



The Cook Islands International Visitor Survey Report

January – March 2022

Prepared for Cook Islands Tourism Corporation

by

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Auckland University of Technology**

www.nztri.org

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Executive Summary

This report focuses on the characteristics, expectations and expenditure patterns of visitors to the Cook Islands between 14 January and 31 March 2022. This is the third international visitor survey (IVS) report during the time of COVID and as such it represents an important barometer of the pandemic performance of the industry. The data that underpins the report is generated by an online departure survey (<http://www.mycookislandsvisit.com>). There are 1,132 individual respondents to the survey - representing a total of 2,365 adults and 125 children in the in-country expenditure analysis (estimated about 24% of all visitors during the period – based on the January to March 2022 visitor arrival data from the Cook Islands Statistics Office). In the report we draw comparisons with NZ visitors and all visitors in the January to March 2019 survey period.

As a result of the border restrictions, nearly all (99%) of visitors surveyed come from New Zealand. Visitors are well educated (66% have some form of tertiary education) with a relatively high annual household income (62% earn over NZ\$100,000 per year). Nearly half (49%) of visitors travel with more than one companion, and solo travellers are less common (8%).

Over a third (34%) respondents surveyed are first time visitors to the Cook Islands. The main purpose of visit is holiday-making (86%). The average length of stay in the Cook Islands is 8.8 nights. The majority of visitors (80%) stay ten nights or less. Twenty three percent of visitors surveyed visited Aitutaki.

Visitor spend prior to arrival in the Cook Islands (\$2,227 per person) which is much higher than the New Zealand visitors in Jan to Mar 2019/20 (\$1,658 per person), and higher than all visitors of the same quarter (\$2,197). Spend on the island (per person per day) is \$217. This spend is much higher than NZ visitors' local spend in Jan to Mar 2019 (\$158) and also higher than all visitors in the same quarter (\$162 for January to March 2019).

When pre-paid spend and local spend are combined, it is estimated that each visitor brings \$2,801 to the Cook Islands economy (or approximately \$318 per day). This figure is higher than NZ visitors of January to March 2019 period (\$1,959), and all visitors of the same period (\$2,321).

Overall visitor satisfaction levels with services and experiences in the Cook Islands remain high (mean value 4.6 out of 5). The most appealing elements are environment, cleanliness and weather; friendly local people; activities, attractions, entertainment and events; and atmosphere. The least appealing elements are poor weather, the lack of public services, facilities and infrastructure, some of the businesses not being open or fully operational, stray animals and mosquitos, and rubbish and natural environment care.

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

The desire of visitors to return to Cook Islands in the future remains strong: 96% of those surveyed state that they would come back for another visit, and 98% say they would recommend the Cook Islands to friends or family. These are slightly up than NZ visitors and all visitors from the same quarter in 2019: both 97%.

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Introduction

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

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

From 14th January 2022 (NZ time), the New Zealand and Cook Islands travel bubble reopened to fully vaccinated New Zealanders. This report focuses on visitors who travelled to the Cook Islands from 14th January to 31st March 2022. Over this three-month period, 5,414 visitors were contacted by email to take part in the survey, and 1,132 responses were received: a conversion rate of 21%. The conversion rate for this period is considerably higher than the 2019/20 annual average (14%) and the January to March 2019 period (14%). These 1,132 responses cover a total of 2,365 adults and 125 children when we examine visitor expenditure. As the third COVID-period IVS report, this document, together with the first two COVID reports (May-June and July-August 2021 arrivals), represents an important barometer of the pandemic performance of the industry.

The data presented includes detailed information on:

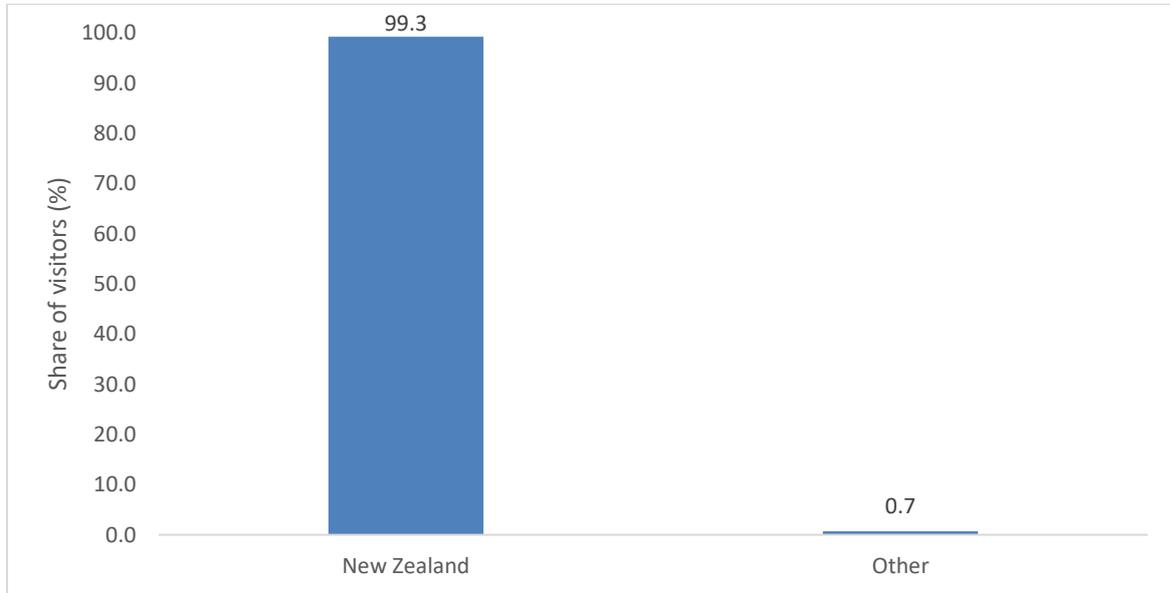
- The characteristics of visitors to the Cook Islands (age, gender, education, country of origin, income, purpose of visit, travelling companions, number of previous visits, length of stay, airline used, and islands visited)
- Visitor information obtained about the Cook Islands, factors influencing the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

Key sections of the report highlight important variations between the 2022 figures and the 2019 January to March quarterly findings (NZ visitors and all visitors).

Visitor Characteristics

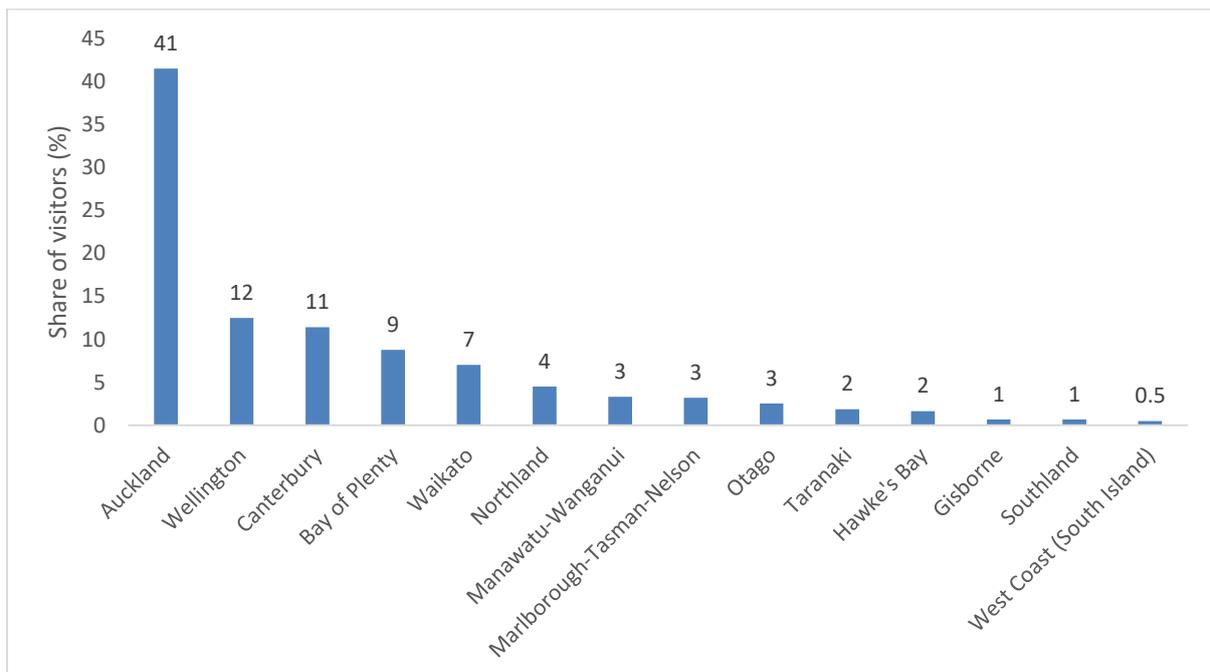
Virtually all (> 99%) of the visitors surveyed come from New Zealand (Figure 1). This compares with 53% of the survey sample in the same quarter of 2019. The few remaining non-New Zealand visitors in 2022 originated primarily from Australia and Europe.

Figure 1: Country of origin (n = 1,034)



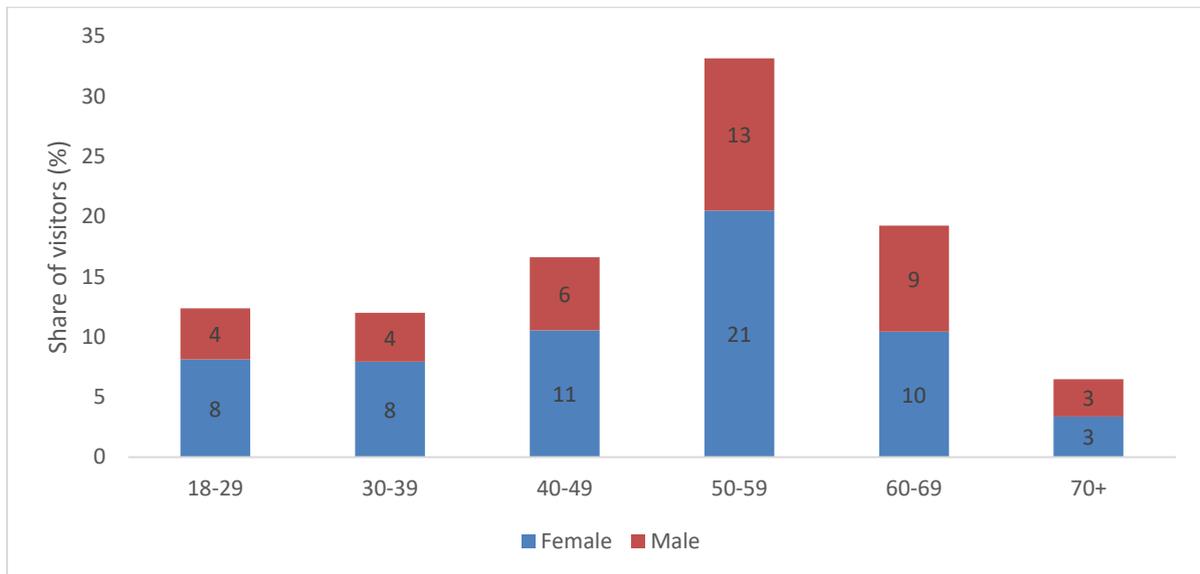
Auckland, Wellington, and Canterbury account for 64% of New Zealand visitors (Figure 2).

