



The Cook Islands International Visitor Survey Report

October – December 2019

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 between 1 October and 31 December 2019. The data that underpins the report was collected from an online departure survey (<http://www.mycookislandsvisit.com>). There are 567 individual respondents to the survey - representing a total of 1,142 adults and 223 children in the expenditure analysis (this equates to 3% of all visitors during the period – based on the same period of 2019 visitor arrival data from the Cook Islands Statistics Office).

Nearly three quarters (72%) of visitors surveyed come from New Zealand, 17% of respondents come from Australia. Visitors are well educated (74% of visitors have some form of tertiary education) with a relatively high annual household income (50% earn over NZ\$100,000 per year). Over two fifths of visitors (42%) travel with one companion. Solo travellers are less common (10%).

Over half (54%) of those surveyed are first time visitors to the Cook Islands, a further 27% have visited two or three times before. The main purpose of visit is holiday-making (81%). The average length of stay in the Cook Islands is 8.5 nights. The majority of visitors (95%) stay either one or two weeks. Sixteen percent of visitors surveyed visited Aitutaki.

Visitor spend prior to arrival in the Cook Islands (\$2,064 per person) has increased slightly from both the same quarter of 2018/19 (\$2,015) and the 2018/19 annual average (\$2,047 per person). Spend on the island (per person per day) is \$149. This spend is lower than both the 2018/19 annual average of \$162 and the same quarter for the previous year (\$165 for October to December 2018/19).

When pre-paid spend and local spend are combined, it is estimated that each visitor brings \$2,093 to the Cook Islands economy (or approximately \$246 per day). This figure is lower than both the annual average for 2018/19 (\$2,189) and the October to December 2018/19 period (\$2,241).

Overall visitor satisfaction levels with services and experiences in the Cook Islands remain high. The most appealing elements are environment, cleanliness and weather; local people; activities, attractions, entertainment and events; and atmosphere. The least appealing elements are the lack of public services, facilities and infrastructure; food and beverage; rubbish and natural environment care; stray animals and mosquitos; price of goods and services; accommodation; poor weather; attractions and activities; and customer service.

The future intentions of visitors remain similar to those seen in the previous year: 93% of those surveyed state that they would return to the Cook Islands, and 97% would recommend the Cook Islands to friends or family.

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Introduction

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

Visitors to the Cook Islands are asked to complete a web-based survey within a few weeks of the completion of their visit. The Cook Islands online International Visitor Survey (IVS) has run since mid-2012 and is scheduled to run through 2020 and 2021.

This report presents the IVS results from October to December 2019. Over this three-month period, 3,488 visitors were contacted by email to take part in the survey, and 567 responses were received: a conversion rate of 16%. The conversion rate for this period is the same as the 2018/19 annual average (16%) while lower than the October to December 2018/2019 quarter (19%). The 567 responses cover a total of 1,142 adults and 223 children when we examine visitor expenditure.

The data presented includes detailed information on:

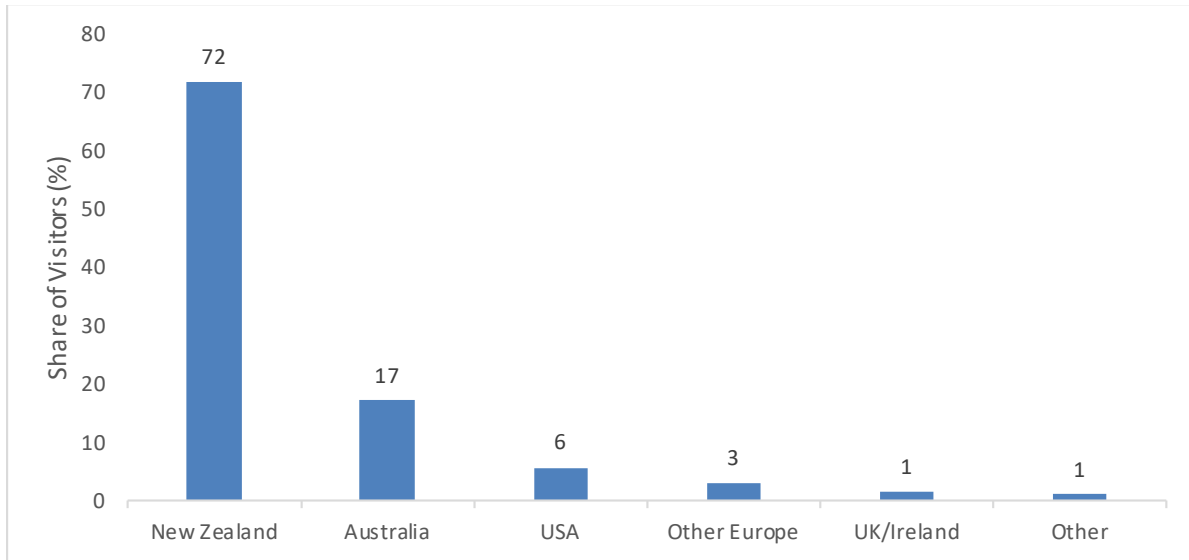
- The characteristics of visitors to the Cook Islands (age, gender, education, country of origin, income, purpose of visit, travelling companions, number of previous visits, length of stay, airline used, islands visited)
- Visitor information obtained about the Cook Islands, the factors influencing in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

Wherever there are significant or notable variations from the 2018/19 annual averages or the 2018/2019 October to December quarterly findings these are highlighted in the following discussion.

Visitor Characteristics

Nearly three quarters (72%) of the visitors surveyed come from New Zealand (Figure 1). The second largest visitor group is from Australia (17%). USA and Europe represent the other main source markets.

Figure 1: Country of origin (n = 492)



Auckland, Bay of Plenty, Waikato, Wellington, and Canterbury account for 68% of New Zealand visitors (Figure 2). For visitors from Australia, the regions of New South Wales, Victoria, and Queensland generate 86% of arrivals (Figure 3).

Figure 2: New Zealand visitors (n = 351)

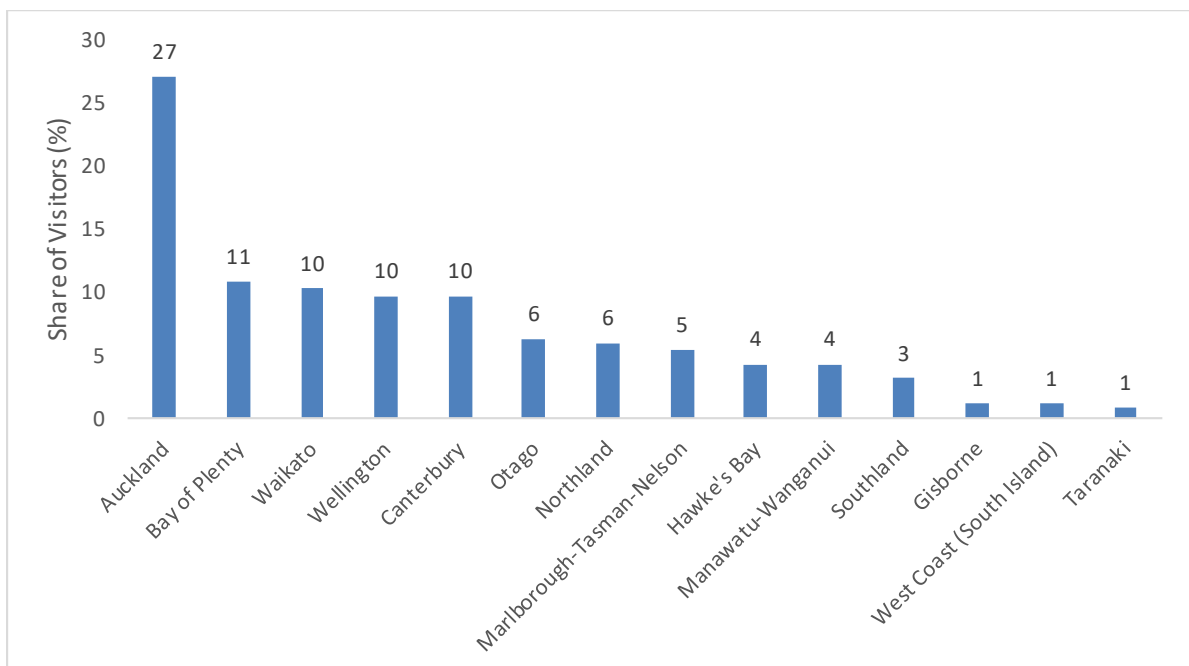
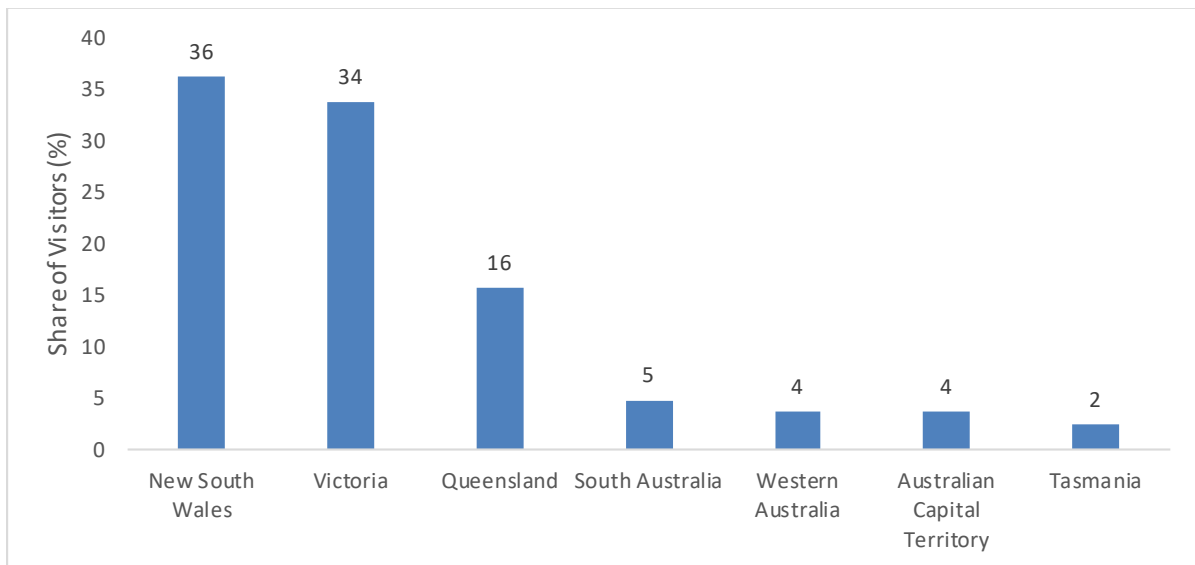
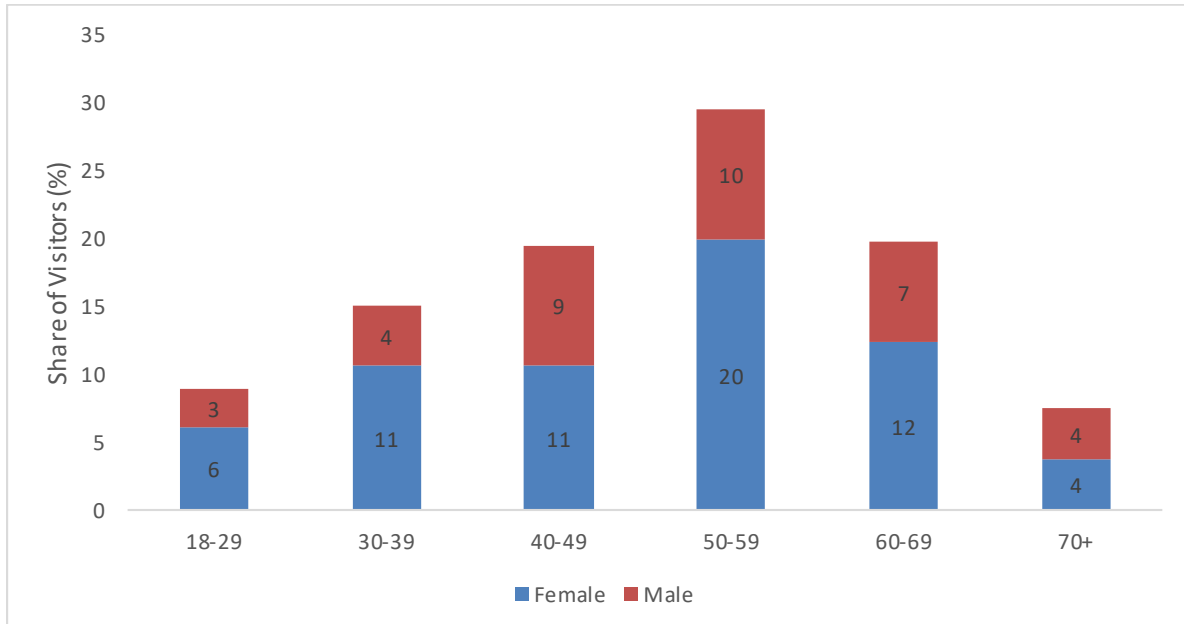


Figure 3: Australia visitors (n = 83)



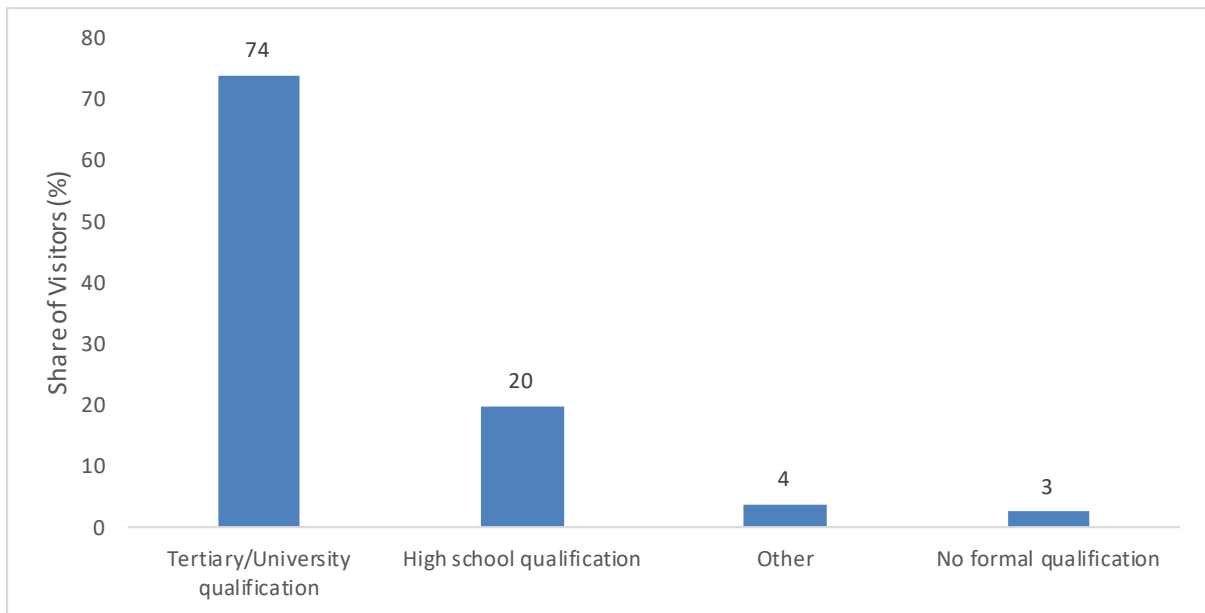
More women (63%) than men (37%) completed the survey (Figure 4). The most significant age categories are the 50 to 59 age group (30%), followed by those aged 40 to 49 year (20%), 60 to 69 (19%), 30 to 39 (15%), and 18 to 29 (9%). There are relatively few travellers in the 70 plus age bracket (8%). Those under 18 are not surveyed for ethical reasons.

