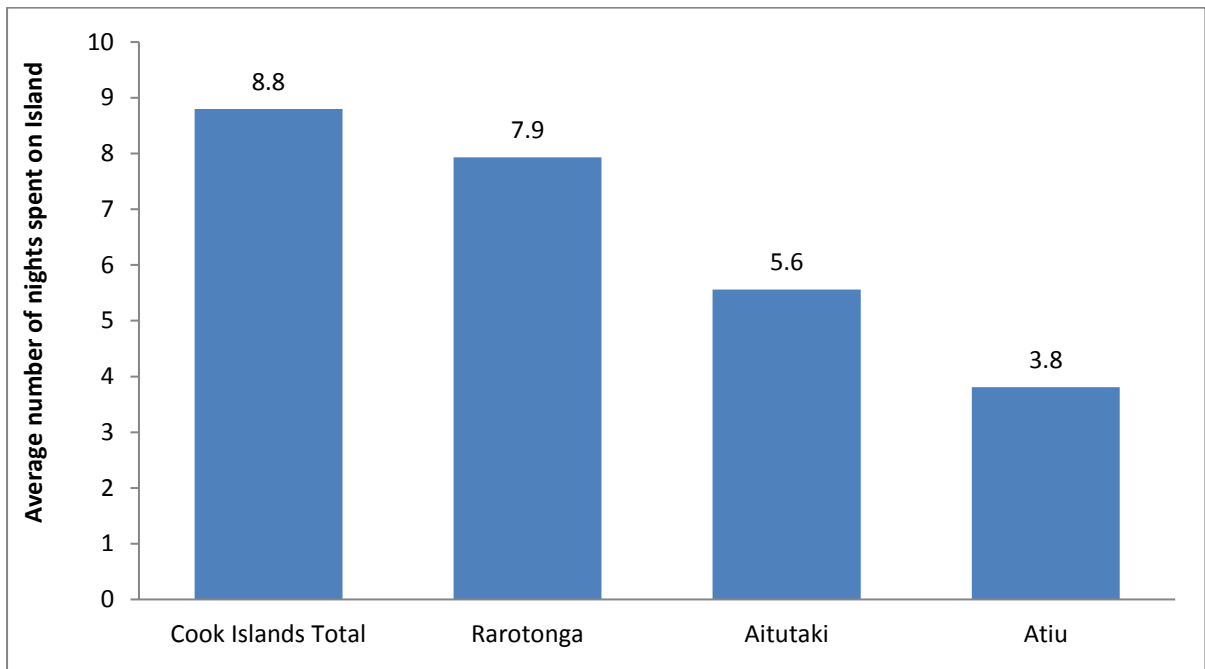
Figure 14: Visited Islands (n=1290)



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

The average length of stay on Rarotonga is 7.9 nights (Figure 15). For the visitors that went to Aitutaki, the average number of nights spent on the island is 5.6.

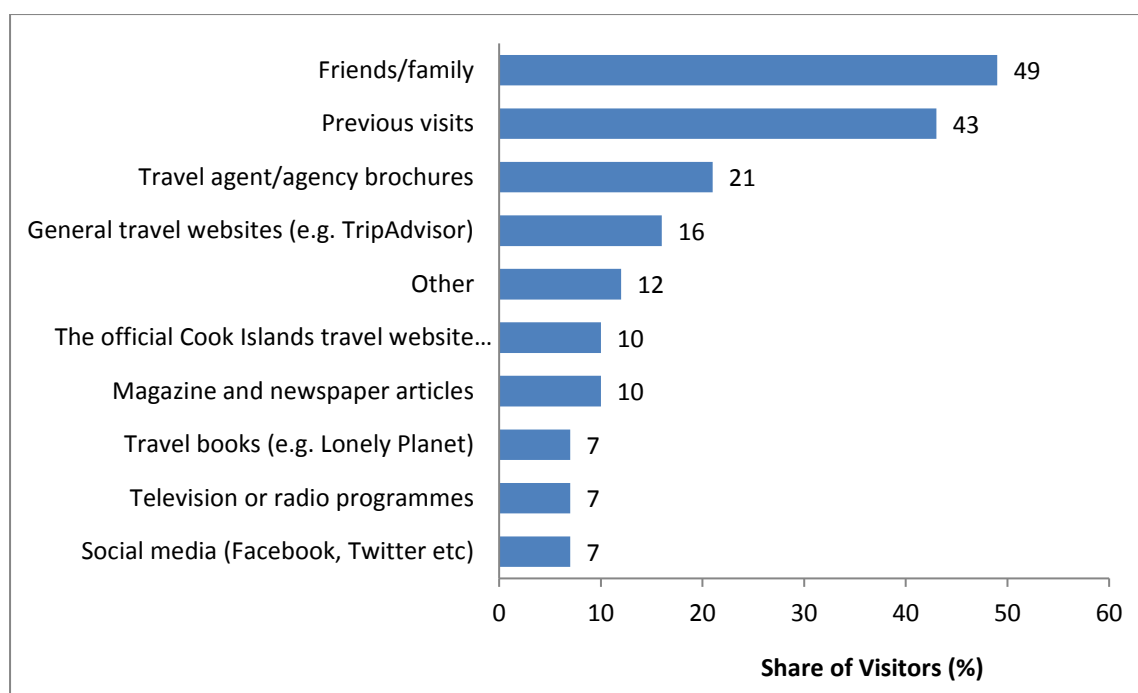
Figure 15: Average length of stay in the Cook Islands and on each island (n=1240)



Information Sources and Purchasing Behaviour

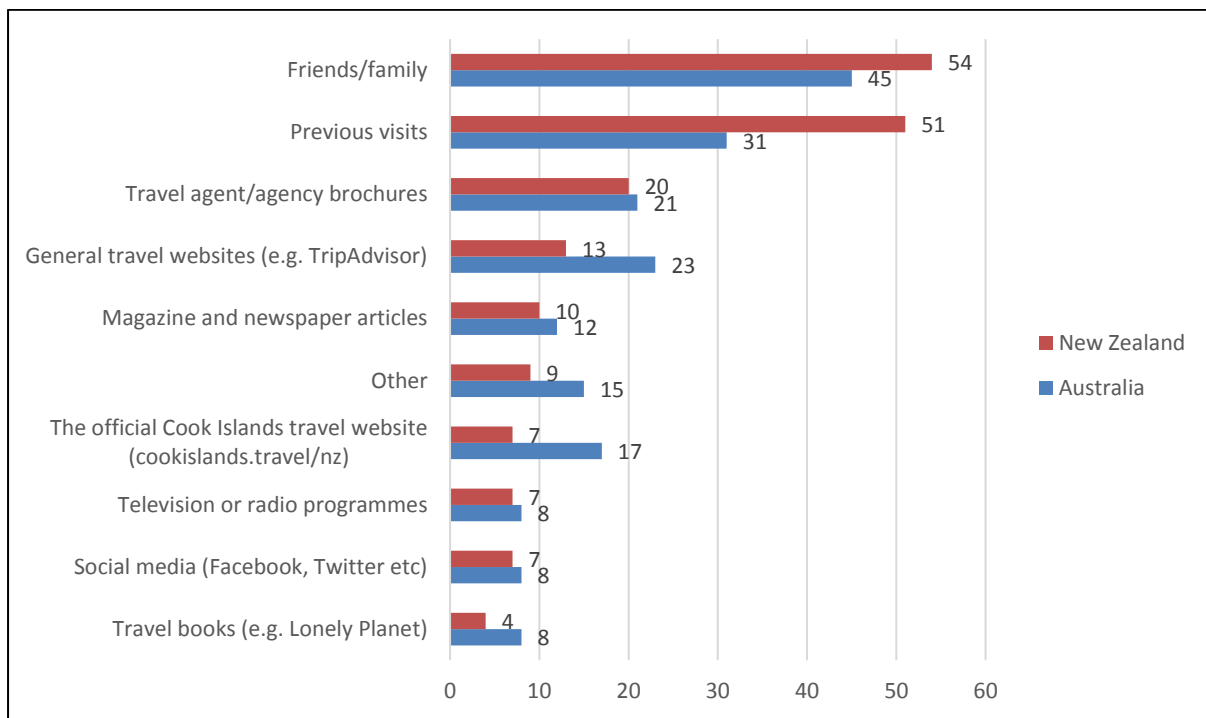
Participants were asked how they had found out about the Cook Islands as a holiday destination for this trip, and to rank the three sources of information that were most important in this respect (Figure 16). Just under half (49%) of respondents ranked word of mouth from friends and family members as the most important influence, followed by previous experience (43%), travel agents (21%), and general travel websites (e.g. Tripadvisor) (16%).

Figure 16: How did you find out about Cook Islands as a destination (n=1290)



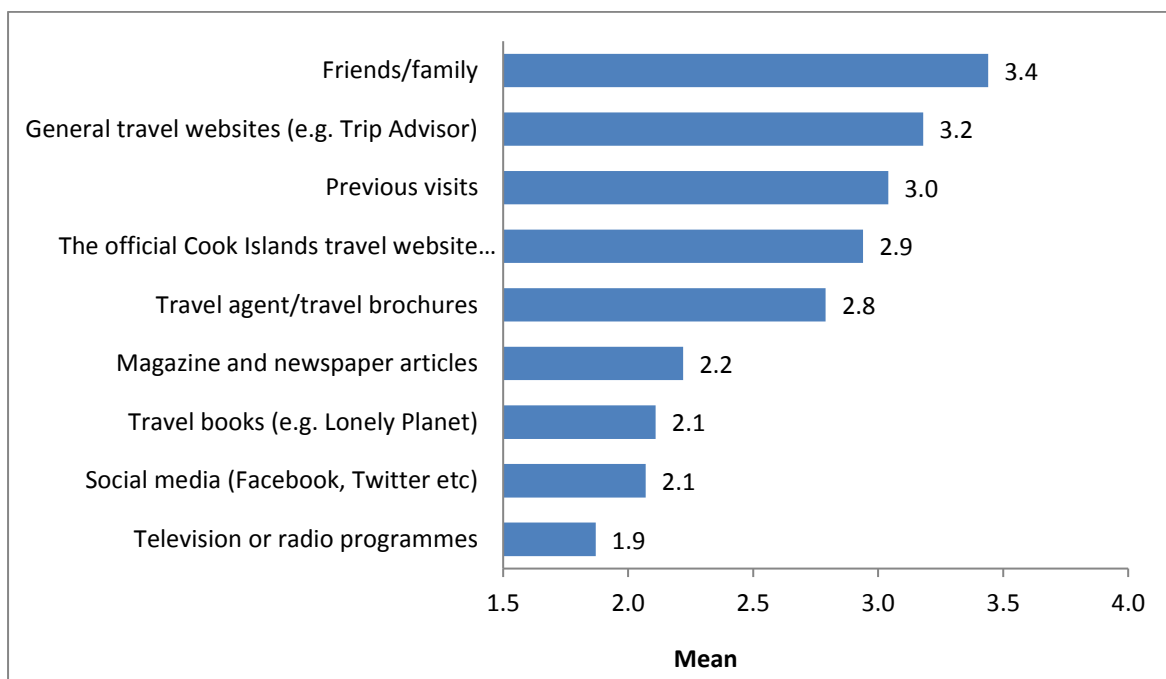
Visitors from New Zealand are more likely to seek information about a destination from word of mouth from friends and family members and their own previous experience. As mentioned above, there are more repeat visitors from New Zealand than Australia. Over half of visitors from New Zealand (51%) ranked their previous visits as the most important information source, which is much higher than for Australian visitors. Australian visitors were more likely to rank travel agents, travel websites, magazine and newspapers, and travel books as the most important influence.