Figure 2: New Zealand visitors (n = 1,027)



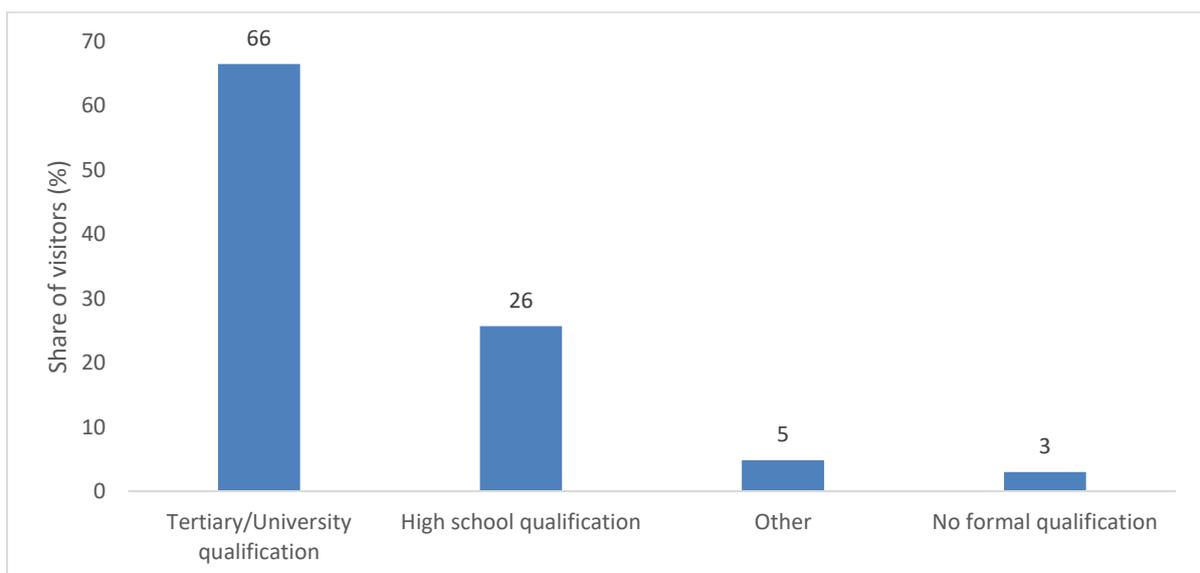
More women (61%) than men (39%) completed the survey (Figure 3). The most significant age categories are the 50 to 59 (34%) and 60 to 69 age groups (19%), followed by those aged 40 to 49 year (17%), 30 to 39 (12%), 18 to 29 (12%). Those under 18 are not surveyed for ethical reasons.

Figure 3: Distribution of age and gender (n = 1,034)



Visitors are well educated, with around three quarters (66%) of those surveyed having some form of tertiary qualification, and a further 26% having completed a high school education (Figure 4).

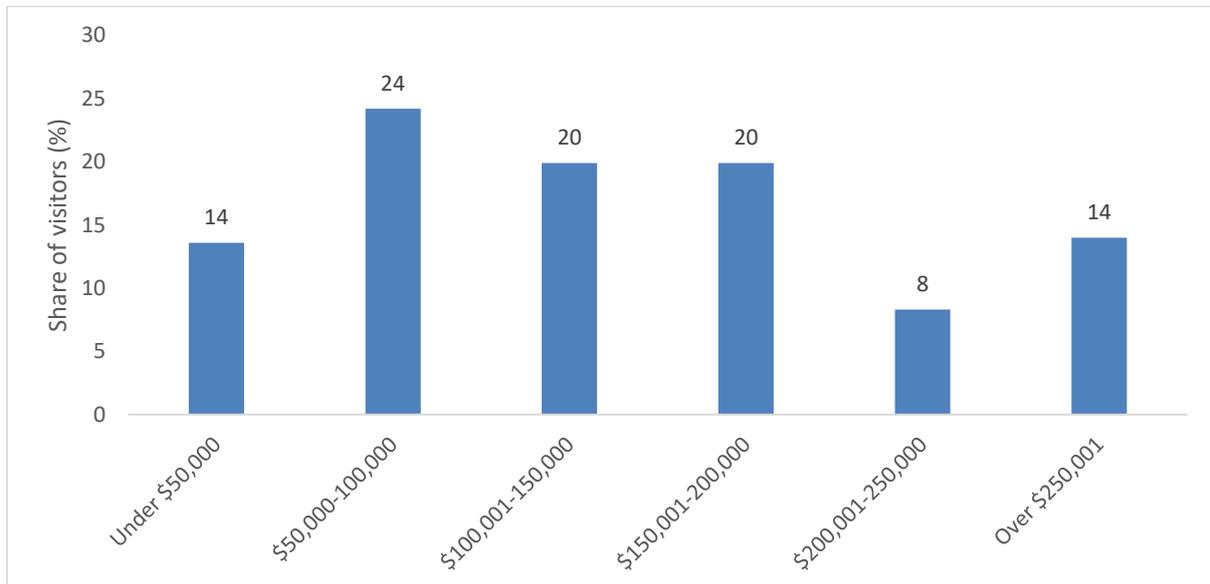
Figure 4: Highest qualification (n = 1,035)



The average household income is NZ\$170,857. By way of contrast the average household income in January to March 2019 for NZ visitors was NZ\$117,176, among all visitors it was NZ\$132,498. Nearly a quarter (24%) of visitors have an annual household income of between

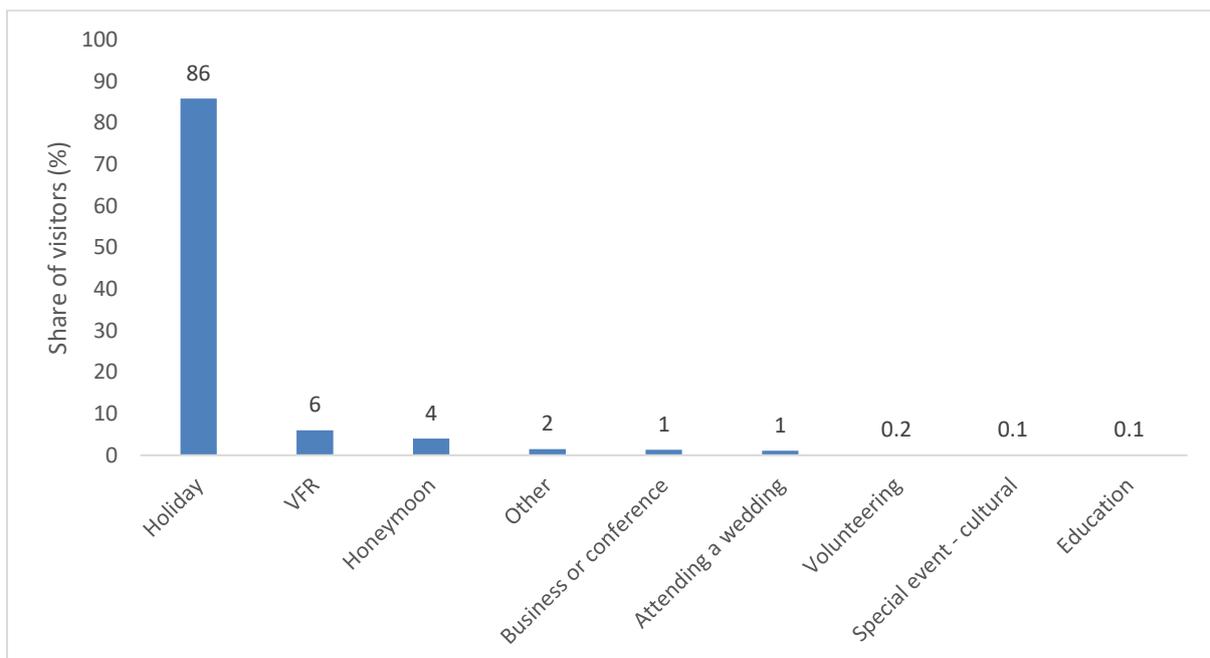
NZ\$50,000 and NZ\$100,000. One in five (20%) respondents surveyed earn between NZ\$100,001 and NZ\$150,000. A further 42% of respondents have a household income of over NZ\$150,000 per year (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Annual household income in NZD (n = 719)



The predominant purpose of visit to the Cook Islands is a holiday (86%) (Figure 6). Other reasons given include visiting friends or relatives (6%), honeymoon (4%), for business and conference (1%), and attending a wedding (1%).

Figure 6: Main purpose of visit (n = 1,132)

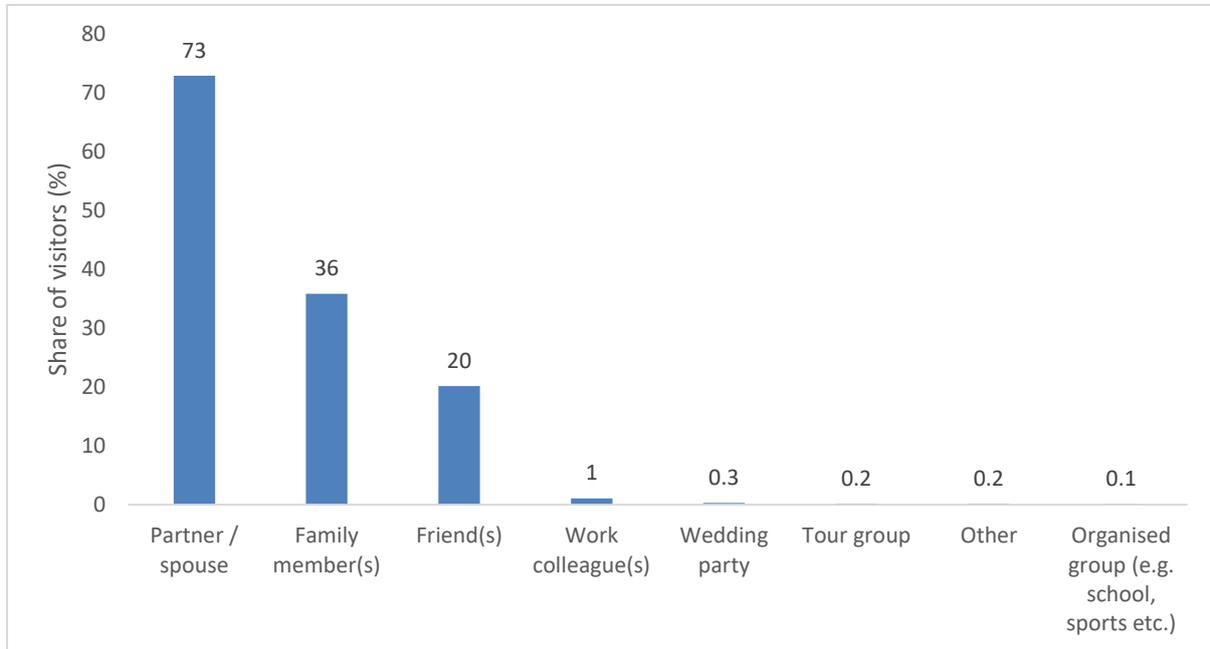


Note: Due to the decimal carry, total does not add up to 100%

The majority (92%) of visitors travel with one or more companions. Among this group, most travel to the Cook Islands with a partner or spouse (73%). Visitors also travel with other family

members (36%), with friends (20%), or with colleagues (1%). Those travelling as part of a wedding party, in the tour group, or in an organised group represent smaller shares of the sample (Figure 7).