Figure 4: Distribution of age and gender (n = 508)



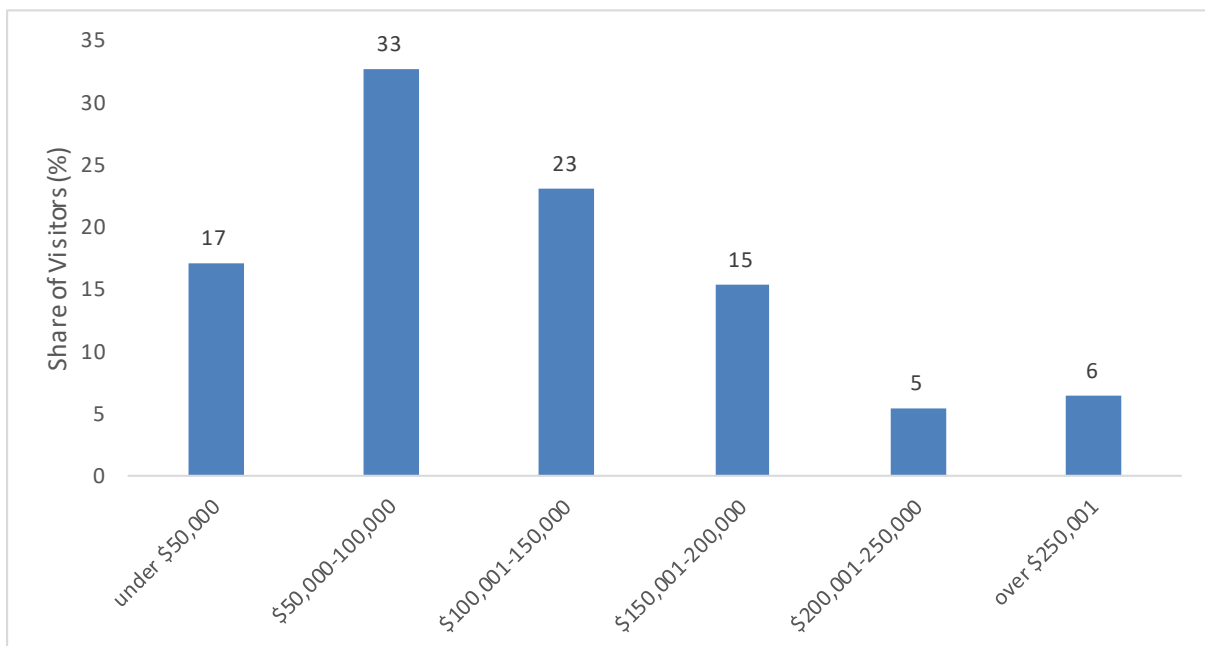
Visitors are well educated, with nearly three quarters (74%) of those surveyed having some form of tertiary qualification, and a further 20% having completed a high school education (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Highest qualification (n = 509)



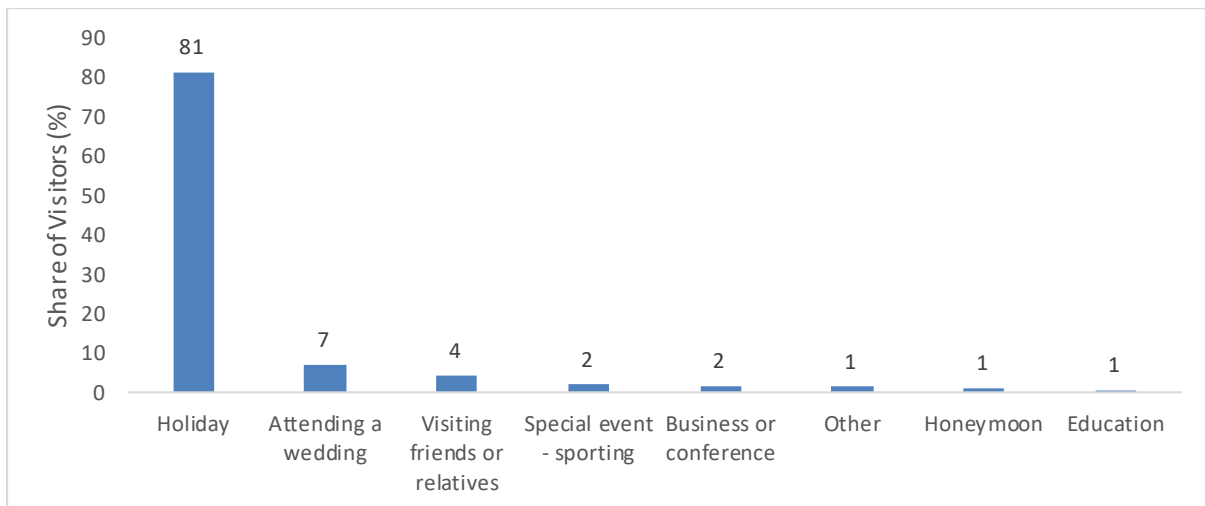
A third of visitors (33%) have an annual household income of between NZ\$50,001 and NZ\$100,000. Over one fifth (23%) of those surveyed earn between NZ\$100,001 and NZ\$150,000. A further 26% of respondents have a household income of over NZ\$150,000 per year (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Annual household income in NZD (n = 404)



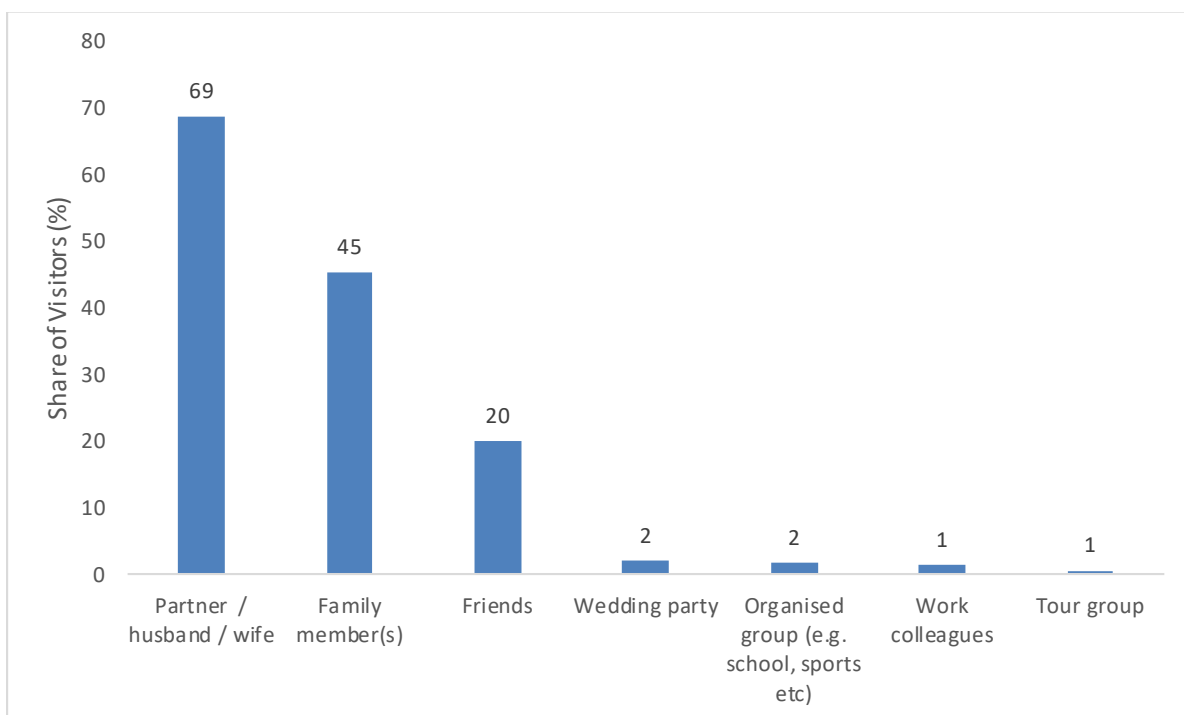
Over four in five (81%) respondents come to the Cook Islands for a holiday. Other reasons given include attending a wedding (7%), visiting friends or relatives (4%), participating special sporting event (2%), for business and conference (1%), for a honeymoon (1%), and education (1%).

Figure 7: Main purpose of visit (n = 567)



The majority (90%) of visitors travel with one or more companions. Among this group, most travel to the Cook Islands with a partner or spouse (69%). Visitors also travel with other family members (45%), or with friends (20%). Those travelling as part of a wedding party, in an organised group, with work colleagues, or in a tour group, represent smaller shares of the sample (Figure 8).

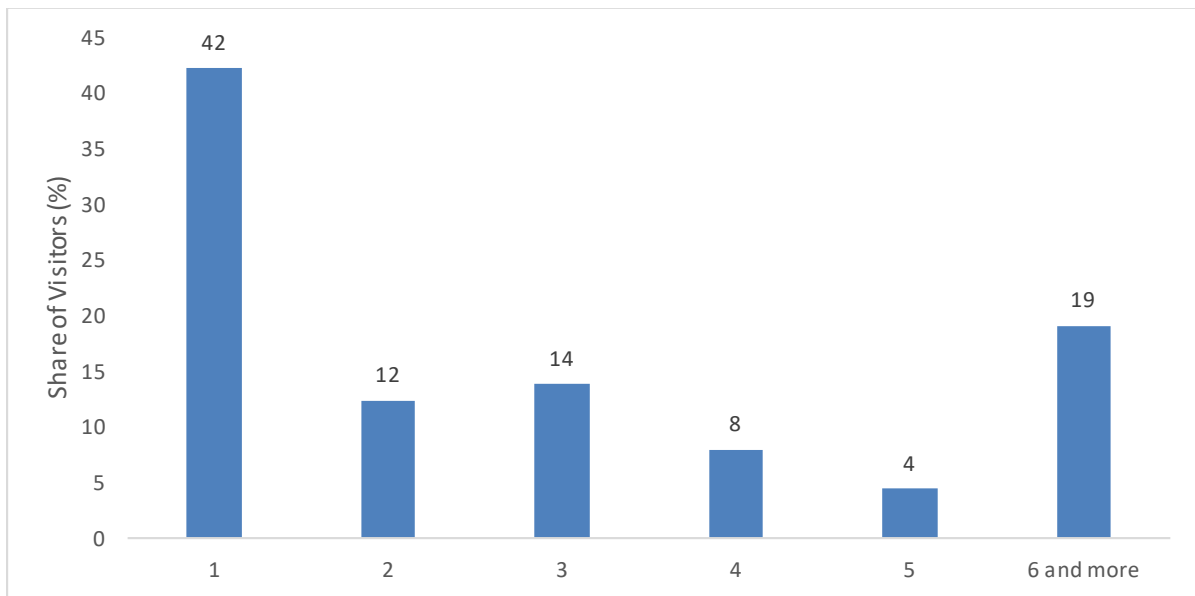
Figure 8: Travelling with whom? (n = 511)



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

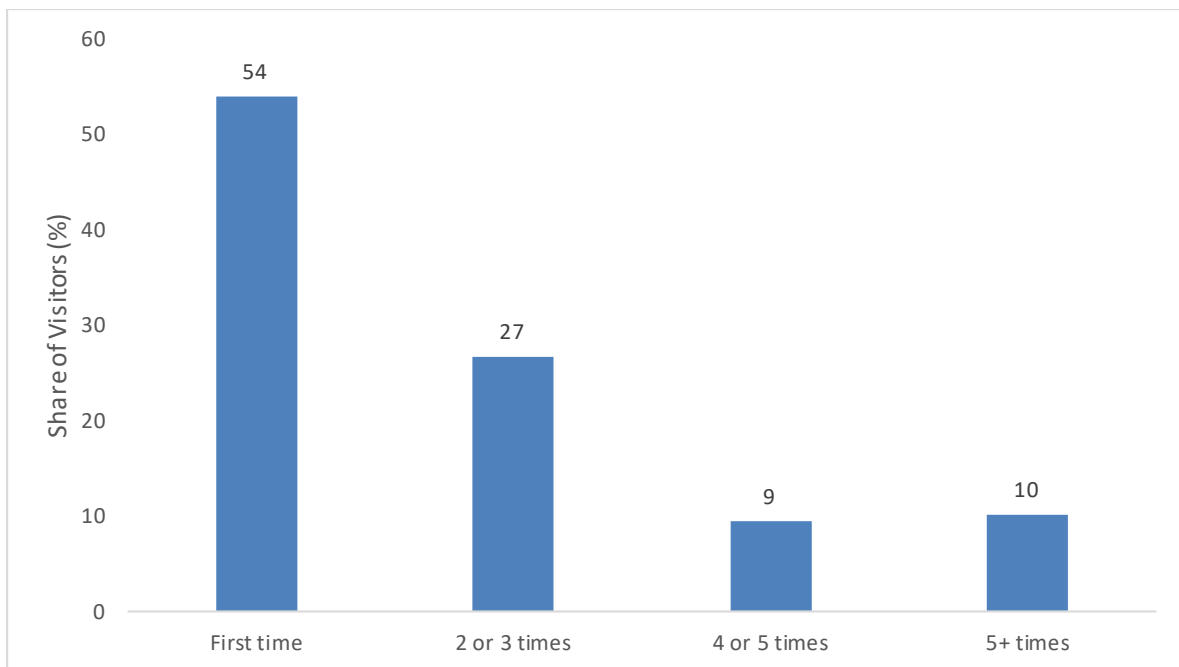
If we exclude those travelling alone over two in five visitors (42%) travelled with one companion on their visit to the Cook Islands (Figure 9), and nearly one in five visitors (19%) travelled with more than six people.

Figure 9: Number of companions on trip (excludes those travelling alone) (n = 476)



Over half of visitors (54%) are on their first visit to the Cook Islands. A further 27% have been to the Cook Islands two or three times before. A smaller group (19%) have visited four or more times (Figure 10).