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



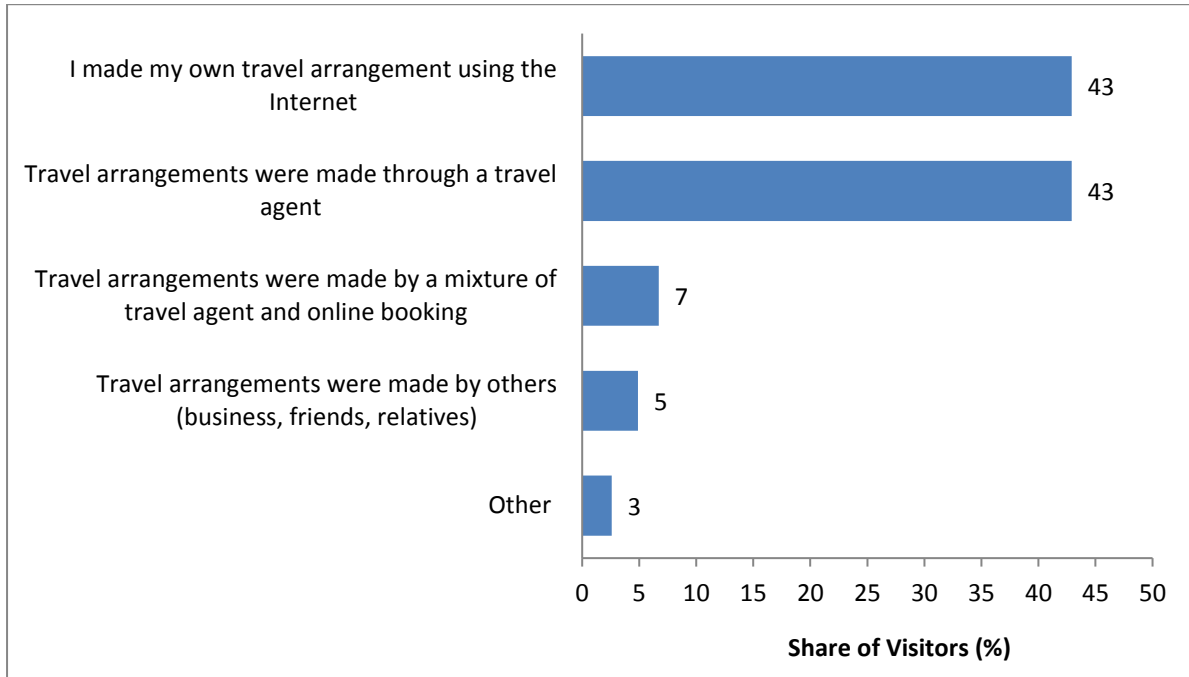
When visitors were asked to rank the importance of the listed information sources used to plan the trip, friends and family members are ranked as the most important source (3.4) (Figure 18). Other important information sources are general travel website (3.2), previous visits (3.0), the official Cook Islands travel website (2.9), and travel agent/travel brochures (2.8).

Figure 18: How important were the following sources of information when planning your trip (n=1287)



Nearly half of visitors surveyed (43%) make their own travel arrangements through online websites or have booked directly with hotels or airlines (Figure 19). The same amount of visitors surveyed (43%) purchased a pre-paid trip through travel agents, followed by 7% of visitors whose travel arrangements were made by a mixture of travel agent and online booking.

Figure 19: How did you purchase your travel to the Cook Islands (n=1290)

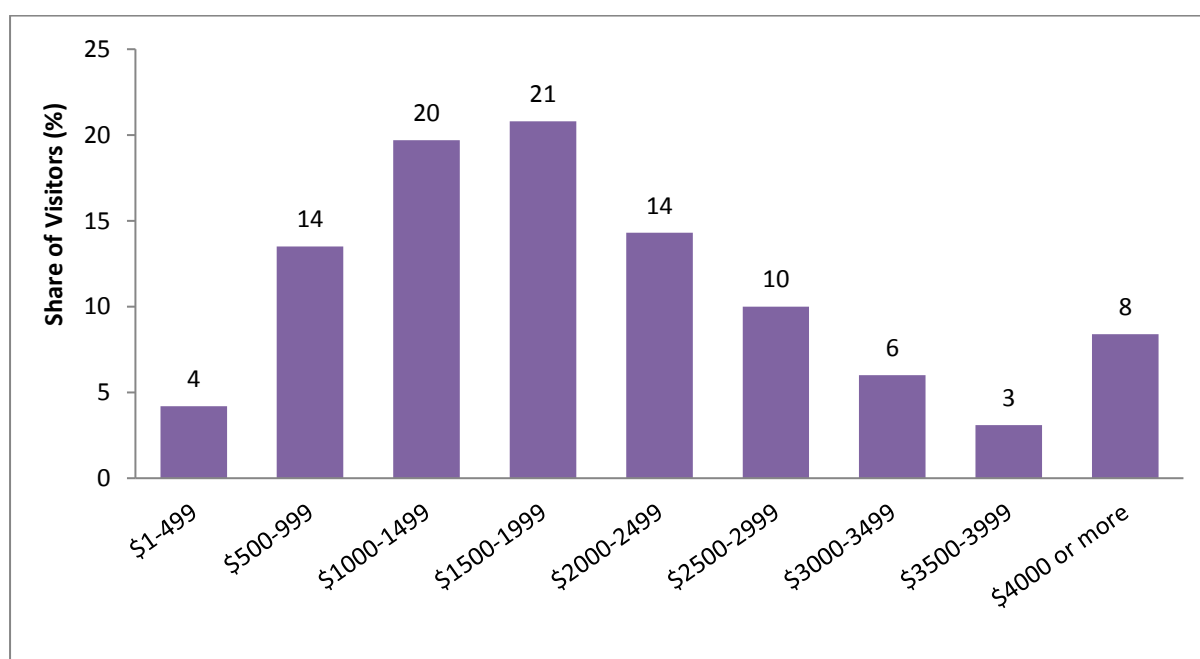


Visitor Expenditure

The survey asked a range of questions about visitor expenditure, both prior to arrival and while in the country. All the figures below are based on respondent estimates of their own spending and any others they spent money on (e.g. spouse, children). The following pre-paid expenditure section is based on the number of adults and children that respondents included in their cost estimates: 3,188 people comprising 2,833 adults and 355 children.

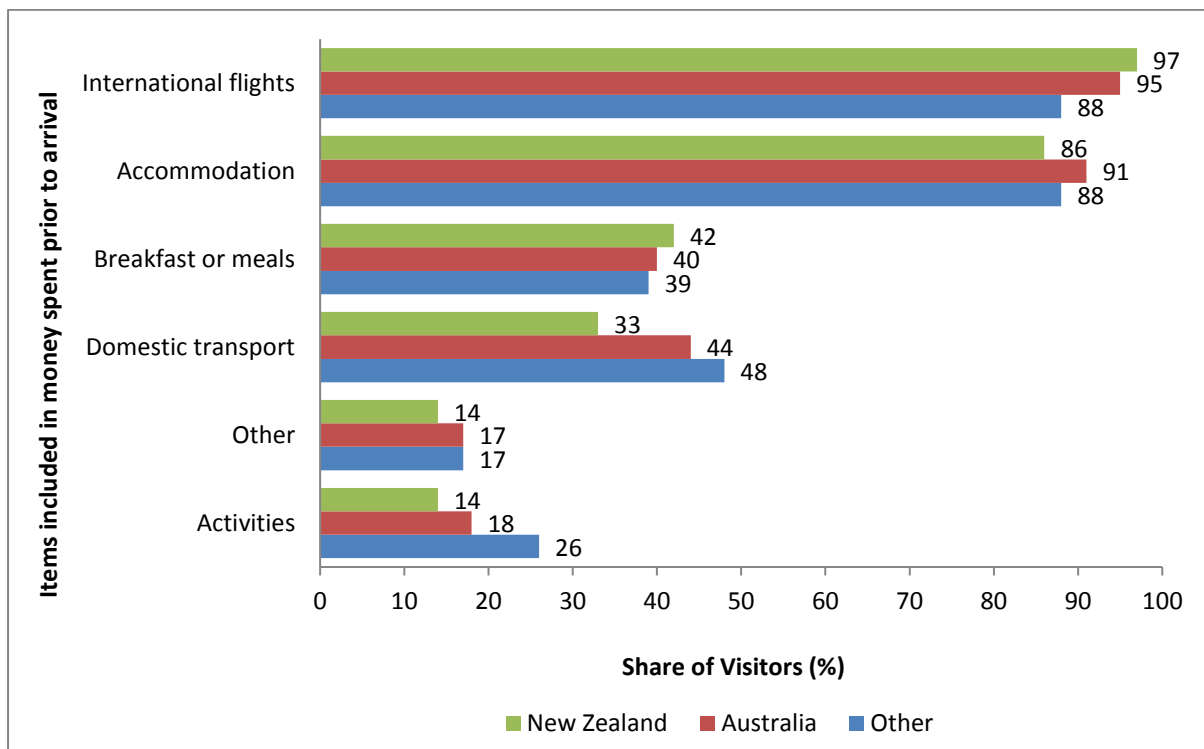
On average, visitors to the Cook Islands spend NZ\$2,092 per person prior to arrival. Over half (55%) of the visitors spend between NZ\$1,000 and NZ\$2,500 prior to arrival. These figures are higher than the data from the previous year (average spend of NZ\$2,000 for 2014/15) and in the same quarter for 2014/15 (NZ\$1,854) (Figure 20).

Figure 20: Amount of money spent per person prior to arrival (n=1048)



In addition to international flights and domestic transport, spending prior to arrival usually includes accommodation: in 86% of the cases for New Zealand visitors, 91% for Australian visitors, and for 88% of visitors from other countries (Figure 21). Just under half of visitors prepaid for breakfast and meals prior to arrival (42% for New Zealand visitors, 40% for Australian visitors, and for 39% of visitors from other countries) which is higher than the data from the previous year and in the same quarter for 2014/15. Activities are much less likely to be included in pre-paid expenses.

Figure 21: Items included in money spent prior to arrival (n=1023)



It is difficult to estimate accurately the proportion of the pre-paid spend that flows to the Cook Islands. For the purposes of this study, and based on previous research in the region, we conservatively estimate that 50% of the pre-paid spend is allocated to airfares. Of the remaining 50% of the pre-paid spend, 80% of this flows back to local operators. In total this means that for every pre-paid dollar, 40 cents flows to the Cook Islands. We assess that the pre-paid spend figure per day flowing back to local operators, excluding flights, is NZ\$95 and for the average total visit is NZ\$837 (over 8.8 nights).