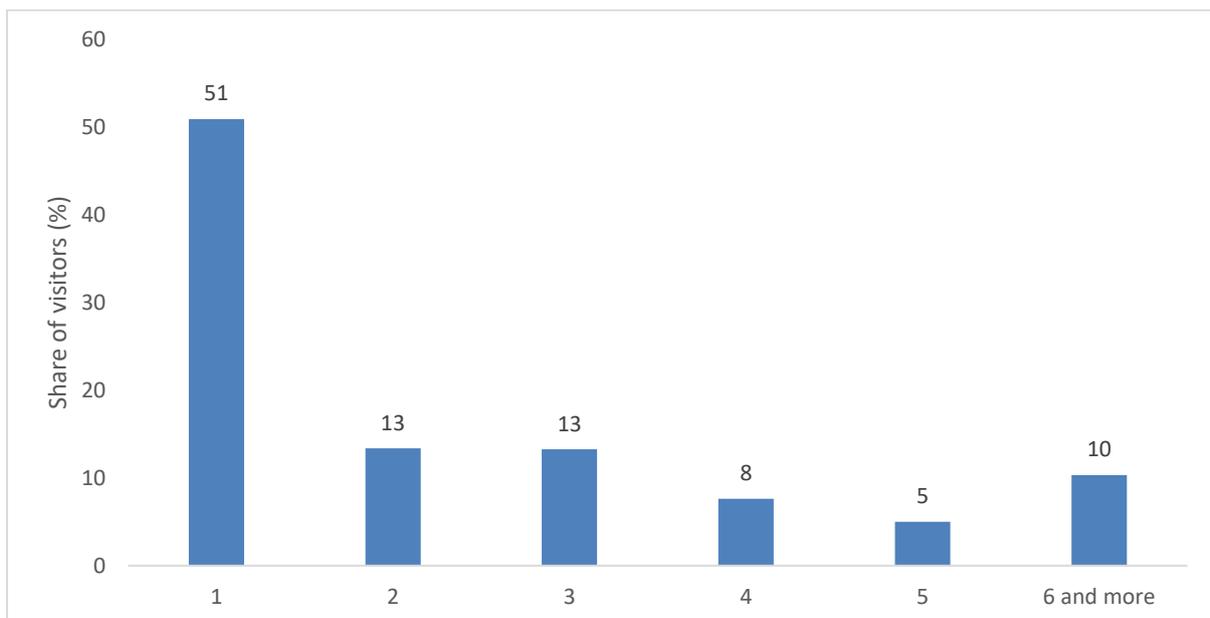
Figure 7: Travelling with whom? (n = 1,045)



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

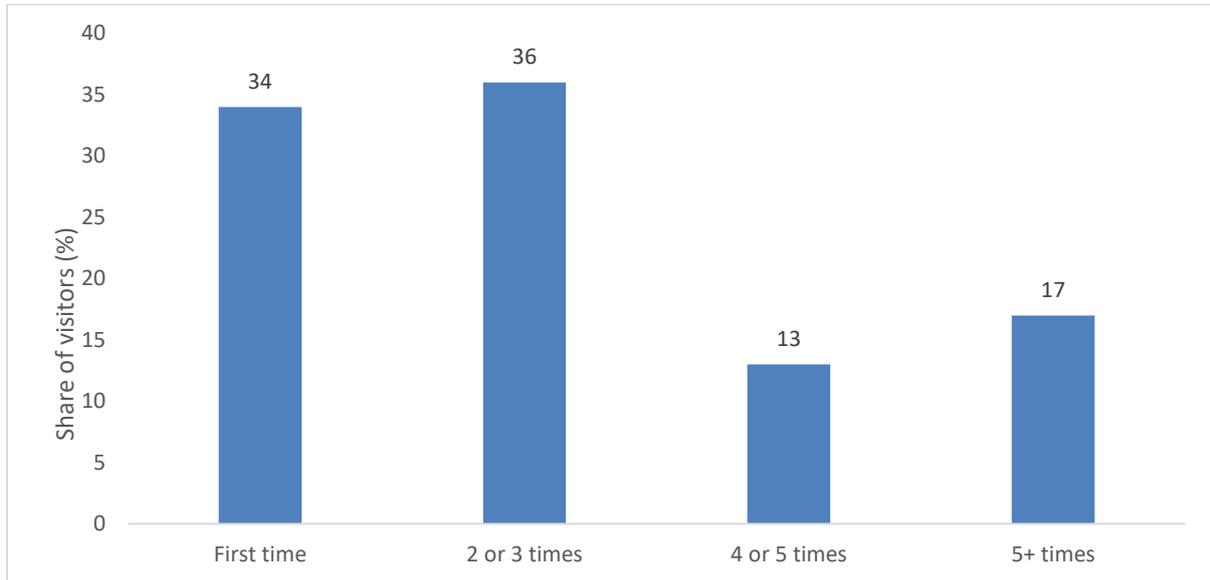
If we exclude those travelling alone, over half of visitors (51%) travelled with one companion on their visit to the Cook Islands (Figure 8), and over a third of visitors (34%) travelled with two to four people.

Figure 8: Number of companions on trip (excluding those travelling alone) (n = 919)



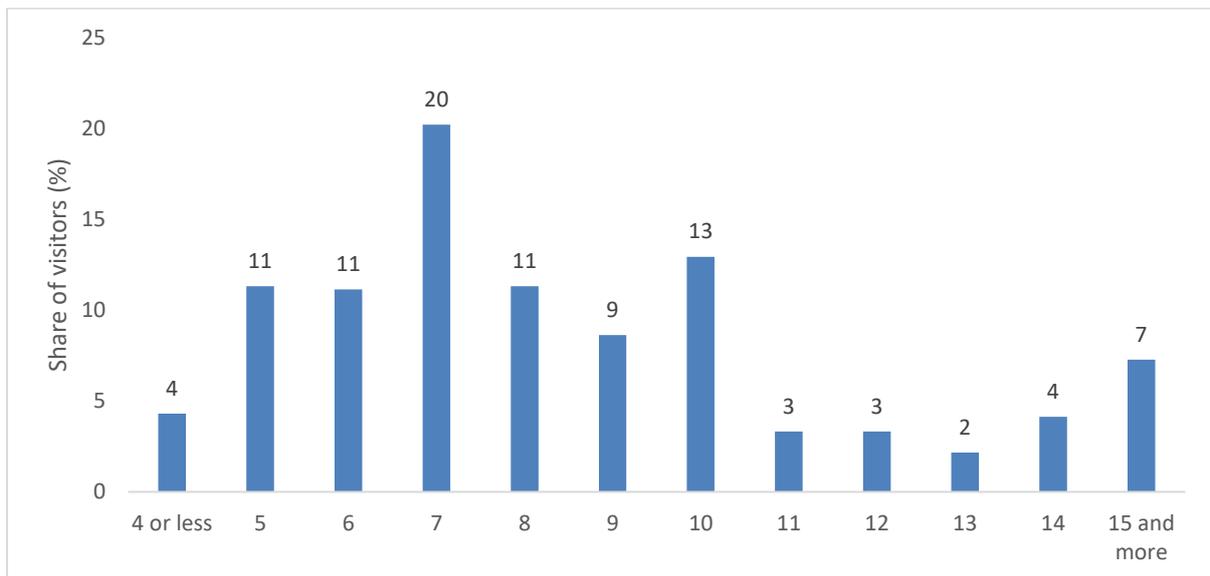
Over one third of visitors (34%) are on their first visit to the Cook Islands. A further 36% have been to the Cook Islands two or three times before. Three in ten (30%) have visited four or more times (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Number of visits to the Cook Islands (n = 1,020)



The average length of stay in the Cook Islands is 8.8 nights (median 8.0) with 79% of visitors spending ten or fewer nights in the country (Figure 10).

Figure 10: Length of stay in nights (n = 1,114)

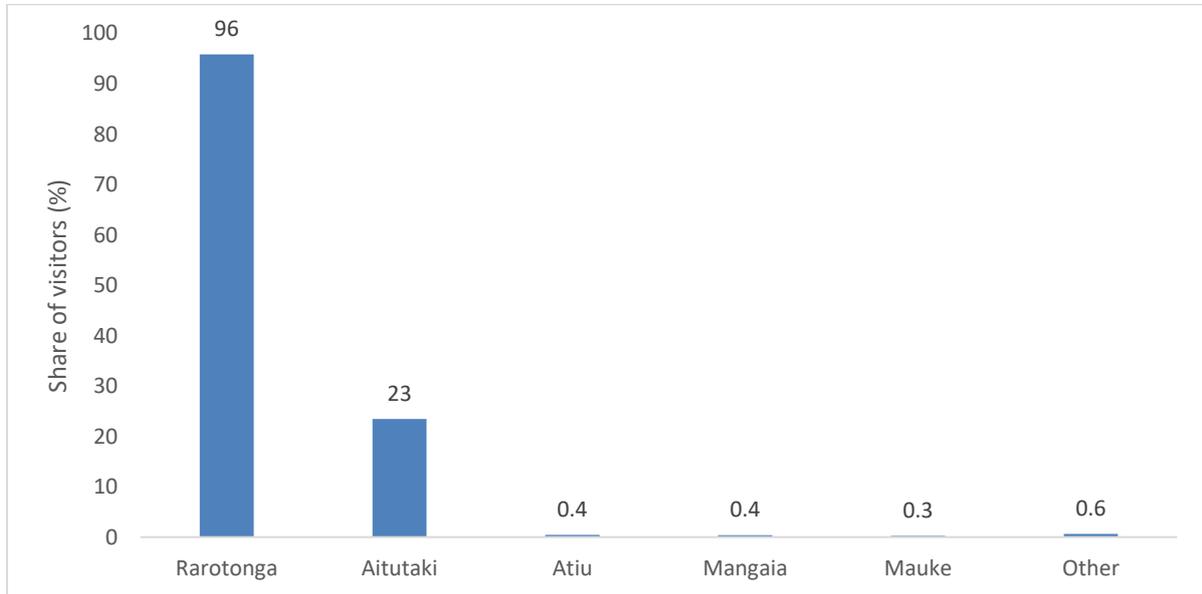


Note: Due to the decimal carry, total does not add up to 100%

Nearly all visitors (99.7%) travelled to/from the Cook Islands with Air New Zealand.