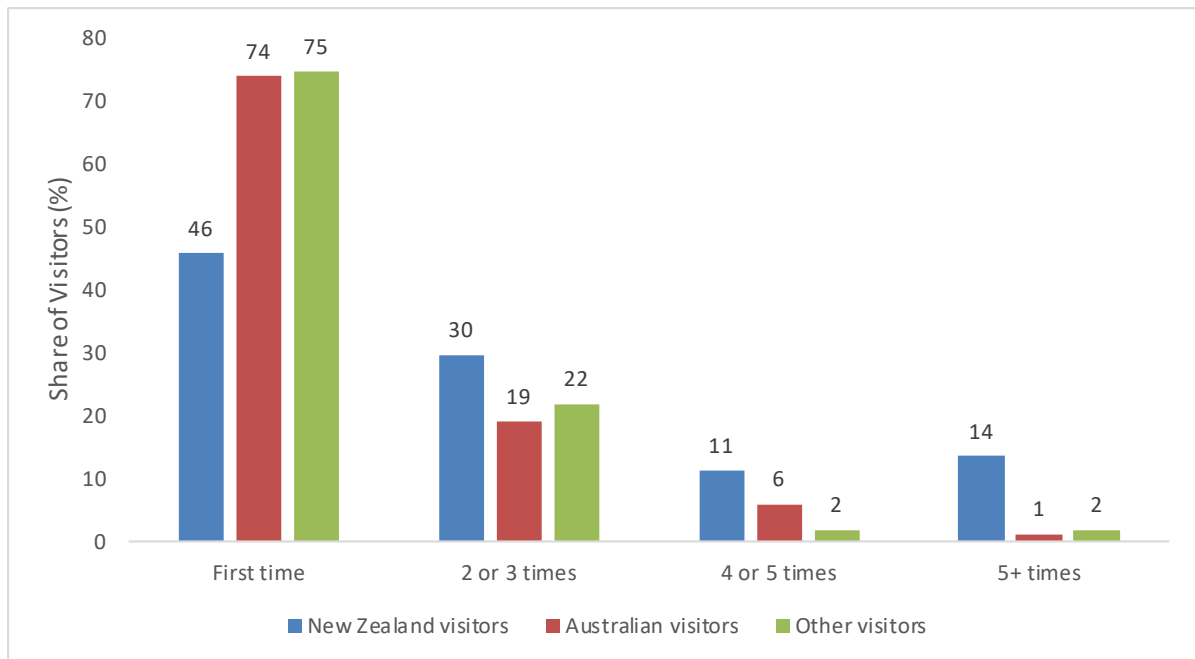
Figure 10: Number of visits to the Cook Islands (n = 503)



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

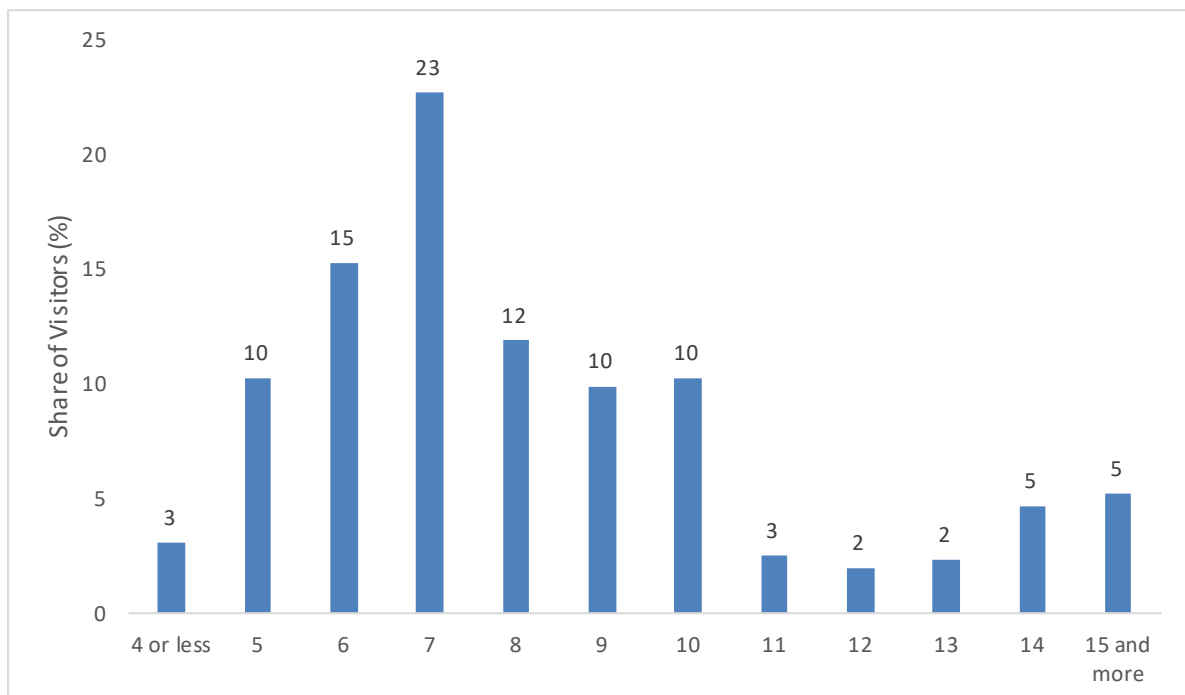
New Zealanders are more likely to be repeat visitors than those from other source markets (Figure 11). Over half of the surveyed visitors from New Zealand (54%) have visited the Cook Islands before, compared to only 26% of visitors from Australia and 25% from other countries.

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



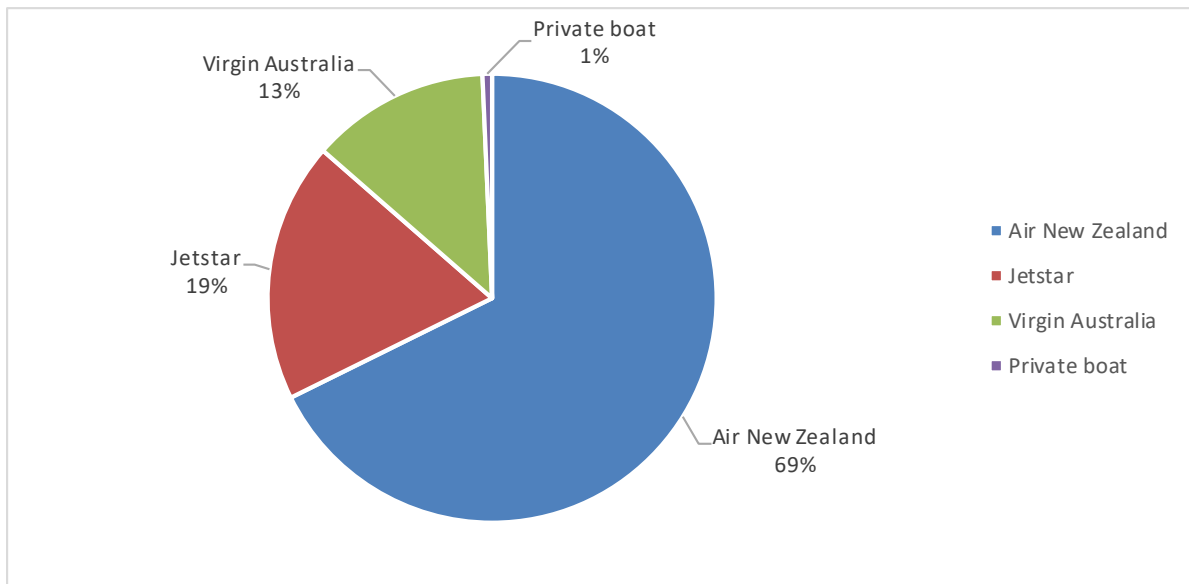
The average length of stay in the Cook Islands is 8.5 nights with 83% of visitors spending 10 or fewer nights in the country (Figure 12).

Figure 12: Length of stay in nights (n = 556)



Nearly two thirds of visitors (69%) travel to/from the Cook Islands with Air New Zealand, a further 19% of visitors fly with Jetstar, followed by 13% of visitors travelling with Virgin Australia and 1% of visitors travelling on a private boat (Figure 13).

Figure 13: Mode of transport (n = 567)

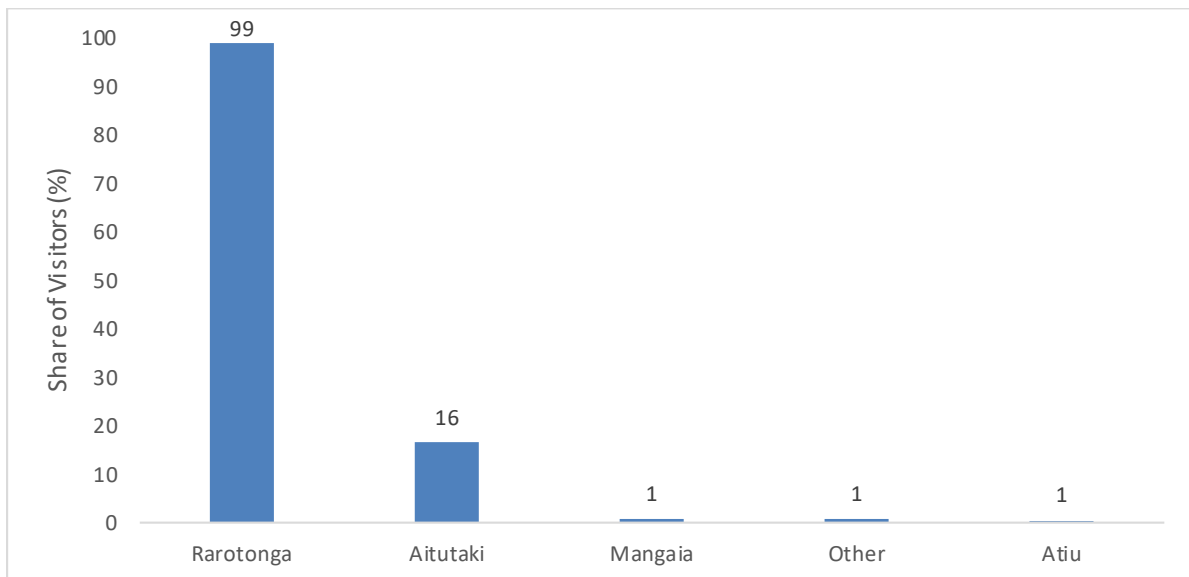


Note: Multiple responses, therefore total does not add up to 100%

For 92% of visitors, the Cook Islands is the sole destination for their trip. For 8% of the visitors surveyed the Cook Islands is part of a larger journey, including some visitors who are on an around-the-world trip. For those travelling to other countries as part of a bigger trip, the top destination mentioned is New Zealand (63%), followed by travel to other Pacific countries (40%), Asian countries (26%), Australia (23%), United States of America (23%), Canada (5%), Europe (5%), and South America (5%).

The vast majority (99%) of visitors to the Cook Islands spend time on Rarotonga, with Aitutaki being the second most visited island (16%). Far fewer visitors spend time on Mangaia (1%), Atiu (1%), and other islands (total of 1%) (Figure 14).

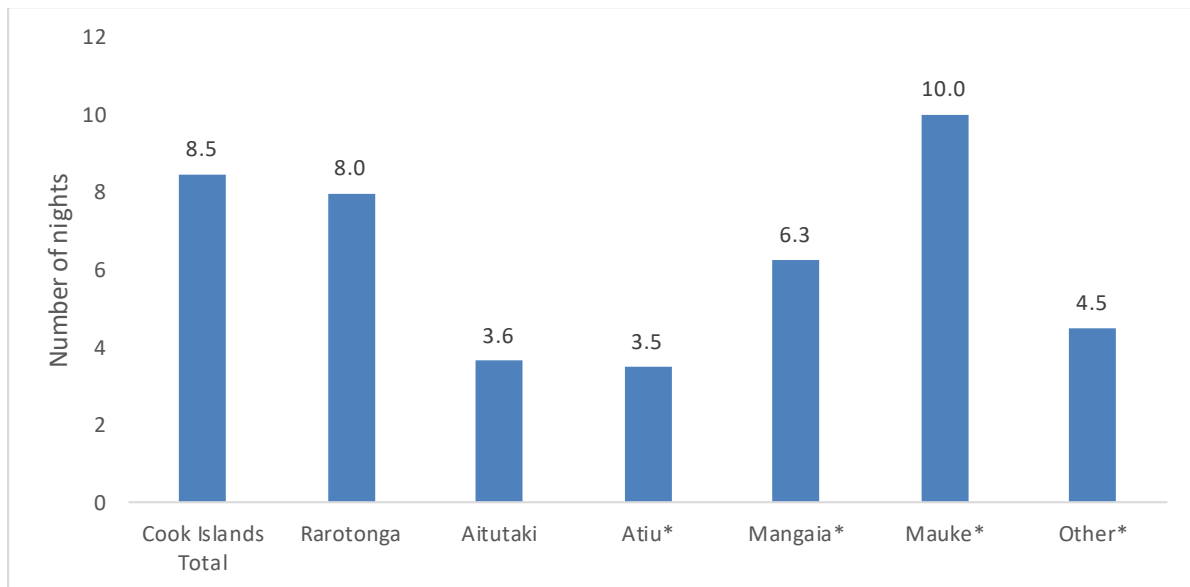
Figure 14: Visited Islands (n = 566)



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 8.0 nights (Figure 15). For the visitors that went to Aitutaki, the average number of nights spent on the island itself is 3.6. It should be noted that small sample sizes for Atiu, Mangaia, Mauke mean that we must treat length of stay figures with caution.