The total spend per visitor per day while in the Cook Islands (excluding any pre-paid expenditure) is NZ\$143 (Table 1). This figure is higher than overall spend figure for 2014/15 (NZ\$112), and higher than the same quarter in 2014/15 (NZ\$115). It is important to note that the figure reflects the increase in in-country spend seen in the previous quarter (July-October 2015) where the figure was \$152. The majority of money spent locally is on accommodation (41%), restaurants, cafes and bars (22%), shopping (10%), and vehicle rental (6%). These per person expenditure figures are based on 1,291 survey responses covering a total of 3,125 people (2,794 adults and 331 children).

By multiplying daily spend by the average stay (8.8 nights) we can see that each visitor spends on average NZ\$1,267 during their time in the Cook Islands. The total figure of what is spent locally and what flows back to the Cook Islands from pre-paid expenses is therefore NZ\$239 per visitor per day (\$144+\$95), or NZ\$2,104 (\$1,267+\$837) for each visitor. The spend per

visit is slightly lower than for the July-October 2015 figure but remains higher than the previous year.

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

Expenditure Items	Overall n=3125	
	Mean (NZ\$)	(% of spend)
Accommodation	58	41
Restaurant, cafes and bar	32	22
Shopping	14	10
Vehicle rental	9	6
Groceries	8	5
Activities	8	5
Domestic flights	6	4
Other	3	2
Petrol	2	1
Cruising	2	1
Internet cost	2	1
Public transportation	1	0
Total Expenditure	144	100

Table 2 provides an overview of the in-country expenditure by the visitor's country of origin. Visitors from Europe and North America have the highest average spend per day at NZ\$182 and NZ\$173 respectively. By comparison, New Zealanders spend on average NZ\$40 less per day (NZ\$137).

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

Expenditure Items	n=36	n=115	n=453	n=23
	USA/ Canada	Australia	New Zealand	Europe
Accommodation	73	65	56	76
Restaurant, cafes and bar	28	36	32	34
Shopping	19	17	12	22
Vehicle rental	10	9	9	6
Groceries	9	9	7	10
Activities	10	9	7	9
Domestic flights	13	7	5	12
Other	3	4	3	3
Petrol	2	2	2	3
Internet cost	2	2	2	4
Cruising	3	2	2	2
Public transportation	1	1	1	1
Total spend (NZ\$)	\$173	\$162	\$137	\$182

Average Australian spend per person for this quarter (NZ\$162) was higher compared to the 2014/15 average of NZ\$115, also higher than the same quarter in 2014/15 (NZ\$119). New Zealanders' spend of NZ\$137 per person per day was up from the average of \$111 for 2014/15 and the same quarter in the previous year (NZ\$114). European visitor spend at NZ\$182 per person per day was up from the average for 2014/15 of NZ\$115, and NZ\$103 for the same quarter in the previous year. Visitors from USA/Canada spend of NZ\$173 for this period was higher than the 2014/15 average of NZ\$125, and NZ\$120 for the same quarter in 2014/15. Given the fact that only 23 visitor from Europe and 36 Visitors from North America participated the survey, the average expenditure figures for these two regions must be treated with caution.

Overall these spend figures reinforce the increased yield seen in the previous (July-October 2015) quarter and revealing a generally positive trend in increased visitor yield over 2014 and the first half of 2015.

Visitor Satisfaction

Visitors were asked to indicate their overall satisfaction with their experience of the Cook Islands on a scale from 1 'very dissatisfied' to 5 'very satisfied' (Figure 25). Over two thirds (68%) of the visitors surveyed were 'very satisfied' with their overall experience of the Cook Islands. Very few visitors (2%) were unsatisfied with their visit (a score of 2 or lower out of 5).

Figure 22: Overall satisfaction with experience of the Cook Islands (n=1207)

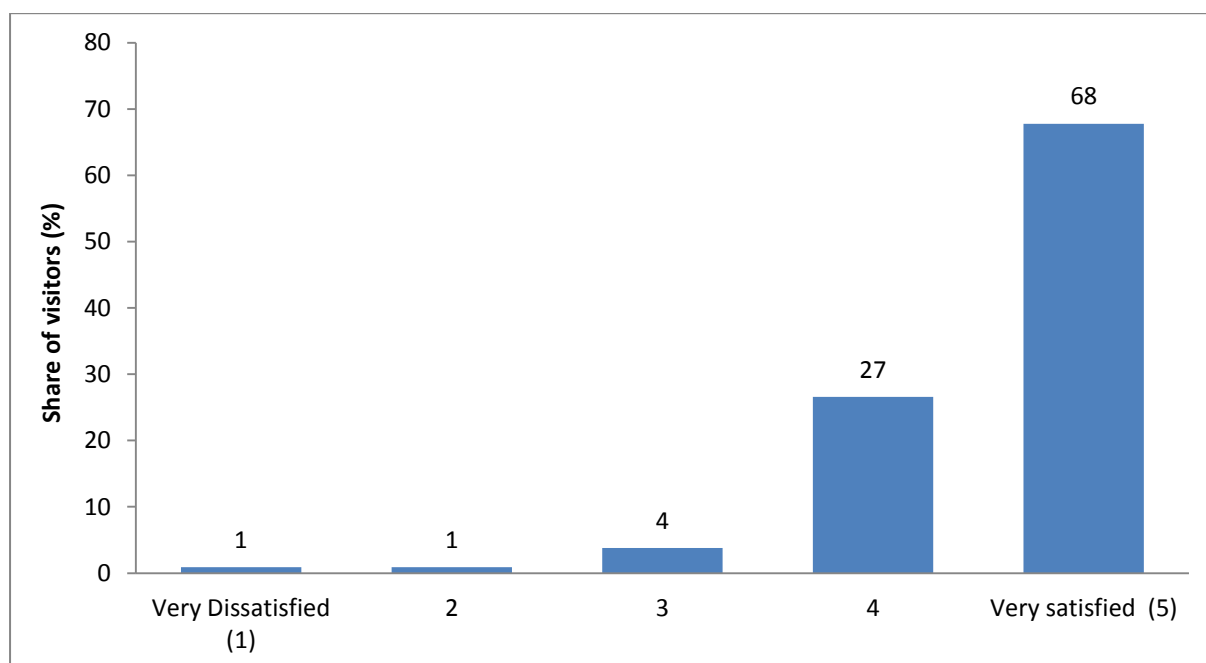


Figure 26 shows the percentage of respondents who undertook an activity while on their visit to the Cook Islands. Almost all visitors participate in water activities and visit at least one restaurant or café during their trip. Most of the respondents (88%) visit a local market, and 59% of visitors experience an Island Night and Feast Show.

Figure 27 shows their level of satisfaction with these activities. Visitor satisfaction is generally high for all activities undertaken (all registering more than 4 out of a possible high of 5). Activities involving water-based activities (average satisfaction of 4.6), and cultural interaction activities (4.6) rank the highest, followed by land-based activities (4.5) and shopping (4.4). It should be noted that some activities e.g. kitesurfing, bonefishing, ocean cruise, and Tumunu on Atiu, are characterised by relatively low numbers of participants (n=11-45).

Figure 23: Degree of participation in activities (n range=11-1264)