The vast majority (96%) of visitors to the Cook Islands spent time on Rarotonga, with Aitutaki being the second most visited outer island (23%). Far fewer visitors spend time on Atiu (0.4%) and other outer islands (less than 2%) (Figure 11).

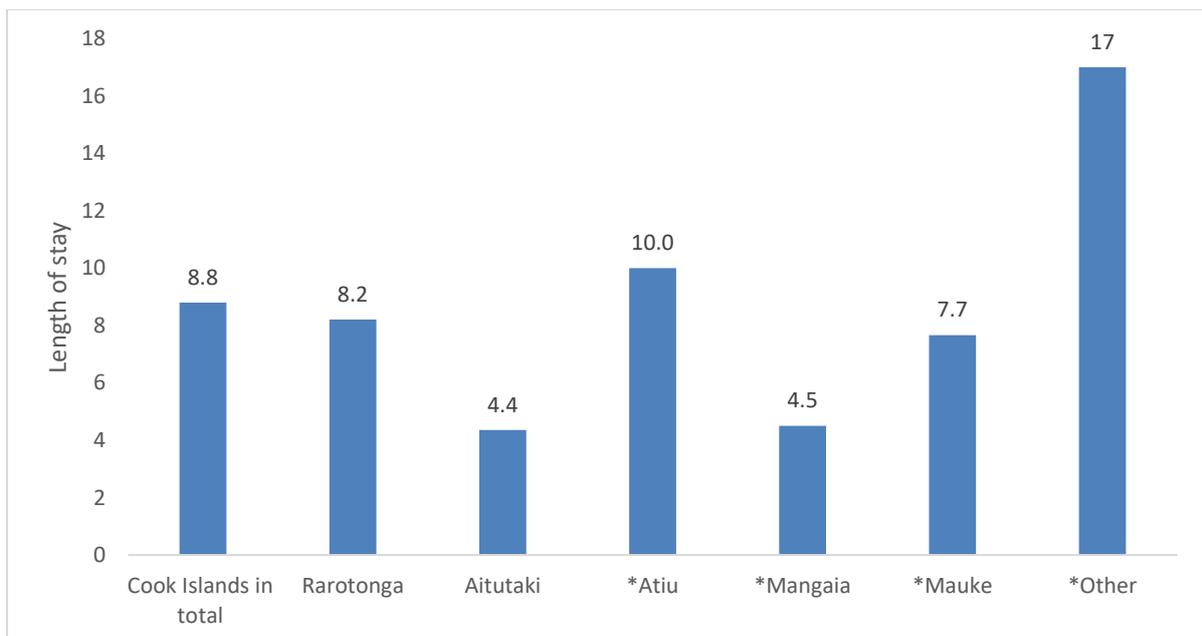
Figure 11: Visited Islands (n = 1,129)



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 8.2 nights (Figure 12). For the visitors that went to Aitutaki, the average number of nights spent on the island itself is 4.4. It should be noted that small sample sizes for Atiu, Mangaia, Mauke, and other islands mean that we must treat length of stay figures with some caution.

Figure 12: Average length of stay in the Cook Islands and on each island (n = 2-1,056)

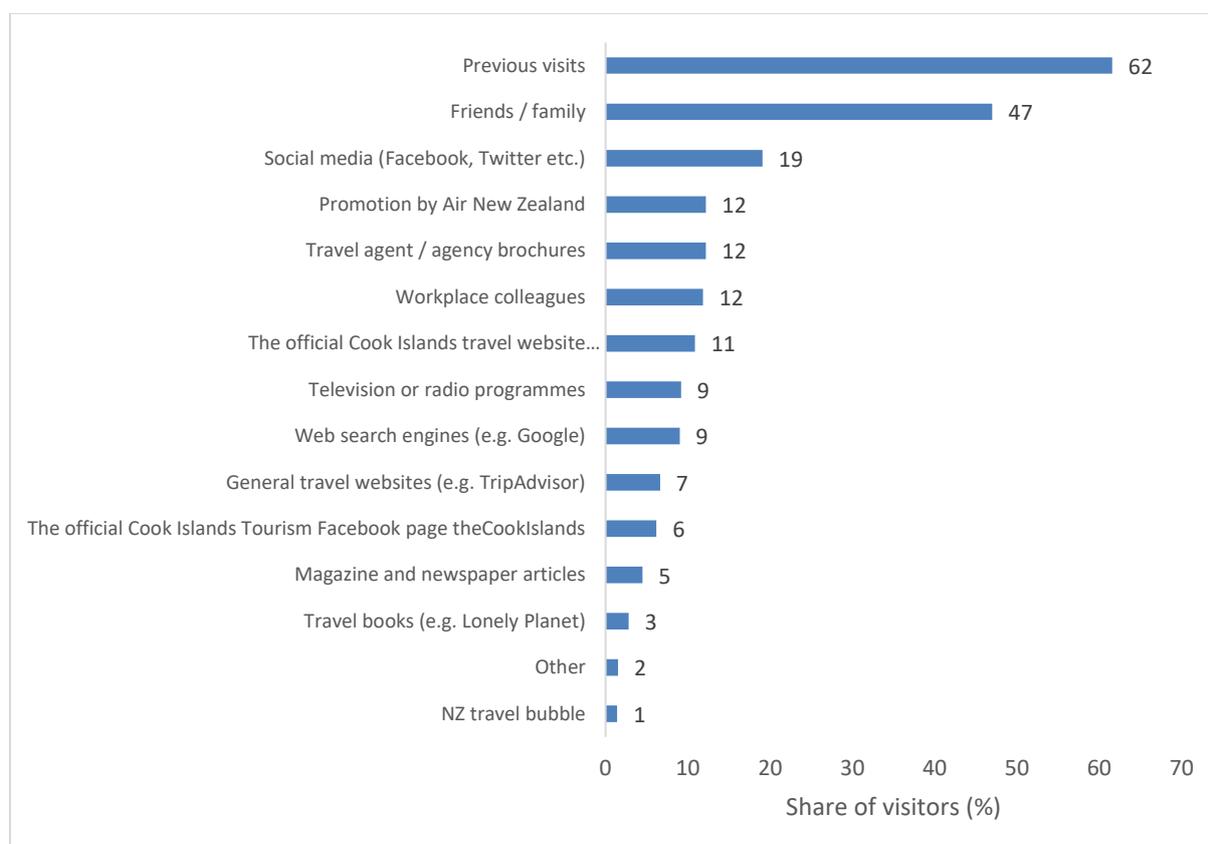


*Note: *n<10*

Information Sources and Purchasing Behaviour

Participants were asked how they found out about the Cook Islands as a holiday destination (Figure 13). Nearly a third (62%) of respondents ranked their previous visit as the most important influence, followed by word of mouth from friends and family members, previous experience (47%), social media (Facebook, Twitter etc) (19%), Air NZ promotion (12%), travel agent/agency brochures (12%), workplace colleagues (12%), and the official Cook Islands travel website (11%). A small percentage (1%) of respondents particularly mentioned finding out about the Cook Islands due to the travel bubble announcement with New Zealand.

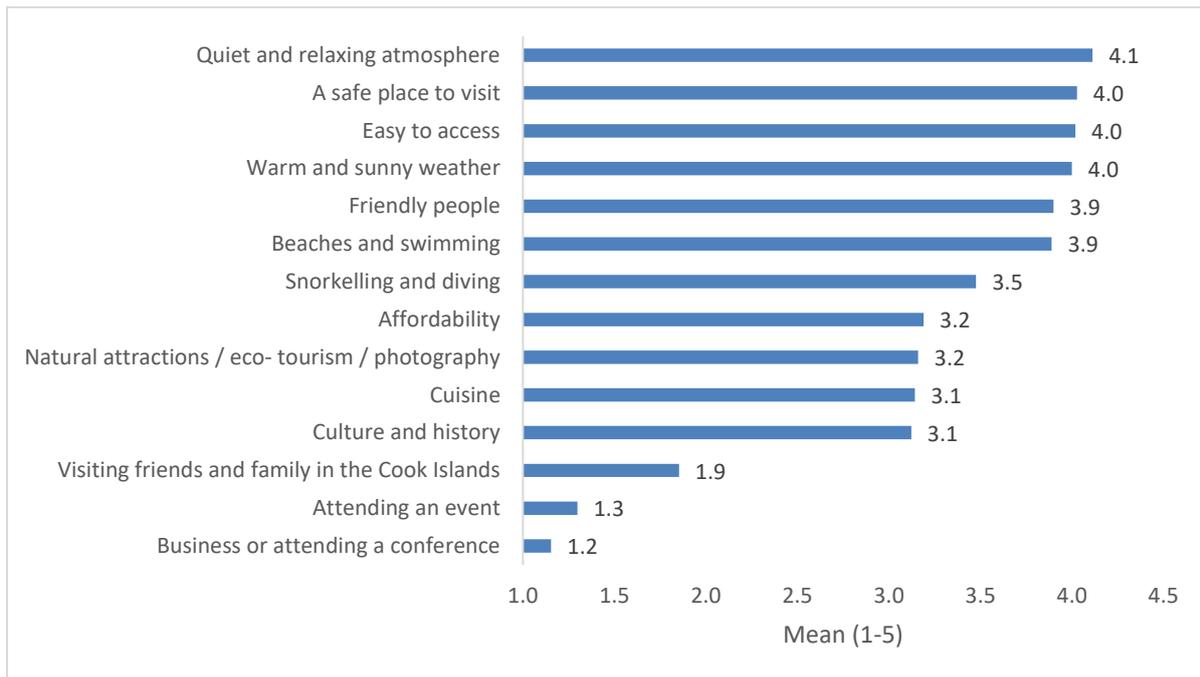
Figure 13: How did you find out about Cook Islands as a destination (n = 1,132)