Figure 15: Average length of stay in the Cook Islands and on each island (n = 2-545)

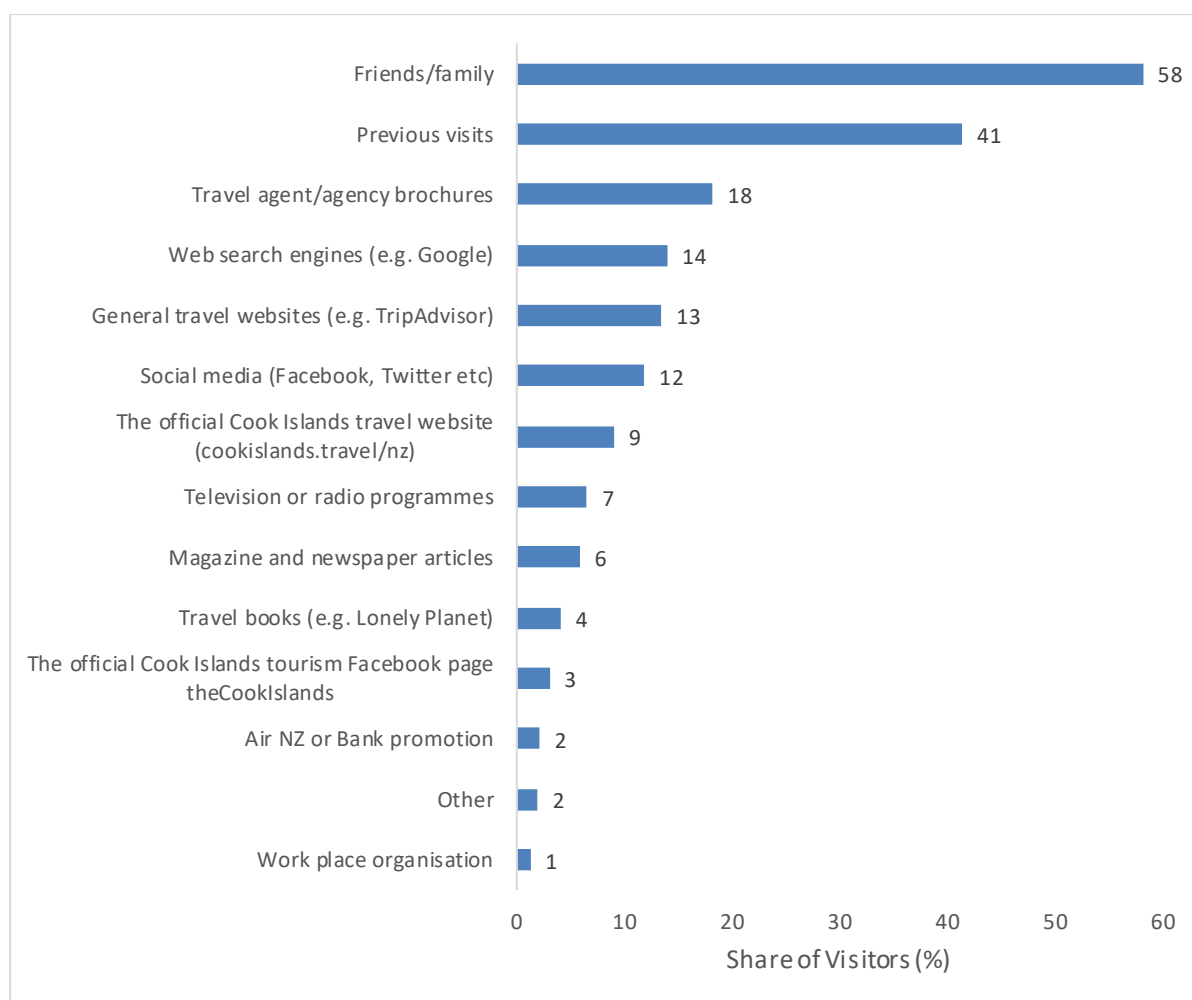


Note: *n≤4

Information Sources and Purchasing Behaviour

Participants were asked how they had found out about the Cook Islands as a holiday destination for this trip (Figure 16). Over half (58%) of respondents ranked word of mouth from friends and family members as the most important influence, followed by previous experience (41%), travel agents/agency brochures (18%), web search engines (e.g. Google) (14%), general travel websites (e.g. TripAdvisor) (13%), social media (Facebook, Twitter etc) (12%), and the official Cook Islands travel website (9%).

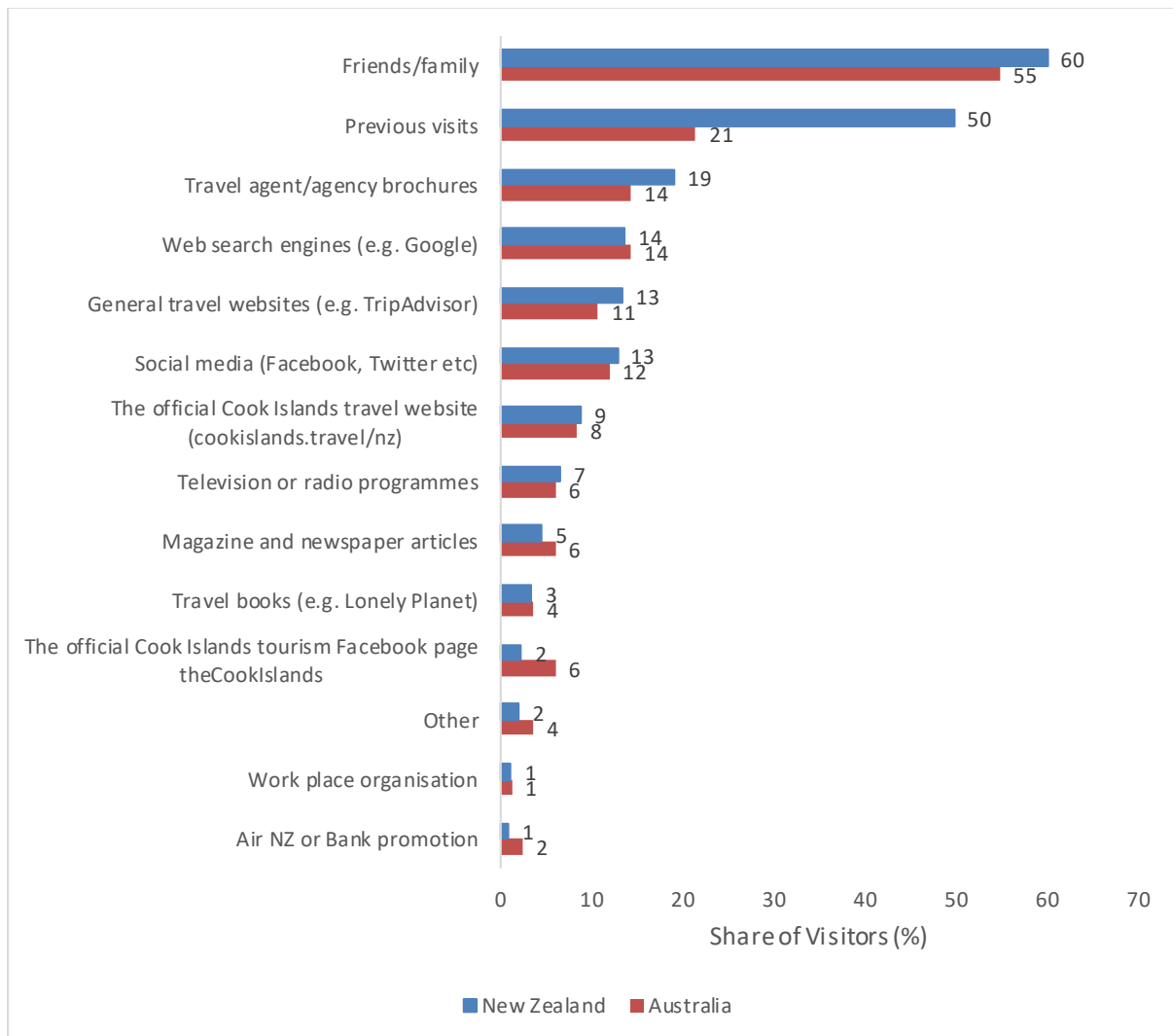
Figure 16: How did you find out about Cook Islands as a destination (n = 566)



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

Visitors from New Zealand are more likely to seek information about the destination via word of mouth from friends and family members (60%). There are more repeat visitors from New Zealand than Australia and this is reflected by the fact that half of visitors from New Zealand (50%) ranked their previous visits as the most important information source (Australian visitors 21%). Australian visitors are more likely than their New Zealand counterparts to rank the official Cook Islands tourism Facebook page, magazine and newspaper articles as the most important influence sources.

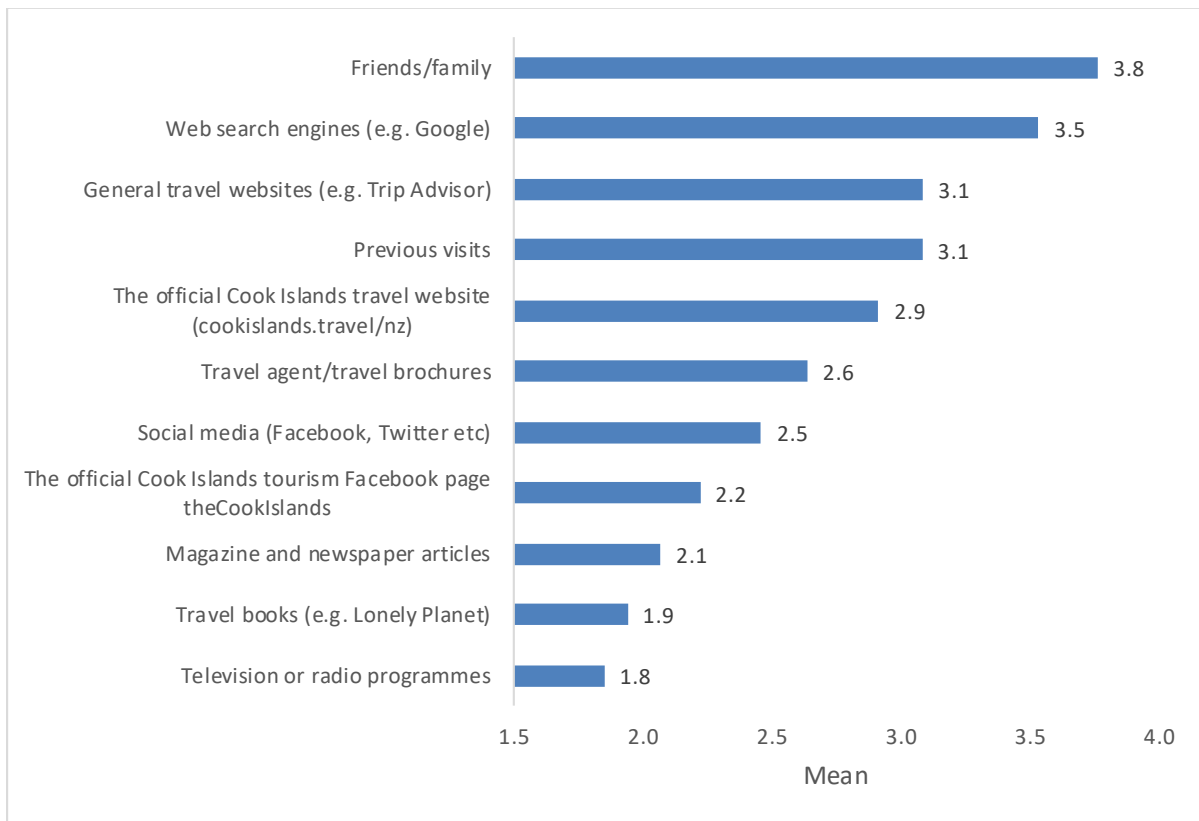
Figure 17: How did you find out about Cook Islands as a destination – country breakdown



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

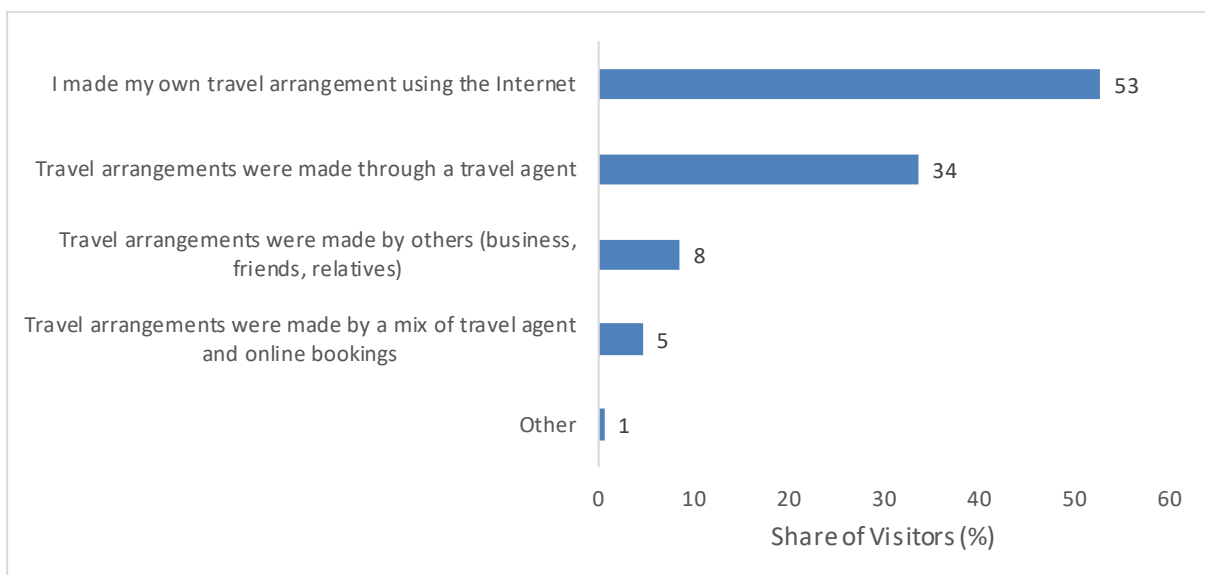
When visitors were asked to rank the importance of the listed information sources used to plan their trip, friends and family members (3.8) ranked as the most important source, closely followed by web search engines (e.g. Google) (3.5) (Figure 18). Other important information sources are general travel websites (e.g. Trip Advisor) (3.1), previous visits (3.1), and the official Cooks Island travel website (cookislands.travel/nz) (2.9).

Figure 18: Importance of information source used when planning your trip (n = 145-505)



Over half of visitors surveyed (53%) made their own travel arrangements through online websites (Figure 19). Over a third of visitors surveyed (34%) purchased a pre-paid trip through a travel agent, followed by 8% of visitors whose travel arrangements were made by others, or who used a mix of travel agent and online bookings (5%).