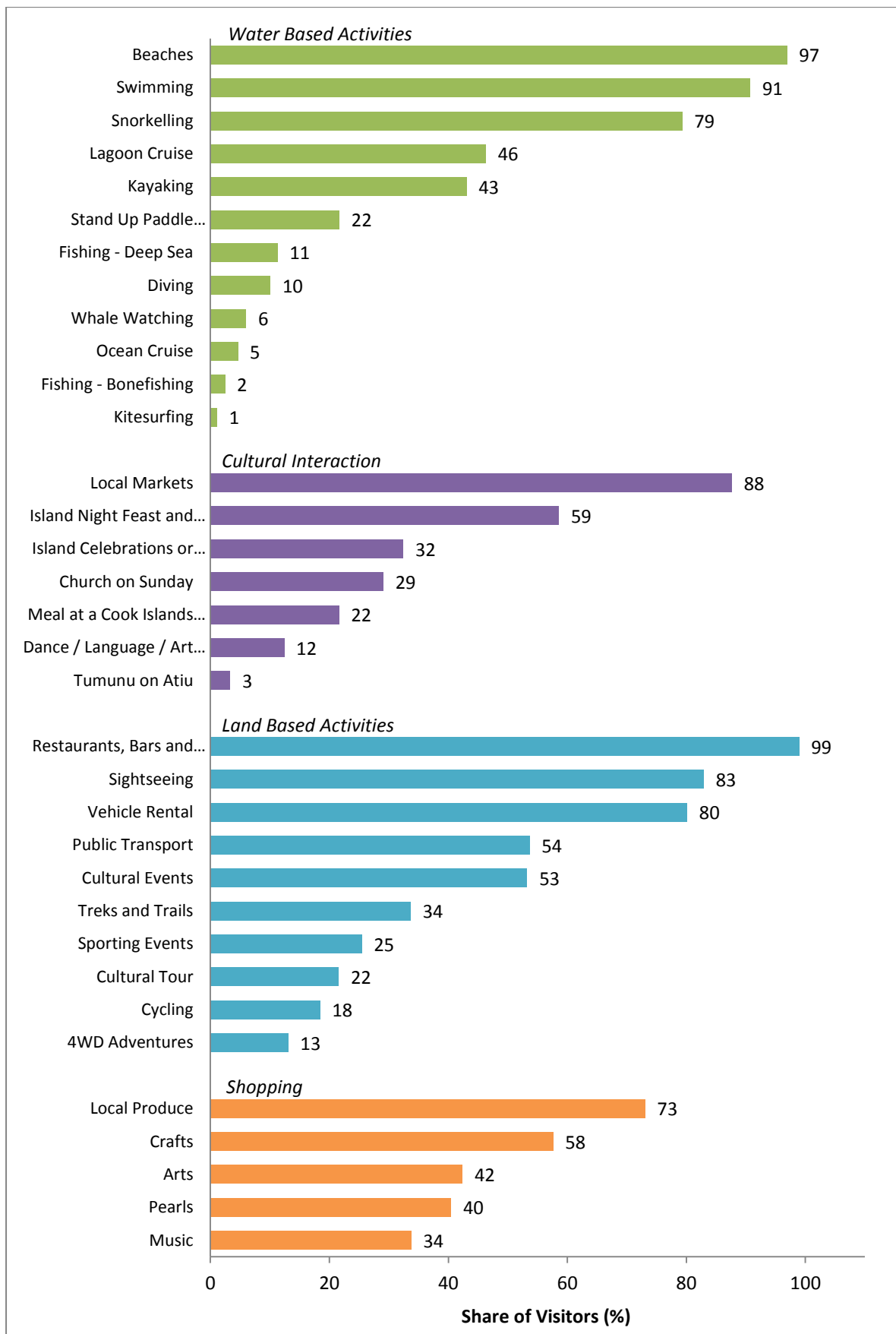
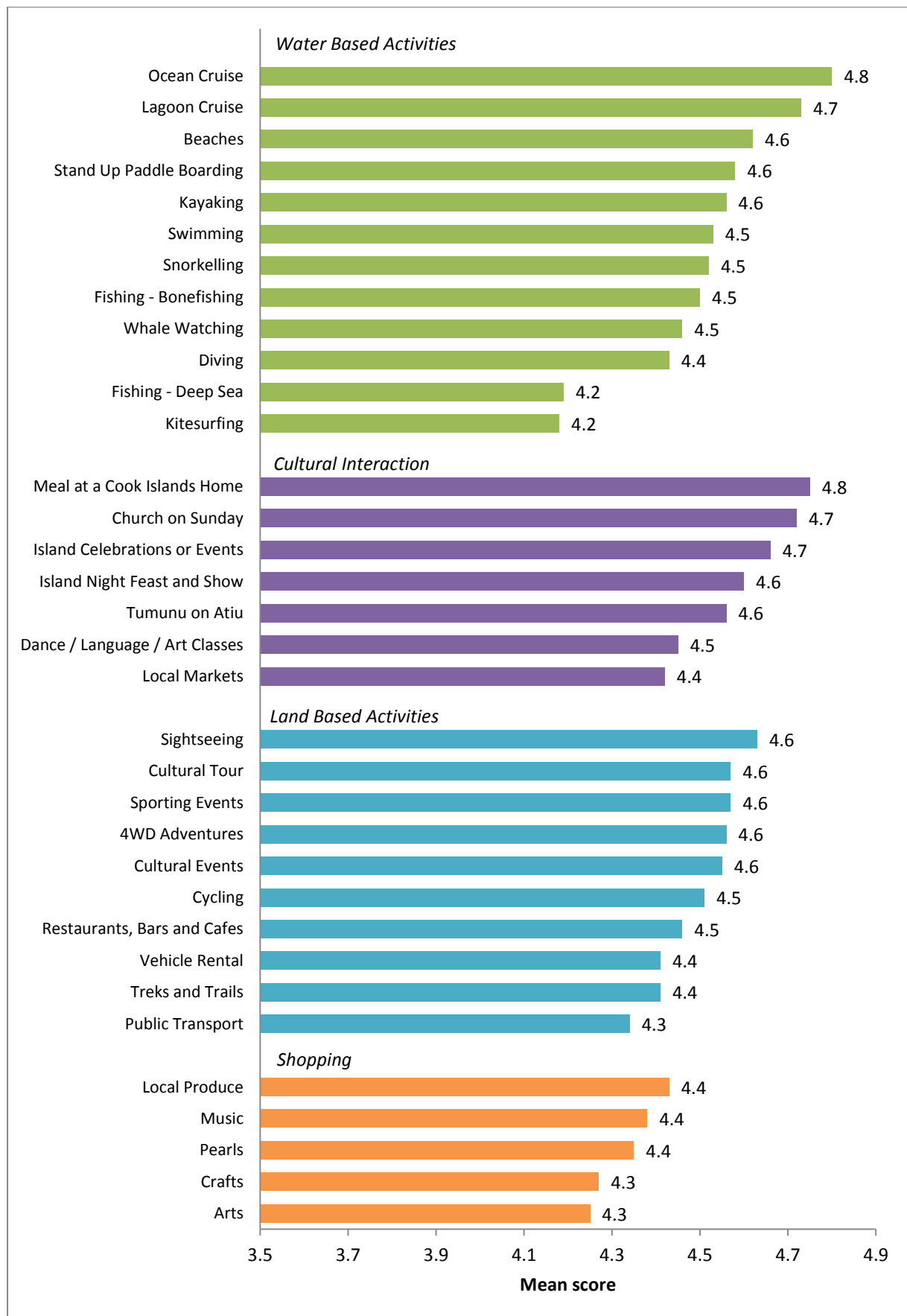


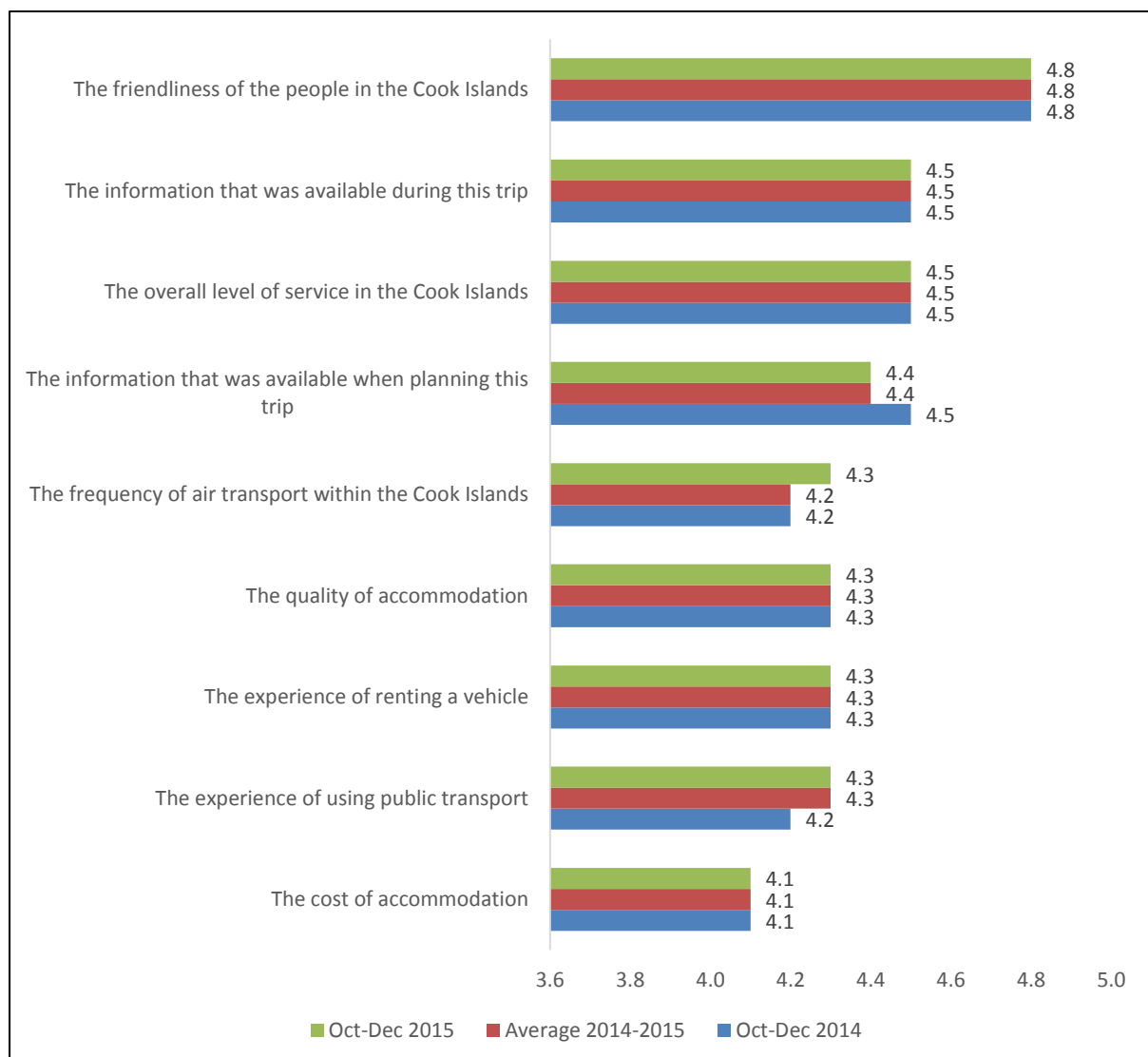
Figure 24: Degree of satisfaction in activities participated in (mean score out of 5)



Visitors were asked to rate their level of satisfaction with nine different statements relating to their most recent visit to the Cook Islands. Responses from the period of October to December are compared to the same period of 2014/15, and the annual average for 2014/15 (Figure 28). Respondents have consistently given the friendliness of the people in the Cook Islands the highest score at 4.8 out of 5.

This quarter also shows a slight upward trend in the level of satisfaction with the frequency of air transport within the Cook Islands compared to the average for 2014/15 and the same quarter of 2014/15. Visitor satisfaction levels with the experience of using public transport is the same as the annual figure of 2014/15, but higher than the same quarter in 2014/15. Overall visitor satisfaction levels are fairly consistent with the previous findings and no rating fell below 4 out of 5.

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



Most appealing aspects of the Cook Islands

Visitors were asked “What did you find most attractive or appealing about the Cook Islands on your most recent visit?” (Table 3). The most appealing elements of the Cook Islands experience are the friendly and helpful local people and their culture, the beautiful and clean natural environment, the tourist attractions and activities on offer, and the peacefulness and relaxing atmosphere of the islands. Smaller numbers of visitors mentioned aspects such as the quality of food and beverages (13%), the un-commercial and unspoilt state of the island (6%), accommodation (5%), the convenience of the Cook Islands as a destination and feeling safe while on holiday (5%), and level of service (4%). While these figures are relatively similar to the annual average for 2014-2015 where respondents rated the top three most appealing aspects as the ‘environment’ (52%), ‘local people’ (43%) and ‘atmosphere’ (29%) it is important to note the ‘local people’ dimension growing in significance something that was also seen in the July-October 2015 quarter.

Table 3: Most appealing aspects of the Cook Islands (n=1131)

Themes	Share of respondents (%)
Local people and culture	54
Environment, cleanliness and weather	53
Atmosphere	30
Activities, attractions and entertainment, events	20
Food and Beverage	13
Un-commercial	6
Accommodation	5
Convenience & safety	5
Level of service	4
Overall good experience	3
Value for money	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%.

Local people and culture

Just over half of the respondents (54%) noted that the most appealing part of their visit was their interaction with local people in the Cook Islands with comments about the friendliness, welcoming nature and helpfulness of local people, and the Cook Islands culture. Key words that dominated the responses included ‘friendly’, ‘warm’, ‘helpful’, ‘beautiful’, ‘genuine’, and ‘welcoming’. Comments included:

“The friendliness, kindness of the locals and the inclusive society that exists in the Cooks wanting visitors to enjoy the Cook’s lifestyle during their stay.”

“I always feel very welcomed and at-home when visiting Rarotonga. The people and the experience is always amongst the best I have experienced anywhere in the world.”

“Friendliness of the local people, their willingness and honesty to share about how life really is on the Island, not just through the eyes of a tourist. The wearing of beautiful ei’s was great to see.....even bought one myself. The singing in the churches was inspiring. The local people are proud and rightfully so of their "slice of paradise", it is a magical place, please don't let them lose what is rightfully theirs !!!”

“The wonderfully friendly people. The laidback attitude and stress free lifestyle was absolutely brilliant...”