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

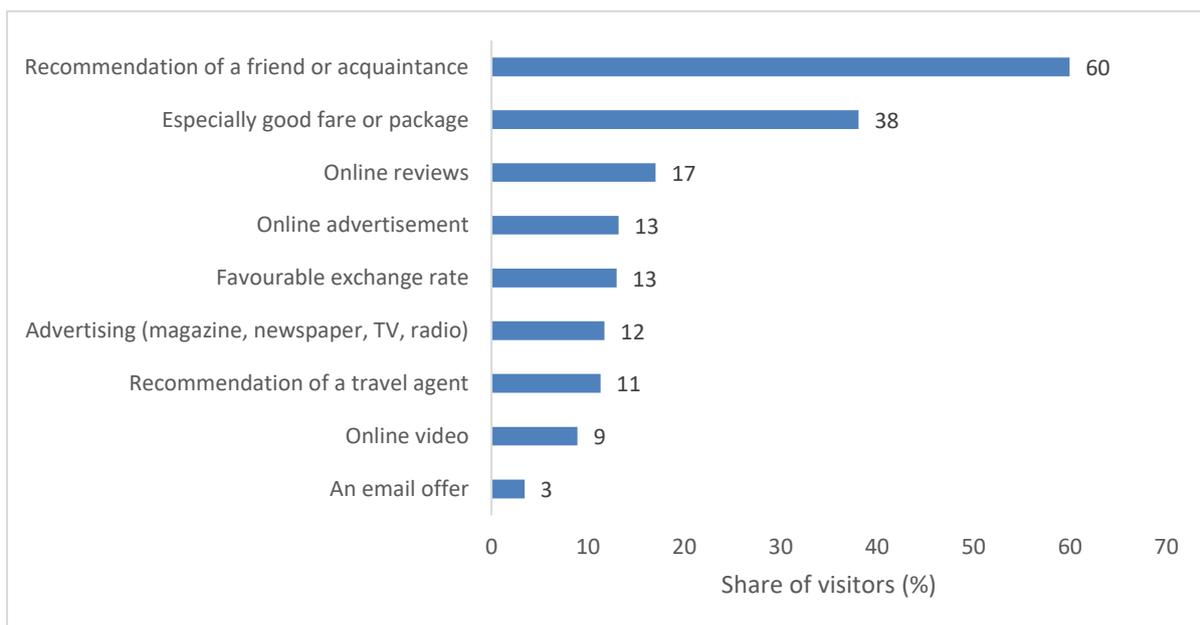
Visitors were asked to highlight ‘influential factors’ that led them to choose the Cook Islands as a travel destination. A quiet and relaxing atmosphere is ranked as the most influential factor (4.1 out of 5.0), followed by a safe place to visit (4.0), ease of access (4.0), warm and sunny weather (4.0), friendly people (3.9), beaches and swimming (3.9), snorkelling and diving (3.5), and affordability (3.2). Visiting friends and relatives (1.9), attending an event (1.3), and business or conference (1.2) are the least influential factors overall (Figure 14).

Figure 14: Influences on the decision to choose the Cook Islands (n = 1,012 - 1,106)



From a marketing point of view, nearly two thirds (60%) of visitors mentioned ‘recommendation of a friend or acquaintance’ as the most important factor (Figure 15). Over a third of those surveyed (38%) indicate that an ‘especially good fare or package’ is important for them in selecting the Cook Islands, followed by online reviews (17%), online advertisements (13%), favourable exchange rates (13%), traditional advertising (magazine, newspaper, TV, radio) (12%), the recommendation of an agent (11%), online videos (9%), and email offers (3%).

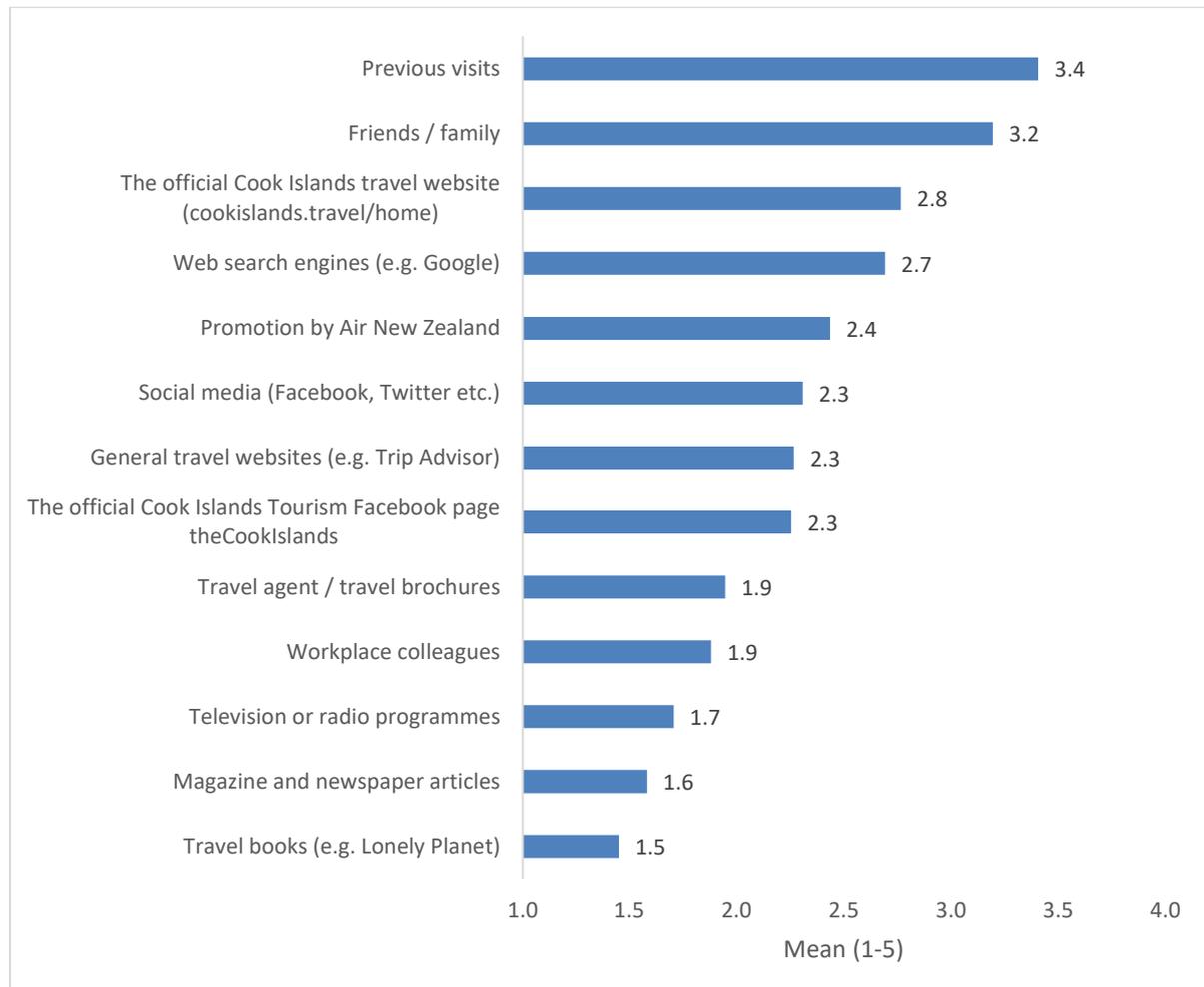
Figure 15: Which factors influenced your selection of the Cook Islands? (n = 964)



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

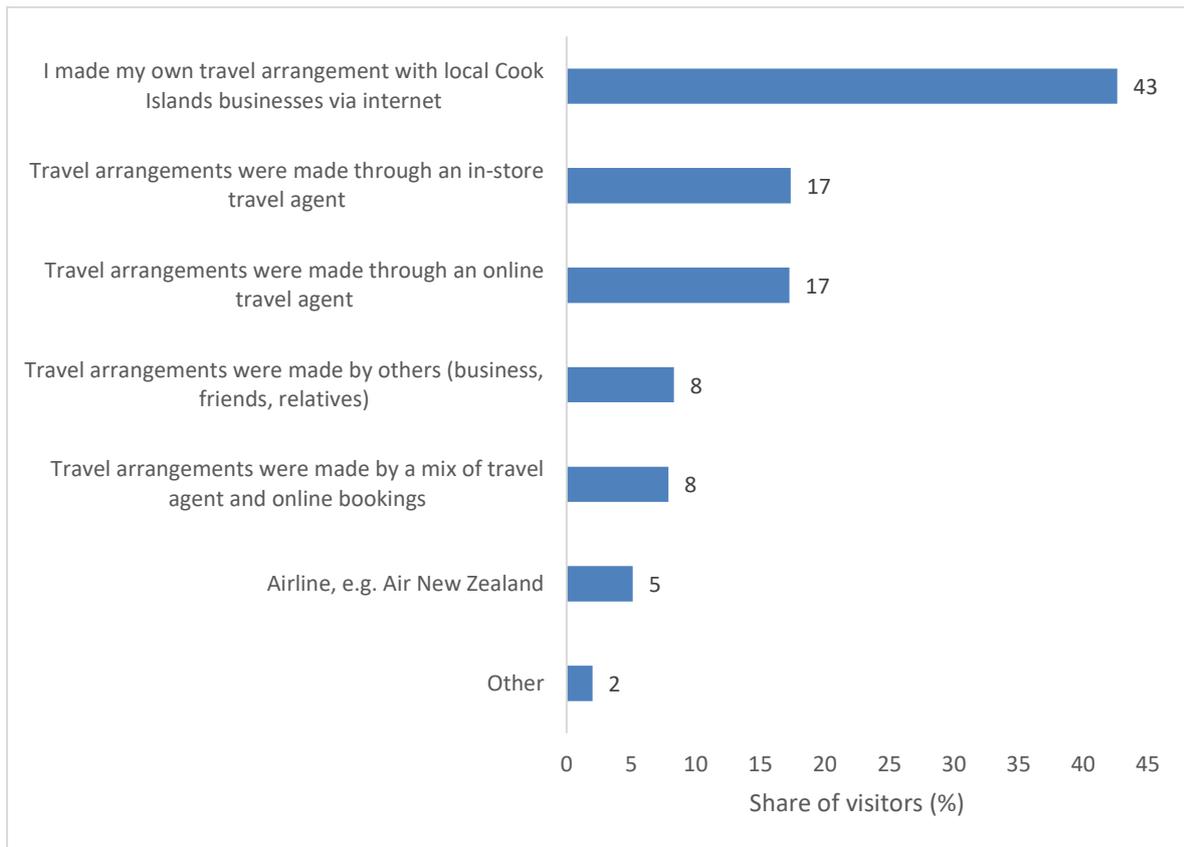
Visitors were asked to rate the importance of the listed information sources used to plan their trip on a scale from 1 to 5. Previous visits ranked as the most important source (3.4), closely followed by friends and family members (3.2), the official Cook Islands travel website (2.8), and web search engines (e.g. Google) (2.7) (Figure 16).