Figure 19: How did you purchase your travel to the Cook Islands (n = 913)

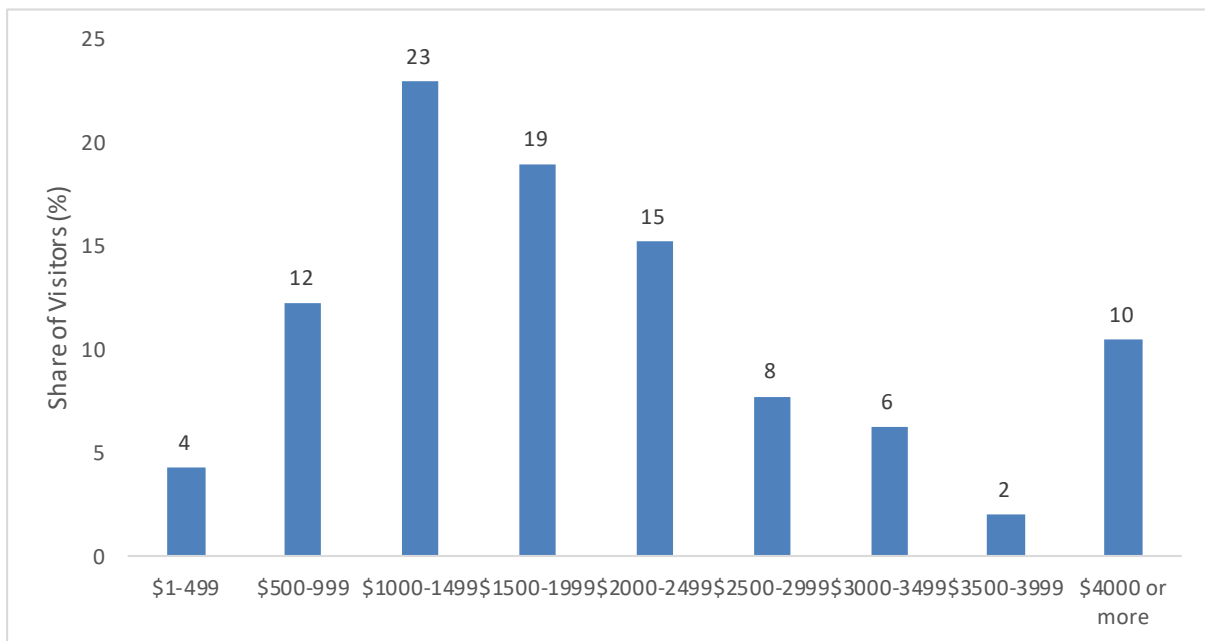


Visitor Expenditure

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). The following pre-paid expenditure section is based on the number of adults and children that respondents included in their cost estimates: 1,328 people comprising 1,114 adults and 214 children.

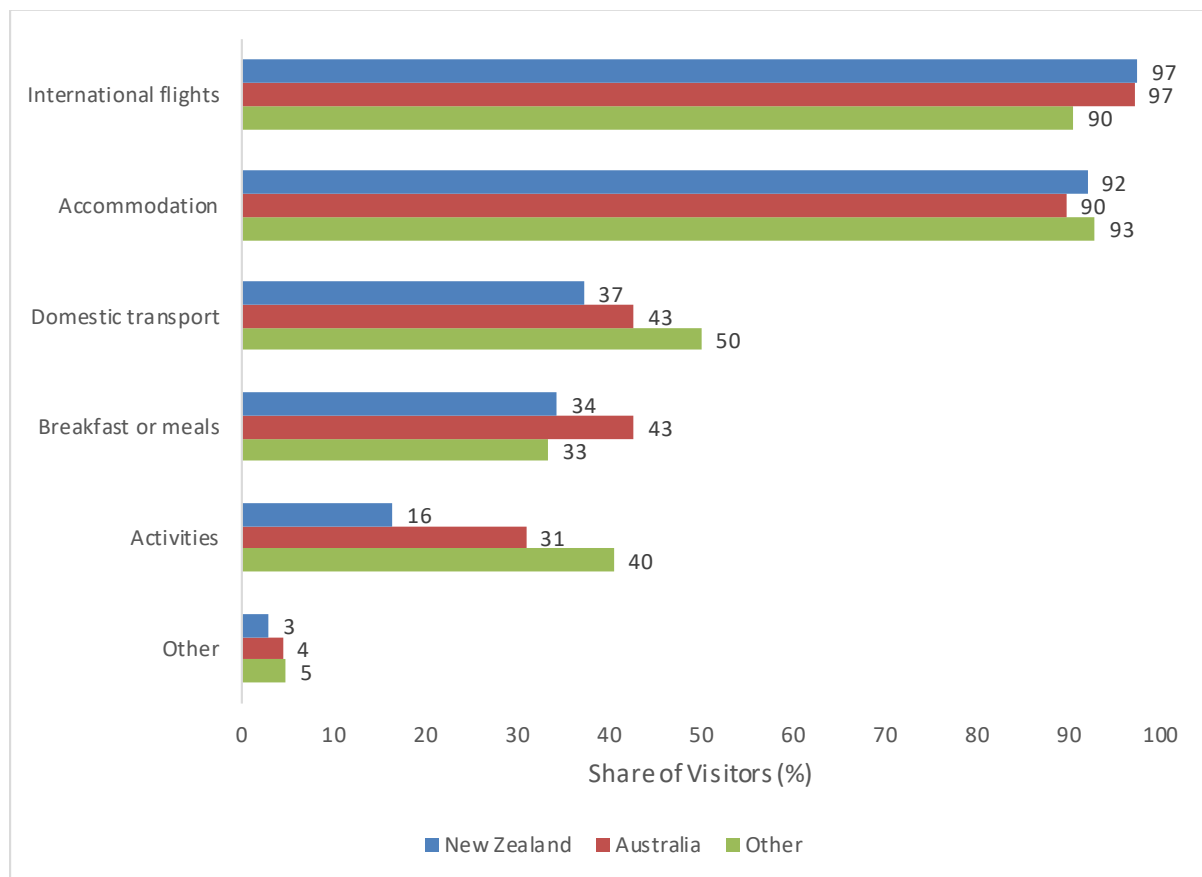
On average, visitors to the Cook Islands spend NZ\$2,064 per person prior to arrival. Over half (57%) of the visitors spend between NZ\$1,000 and NZ\$2,499 prior to arrival (Figure 20). The prepaid figure per person is slightly higher than both the same quarter for 2018/19 (NZ\$2,015) and the previous year (average prepaid spend of NZ\$2,047 for 2018/19).

Figure 20: Amount of money spent per person prior to arrival (n = 401)



In addition to international flights and domestic transport, spending prior to arrival usually includes accommodation: in 92% of the cases for New Zealand visitors, 90% for Australian visitors, and 93% of visitors from other countries (Figure 21). Over one third of visitors prepaid for breakfast and meals prior to arrival (34% New Zealand visitors; 43% Australian visitors, 33% of visitors from other countries). Activities are much less likely to be included in pre-paid expenses.

Figure 21: Items included in money spent prior to arrival



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

It is difficult to estimate accurately the proportion of the pre-paid spend that flows to the Cook Islands. For the purposes of this study, and based on previous research in the region, we conservatively estimate that 50% of the pre-paid spend is allocated to airfares. Of the remaining 50% of the pre-paid spend, 80% of this flows back to local operators. In total this means that for every pre-paid dollar, 40 cents flows to the Cook Islands. We estimate that the pre-paid spend figure per day flowing back to the local economy is NZ\$97 and for the average total visit is NZ\$826 (8.5 nights).

The total spend per visitor per day while in the Cook Islands (excluding any pre-paid expenditure) is NZ\$149 (Table 1). This figure is lower than both the overall spend figure for 2018/19 (NZ\$162) and the same 2nd IVS survey quarter in 2018/19 (NZ\$165). The majority of money spent locally is on accommodation (40%), restaurants, cafes and bars (22%), and shopping (8%). These per person expenditure figures are based on 567 survey responses covering a total of 1,365 people (1,142 adults and 223 children).

By multiplying daily in-country spend by the average stay (8.5 nights) we can see that spend per person per visit to the Cook Islands is on average NZ\$1,267. The total figure of what is spent locally and what flows back to the Cook Islands from pre-paid expenses is therefore NZ\$246 per visitor per day (\$149 + \$97), or NZ\$2,093 (\$1,267 + \$826) for each visitor.

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

Expenditure Items	n = 567	
	<i>Mean (NZ\$)</i>	(% of spend)
Accommodation	59	40
Restaurant, cafes and bar	33	22
Shopping	12	8
Vehicle rental	10	7
Activities	9	6
Groceries	8	5
Domestic flights	7	5
Other	3	2
Petrol	2	1
Internet cost	2	1
Cruising	2	1
Public transportation	1	0
Total Expenditure	149	100

Table 2 provides an overview of the in-country expenditure by the visitor's country of origin. Visitors from New Zealand have the highest average spend per person per day at NZ\$160. Australian visitors spend on average at NZ\$128 per day, followed by United States of America/Canada visitors (NZ\$124 per day). The European visitors during this period spent the least at NZ\$101 per day.

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

Expenditure Items	n = 68	n = 211	n = 1,000	n = 41
	USA/ Canada	Australia	New Zealand	Europe
Accommodation	37	52	64	36
Restaurant, cafes and bar	23	28	36	22
Shopping	13	9	13	9
Vehicle rental	8	7	12	5
Activities	10	8	9	10
Groceries	9	10	8	3
Domestic flights	12	7	7	8
Other	5	2	3	1
Petrol	2	1	2	1
Internet cost	2	2	2	2
Cruising	1	1	2	3
Public transportation	1	1	1	1
Total spend (NZ\$)	124	128	160	101

New Zealanders' spend of NZ\$160 per person per day is significantly higher than both the same quarter in the previous year (NZ\$139) and the average of \$148 for 2018/19. Average

Australian spend per person for this quarter (NZ\$128) is considerably lower compared to the same quarter in 2018/19 (NZ\$167) and the 2018/19 average of NZ\$174. The average spend of NZ\$124 for visitors from the United States of America/Canada for this period is slightly lower than both the same quarter in 2018/19 (NZ\$138) and the 2018/19 average of NZ\$158. European visitors spend at NZ\$101 per person per day is lower than both the same quarter in the previous year (NZ\$121) and the average for 2018/19 of NZ\$141.

Visitor Satisfaction

Visitors were asked to indicate their overall satisfaction with their experience of the Cook Islands on a scale from 1 'very dissatisfied' to 5 'very satisfied' (Figure 22). Over two thirds (69%) of the visitors surveyed were 'very satisfied' with their overall experience of the Cook Islands. Very few visitors (3%) were unsatisfied (a score of 2 or lower) with their visit.

Figure 22: Overall satisfaction with experience of the Cook Islands (n = 511)

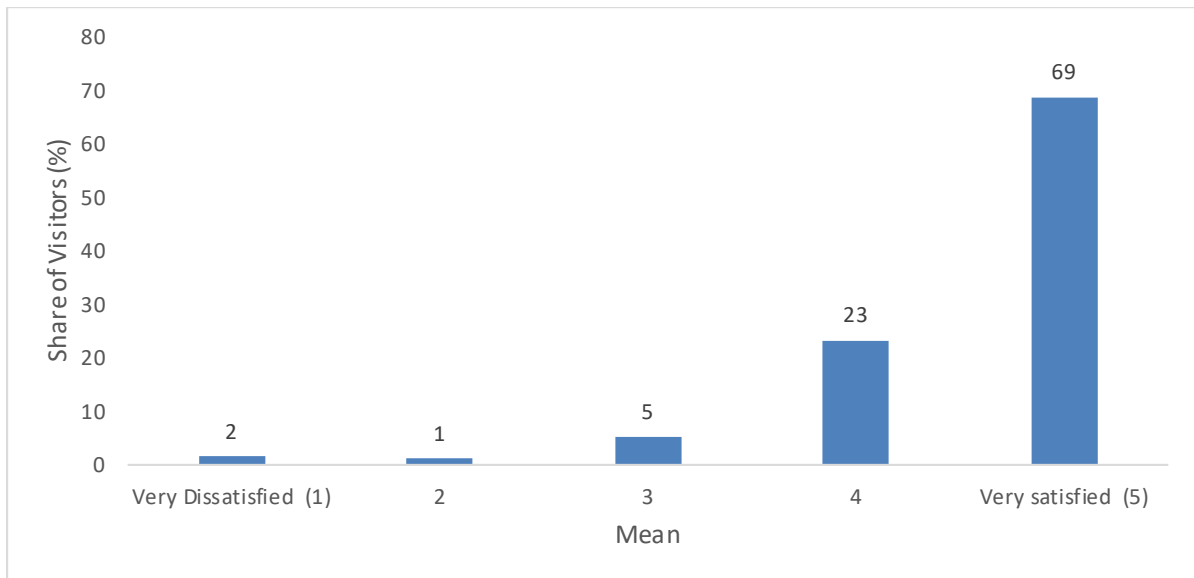


Figure 23 shows the percentage of respondents who undertook specific activities while on their visit to the Cook Islands. Almost all visitors visited a beach (97%) and frequented at least one restaurant or café (98%) during their trip. Most of the respondents either go swimming (92%) or visit a local market (88%), and 54% of visitors experience an Island Night and Feast Show.

Visitor satisfaction is generally high with all activities undertaken (almost all registering more than 4 out of a possible high of 5 except bonefishing and kitesurfing) (Figure 23). Activities involving cultural interaction (average satisfaction of 4.6) rank the highest, followed by land-based products (4.5), shopping (4.5), and water-based experiences (4.4). It should be noted that kitesurfing and bonefishing are characterised by relatively low numbers of participants (n = 14-17).

Figure 23: Degree of participation in activities (n range = 14-534)