Environment, cleanliness & weather

One in two respondents (53%) considered the ‘beautiful’ and ‘clean’ natural environment, and the warm and sunny climate to be the most appealing aspects of their Cook Islands experience. Visitors used words such as ‘fantastic’, ‘breath taking’, ‘amazing’, ‘clear’, and ‘unspoilt’ to describe the environment. Most comments here focused on the beauty and the cleanliness of the beaches and lagoons, the weather, the pristine water, and the beautiful scenery of the islands in general. Comments included:

“Everyone was so relaxed and helpful. The scenery was magnificent, the weather perfect and the people delightful.”

“The natural beauty of the island. I was impressed with the lack of rubbish around (improvement from my last visit 10 years ago!)”

“The beaches and the water were absolutely breath taking. Easily one of the most beautiful places I've ever been.”

“The beautiful nature of the islands which still is not over developed and ruined like a lot of other island...Loved the beaches, nature, ocean and pace of the place. People truly care about their homes, the island and ensuring the sustainability of the oceans.”

“The islands are beautiful, the weather was lovely and warm...”

Atmosphere

Nearly a third part of visitors surveyed (30%) focused on the relaxed atmosphere of the Cook Islands. They considered the Cook Islands to be very peaceful, relaxing, and laid-back, which made it a good destination to ‘relax’ and ‘unwind’. Respondents used words such as ‘peaceful’, ‘relaxing’, ‘casual’, ‘simple’, ‘laid back’, ‘easy’, and ‘slow pace’ to describe the overall atmosphere of the Cook Islands. The notion of ‘island time’ was also mentioned. Comments included:

“Being away from my busy life. Not having to worry about anything. Loved the laid back lifestyle, the friendliness of every one we met.”

"A good time to relax and recharge. We have visited the Cooks numerous times hence this time was a recharge time."

"The quietness and tranquillity of the islands. We were especially impressed with Aitutaki (a true paradise on earth)..."

"The totally relaxed vibe around the island, the people were so friendly, not in we're helping the tourist way but in this is how we respond to anyone way."

Activities, attractions, entertainment & events

Activities, attractions, entertainment and events were mentioned by 20% of respondents as the most appealing elements of their visit to the Cook Islands. Most comments in this category focus on water-based activities such as swimming, snorkelling and lagoon cruises. Land-based activities that respondents mentioned included the experience of travelling around the island by scooter, shopping, walks, cultural tours, Vaka Eiva race and local markets. Comments included:

"...The abundance of fishing activities mixed with a fanged of other activities was very appealing."

"Just being able to relax, whether on the beach at our bungalow. I love that we can hire a scooter (although there seem to be so much more & cars on this trip) and just cruise around the island. I love walking down the beach to have dinner or cocktails at different places."

"The lagoon boat tour was amazing. The water and snorkelling was amazing. Everyone was so friendly!"

"Easy to get around. Lots to see and do..."

"...loved the traditional drumming and dancing! The market, snorkelling, riding on buses everywhere and seeing the whole island in one bus ride!"

"Saturday market, island nights with dancing performance."

"...a really fantastic time during the Vaka Eiva races and events and their extension on Aitutaki."

Food and beverage

More than one in ten respondents (13%) mentioned food and beverages as the most appealing aspect of their trip. Their comments focused on the quality and range of food and beverages available in the Cook Islands. They used words such as 'great', 'awesome', 'delicious', and 'fresh' to describe the food. Many visitors commented on the great selection of good cafes and restaurants. Comments included:

“The selection and quality of meals were outstanding and better than expected.”

“The food and the snorkelling were stand outs. Didn't matter where we went the food was great and very reasonable and the snorkelling was awesome.”

“Cafes and the local fresh foods for salads fantastic...”

“The food was amazing. Fish so fresh and portion sizes huge.”

Un-commercial

Six percent of respondents mentioned the Cook Islands as being a place that is not over-commercialised or over-developed compared with Fiji or Hawaii. Some visitors also emphasised the importance of preserving the destination from mass tourism development and keeping it the way it is. Comments included:

“The fact the island is slightly underdeveloped and has minimal multi story buildings interfering with the natural beauty and mountain backdrops.”

“The relaxed island atmosphere and the fact it was not built up with high rise accommodation...This was the most relaxed holiday I have had.”

“Aitutaki lagoon is amazing! I loved the fact that the island is completely uncontaminated by mass tourism. Please remain like this! Don't build horrible overwater resort like some other Polynesian island! Select the tourism and take care of your wonderful nature!”

“Laid back lifestyle, not over regulated (fantastic to be able to choose to ride motors scooters at slow speeds without helmets), slow pace of life and traffic, courtesy, clean beaches and sea, peace and quiet, low level of development and the hillsides generally free of buildings.”

Accommodation

Another 5% of respondents noted that the accommodation they stayed in was an appealing aspect of their visit to the Cook Islands, referring to the level of service, the warm welcome from their hosts, and the opportunity of seeing whales from their rooms. Comments included:

“The always friendly and consistent great service and accommodation at the Edgewater Resort and seeing and hearing positive comments from the first timers in the group.”

“We stayed at the Crystal Blue Lagoon Villas in Muri... it was a stunning place and the staff was amazing.”

“Excellent service. Accommodation was as advertised. I wanted a relaxing break and that is what I got.”

"... We managed to see whales every day from the balcony of our accommodation and the snorkelling was excellent."

Convenience and safety

The convenience and safety of the Cook Islands as a holiday destination was mentioned by five percent of respondents as an appealing aspect of their trip. In particular, they referred to the ease of getting to the Cook Islands, and also of getting around the islands, the wide use of the English language, the convenience of using the New Zealand dollar, and the feeling of safety. Comments included:

"Easy place to visit. No language barrier."

"Easy to understand the language, customs & currency."

"Not far from NZ & very relaxing holiday."

"Casual, relaxed atmosphere. Felt safe everywhere."

Level of service

Four percent of visitors commented on the service they encountered while in the Cook Islands as being an appealing feature of their trip. Respondents had positive things to say about the local hospitality they experienced, especially mentioning the friendly and helpful staff at the restaurants, bars, hotels, and resorts. Comments included:

"The lovely people. Everyone was very happy and assisted us in any way they could. It was like being in heaven."

"The friendliness of the people. Nothing was ever a problem. Any request was attended to with a smile."

"Our stay on Aitutaki was the highlight, the service and friendly nests of the people and staff was excellent."

"Friendly locals, who would often ask if I needed help (got lost on first day), staff at the Islander Hotel who were willing to provide concierge advise, and recognised me for the duration of my stay (even though I was not an in house guest)..."

"Warm relaxed welcome...Willingness to provide service...It is a beautiful place to have a relaxing holiday..."

Overall good experience

Three percent of visitors surveyed simply stated that their whole experience was a good one, and that they loved 'everything'. Some visitors expressed their desire to visit the Cook Islands again in the future. Comments included:

“The whole experience. What the Cook Islands offer is why we return year after year.”

“Everything from the lovely welcome at customs where the customs agent saw our children and put us in the Cook Island residents line, to the friendliness of the girl in the fudge shop. We loved Rarotonga and can't wait to go back- it was our first visit but not our last!”

“Everything really - the Cook Islands have got to be the best Pacific destination for a holiday. This wasn't my first trip and it certainly won't be my last.”

Value for money

A few respondents (1%) have made comments about good value for money. Comments included:

“Very relaxing, friendly people, value for money.”

“...food pricing seemed less expensive than previously.”

“The lack of price-gouging of tourists. The very reasonable prices was a pleasant surprise and all the locals we dealt with were genuine and down-to-earth.”

Least appealing aspects of the Cook Islands

Visitors were also asked “What did you find least attractive or appealing about the Cook Islands on your most recent visit?” A quarter of the respondents (25%) simply stated that they did not think that ‘nothing’ was unappealing, ‘can’t think of anything’ or that the only unappealing aspect of their trip was that they had to leave. These visitors expressed that they just had ‘a lovely time’. However, the other three quarters of the visitors had some complaints about their last trip to the Cook Islands. Table 4 shows the different themes that came up and the share of respondents that commented on these themes. The comments ranged from price of good and service, public services, facilities and infrastructure, to the opening hours of shops and attractions. Each theme is discussed in more depth below.

Table 4: Least appealing aspects of the Cook Islands (n=1141)

Themes	Share of respondents (%)
Rubbish and natural environment care	15
Public services, facilities and infrastructure	15
Price of goods and services	14
Stray animals and mosquitos	10
Food and beverage	9
Poor weather	8
Customer service	7
Accommodation	7
Local people	4
Flight related issues	4
Rental cars or scooters	3
Attractions and activities	3
Opening hours	2
Too touristy	2
Safety 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%.

Rubbish and natural environment care

The unappealing aspect that is mentioned the most by the visitors (15%) is rubbish and natural environmental care. Waste management, the lack of care of the natural environment are mentioned as unappealing factors. Rubbish on the side of the streets, broken glass on the beaches, the burning of trash and the abandoned buildings (especially the Old Sheraton resort) were frequently mentioned. The poor condition of the lagoons and beaches, polluted water, degraded coral reefs, and threatened marine life are concerns visitors addressed. The Muri lagoon with the green algae is especially mentioned. Comments included:

“Poor beaches for swimming/snorkelling. Shallow, very few fish no matter where around the island we went.”

“Burning rubbish everywhere. I had hoped for the freshest air on earth, but we were constantly coughing through the smoke.”

“A lot of broken glass on a lot of the beaches.”

“The wrecked cars and derelict buildings, also rubbish on sites.”

“The coral reef surrounding the island is suffering compared to other Pacific islands. There needs to be more care taken on the basis that your reefs are mostly shore based.”

“Pollution. Rubbish at beach and on roads and sewerage smells coming from Aorangi hotels. Sewerage systems need sorted very badly as the lagoon will die.”

“Coral was sadly mostly dead and suffering from conservation.”

“Maybe on the wrong part of the island, but didn't think too much of the beaches, quite rocky outside our unit once you left the sandy beach. Needed to have footwear for swimming.”

“The bad state of Muri beach and also Aitutaki's Ootu area around Aitutaki Island Resort which stank of sewage with algae starting to form there. We were very shocked how bad the smell was and duly disappointed after 8 years of regular visits. It's devastating, surprised it's not on Trip Advisor.”

“Pollution and water quality problems at Muri Beach and elsewhere. Increased numbers of sea slugs (sea cucumbers) demonstrates increased pollution. Sanitation should be improved so that there is NO runoff from land into the lagoon.”

Public services, facilities and infrastructure

Another aspect mentioned by the visitors (11%) is the lack of public services, facilities and infrastructure on the Cook Islands. Many comments were about the poor condition of the local roads on the islands. Some visitors mentioned their concern about the lack of sidewalks, especially when walking at night. The lack of public transport and toilets is another aspect mentioned by the visitors and some visitors complained that there is not enough signage on the island and therefore hard to find some places. The high price of internet was also an issue for some visitors. Comments included:

“The state of the main road, bit rough and needs some work”

“Derelict buildings and no footpaths for walking at night time.”