Figure 16: Importance of information source used when planning your trip (n=1,006-1,081)



Forty-three percent of travellers surveyed made their own travel arrangements with local Cook Islands businesses through online channels (Figure 17). Nearly one in five visitors surveyed (17%) purchased a pre-paid trip either through an in-store travel agent or through an online travel agent. For 8% of visitors travel arrangements were made by others (business, friends, relatives). A further 8% of those surveyed relied on a mix of travel agent and online bookings. Five percentage of visitors purchased a pre-paid trip through airline service, especially the online bookings through Air NZ website.

Figure 17: How did you make your travel arrangements for the Cook Islands (n = 1,130)

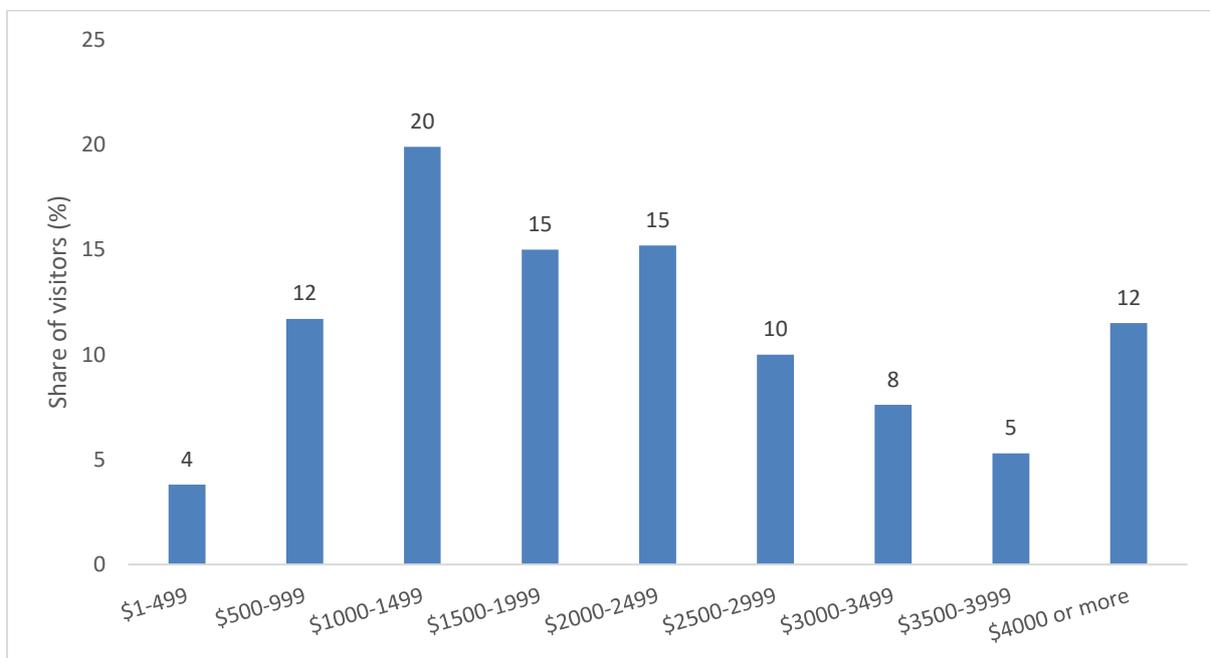


Visitor Expenditure

The IVS asks a range of questions about visitor expenditure, both prior to arrival and while in the Cook Islands. All the figures below are based on respondent estimates of their own spending and any others they spent money on (e.g. spouse, children etc.). The following prepaid expenditure section is based on the number of adults and children that respondents included in their cost estimates: 2,076 people comprising 1,977 adults and 99 children.

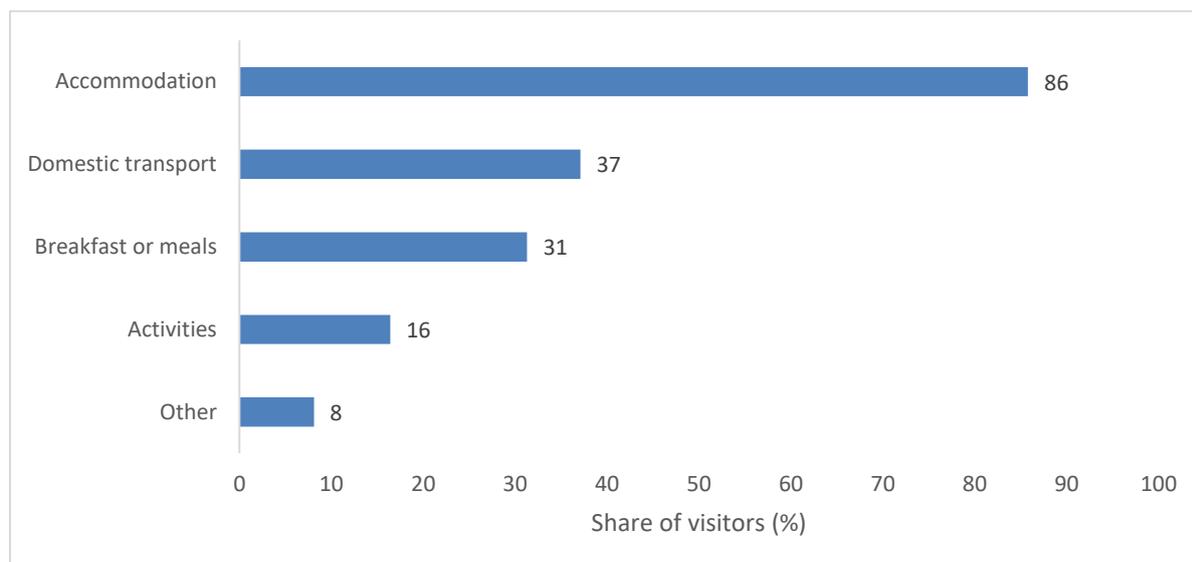
On average, visitors to the Cook Islands spend NZ\$2,227 per person prior to arrival. Half (50%) of the visitors spend between NZ\$1,000 and NZ\$2,499 prior to arrival (Figure 18). The prepaid figure per person is higher than NZ visitors' average prepaid spend (NZ\$1,658) and all visitors (NZ \$2,197) in the January to March 2019.

Figure 18: Amount of money spent per person prior to arrival (n = 772)



In addition to international flights, spending prior to arrival includes: accommodation (86%), domestic transport and airport transfers (37%), and meals and breakfast (31%) (Figure 19). Activities are far less likely to be included in pre-paid expenses (16%). A further 8% of other category is mainly about the COVID-19 test fee prior to arrival at the Cook Islands.

Figure 19: Items included in money spent prior to arrival (n = 801)



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

The total spend per visitor per day while in the Cook Islands (excluding any pre-paid expenditure) is NZ\$217 (Table 1). This figure is 37% higher than NZ visitors in the same 3rd quarter IVS survey period in 2019/20 (NZ\$158) and 31% higher than all visitors of the same quarter (NZ\$162).

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

Expenditure Items	n = 2,490	
	Mean (NZ\$)	(% of spend)
Accommodation	99	46
Restaurant/Café/Bar	48	22
Shopping	15	7
Vehicle rental	14	6
Domestic Flights	10	5
Water-based Activities	9	4
Groceries	9	4
Land-based Activities	5	2
Other	4	2
Petrol	2	1
Internet	2	1
Public Transport	0.4	0.2
Total spend (NZ\$)	217	100%

Most money spent locally is on accommodation related services (46%) and restaurants, cafes and bars (22%). Shopping (7%), and vehicle rental (6%) are the next most significant categories along with domestic flights. Water and land-based activities have daily spend figures of \$9 and \$5 NZ respectively. These per person expenditure figures are based on 1,132 survey responses covering a total of 2,490 people (2,365 adults and 125 children).

It is difficult to estimate accurately the proportion of the pre-paid spend that flows to the Cook Islands. For the purposes of this study, we conservatively estimate that 50% of the pre-paid spend is allocated to airfares. Of the remaining 50% of the pre-paid spend, 80% flows back to local operators. In total this means that for every pre-paid dollar, 40 cents flows back to the Cook Islands. We estimate that the pre-paid spend figure per day flowing back to the local economy is NZ\$101 and for the average total visit is NZ\$891 (8.8 nights).

By multiplying daily in-country spend by the average stay (8.8 nights) we can see that spend per person per visit while in the Cook Islands is on average NZ\$1,910. The total figure (what is spent locally and what flows back to the Cook Islands from pre-paid expenses) is therefore NZ\$318 per visitor per day (\$217 + \$101), or NZ\$2,801 (\$1,910 + \$891) for each visitor. Table 2 shows that 2022 visitors contributed considerably more to the local economy than NZ visitors and all visitors who came during the January to March 2019 period.

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

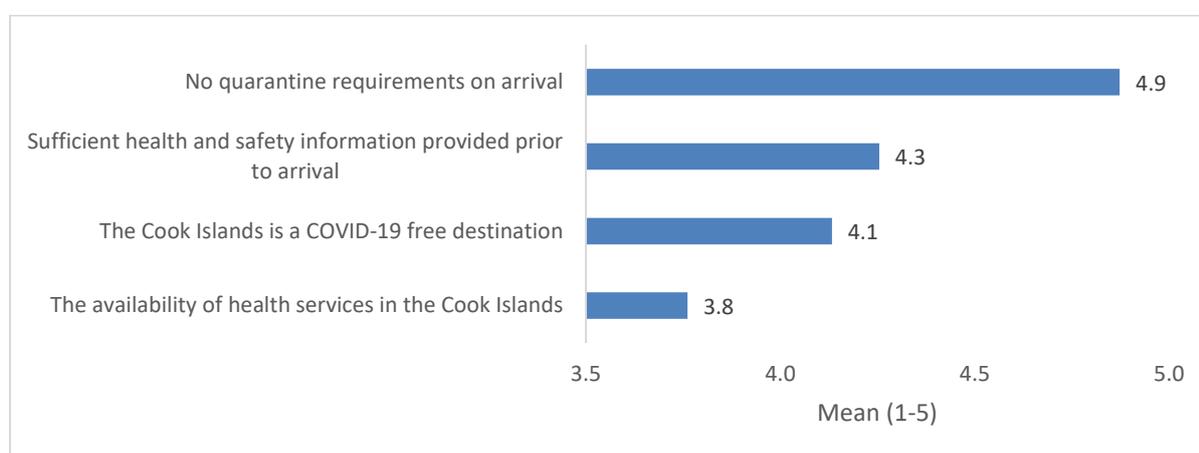
	Jan-Mar 2022	Jan-Mar 2019 NZ visitors	Jan-Mar 2019 All visitors
Average Spend Prior to arrival (NZ\$)			
Per Person Per Trip	\$2,227	\$1,658	\$2,197
Flowing into local economy rate – estimated 40%			
Per Person Per Trip	\$891	\$663	\$879
Per Person per Day	\$101	\$81	\$99
Length of stay (nights)	8.8	8.2	8.9
Average Local Spend			
Per Person Per Trip	\$1,910	\$1,296	\$1,442
Per Person per Day	\$217	\$158	\$162
Total Economic Impact-Per Trip	\$2,801	\$1,959	\$2,321
Total Economic Impact-Per Day	\$318	\$239	\$261