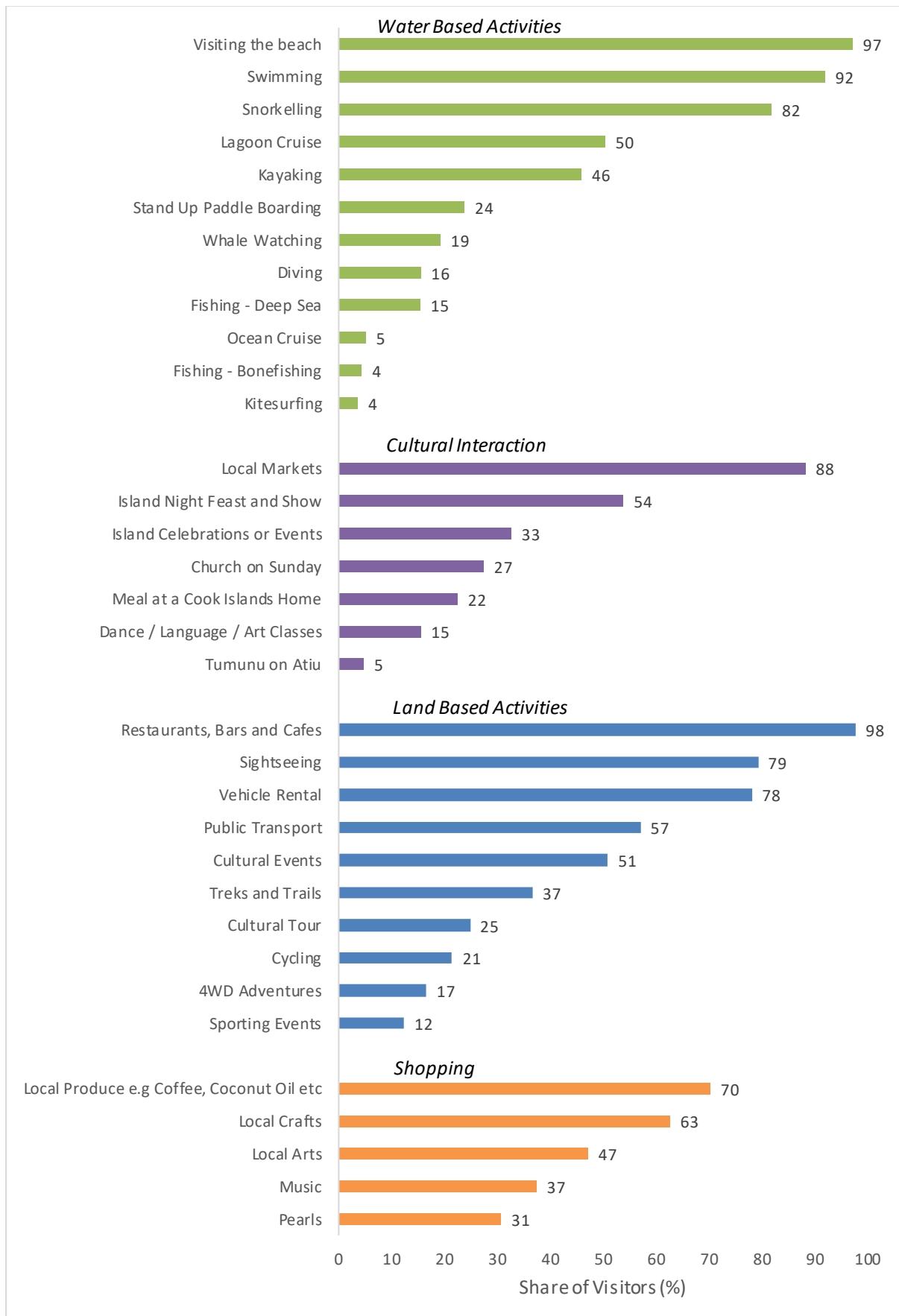
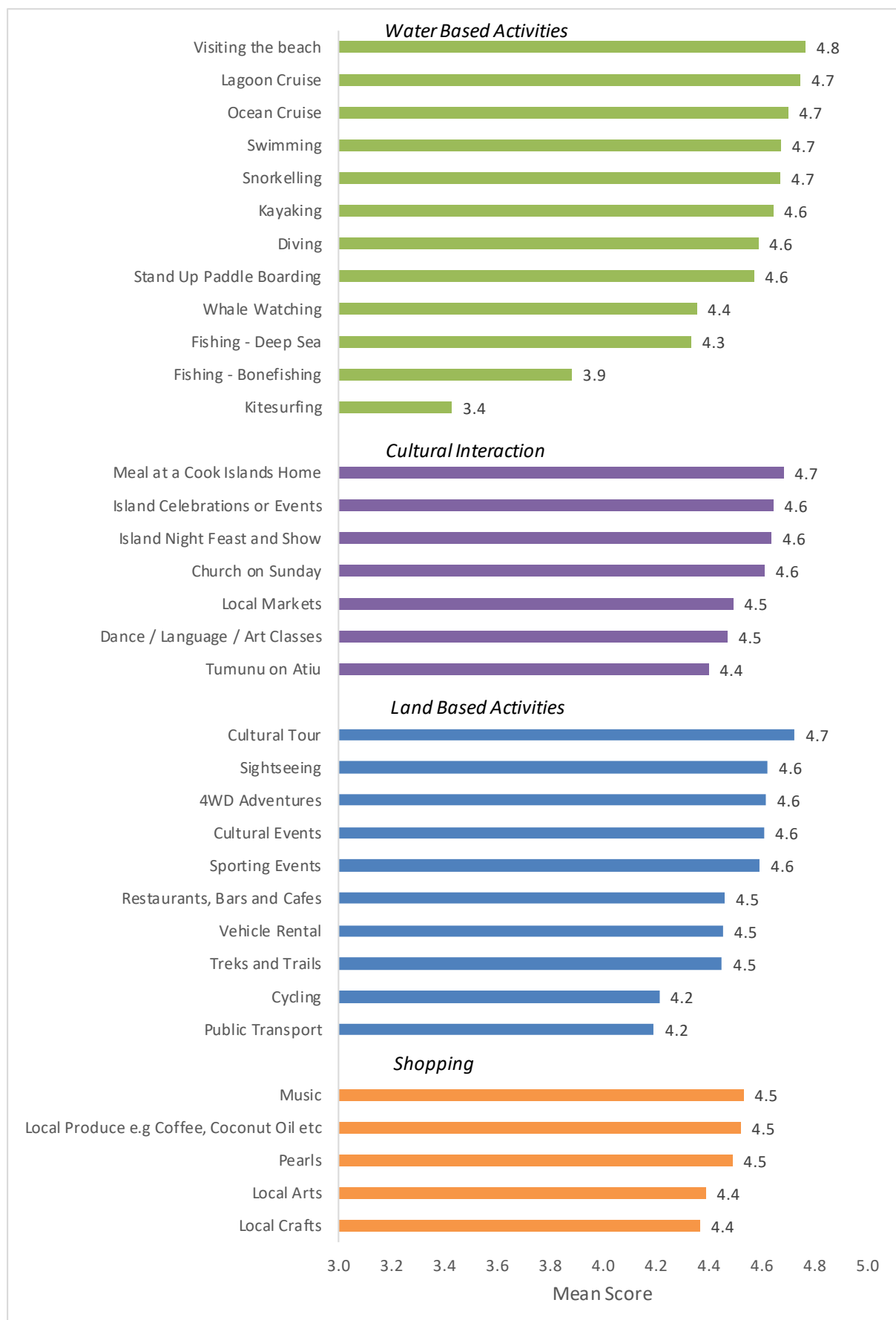


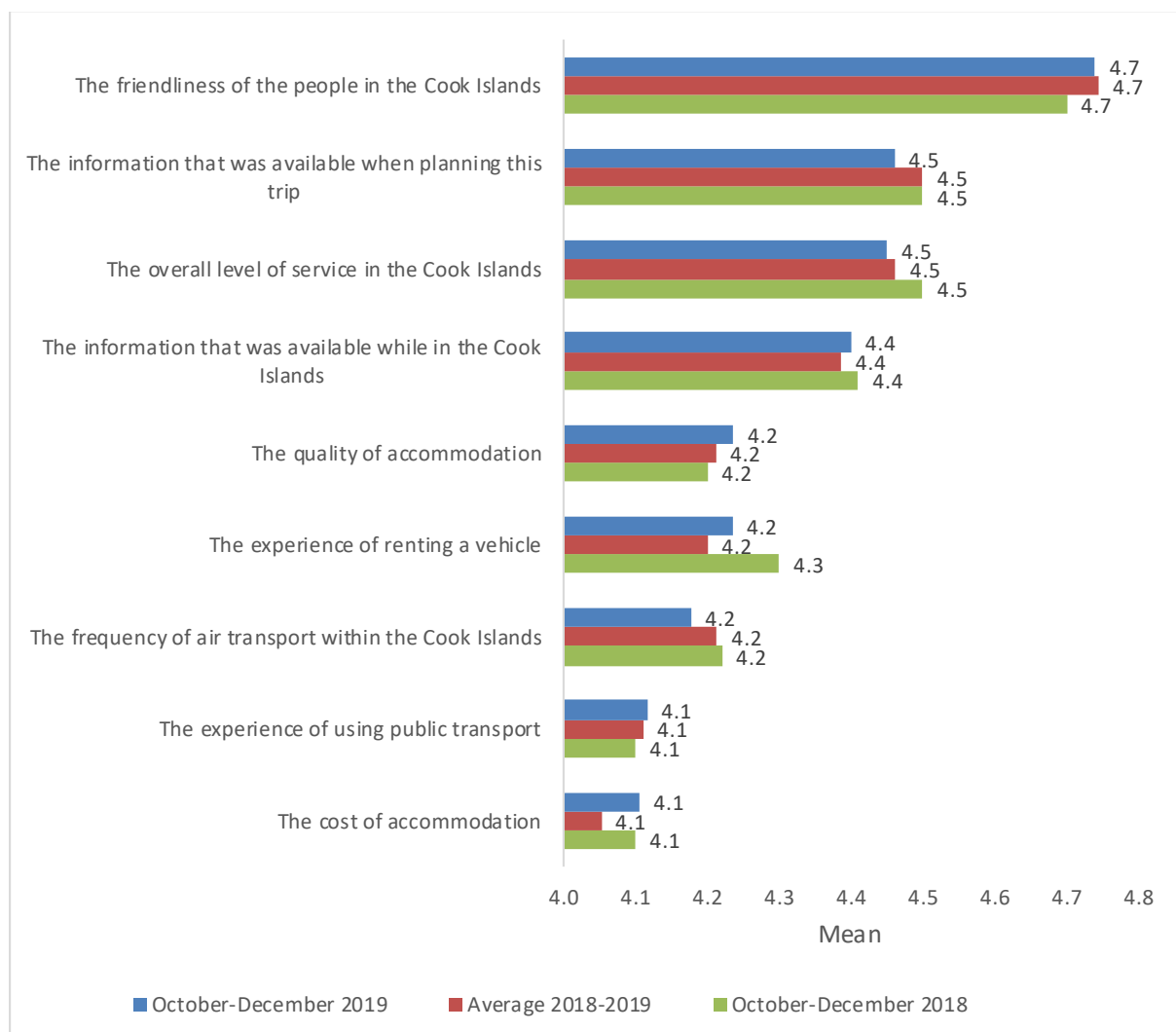
Figure 24: Degree of satisfaction with activities participated in (mean score out of 5)



Visitors were asked to rate their level of satisfaction with nine different statements relating to their most recent visit to the Cook Islands. Responses from the period of October to December 2019 are compared to the annual average for 2018/19, and the same quarter of 2018/19 (Figure 25).

Respondents consistently highlight the friendliness of the people in the Cook Islands. As can be seen from Figure 25, the degree of satisfaction with the majority items are similar to both the same quarter in 2018/19 and the annual average for 2018/19 including: the friendliness of the people in the Cook Islands, the information that was available when planning this trip, the overall level of service in the Cook Islands, the information that was available while in the Cook Islands, the quality of accommodation, the frequency of air transport within the Cook Islands, the experience of using public transport, and the cost of accommodation. Visitor satisfaction with the experience of renting a vehicle remains the same as the annual average for 2018/19 but is a little lower than the 2nd quarter in 2018/19. 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 Islands services (mean score out of 5)



Most appealing aspects of the Cook Islands

Visitors were asked “What did you find most attractive or appealing about the Cook Islands on your most recent visit?” (Table 3). The most appealing elements of the Cook Islands experience are the natural environment (47%), the friendly and welcoming local people (46%), the tourist attractions and activities on offer (27%) and the peacefulness and relaxing atmosphere of the country (26%). Smaller numbers of visitors mentioned aspects such as convenience and safety (12%), food and beverage (11%), culture (6%), non-commercial destination (6%), accommodation (5%), overall good experience (3%), family friends (3%), level of service (3%), and emotional connection (2%).

Table 3: Most appealing aspects of the Cook Islands (n=510)

Themes	Share of respondents (%)
Environment, cleanliness & weather	47
Local people	46
Activities, attractions and entertainment, events	27
Atmosphere	26
Convenience and safety	12
Food and beverage	11
Culture	6
Un-commercial	6
Accommodation	5
Overall good experience	3
Family friends	3
Level of service	3
Emotional connection	2

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

Environment, cleanliness & weather

The beautiful scenery, natural environment, the beaches, and gardens in the Cook Islands were mentioned by just under half of the respondents (47%) as the most appealing aspects for their trip. Words like ‘beautiful’, ‘clean’, ‘paradise’, ‘crystal’, and ‘warm’ to describe the attraction of the local environment. Most comments here focused on the beauty and the cleanliness of the beaches and lagoons, the warm weather, the beautiful scenery, and the landscapes of the islands in general. Comments included:

“Fantastic environment.”

“...The gardens and plant life is always very appealing.”

“How green and lush the place is. The animal life. Fruits and fish...”

“Very pleased by the level of care being taken with roadside rubbish collection and beach cleaning. So important for the impression on visitors.”

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

"The scenery and level of care taken with the land and surrounding lagoon ocean is beautiful."

"Lagoon is wonderful and the tropical fish exciting. "

"Nature, above and below water surface. The beach!"

"The fish in the reef were amazing."

"The sheer beauty of the island with it's sparkling aquamarine lagoon, pearly sands, glorious sunshine."

"Overall scenery, water & beach were amazing & very clean everywhere."

"The amazing beach/coral outlook from almost everywhere on the island."

"Really enjoyed the natural beauty. It was breathtaking. Mountains and lush vegetation on one side and crystal clear water on the other."

"The weather was amazing."

"Good stable weather, clear water, relaxing."

Local people

The second most significant attraction for the visitors is their interaction with local people in the Cook Islands. Nearly half of respondents (46%) expressed that the warmth and welcoming nature of local people is an important factor of having a positive travel experience. Key words that dominated the responses include 'friendly', 'welcoming', 'helpful', 'lovely', 'beautiful', 'amazing', 'happy', 'kind', 'relaxed', 'accommodating', 'humble', and 'genuine'. Comments included:

"Wonderfully friendly and helpful locals who are particularly respectful towards elderly people."

"From the moment we got off the plane, everyone was so welcoming."

"The never ending courteous hospitality and friendly people."

"The people of course, they are so friendly, but also the beautiful Island itself, I love how the local people take such great pride in the appearance of Rarotonga."

"The hospitality provided by locals and their warmth."

"Beautiful warm hearted people from the same cultural background."

"The friendliness and genuineness of the people."

"The friendliness and welcoming nature of the Cook Islanders (especially the wonderful lady, an ex-Silver Fern who was home for a netball reunion, who drove my sisters and I home from church to save us waiting for the Raro bus)."

"The attitude of the local people wherever we went- so friendly and helpful."

"Very friendly and accommodating people, love the locals."

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

"The very friendly locals."

Activities, attractions, entertainment & events

Activities, attractions, entertainment, and events were mentioned by twenty-seven percent of respondents as the third most appealing element of their visit to the destination. The availability of water related activities including snorkelling, surfing, swimming, lagoon cruise, diving, fishing, and kayaking are the most frequently mentioned. In addition, land-based activities like hiking, cross island walking, cycling, 4wd ride, and markets are also mentioned by respondents. Aitutaki lagoon, Muri lagoon, Rarotonga Island and One-foot Island are top attractions mentioned. Comments included:

"Swimming, snorkelling and playing."

"The awesome museum Te Ara."

"Wonderful snorkelling, swimming and exploring."

"Went to Oceania Football games to watch and it was run superbly and great local crowd supported the teams as well."

"Snorkelling off the fruits of Rarotonga site"

"...plenty of variety with things to do. Some of the marine snorkelling areas were nice too."

"Snorkelling right off the beach at Moana Sands and the supermarket right across the road."

"The Rarotonga Safari and snorkelling in Muri Lagoon were highlights."

"Fishing was fantastic - Marlin Queen highly rated. Scooter hire was fun, cycling around the island was great."

"4wd safari tour, semi sub and turtle swimming."

"Aitutaki lagoon is breath-taking. I have never seen something like this before."