“Public areas like the walk in the bush; picnic areas; public areas all in major need of attention. The place looks very untidy and unloved - signage is poor. The track over the mountain was impassable.”

“Could have used some more street signs, e.g. to Wigamores waterfall.”

“Side roads and attractions could be marked with bigger signs. Had to be careful on the roads at night as narrow and dark in places.”

“Driving on the main road at night. Badly lit and no markers or white lines to tell you where the left kerb is.”

“Lack of reliable public transportation.”

“Transportation. I didn't realize how impossible it would be to get around Aitutaki especially without renting transport.”

“More public toilets required at the beaches.”

“The internet service was a hassle and very expensive.”

“No free Wi-Fi readily available so I was unable to upload pictures on my Instagram! Haha. I have a lot of followers and I would've loved to help the Cook Islands by promoting your amazing Island whilst I was on the island.”

Price of goods and services

One other least appealing aspects for visitors is the high prices of goods and services on the Cook Islands (14%). Visitors made comments about the costs and the high price of things, especially items such as accommodation, food in restaurants, groceries, taxis and internet. Comments included:

“The cost of basic items - none of our research really outlined the cost of things it did add a lot to our overall expenditure which was not expected.”

“Very expensive accommodation for what you got, not value for money.”

“Some things are extremely overpriced, such as broadband and wine. I paid over 3 times more for a basic bottle of wine in the Cook Islands, compared to what I pay in Australia. Food in general is quite expensive.”

“Too expensive. Nowhere in the world are taxis charging by the head. This per person charge for taxis is a rip off.”

“Expensive mobile connections and top-ups, expensive and lack of taxi service and a generally expensive lifestyle e.g. groceries etc.”

“The high cost of essential items (though understand why).”

“The cost of food was shockingly high even though I thought I'd prepared myself for it. Having said this, it is such a beautiful island, that this would not stop me from visiting again.”

Stray animals and mosquitos

Another aspect mentioned by the visitors (10%) as unappealing is stray animals and mosquitos, especially dogs and roosters. Comments included:

“Roosters and too many wild cats (fighting in the night) and dogs.”

“The roaming dogs- it’s sad that they can’t be bought under control.”

“Nothing much, but the wandering, menacing, aggressive dogs are a worry when walking around the roads.”

“I worry about the dogs and how well they are being looked after. Also that the answer to the dog problem seems to be that they get 'culled' and maybe there is still a market for dog meat, I'm not sure but why would so many owners still not get their dogs neutered? I know the SPCA are doing what they can to help but I think the whole island needs to get behind educating dog owners - and maybe consider compulsory neutering. The island is too small for the amount of dogs that seem to be around. I met a lot of tourists who had concerns about the welfare of the dogs. The answer is not in culling when there is a problem.”

“Feel animal welfare still needs a lot of work very distressing seeing pigs tethered by the foot cows tied by the neck and goats with no shelter from the sun and all animals with no water very distressing for people that care about animals.”

Food and beverage

A number of visitors (9%) commented on the cost, quality and variety of food in the Cook Islands. The biggest complaint in regards to food and beverages, was the price of the food and especially the costs of groceries and the availability of fresh vegetables and fruits. Comments included:

“Same type of food - buffet style. (The food was nice, but not much variety)”

“Honestly the only downside I found was the lack of fresh dairy and fruits.”

“Poor options of food unless you are in a resort...”

“The availability of groceries. I was prepared for what would be available but a bit more variety would have been great. Also, more fresh fruit and veg that are grown on the island would be excellent. We would have been happy to live on fruit but found very little around.”

“Aitutaki is really lacking in food opportunities other than hotels. If there are places to eat, they are a mystery.”

“Not enough selection of less expensive quality food outlets - or at least they weren't obvious to me.”

Poor weather

Some visitors (9%) commented on the weather during their trip. They state that the weather was not what they expected or hoped for. Visitors in particular complain about the amount of rain and the wind. Most of the respondents acknowledge that the weather is seasonable and cannot be changed, but it did affect their stay on the Cook Islands. Comments included:

"Weather wasn't as warm as we had hoped, so not so great for swimming. It was windy."

"Weather wasn't the best although you can't do anything about it."

"Poor weather. Rained or was cloudy, was windy and cool on all days except one."

"The weather was a little cool and it rained, but no one can control that."

"Unfortunately we had very windy weather that hampered our water experiences."

Customer service

The level of customer service is mentioned by visitors (7%) as one of the least appealing aspects of the Cook Islands. Visitors feel that there is a lack of good customer service, especially in restaurants, shops, hotels and car rentals. Visitors commented about 'unfriendly', 'rude', 'attitude' staff. Comments included:

"The attitude of some shop assistants or non-assistance."

"Customer service almost non-existent at three of the rental car companies we visited. Was a common complaint by all people we talked to."

"Some shop assistants were verging on rude and we felt uncomfortable and unwelcome at times. This is not the Cook Islands way, you are such awesome people on the whole."

"The poor service at the hotel, delays in being seated and getting orders placed, very under staffed."

"Service staff at hotel were not altogether engaged - did not clean room or did not clean room efficiently - had to be asked. (Even to remove dishes despite them warning us about ants!) Hard to catch the eye of restaurant staff - as I said, not entirely engaged in making the guests feel welcome - pity really."

"Some of the shop accidents where a little unfriendly in the supermarket type shops."

Accommodation

The high cost and poor quality of accommodation was for a number of visitors (7%) a concern. Visitors mentioned that accommodation is expensive on the Cook Islands and that the prices do not correspond with the quality of the accommodation. According to the visitors there is a poor value of money when it comes to accommodation. A few hotels should also upgrade their facilities and services according to visitors. Comments included:

“Accommodation in general is very tired and needs maintenance. A lot of our guests commented on this.”

“Very expensive accommodation for what you got, not value for money.”

“Accommodation is expensive and after a number of visits (6 in last 18 months) I find it annoying to be paying 5 star rates that are not matched by the facilities. I suspect that if the people were not so fantastically friendly this cost would generate a lot more complaints than it does now. The best way to visit is staying at a locally owned business - where I have stayed twice - is a great example - excellent value. However, given my visits are primarily on business, and can be at short notice, I tend to end up in a resort as local accommodation is booked.”

“The standard of accommodation was poor for the cost.”

Other unappealing aspects

Other unappealing aspects mentioned by visitors, include flight/airline related issues (arrival and departure times, cost, airport procedure), internet (lack of coverage on the island), rental cars and scooters (quality, service and the process of getting a driving license), disappointment of attraction and activities (lack of activities for every type of weather), opening hours of shops and restaurants (close to early, not open on Sunday), that the Cook Islands become too commercialised/touristic (loss of authenticity, over development) and safety related issues (burglary).

Comments included:

Flight related issues:

“Internal flights were considered just too expensive so we didn't go to any other islands.”

“Inconvenient flight times!”

“The flight times from Australia and quality of service on Air New Zealand.”

“The delay in processing visitors on arrival in the airport.”

“The non-availability of storage lockers at the airport. This resulted in not being able to leave the airport after arriving from Aitutaki at 8pm and waiting for an onward flight to Auckland at 2am.”

“Lack of information boards in departure lounge at the airport.”

Rental cars and scooters

“Quality and price of rental vehicles. Very little petrol in tanks so you have to fill up on day 1. No lights on bikes, very dangerous.”

“The rigmarole of renting a scooter and the process of the practical and written driver’s license. This took too long and felt like a money making scheme!”

“The rental car and service from the rental car company.”

“Crappy rental cars. Have visited many times to Rarotonga and each time we went through 4 or 5 vehicles. This last trip we went top of the line cost wise to get a decent car.”

Attractions and activities

“Our main holiday pleasures are reading, beautiful food and snorkelling. We weren't aware that we wouldn't be able to snorkel outside our accommodation as it is too shallow and therefore dangerous.”

“Was incredibly disappointed with the Muri Lagoon cruise. A waste of time/money, particularly compared with our Aitutaki Adventures experience which was absolutely fantastic”

“Activities limited after about 7 days of staying.”

“The lack of things to do when your flight leaves at midnight on a Saturday. Everything closes though we did find the fish club and that was great.”

“We had a few days of bad weather due to a cyclone which meant that water, beach and many outdoor activities were not possible - we found it difficult to find other things to do, given these weather conditions. We appreciate that the weather can't be helped but if that fails you have to work hard to find interesting indoor activities.”

Opening hours

“I can't think of anything; however, it would be nice to have some of the shops open a little later than 5 p.m. on weekdays and 12 noon on weekends.”

“Shops close so early, if you are attending a conference which ends late afternoon, there's not much to do after in terms of shopping because the shops are already closed.”

“The difficulty of finding places to have Sunday lunch or coffee because everything is closed - though we understand why. We did find a very good cafe near Muri - but we

had to hunt for one that was open.”

“While I understand the importance of Sunday to the Cook Islanders as a day of rest and prayer. It was mildly inconvenient with the amount that was apparently closed on Sunday. We did not leave the Rarotongan Resort and Spa so I am not certain what was closed and what was open. Thankfully the staff at the resort mentioned that most shops were closed on Sunday. We instead spent the day poolside reading. While we had a great day, just flying in Saturday and not knowing about this meant that we could not get a rental vehicle until Monday. Not complaining as we had a great Sunday relaxing, just wanted to mention it.”

“Early closing time for restaurants. Limited restaurant options Saturday night.”

Commercialisation

“Find it also a little sad that the main island seems to be completely dedicated to tourism, so little chance to really see the true Cook Islands, and wonder how much this has impacted local culture. For this reason Rarotonga will never be a favourite destination for us (ironic I know, but too many package tourists/weddings etc.)”

“The increasing commercialisation.”

Safety related issues

“We had our house broken into again, unfortunately it's the 3rd time it's happened to me. We know to set traps for them now so they get huge frights and run away.”

“Seeing so many young people not wearing helmets on scooters, the need to be totally secure at all times even when inside your accommodation because of the high number of burglaries.”

Suggestions to improve the visit to the Cook Islands

When asked if there was anything that could have improved their visit to the Cook Islands, just under half (44%) of respondents said ‘yes’. Suggestions mentioned by respondents focused on public services and infrastructure (14%), a longer stay (11%), environment/safety/animal care (11%), weather (10%), accommodation (10%), entertainment, activities and transport (9%), flight schedules in and out of Cook Islands (8%), quality/cost of food and beverages (7%) and friendliness of locals and service levels (6%). Comments on these themes included:

“The buses should run in both directions, anti-clockwise bus was very irregular.”

“Improve the level of internet accessibility in terms of speed and cost.”

“More signage for the bus stop locations - there is a timetable but you don't always know where to wait for the bus.”

“Accommodation staff not happy...”

“More information about the markets and finding authentic Cook Island crafts that are affordable.”

“More information given out about local events and fixtures happening within the Cook Islands for all visitors and tourists.”

“Easier access to information on activities and schedules and ability to contact purveyors to schedule activities.”

“Internet needs to be available, free, broadband, 24/7, island wide, all carriers....I would not return based on lack of internet alone.”