Perception of COVID-19 Impact and Responses

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

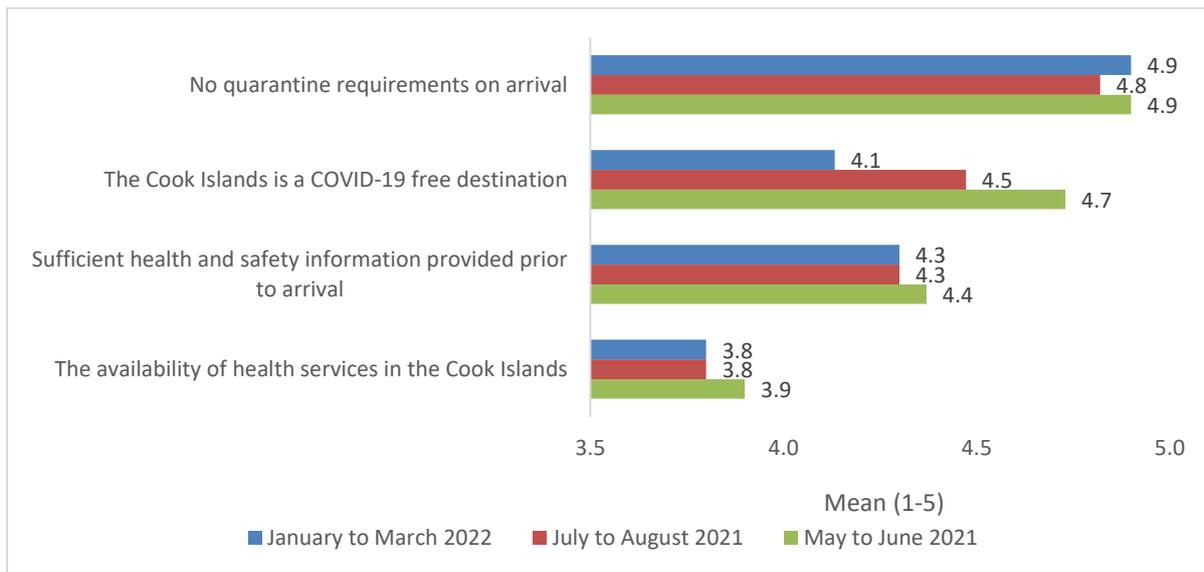
When asked about the important COVID-19 related factors influencing the decision to travel to the Cook Islands, “no quarantine requirement on arrival” was ranked as the most important factor, followed by “sufficient health and safety information provided prior to arrival” (Figure 20).

Figure 20: The important factors in your decision to travel to the Cook Islands (n=955-1,017)



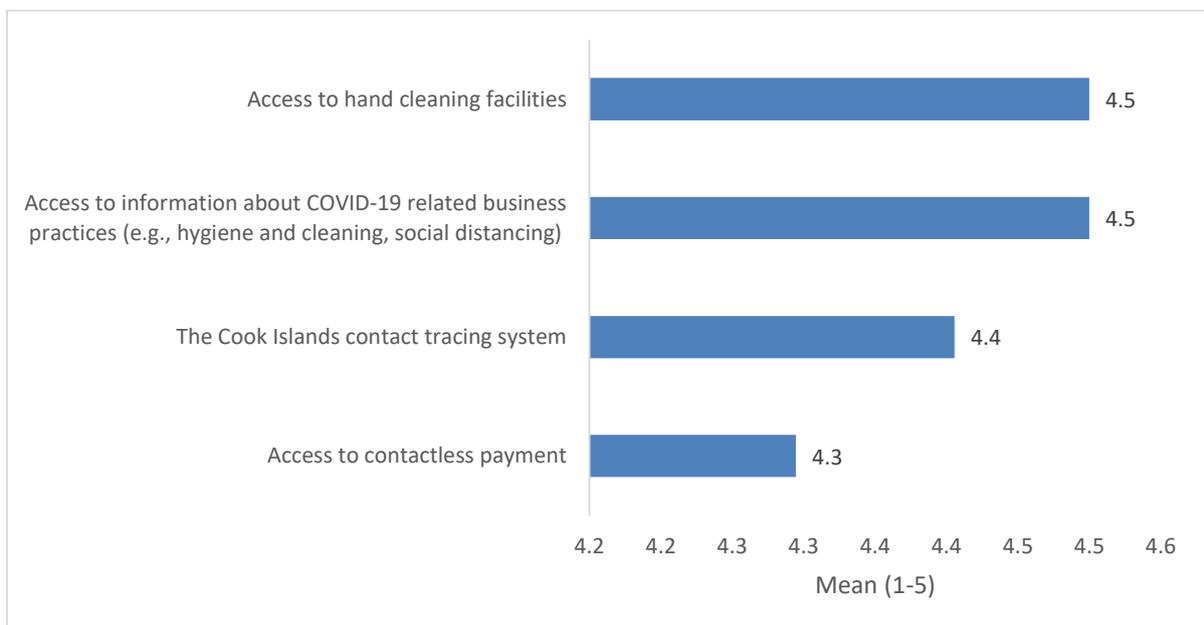
We can see that all factors listed are rated as similarly important by the January to March 2022 visitors when compared to their July to August and May to June 2021 counterparts (Figure 21). The only exception is “the Cook Islands is a COVID-19 free destination” which has fallen considerably in importance.

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



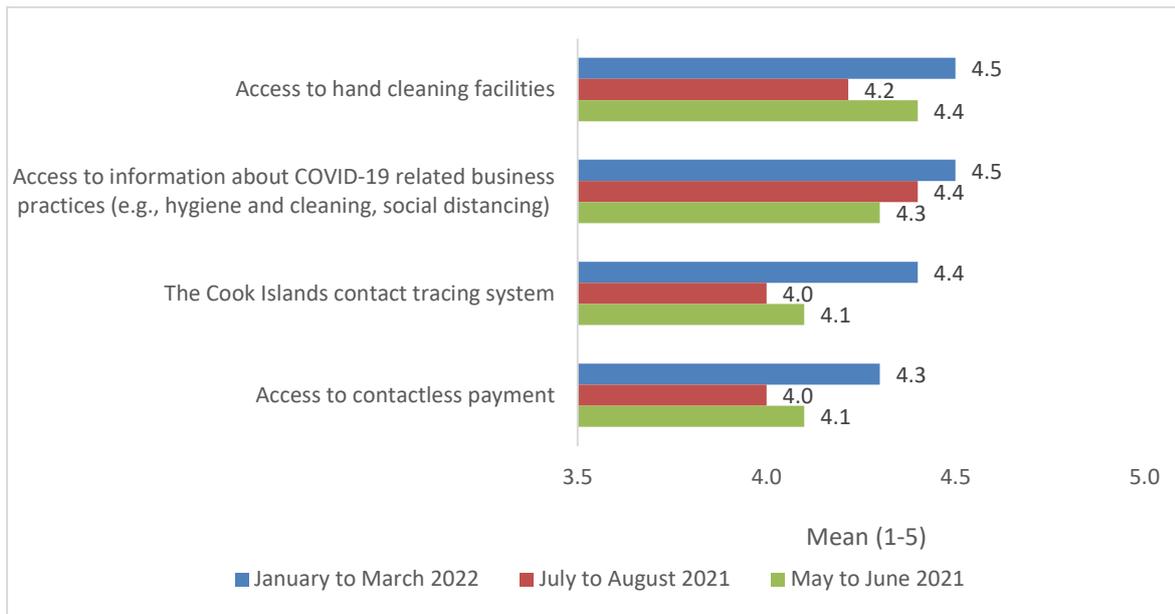
In terms of the COVID-19 responses in the Cook Islands (Figure 22), visitors feel satisfied with access to hand and cleaning facilities (4.5 out of 5), and appreciate easy access to information about COVID-19 related business practices (4.5). Visitors expressed a relatively lower level of satisfaction with access to contactless payment options and with the contact tracing system (both 4.3).

Figure 22: Degree of satisfaction with COVID-19 responses (n=947-1,018)



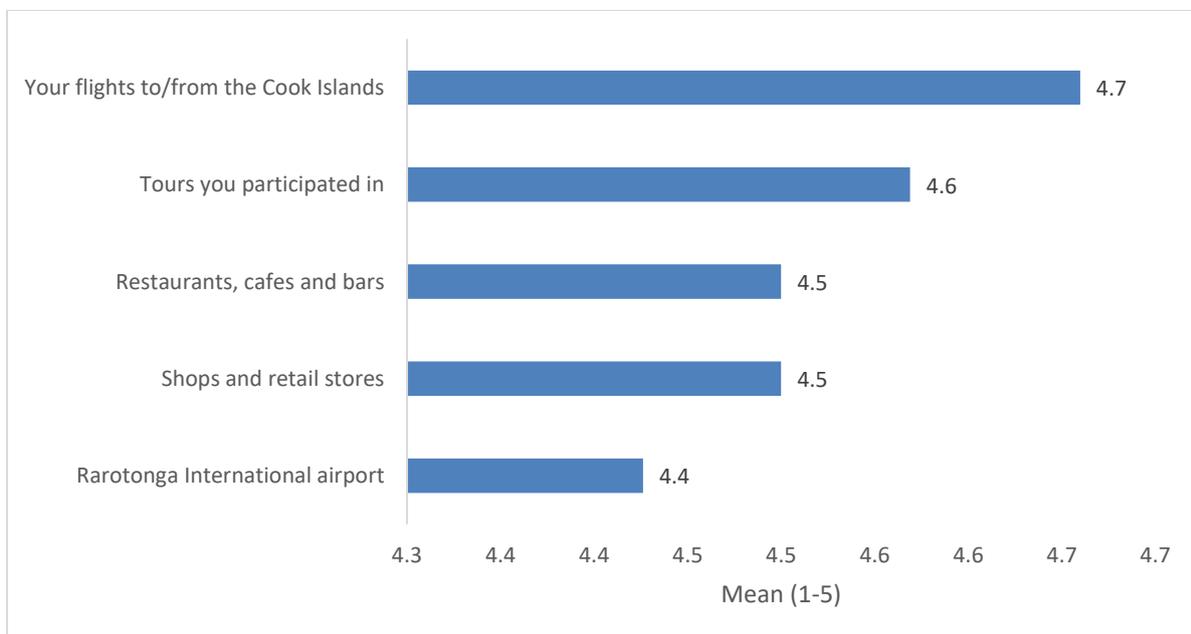
January to March 2022 visitors feel more satisfied with all variables than their May to June and July to August 2021 counterparts (Figure 23).