"The Maeva - which was on when we arrived."

"The independence day celebrations and Te Maeva nui competitions."

Atmosphere

The Cook Islands is described as a very peaceful, relaxing, and laid-back destination by respondents and this atmosphere is an appealing factor for twenty-six percent of those surveyed. Visitors love the slower pace of local life, which mostly refers to island pace. Some of the words used to describe the atmosphere in Cook Islands are 'relaxing', 'calm', 'chilled', 'tranquillity', and 'laid back'. Comments included:

"Relaxed pace of life, lovely weather, great food and coffee, general atmosphere."

"I loved how relaxed it is there."

"Slower pace of life. Peacefulness. Roosters, hens and chicks roaming around."

"... foliage and the laid back pace of life."

"... no hurry, just cruising in life nice change from our life in New Zealand."

"As always the way when I arrive in Rarotonga the complete feeling of 'Relaxation and Holiday Mode' no worries."

"The relaxed environment. Island time was enjoyable."

"... being able to relax and breathe, being surrounded by the ocean and the calming and friendly environment."

"... The relaxed and hassle-free way Rarotonga made me feel, unhurried, un-hassled and recharged."

"The very relaxed attitude across the island made for a rejuvenating stay."

"How peaceful and scenic the island was."

Convenience & Safety

The convenience and safety of the Cook Islands as a holiday destination were mentioned by twelve percent (12%) of respondents. They referred to safety, currency, proximity, ease of travel around the islands, safe speed-limits, hassle-free services, and accessibility of attractions. Some tourists emphasise safety particularly feeling safe at night. Comments included:

"Very safe environment."

"It was easy to get around the island."

"... easy to get around, relaxed, NZ dollar makes it easy."

"... time difference good for NZers. Same easy currency."

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

"The ease of everything (currency, time zones, transport, food, activities, friendly was, helpfulness, safety)."

"Friendly .. easy to get around .. same language and currency. Not many bugs."

"The ease of getting around and access to sites e.g. black-rock/fruits of Raro/the beaches. A lot of holiday destinations i've been to you are limited in your access e.g. you might have to buy a tour, a ticket etc."

"I like the ease of the bus that travels around the island, but the timings were a little difficult to understand."

Food and beverage

Food and beverages were also identified as an appealing aspect by eleven percent of respondents. Their comments focused on the food and beverage variety, quality, and range of fresh food available in the Cook Islands. 'Amazing', 'excellent', 'high standard/quality', 'delicious', 'local' and 'fresh' are some frequent terms to describe the attraction of food for tourists. Many visitors mentioned the local sea food and fruits. Comments included:

"Local food with traditional plate."

"The Mooring fish and chips by the water."

"Great cocktails."

"Relaxing good food and coffee"

"I LOVE Ika Mata - ate it every day!"

"Excellent Progressive Dinner with locals."

"... make the most amazing food just yum yum."

"Very good cafes and restaurants. Really enjoyed markets."

"The many restaurant choices and cuisines."

"Food would rival any good restaurant in a major city. Fruit...yum!"

Culture

Six percent of the respondents considered Cook Island's unique culture as one of the most appealing aspects of their visit. Art, traditions, religion and other cultural aspects shape lives

of the local indigenous community of the islands. The unique local people and their culture is something that appeals:

"The musicality of the people. The genuine and general Christian beliefs of the people."

"The love of their culture"

"Culture, sea and "island life""

"Te Maeva Nui."

"Laid back island culture."

"learning the history and culture of the islands."

Not too commercialised

Six percent of the survey participants mentioned that the lack of commercial development on the Cook Islands was one of the most appealing factors for them. They were inclined to the rustic, less commercially developed and secluded ambience of the Cook Islands. Many believed that the rural or closed to nature experience is the salient characteristic of the destination. Comments included:

"Although there are many tourist resorts there is still the feeling of being the only one as there aren't large highly commercial type places."

"Although there is tourism, the island is not completely over run with tourists."

"It is still relatively undiscovered. As good if not better than Maldives at a fraction of the cost."

"Not over crowded. Ease of our Cook Islands experience from entering to leaving the country."

"Not too 'touristy'."

"Unspoilt beautiful tropical island setting."

"It is not too touristy like other islands in the pacific/around the world. Has an untouched rustic feel."

"Despite of being a tourist place, it is not exploited. So, all the natural places are conserved."

"Not overcrowded. Good awareness of keeping the place clean, no littering."

"Not over commercialized."

"The country is not owned or run by foreigners. Beautiful environment, food and

culture. Not over commercialised or developed like Hawaii or the Gold Coast.”

Accommodation

Five percent of respondents expressed that the accommodation they stayed in was an appealing aspect of their visit to the Cook Islands, referring to the privacy, environment, luxury, and in-house restaurant, cafes and other facilities, and the friendly and supportive staff. Comments included:

“... we stayed at sunset palms which wasn’t listed in your survey it was excellent and will certainly return.”

“The lagoon at the resort.”

“We enjoyed stayed at our resort which was Child free.”

“I stayed in resorts during my first trip to the islands, but kept running into tourists who raved about staying in AirBnBs on the island. This time, I stayed at an AirBnB with my mom and my kids (Joey and Odette's). It was 10x better than I imagined - we all loved our stay.”

“Location of accommodation right on the beach.”

“The Rarotongan resort was excellent for our family.”

Overall good experience

Three percent of visitors surveyed focused on their overall experience when discussing appealing factors. Comments such as ‘everything’, ‘wholeness’, ‘general’ and ‘it was all so amazing’ demonstrated the holistic nature of the overall experience gained. Comments included:

“The tidiness of the properties and the general charm of the place.”

“Everything was awesome, can’t complain about anything.”

“Everything! Weather, food, people, relaxation.

“... general feeling of the place.”

“Everything, just love the place.”

“Just a wonderful place to be.”

Family and friends

Three percent of the respondents commented on links being strengthened with family and friends in the Cook Islands as a most appealing aspect of their visit. These visitors mentioned words like “family”, “friends”, and specific family members. Further comments included:

"I've always dreamed of going back to Rarotonga, while there the most attractive for me was visiting family who have since passed away."

"Just catching up with friends."

"Visiting family and friends, finding homes of where my great grand parents lived."

"Catching up with family and friends."

"Enjoying family wedding."

Level of service

Three percent of visitors commented on the service and local hospitality they experienced. The quality of service at the accommodations, restaurants, and resort also won recognition from some visitors. Comments included:

"We loved the friendly locals & staff nothing was a problem."

"Friendly helpful staff at venues, attractions and accommodation as well as the local people."

"The outgoing nature of the local people who always went out of their way to make sure we're satisfied with their service."

"... amazing service everywhere we went."

"The staff were friendly at the resort. The Spaghetti House was great, excellent staff, service was great and the food was amazing."

"The property management displayed a prompt efficiency and professionalism I would expect from a more urban area."

Emotional Connection

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

"It is somewhere that I feel right at home straightaway."

"The place makes me feel closer to God."

"Rarotonga is nostalgic for us as we were married there and know some locals who are always welcoming."

"Feels like going home when I land."

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 summarises key themes respondents felt were unappealing.

Table 4: Least appealing aspects of the Cook Islands (n=472)

Themes	Share of respondents (%)*
Public services, facilities and infrastructure	17
Food and beverage	12
Rubbish and natural environment care	11
Stray animals and mosquitos	11
Price of goods and services	10
Accommodation	8
Poor weather	8
Attractions and activities	7
Customer service	6
Rental cars or scooters	6
Too touristy	4
Local people	3
Flight-related issues	3
Safety	3
Lack of information	2
Law and legislation	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

Seventeen percent of respondents considered the destination’s public services and facilities to be the least appealing aspects of their Cook Islands experience. Most comments focused on limited and unreliable public transport, road conditions, poor internet connection, toilet facilities, and the lengthy waiting time at the airport and its limited facilities. Comments included:

“Infrastructure - roads, septic systems, water, telecommunications as poor as ever.”

“The roads seem to get more bumpy and pot holed each time we visit over the last 10 years.”

“The roads are awful. Major upgrades needed.”

“Bus service a bit confusing and a couple of times waited for over an hour for a bus only to find we had missed the last one going the direction we were trying for or there were none on that day going out way.”

“Public transport frequency and punctuality.”

“Internet still at 3G network, fairly slow download and upload speeds. So WiFi too is also quite slow.”

“Very relaxing for adults but for teenagers having no WiFi was a problem and passed onto us!”

“WiFi/Internet access is seriously lacking. So difficult to get a connection even with a data plan and the plans are so expensive.”

“Cost of internet which is also too slow. Cook Islands is not part of international grouping with Vodaphone, unlike Fiji, Samoa, Tonga and Samoa, all of which we visited.”

“Public toilet facilities were dirty and unhygienic.”

“No potable water from taps - lack of warning.”

Food

Twelve percent of respondents noted that the food and beverage in the Cook Islands was the least appealing aspect of their visit. Comments tended to focus on the lack of local produce (especially fresh fruit, veggies and fish), the high prices, and limited food choices. Comments included:

“Not enough upmarket restaurants, nightlife. Sunday trading with stores being closed.”

“Fried & processed foods becoming more prevalent. Need more island fresh food or fresh ingredients used more.”

“Also poor access to dairy free food.”

“Upward price creep in all food outlets, markets, supermarkets, etc.”

“Too many hamburger joints on the island. Only one fish shop on Rarotonga.”

“Lack of coffee.”

“Cost of beverages ... \$8 for 600ml soft drink was way overpriced.”

“Buying meals, the food is average and mostly unhealthy.”

“The lack of fresh and local fruit.”

“Better restaurants have either closed or restricted opening days since previous visits. dining has moved down-market.”

“Some very slow services such as waiting one hour for the ordered food in a restaurant.”

"The food - this was great but overall I found the meals out very dated and disappointing."

"Some of the prices for food and drink felt expensive, but the quality was great."

"Hard to find suitable meal options for special food requirements. I am vegetarian, gluten intollent and limit the diary intake. Ended up going to the supermarket and making some meals at the crown. I brought lots of money to spend but didn't spend it on dining."

"Too much western fried chicken & chips, that not all locals (born and raised) can't speak kuki fluently".

Rubbish and natural environment care

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

"How tourism has killed off the coral reefs."

"Coral was generally disappointing with some recovery underway."

"I was saddened to see the reef / coral being ruined by uneducated tourists. Needs to be more rubbish bins. Ban plastic bottles and bags on the island. Shut down parts of the reef and coral areas to tourists to help them regenerate and hopefully the fish life and Coral will have a chance to grow or there will be nothing left to see in the water."

"Rubbish and glass on the beautiful beach (we picked up a lot)."

"Pollution. No wildlife hardly. What has happened to the birds?"

"There was evidence of some water pollution in the highly populated areas."

"The amount of plastic still being used on such a beautiful island and how cheap it is to purchase tobacco products and the number of people that smoke (local and tourists) - both will pollute this paradise."

"I am concerned about the level of pollution and rubbish I saw, which seems to be increasing. I am concerned for how rubbish is to be managed in the future. I would hate to see Rarotonga become a huge rubbish dump. It is a place very close to paradise. Haawaaiiki nui, Haawaaiiki roa, Haawaaiiki paamaamao."

"The amount of rubbish on the roads I found hard to see so I filled up a large fertiliser bag just from visiting the waterfall by the abandoned Sheridan."

Stray animals and mosquitos

Stray animals, noisy roosters, chickens and mosquitoes/insects were mentioned by eleven percent of respondents. Dogs tended to dominate. Comments included:

“Large number of roaming dogs on Rarotonga.”

“Dogs running wild everywhere. Dogs running at us on the beach barking. Dog waste on the beach that we had to avoid walking over. Dogs barking at night preventing us sleeping. It was disgusting. The dogs running wild on Rarotonga are a major turn off and we would not go back to Rarotonga for that reason.”

“Dog poo (including locals letting their dogs poo on the beaches, eg: Black Rock! Shocking, disgusting and sad- hard to control the stray but when your dog is on the lead there is NO excuse).”

“The dogs are a pain in some parts of the island.”

“Dogs wandering on the beach often in groups, it was hard to tell if they were safe and we didn't want to get too close to them. That made us feel afraid & I know that other visitors felt like that also.”

“Barking dogs and crowing roosters.”

“The roosters waking us very early in the morning!”

“Roosters crowing all night, but don't change that. The roosters and hens are part of the charm.”

“Mosquitoes at the waterfalls.”

Price of goods and service

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

“Expensive. I think you would sell more if the prices for things were a bit less. I do understand this is your only way of making money there but clothes etc should be a bit cheaper on par with NZ prices...we would've bought more if it was a bit cheaper. \$10-15 for a hair piece is very expensive.”

“The prices. Everything seems to be a bit too pricy.”

“The least appealing for me would be the cost of buying soft drinks and packet of chips in a store that is a total of \$10.00 for the two items.”

“Price of supermarket food surprised me (although I completely understand why).”

“Cost of basic groceries.”

“Prices of food and drink, activities & WIFI.”

“Food/accommodation was expensive and fairly average for the price spent. Also, car hire very expensive (and we were unaware of the need to get a scooter license, so for a day hire on such as short stay it was not worth it).”

“Extremely expensive accommodation, although at the time of visit, there was a religious conference on, plus Oceania games.”

“Cost. Internet connection. The big phone bill surprise in spite of paying for and using the ‘internet connection’. The flight in and out only at midnight. We were stuck wandering around with luggage until 1pm.”

“I had organised a shuttle from the Airport to the apartments prior to my arrival (via email) and the stated cost was \$20. When I got to pay the shuttle driver demanded \$40.”

“Taxis a bit expensive and buses a little unreliable.”

Accommodation

Eight percent of visitors surveyed mentioned their accommodation while in the Cook Islands as being a least appealing aspect of their stay. Some visitors rated the cost of accommodation as expensive for the value received, and some also pointed out that some accommodation needed an upgrade of facilities and/or service. Respondents used a variety of words to describe accommodation including ‘awful’, ‘disappointed’, ‘terrible’, ‘dated’, and ‘poor’. Comments included:

“Cost of accommodation expensive: didn’t find the food that exciting given the wealth of fresh produce.”

“At the resort, no power points readily available. Our only one with free power points was deep inside a cupboard. You know for \$170 a night that was piss poor and left us and others there with a bad taste in our mouths.”

“The resort and spa mucked up our accommodation and put us three single women in which looked like a honeymoon room with a four poster bed and then added a single. We paid for a beach front and three separate beds. They didn't care. Gave us a pitiful \$100 towards meals at the resort. Not helpful at all.”

“Terrible accommodations awful time.”

“Our accommodation provider hadn't communicated with his cleaning service to let them know our date of arrival, so my family arrived to dirty sheets and towels and mess from the last family who had stayed in the accommodation. To be fair, there was one of the cheapest options that could accommodate our whole whanau (18 people), but the communication from Ian wasn't the best.”