“Make the flights within the islands cheaper.”

“More seafood and more island food.”

“A few people noted that the Muri beach now has a lot of algae which is a new occurrence. It needs a big clean up. Other than that, it was great.”

“An improved complete list of restaurants with better descriptions of the food and atmosphere should be available at the tourist office.”

“Knowing that there will be a good level of animal welfare there.”

“We found it strange that there seemed to be little in tourist shops in the way of clothing or textiles that were made in Rarotonga. It had all been imported from China or Taiwan. More locally made goods (even if more expensive) would have been good.”

Reasons to return to the Cook Islands and recommend to others

The majority of visitors (93%) indicated that they would consider re-visiting the Cook Islands in the future. This figure is the same as the 2014/15 annual average of 93%, but slightly lower than the identical quarter in 2014 (94%). The main reason given by the visitors to return to the Cook Islands is the overall great experience that the islands offer and the wish to experience this again. Other reasons are the beauty of the islands, the beaches, the great weather, the friendly local people, the peacefulness and relaxing atmosphere of the islands, and convenience with regards to travel time, language and currency.

The atmosphere of the islands was mentioned as a main reason to revisit by 31% of respondents. It was described as relaxed, quiet, peaceful and laidback. Comments included:

“Because of its reasonable prices and its quiet, relaxing ambience.”

“I had a wonderful time, loved the people and the relaxed atmosphere, and beautiful scenery.”

“Absolutely. As stated earlier, the people, the food, the island itself and wonderful

stress free environment that make a truly relaxing holiday. Congratulations and thank you to all the people of the Cooks."

"Planning another trip next year - loved the place - relaxed, casual atmosphere and pace..."

"Relaxed, friendly atmosphere. Good place to unwind...Plenty to see and do or do nothing."

The beautiful natural scenery and the warm climate of the islands are mentioned by almost one third of the visitors (29%) as a reason to return to the Cook Islands. Especially visitors from New Zealand mentioned that the Cook Islands is a great destination to escape from the cooler weather. Key words used to describe the scenery include 'beautiful island(s)', 'warm climate', 'unspoilt', 'beautiful scenery', and 'lovely lagoon'. Comments include:

"Beautiful unspoiled destination with a warm climate and friendly people. The tourist accommodation caters for all and the activities offered are perfect for the islands' environment."

"I would return with a group because it is near to NZ the beaches are beautiful and the hills in Rarotonga look great to trek in. It is very relaxed and it would be a great place for a family holiday."

"Love the area and the people. The islands aren't ruin! Very lay back and the lagoons are wonderful to explore."

"We loved how unspoiled the island is and the people are very friendly and helpful also the weather on the most part is fantastic! We are from Canada and there is already much snow and cold."

A quarter (25%) of the comments by visitors were about how great the islands were, that they 'just loved it' and that the Cook Islands are the best place for a holiday. Comments included:

"My favourite place to visit!! Love the relaxed atmosphere, beautiful scenery, snorkelling, weather, friendly people..."

"It is heaven on earth."

"It is a fantastic destination for a holiday and we also got married so will return occasionally for our anniversary."

"Because it is absolutely beautiful, people are friendly, Pacific resort was fantastic, amazing beaches and overall lovely and outstanding place."

"It's the perfect Pacific holiday destination. Warm, friendly, happy and your animals are healthy & friendly. It's paradise."

"Amazing holiday destination."

The friendly local people are mentioned by 23% of the visitors as an important reason for their desire to return. The visitors mentioned the kindness and helpfulness of the local people during their stay on the islands. Words used to describe the local people of the Cook Islands are 'friendly', 'amazing', 'beautiful', and 'lovely'. Comments include:

"It was relaxing. Great place to spend quality time with family. The size of the island. Friendliness and laid back nature of the locals."

"The people are amazing."

"Would return to Rarotonga. Peaceful beautiful natural place with happy people ..."

Attractions and activities that the Cook Islands can offer or the wish to explore the islands further are mentioned as a reason to return, especially snorkelling. Some visitors are inspired by their trip to come back and visit other islands on their next visit to the Cook Islands.

"This was our 7th trip in 8 years. We try to have an annual snorkelling holiday in Titikaveka."

"The island is fantastic and there is still so much more to see and do."

Another reason to come back to the Cook Islands is the convenience with regards to flight times from New Zealand, the currency and English as the local language. For visitors from 'close-by', e.g. New Zealand and Australia, a holiday to the Cook Islands is an easy and loved getaway. The ease of getting around on the islands was also mentioned in the list of the reasons to return.

"Because I thought it was the perfect destination for a totally relaxing, very low key break. It also felt very familiar, ie same money was used, and strong ties with NZ, people even had Kiwi accents!"

"It is close to NZ, warm and beautiful and easy to get around. Much nicer than Fiji, Tonga or Samoa."

Other reasons mentioned by a smaller group of visitors to revisit the Cook Islands are that it is a safe, clean and family friendly destination, visiting family and friends, food and beverage, affordable, local culture and that the Cook Islands are still sort of 'unspoiled' and not too commercialized.

"... I love the local music and the dancing and I feel very safe."

"... Enjoyed seeing a different way of life and culture."

"I would bring more family members to experience the friendliness and happiness of paradise."

Of the visitors who added reasons why they would not want to return to the Cook Islands (7%) the majority stated that did not wish to return and said that they 'had been there and seen it all', some visitors added, especially return visitors, that they want to 'see other places'. Some visitors commented that a holiday to the Cook Islands is expensive (especially accommodation and food) and that it is not good value for money. Other factors given for not wishing to return included a lack of activities, poor service, distance to the Cook Islands or that it is too quiet.

"The locals are too unfriendly, rude and not really interested in tourists, the grocery shopping is too expensive."

“Internet/communications is the main reason. Food is nothing special (at best). It was MUCH colder than I expected.”

“Cook Islands are too far from Canada. My wife and I have travelled to more than 135 countries and at over 70 years old we look forward to seeing new place or travelling to closer old favourites. One foot Island is probably the most scenic island we've visited around the world.”

“Rarotonga didn't meet our expectations for an island beach holiday.”

Under half (42%) of the visitors mentioned that they would definitely include the outer islands in their next visit. Just over half (53%) of visitors indicate they will “maybe” visit outer islands next time. Most (89%) of the visitors surveyed in this quarter mentioned they would like to include ‘Aitutaki’ in their next visit to the Cook Islands. ‘Atiu’ was the second most mentioned island at 44%; another 27% of visitors stated that they would like to visit Mangaia, 22% of the respondents would like to visit Mauke. Only four percent mentioned the high cost of visiting other islands as a barrier for not visiting.

Nearly all visitors surveyed (98%) said that they would recommend the destination to their family and friends which is consistent with previous survey periods.

Over a third (39%) of visitors surveyed stated they would recommend the Cook Islands to others because of the ‘atmosphere’: this was again described as ‘relaxing’, ‘peaceful’, ‘no rush’, ‘low key’, ‘restful’ and with a ‘laid-back’ lifestyle. Respondents felt that the Cook Islands was a great place to ‘relax’ and ‘unwind’, and said they would recommend the Cook Islands as a good holiday destination for those who are looking for a ‘quiet holiday’ or ‘relaxed atmosphere’.

Thirty percent of respondents said that the ‘beautiful’ and ‘unspoiled’ natural environment of the Cook Islands was a reason to recommend the island nation to others – including the beautiful tropical scenery, great beaches and lagoons, the warm climate, and its natural attractions. Visitors particularly mentioned the untouched natural beauty of Aitutaki.

Just under a quarter of respondents (24%) mentioned the ‘friendly’ local people as a reason to recommend the Cook Islands to friends and relatives. Other words used to describe the local Cook Islanders included ‘lovely’, ‘beautiful’, ‘great’, ‘happy’, ‘warm’ and ‘amazing’.

Just under a fifth of visitors (18%) surveyed would recommend the Cook Islands to others based on their own ‘great holiday experience’. These visitors described the Cook Islands as a ‘great place’, and said that it is a ‘perfect holiday’. These respondents also often described the Cook Islands as a ‘paradise’ and ‘a place of heaven’.

Other themes that were mentioned included the convenience of the islands as a destination – especially for New Zealanders and Australians (11%), the attractions and activities available (8%), the affordability of the holiday and good value for money (6%), food and beverage

options (5%), the fact that the Cook Islands are not too touristy or over-commercialized (4%), the islands being a family-friendly destination (3%), the Cook Islands culture (2%), and the choice of accommodation available (1%).

Comments on why visitors would recommend the Cook Islands to others included:

"It is fantastic place to slow down and experience life at a relaxing pace."

"For Kiwis it's perfect, warm with great beaches and clear water and no exchange rate!!!"

"It's a great place for a holiday the people are friendly and helpful."

"Really enjoyed the experience. It was exactly what we had expected."

"Very affordable and I love the fact that we can use NZ currency there."

"For the snorkelling and tropical, natural beauty of the islands. Cheaper and easier to get to than some other South Pacific islands."

"Great value for money, beautiful place, great food and alcohol, lots of things to do. Well rounded holiday whatever you feel like doing."

"The Cooks are a very secret and special place. Don't ever let it become over commercialised."

"Already have - perfect place for a relaxing family holiday."

Only 2% of visitors would not recommend the Cook Islands to others and this is largely based on the high prices and the negative attitude of the locals.

Final observations

This report shows that the Cook Islands tourism industry generally performed well during the October to December 2015 period. Visitor satisfaction levels and the desire for return visitation have remained very high, and it is clear that the destination is making a generally positive impression on visitors. Visitor yield has remained relatively high after the significant increase seen in the previous (July-October 2015) quarter and it will be important to see if this trend is sustained for the rest of the year. The increase in yield is largely accounted for by increased accommodation spend. The increase may be a broader reflection of an upturn in visitor spend in New Zealand that has been witnessed in the past 12 months.

Despite the growth in visitor spend this report again highlights that there is room to enhance the visitor experience and to increase the economic yield and broader community benefits associated with tourism. As with previous reports, this quarter's research highlights issues around environmental degradation and infrastructure provision that should be monitored and managed carefully. In particular concerns over the condition of Muri lagoon have featured in visitor comments. There are also some concerns from visitors around the value for money/quality of service provided by accommodation and food/beverage operations that need to be addressed. The on-going concerns around stray dogs should also be noted.

It is a positive sign that in the last two quarters the 'friendly people' dimension has been featuring as the most appealing aspect of the visitor's experience in the Cook Islands and has surpassed or equalled the 'natural environment' as a key feature. This may well reflect initiatives such as the recently introduced Kia Orana values program and this will be an important trend to observe and trace over the coming year.

Overall the Cook Islands tourism sector is performing well in terms of visitor satisfaction but it remains important to look at ways to increase visitor yield in a sustainable manner. It is critical to find ways to build on and develop the visitor experience in a manner that enhances local economic linkages. By developing new product offerings, and more importantly, enhancing the quality and 'value added' of existing activities and experiences, the tourism industry can increase visitor satisfaction, and enhance the generation of local economic benefits. The 2015/16 annual report will review this theme in more depth.

Appendix – Cook Islands Visitor Survey



Cook Islands Visitor Survey

Information for Participants

Kia Orana and warm Pacific greetings to you. As a recent visitor to the Cook Islands, we invite you to participate in research designed to improve the visitor experience as well as support us to make good decisions for tourism in our beautiful island nation. The research is funded by the Cook Islands Tourism Corporation and conducted by the New Zealand Tourism Research Institute at AUT University, Auckland, New Zealand.

If you are a permanent Cook Island resident, thank you for your interest but this Survey is focused on non-resident visitors to the Islands.

We would like to know about your most recent visit to the Cook Islands and ask you to complete this Visitor Survey within two weeks of your trip if possible.

Participation is entirely voluntary. To participate in this research, simply click on the button below. The Survey asks a number of questions where you select your answer from a range of options given. Some questions ask you to type your comments in your own words into the box provided. We would appreciate it if you could fill this survey out as accurately as possible. All questions are optional. The survey will run until the end of December 2013.

This survey will take approximately 15 minutes to complete.

All answers are confidential and can in no way be linked to your personal details. By taking the survey you are giving consent to be part of this research.

[Take the survey](#)

Aggregated results of this research may be used in journal and conference publications. A summary of the results of this research will also be available on www.nztri.org in late 2013.

For further information about this research contact:

Project Coordinator: Carolyn Deuchar, New Zealand Tourism Research Institute, AUT University: email carolyn.deuchar@aut.ac.nz, phone 09 921 9999 ext 8892

Team Leader: Professor Simon Milne: New Zealand Tourism Research Institute, AUT University: email simon.milne@aut.ac.nz, phone 09 921 9245

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 13 December 2011. AUTEK Reference Number 11/335.

ABOUT YOUR VISIT:

This survey is about your most recently completed visit to the Cook Islands. We would ask you to complete this survey within two weeks of your return home if possible.

(If you are a permanent Cook Islands' resident, thank you for your interest but this survey is focused on non-resident visitors to the Cook Islands)

By completing the survey you are giving consent to participate in this research.

1. When did you arrive in the Cook Islands on your most recent visit? (format dd/mm/yyyy, e.g. 26/06/2015)

2. How many nights did you spend in the Cook Islands on your most recent visit?

3. What was the main purpose of your visit?

- Holiday (1)
- Wedding party (2)
- Business or conference (3)
- Visiting friends or relatives (4)
- Honeymoon (5)
- Te Maeva Nui 2015 (50th Constitution Celebrations) (12)
- Special event - sporting (6)
- Special event - cultural (7)
- Volunteering (9)
- Education (8)
- Other reason, please specify (11) _____

4. How did you get to the Cook Islands? (tick as many as apply)

- Airline - Air New Zealand (1)
- Airline - Virgin Australia (2)
- Airline - Air Tahiti (3)
- Ferry (4)
- Private charter plane (5)
- Private boat (6)

5. Who were your travelling companions? (tick as many as apply)

- a) No one - I was by myself
- b) Partner / husband / wife
- c) Family member(s)

- d) Friends
- e) Work colleagues
- f) Tour group
- g) Organised group (e.g. school, sports etc)
- h) Wedding party
- i) Other _____

6. How many people accompanied you on this trip?

- a) 0 - travelled by myself
- b) 1
- c) 2
- d) 3
- e) 4
- f) 5
- g) 6
- h) 7
- i) 8
- j) 9
- k) 10+

7. How did you find out about the Cook Islands as a destination? (tick as many as apply)

- Previous visits (1)
- Friends/family (2)
- Travel agent/agency brochures (3)
- Social media (Facebook, Twitter etc) (4)
- Television or radio programmes (5)
- Travel books (e.g. Lonely Planet) (10)
- Magazine and newspaper articles (6)
- The official Cook Islands travel website (cookislands.travel/nz) (7)
- General travel websites (e.g. TripAdvisor) (8)
- Other (9) _____

8. How important were the following sources of information when planning your trip to the Cook Islands?

Previous visits (1)

Friends/family (2)

Travel agent/travel brochures (3)

Social media (Facebook, Twitter etc) (4)

Television or radio programmes (5)

Travel books (e.g. Lonely Planet) (9)

Magazine and newspaper articles (6)

The official Cook Islands travel website (cookislands.travel/nz) (7)

General travel websites (e.g. Trip Advisor) (8)

9. How did you purchase your travel to the Cook Islands?

- Travel arrangements were made through a travel agent (1)
- I made my own travel arrangement using the Internet (2)
- Travel arrangements were made by a mixture of travel agent and online booking (5)
- Travel arrangements were made by others (business, friends, relatives) (3)
- Other - please specify (4) _____

10. Which islands did you visit on this trip? Please provide additional information when prompted on the following page.

- a) Rarotonga
- b) Aitutaki
- c) Atiu
- d) Mangaia
- e) Mauke
- f) Other

11. How many nights did you spend on each island?

- a) Rarotonga
- b) Aitutaki
- c) Atiu
- d) Mangaia
- e) Mauke
- f) Other

12. Please select the accommodation(s) you stayed in the Cook Islands? (Hold down the Ctrl key to choose more than one accommodation)

13. How satisfied were you with the following aspects in terms of your recent visit?

The level of service provided at this accommodation (1)

The quality, availability and maintenance of facilities provided at this accommodation (2)

The overall value for money (3)

14. On your most recent visit to the Cook Islands, please indicate below (on a scale of 1 to 5 where 1 is 'very dissatisfied' and 5 being 'very satisfied') the activities that you engaged in and how satisfied you were with your experience.

Water based activities:

- a) Beaches
- b) Swimming
- c) Snorkelling
- d) Diving
- e) Kayaking
- f) Fishing - Deep Sea
- g) Fishing - Bonefishing
- h) Lagoon Cruise
- i) Ocean Cruise
- j) Whale Watching
- k) Kitesurfing
- l) Stand Up Paddle Boarding

Cultural interaction:

- a) Island Night Feast and Show
- b) Meal at a Cook Islands Home
- c) Church on Sunday
- d) Island Celebrations or Events
- e) Tumunu on Atiu
- f) Local Markets
- g) Dance / Language / Art Classes

Land based activities and Touring:

- a) Restaurants, Bars and Cafes
- b) Cultural Events
- c) Sporting Events
- d) 4WD Adventures
- e) Cultural Tour
- f) Treks and Trails
- g) Cycling
- h) Sightseeing

- i) Vehicle Rental
- j) Public Transport

Shopping:

- a) Pearls
- b) Arts
- c) Crafts
- d) Music
- e) Local Produce e.g Coffee, Coconut Oil etc

Please tell us about any other activities you participated in:

SPECIAL EVENTS

As part of the survey, we are helping the Ministry of Cultural Development to better understand the impact of the Te Maeva Nui 2015 (50th Constitution Celebrations). If you participated, please answer the following questions in this section.

What did you attend in Te Maeva Nui 2015 (50th Constitution Celebrations)? Please select all that apply.

- Float parade (1)
- Cultural performances (2)
- Trade days (3)
- Other, please specify (4) _____

Answer If Did you attend Te Maeva Nui 50th National celebration while in the Cook Islands? Yes Is Selected

Q77 Did you make any purchases at the Te Maeva Nui 2015 (50th Constitution Celebrations) this year?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Answer If Did you make any purchase at Te Maeva Nui this year? Yes Is Selected

Q78 How much did you spend at Te Maeva Nui 2015 (50th Constitution Celebrations) (in NZ\$)?

Answer If Did you attend Te Maeva Nui 50th National celebration while in the Cook Islands? Yes Is Selected

Q79 Overall how satisfied were you with your experience of Te Maeva Nui 2015 (50th Constitution Celebrations):

9. On your most recent visit, how satisfied were you with the following (on a scale of 1 to 5 where 1 is 'very dissatisfied' and 5 being 'very satisfied')?

- a) The information that was available when planning this trip?
- b) The information that was available during this trip?
- c) The cost of accommodation?
- d) The quality of accommodation?
- e) The experience of renting a vehicle?
- f) The experience of using public transport?
- g) The frequency of air transport within the Cook Islands?
- h) The overall level of service in the Cook Islands?
- i) The friendliness of the people in the Cook Islands?

15. What did you find most attractive or appealing about the Cook Islands on your most recent visit?

16. What did you find least attractive or appealing about the Cook Islands on your most recent visit?

17. Is there anything that could have improved your visit to the Cook Islands?

- a) No
- b) Yes

EXPENDITURE

Information on how much money you spent during your visit helps the planning and development of the Cook Islands economy.

We would appreciate it if you could fill out this section as accurately as possible.

18. In the expenditure estimates you will provide below, how many people are included (including yourself)?

- a) Adults
- b) Children (0- 16 years old)

18.1 Please indicate below the total value of what you paid prior to your arrival to the Cook Islands (including purchases made via travel agents or the internet), in the currency specified below:

- a) NZD
- b) AUD
- c) GBP
- d) USD
- e) EUR
- f) CAD
- g) Other - please specify: _____

18.2 What does this amount above include? (tick as many as apply)

- a) International flights
- b) Accommodation
- c) Meals
- d) Domestic transport
- e) Activities
- f) Other

19.1 After you arrived in the Cook Islands, how much do you estimate that you spent in each island (Rarotonga, Aitutaki and Other island(s)) in local currency (NZ\$)?

- a) Accommodation
- b) Restaurants, Cafes & Bars
- c) Vehicle Rental
- d) Petrol
- e) Domestic flights
- f) Public transport
- g) Cruising
- h) Groceries
- i) Shopping (e.g. souvenirs, clothes)
- j) Activities (e.g. water sports, sightseeing)
- k) Internet cost
- l) Other

20. Was your recent visit to the Cook Islands part of a bigger trip?

- a) Yes

b) No

21. Would you return to the Cook Islands? Why?

a) Yes

b) No

If yes, would you include the following outer islands? (tick as many as apply)

Aitutaki (1)

Atiu (2)

Mangaia (3)

Mauke (4)

Other (5) _____

22. Would you recommend the Cook Islands to others? Why?

a) Yes

b) No

23. How satisfied were you with your overall experience of the Cook Islands (on a scale of 1 to 5 where 1 is 'very dissatisfied and 5 being 'very satisfied')?

24. Please add any comments you would like to make about your overall experience of the Cook Islands.

ABOUT YOU

25. How many times have you been to the Cook Islands prior to your most recent visit?

26. Your age group:

a) 18-29

b) 30-39

c) 40-49

d) 50-59

e) 60-69

f) 70+

27. Your gender:

a) Female

b) Male

28. What is your highest qualification?

- a) No formal qualification
- b) High school qualification
- c) Tertiary/University qualification
- d) Other

28.1 What is your approximate annual household income in your home currency? Please use the following format: e.g. 50,000 and specify currency in question below:

- a) NZD
- b) AUD
- c) GBP
- d) USD
- e) EUR
- f) CAD
- g) Other - please specify

29. Where do you live? (Please select from list of all countries)

Survey Powered By Qualtrics