“Failure of hot water at the hotel for two days and seemingly no concern to repair it.”

“Cleanliness of accommodation.”

“The rat in our room... he disappeared pretty quickly, but it was a bit of a surprise...”

“Disappointed in where I stayed.”

“The Resort we stayed in doesn’t seem to have had any money put back into it. After staying there 2 years ago it seems to be dated and need of a tidy.”

“The water room that we stay, we couldn't turn our fan off, and the 3rd day I have to ask the secretary man to come try an turn our fan off, coz we were cold, it took that long, but everything else was ok.”

“The hotel accommodation which had been over booked so left without rooms which had been booked and paid for 5 months previous.”

“The accommodation was awful, the walls were really thin and could hear TV through the adjoining door, and every step of the people above us. The bathroom sink leaked and shower leaked causing you to always be walking in water on the floor to the toilet after a shower or using the sink.”

“Accommodation was really poor.”

Poor weather

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

“Rainy, bad weather for three straight days.”

“The weather was rainy and windy at times so activities that we planned for such as the lagoon boat tour and paddle boarding were cancelled.”

“We had a major high tides with a storm. Our daughter, son-n-law and two mokopuna had a beachfront villa and were moved to alternative accommodation but all was cleaned up and returned to original accommodation. George and I were upstairs so were not affected by the water.....”

“The weather was pretty changeable and windy.”

“The coldness of the very windy weather by the beach... Is a windbreak possible there when the wind is direct from the ocean?”

“This time the weather was not great and so the appeal of the lagoons was not as great as previous.”

"We got caught in bad weather the last half of our holiday and our activities were cancelled."

"Mozzies heat and humidity."

"Sunburn."

"Weather (can't control that)."

"The weather - but that can't be helped!"

"Weather not great while we were on Rarotonga but that's not the Island's fault."

Attractions and activities

Seven percent of respondents mentioned attractions and activities as the least appealing aspect of their Cook Islands visit. Their concerns regarded the limited range of attractions and activities available, especially the lack of kids' activities and local crafts, poor facilities in the attractions, poor water-based activity experience (snorkelling, swimming, fishing, etc.) and the access to the waterfall and beaches. Some comments focused on the poor selection of shops and the fact that shops and stores close on weekend/holiday. Comments included:

"Having more kids' activities."

"The Gardens visit - not as appealing as it was on our previous visit about 7 years ago."

"Lack of footpaths. Some of the attractions - no seating available during presentation; - seating without backs; - one lot of seating was a wooden plank seated on a couple of stools."

"The cross island walk was not fun at all. We were absolutely physically capable of doing the walk and have done much longer/higher and more strenuous hikes than this. I needed to spend the entire hike looking down to get a sure footing. It was definitely a destination hike and not one to smell the roses and enjoy the journey. I note also that it is rarely promoted in the Cook Islands travel magazines/brochures which I picked up while there. Perhaps there is a reason for the safety."

"Activities were expensive."

"A charge to visit 'Wl Kilgmore Falls, in NZ they can be viewed free and no mozzies."

"Snorkeling was average, coral reef not the best one I have seen."

"Shops close at 4 o'clock."

"Markets only once a week."

"Crafts from Bali."

“Local craft and shop available around island.”

Customer service

Six percent of respondents mentioned customer service as a least appealing aspect of their holiday in the Cook Islands. Their comments often focused on customer service at the airport, followed by complaints about the service at restaurants, accommodation and transport. Most visitors used words such as ‘very slow services’ ‘rude’, ‘unhelpful’ to describe the services. Comments included:

“The wait times in most of the restaurants we tried. Improvements in the service would be much appreciated.”

“Some very slow services such as waiting one hour for the ordered food in a restaurant or waiting almost one hour to be served at the car rental agency.”

“The level of service from staff and attitudes which made us feel unimportant. For example when asking a staff member at the resort for help they would simply say "sorry I don't know" and walk away. This happened a lot. Often staff and locals would intimidate you for being in their presence.”

“Your harbor and the services available to cruising sailboats were terrible.”

“Sometimes we’re ignored by staff at both the resort and rental cars.”

“Some people working in businesses were rude or unhelpful.”

“We found a lot of the staff quite rude. People weren't very helpful.”

“When we went through Customs at the start of our trip. The woman on duty was EXTREMELY rude to my friend. She made a point of singling her out - for no real reason. So 'The friendly Cook Islands' seemed like the opposite. It was a truly horrible experience.”

“Few unfriendly employees.”

“Some very slow services such as waiting one hour for the ordered food in a restaurant or waiting almost one hour to be served at the car rental agency.”

Rental cars or scooters

Six percent of respondents mentioned rental cars and scooters as least appealing aspects of their Cook Islands visit. Respondents referred to the quality and the availability of rental vehicles, the lack of information about the process of renting vehicles and the unreliable service. Comments included:

“Lack of rental car availability.”

“E-bikes we rented had some problems - flat tire, with no contact number for help.”

Batteries on bikes not lasting anywhere near as long as we were told they would."

"E-bike hire - batteries failed after 30 minutes and no replacement or refund."

"Confusion at a rental company. They insisted we had to get a bike license at police station before we could hire a bike. The police however allowed me to use my Australian motorcycle licence. Mucking around with public transport to get to police station, then hiring a bike, wasted half a day! In the end we hired the bike at Avarua."

"Rental car service. They attempt to rip us off. Apologized when I complained."

"I was disappointed we couldn't rent scooters as it required a license. Hadn't experienced that in our previous travels."

"Having to wait so long to get our rental car on arrival. There should have been more staff to more speedily deal with the number of cars arranged for pick up."

"Rental car wasn't didn't have the ticket to exit airport so had to find assistance then pointed to fire dept room. eventually the lady in the ticket box came back and sorted the issue for at least 4 rental cars not just me."

"The wasted time it took to get a scooter license."

"Given the wrong hire car."

"Trying to rent a car, keep getting the yes no answers."

Too touristy

Four percent of respondents mentioned the Cook Islands as being 'too touristy', commercialised, and busy in the traffic and stress on the infrastructure. Visitors also mentioned some negative behaviour on the part of other visitors. Comments included:

"Some of the Islanders gave the impression they were over tourists."

"Raro may be in danger of too much tourism soon."

"Because of the school holidays we had underestimated how popular the reef cruise was and even 3 days out we could not get on a cruise."

"Rarotonga is super touristy now and the locals seemed over it. To be fair it was the last week of the school holidays, I'd probably be over it too."

"The amount of tourists and the stress put on infrastructure."

"This was our third trip in 10 years and found that there was way more dogs and cars on the road. It was busier than previous years but nothing like Sydney."

"We were quite shocked at the amount of vehicles on the road this time... and large

vehicles. It was so different from our last visit a couple of years ago. there was constant traffic noise/ difficulty walking from the night market because of parking etc..”

Local people

A small group (3%) of respondents noted that the least appealing part of their visit was their interaction with local people in the Cook Islands. Recurrent themes related to unfriendly attitudes and rudeness. Comments included:

“The people - no one says hello, or smiles - they all seem depressed.”

“Felt locals overall were not as friendly in shops/cafes etc as what they were on all our previous trips.”

“Lack of friendliness from locals.”

“One of the bus driver was distinctly unfriendly and appeared stressed. Misunderstood requests. Most drivers were awesome.”

“How tourism is changing the local people noticed some tourist are demanding and can be quite rude. Kia orana greeting was not used as much. Please don't let other cultures change you, the locals is what makes Cook Island special.”

“I found the people less friendly than I expected and it felt that tourism was tolerated not welcomed (compared to Nuie).”

Flight related issues

Three percent of respondents mentioned flight related issues as the least appealing aspect of their visit to the Cook Islands. Visitors mentioned unavailability of direct flights, poor frequency, arrival and departure times, delays or cancellations, and lost baggage. Comments included:

“Nothing really besides the lack of flights to outer islands.”

“The fact that direct flights from Christchurch are only in certain months of the year. This year when I booked via Auckland a few weeks later direct flights were released by Virgin Australia.”

“The return trip by Virgin was very inconvenient time-wise. Very uncomfortable overnight stay in Auckland.”

“More flights, queues through customs immigration.”

“Flight connection schedule should be improved, early morning flight from RAR to AIT.”

“The amazing widely advertised market Pananga Nui on Raratonga is actually not available to most of the tourists due to the flight schedule. It opens up on the weekend right after the flight that takes visitors back home, very frustrating experience indeed!”

“Return air trip (Jetstar) was delayed 2 days due to engineering issues. Required lots of replanning.”

“An overnight wait for a plane in Raratonga airport.”

“Experience with Jetstar airline.”

“The flight in and out only at midnight. We were stuck wandering around with luggage until 1pm.”

Safety

A small number of visitors surveyed (3%) mentioned safety in the Cook Islands as a least appealing factor. In particular, this group referred to petty theft, and poor safety while on the road and water. Comments included:

“Some guy stopped us in the middle of the night at road works, wearing a hi vis and asked to check our license. He wasn't a cop. It was dodgy or seemed suspicious at the very least.”

“Drunks in the township area at night not safe.”

“Getting hand bag stolen.”

“Road safety.”

“The main harbour is probably the worst I have ever been into. Even with light winds, it was bordering on being untenable. If Raratonga wants to encourage private yachts to visit (we know of many who didn't), then it needs to provide some security in the harbour - to at least the standard that is provided to the local fishing fleet.”

“The harbour can be extremely vulnerable and dangerous for visiting yachts.”

Lack of information

A lack of available information was mentioned by two percent of visitors surveyed. Areas where information was lacking included transportation, activities and safety signs. Comments included:

“Information on some activities did take some searching.”

“Bus timetable not helpful at night to use as only goes one way so takes a good 45 mins to get home and have to time to wait outside in dark for it.”

“Public transport. Published information was consistently wrong.”

“Difficulty finding information about snorkeling reef passages, church mass times, bike rental.”

“No potable water from taps - lack of warning.”

Law and Legislation

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

“Tourist speeding on the roads.”

“We hoped to hire E bikes with our 14 year son but were unable to as he was under 16. E bikes would be an excellent option for families and create way less vehicle traffic.”

“Letting big countries like China come in... they have ruined many other places I the world. They will ruin the Cooks in time too.”

Suggestions for improvements

When asked if there was anything that could have improved their visit to the Cook Islands 42% of visitors made a comment. Suggestions mentioned by respondents focused on public services and infrastructure (20%), improvements to the environment, safety and animal care (14%), the need for more entertainment, activities, transport (13%), accommodation (11%), the availability, quality, price of food and drinks (11%), attitudes of locals and customer services (9%), flights (8%), better value for money (7%), weather (7%), the need for better information (4%), and the law and legislation (2%). Comments on these themes included:

“Better footpaths, we like to walk and the road is getting a bit dangerous with extra traffic, clearer signage about beach access points.”

“Promote more road safety, especially to tourists that are wanting to drive the local bikes.”

“Cheaper WiFi, no bugs, better roads.”

“Public toilets.”

“Rubbish clean up frequently.”

“Less roosters crowing at night would improve sleep and the restfulness of our stay.”

“More regular markets as it was only on the day after we left.”

“More options to get to Aitutaki.”

“Availability of cultural shows - there was an event on while we were there and dancers were tied up with that, sad we missed that.”

“More accomodation information on the smaller islands.”

“Child-friendly resorts.”

“More Island food being sold, cheaper prices if poss.”

“More focus on customer service and clean beaches.”

“Experiencing more of the islans but we will just have to come back. :)”

“More direct flights. I have to take 4 flights round trip to work with my dates. Only 1 direct flight a week from Sydney is not enough. I would come more regularly if this was available.”

“From supermarkets to restaurants, price of food in general is far too expensive.”

“Weather, but that is out of your control.”

Reasons to return to the Cook Islands and recommend to others

The majority of visitors (93%) indicated that they would consider re-visiting the Cook Islands in the future. This figure is higher than the 2018/19 annual average (92%) and the identical quarter in 2018/2019 (91%). Of the seven percent of visitors who indicated they would not want to return to the Cook Islands, the majority stated that did not wish to return because of a desire to visit another destination and because they have “been there and seen it all”. Some visitors commented that a holiday to the Cook Islands is relatively expensive (especially accommodation and food) and not good value for money. A few visitors mentioned a lack of activities, long travel distance, and a lack of the infrastructure and customer service. Other factors given for not wishing to return included old age, stray animals, environmental care, and weather. Comments included:

“Want to see other islands, but wifi, accomodation very expensive and I don’t get many holidays.”

“Very expensive holiday for what we did. Kids enjoyed it, would like to see other places.”

“Boring, not enough to do, bike tour was the worst, weather was always overcast.”

“Very far away.”

“The wait at Raratonga airport on arrival.”

“I am now too old to travel - it was my last overseas holiday.”

“Many other Pacific Islands to visit - coral reefs badly impacted by climate warming and perhaps cyclones. Fairly expensive.”

Nearly half (45%) of the visitors who said they would return stated that they would definitely include the outer islands in their next visit. A further 51% of visitors indicated they would ‘maybe’ visit outer islands next time. Of those who said they will or may visit outer islands the next time, most (91%) mentioned they would like to include Aitutaki. Atiu was the second most mentioned island at 33%; another 25% of visitors stated that they would like to visit Mangaia, 20% of the respondents would like to visit other islands. A few mentioned the high cost of visiting outer islands as a barrier to a return visit to the country.

Nearly all visitors surveyed (97%) said that they would recommend the destination to their family and friends which is consistent with previous survey periods. Only 3% of visitors would not recommend the Cook Islands to others and this is largely based on no direct flights, the high prices, environmental degradation, and poor customer services.

Final observations

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

Despite the overall positive performance this report again highlights that there is room to enhance the visitor experience and to increase the economic yield and broader community benefits associated with tourism. As with previous reports, this quarter's research highlights issues around the food and beverage, as well as the rubbish and natural environment care in the Cook Islands. There are also some concerns about the on-going issues around stray dogs, price of goods and services, and the value for money/quality of service provided by accommodation and food/beverage operations.

Visitor expenditure decreased compared with the same period last year despite the fact that New Zealanders' rose. This fall in visitor yield is a trend reflected elsewhere in the region as we see some impacts related to global economic uncertainty and caution. It is important to monitor this trend in forthcoming reporting periods.

It is vital to continue to build on this overall positive industry performance and to convert it into even greater economic benefits for local people. It is critical to find ways to build on and develop the visitor experience in a manner that enhances local economic linkages. The report reinforces the fact that cost effective on-line research can generate information that is of value to both the tourism industry and government policy makers. As the survey continues we are able to explore in more detail on the characteristics of different market segments and the overall impacts and performance of the industry.

Finally, this report provides a snapshot of how the industry was performing just prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. It provides a bench mark against which we can view the impact on Cook Islands tourism of this global challenge and also enables us to measure the journey to recovery that will occur in the coming months.