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



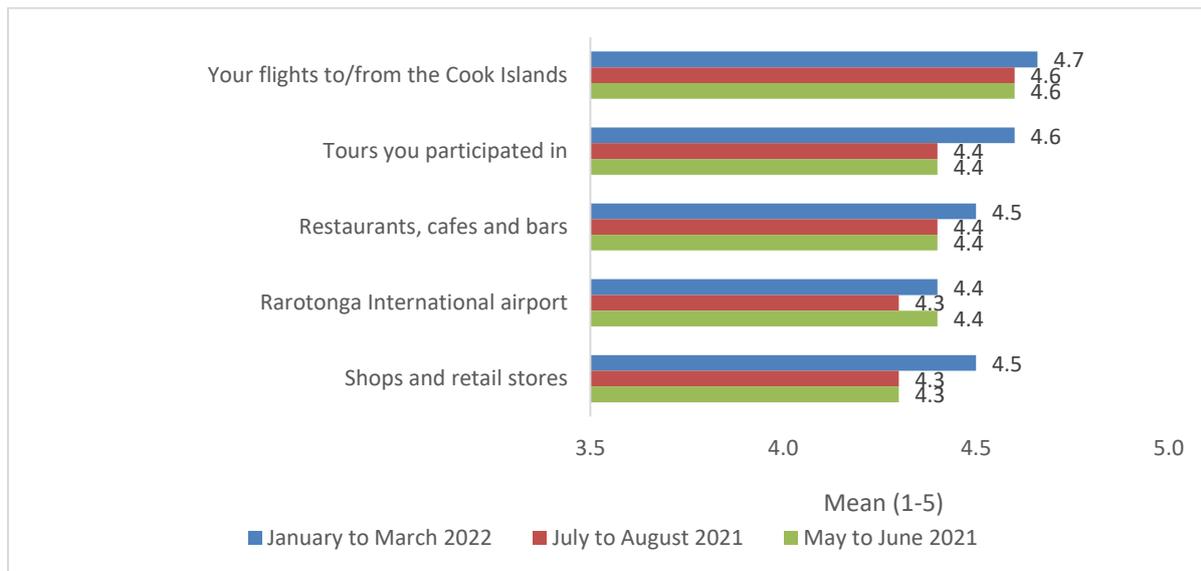
Visitors were asked to rate their level of satisfaction with health and safety measures during their trip to the Cook Islands (Figure 24). Overall, respondents give high scores (all above 4 out of 5) across a range of activities and sectors. The health and safety at Rarotonga International airport received the lowest score (4.4).

Figure 24: Degree of satisfaction with health and safety measures (n=645-1,030)



January to March 2022 visitors generally show higher levels of satisfaction with health and safety measures in the Cook Islands compared to May to June and July to August 2021 visitors. The only exception is Rarotonga International Airport where ratings have remained consistent (Figure 25).

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



A total of 272 respondents provided further comments about their perception of COVID-19 related management during their time in the Cook Islands. Over half (52%) are positive in nature, including: appreciation of the well managed COVID-19 precaution system; appreciation of being able to enjoy the visit; the ease of use of contact tracing system in the Cook Islands. Positive comments include:

Well managed; no issues

“Excellent COVID prevention everywhere.”

“Very organised and thorough processes in place similar to NZ set up. Felt safe.”

“We were one of the first arrivals after the border opened. The island was well organised and very welcoming despite the risks. ”

“Rarotonga is well set up to deal with any COVID 19 related outbreaks. They are very safety conscious.”

“It's amazing how the Cook Islands are trying their best to protect their people from COVID.”

“On the whole I think Rarotonga was making a good effort to adhere to COVID protocol. Mask wearing, signing in and hygiene were all noticeable.”

“Locals took the virus and protocols seriously. Extremely satisfied with the attitude.”

Enjoy the stay

“No feedback other than thank you for one of the best trips. looking forward to going back.”

“Beautiful place and people.”

“It was heaven can’t wait to go back.”

“We appreciate the risks taken to welcome visitors and felt there was a good balance between caution and a relaxed trip.”

Ease of using contact tracing or scanning

“Was impressed by the fact that many shops had someone at the door requiring masks and scanning.”

“Cook Islands tracking system is great. Love how there was a person, or more, standing at the door of retail actually checking your COVID pass. No pass no entry. they need to have this in NZ.”

“Good tag system, very easy when using COVID card. NZ should copy You.”

“The Cooksafe initiative was very good.”

“Easy to use.”

Forty-three percent of comments were negative in nature, including: arrival or departure experiences in Rarotonga airport; concerns over certain COVID-19 protocols; problems using the scanner or the CookSafe app; pre-departure COVID test in NZ; the need for quarantine and concerns about COVID cases in the Cook Islands; and on-flight issues with mask-wearing or on flight distancing”. Negative comments include:

Arrival or departure experience

“The wait at arrival was too long. If someone had COVID we would all have been heavily exposed.”

“The area least protected from COVID was at the airport.”

“Airport arrivals could be better organised.”

“Arrival at Raro Airport was terrible. Took hours to go through checks which had already occurred in NZ as a requirement to get on the flight. Very hot, standing in lines, very close to each other. It was horrible & we were exhausted & felt sick after that experience.”

“Social distancing at airport needed.”

“Rarotonga is a small airport. Long queues of people closely packed and waiting in line in a space without air conditioning while officials work slowly through the COVID process is not a good look for the start of a holiday.”

Poor protocols and concerns

"Information on COVID card not readily available at airport. Would be good for all passengers to be provided one in arriving or in plane."

"... there was not much social distancing."

"All necessary systems were in place. Some tourists didn't always follow systems. Same as NZ!"

"While asking tourists to mask up and sign in it was disappointing to see so many locals not complying."

"Very poor info after being contacted as a close contact."

"General impression was that COVID-19 wasn't being taken seriously."

"Found there to be a complete disregard for such things as mask wearing, social distancing - mainly by other tourists, but by some local staff members too."

Scanner or APP problems

"The tracer app does not work and the blue tooth tracing does not exist so we had to manual sign in with pens and paper, causing risk of spreading germs."

"Many of the contact tracing machines were broken, but we could fill in a sheet instead."

"Cooksafe Tracer app not effective for visitors, had to check in manually which was available everywhere."

"Just using of the Cook Islands COVID tracing in Rarotonga, it was a bit not clear what to do."

"Tracer barcode screen often missing, flat battery or not working."

"Got very stressed and tired doing all COVID related stuff which was often done on computer which my age group not good at."

A further 12% of comments gave constructive suggestions for possible improvements or offered best wishes for the future. Comments include:

"A lot of places were closed or only opening when they could. Meant that a lot of online information was wrong. The night markets were not worth the effort. To get the tourists back, things must be open."

"Would be great to have a tracer app on your phone like we do in NZ so you don't have to keep your piece of paper."

"Very important to the whanau in Rarotonga to protect them from COVID."

Visitor Satisfaction

Visitors were asked to indicate their overall satisfaction with their experience of their visit to the Cook Islands on a scale from 1 'very dissatisfied' to 5 'very satisfied' (Figure 26). Nearly seven in ten (69%) visitors surveyed were 'very satisfied' with their overall experience of the Cook Islands. Very few visitors (2%) were unsatisfied with their visit (giving a score of 2 out of 5 or lower). The percentage of saying they are 'very satisfied' in January to March 2022 is slightly lower than all visitors in January to March 2019 (70%) and NZ visitors of the same period (70%). The average overall satisfaction score is 4.6 which is same to July to August 2021 and slightly lower than May to June 2021 period (4.7).

Figure 26: Overall satisfaction with experience of the Cook Islands (n = 1,045)

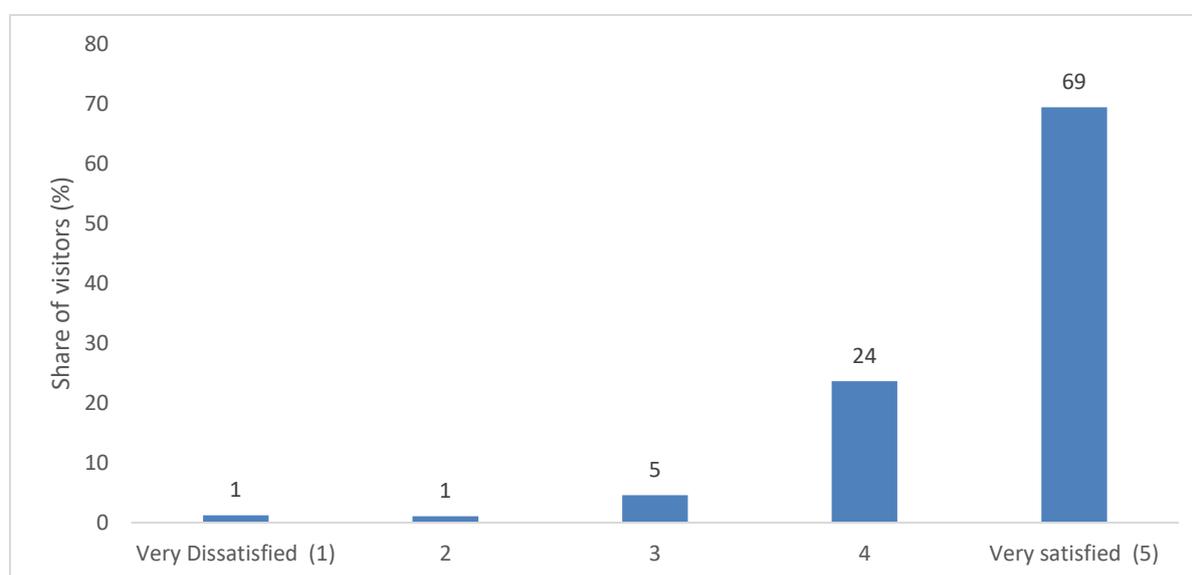


Figure 27 shows the percentage of respondents who undertook specific activities while on their visit to the Cook Islands. Almost all visitors visited a beach (98%) and frequented at least one restaurant or café (98%) during their trip. Most of the respondents either go swimming (96%) or visit a local market (71%), and 84% of visitors have also tried snorkelling.

Visitor satisfaction is generally high with all activities undertaken (almost all providing a rating greater than 4 out of 5) (Figure 28). Activities involving cultural interaction (average satisfaction of 4.5), land-based products (4.5), and shopping (4.5) are rated higher than water-based experiences (4.4). It should be noted here that whale watching, kitesurfing, and Tumunu on Atiu are rated by relatively low numbers of participants (n = 27-32).

Figure 27: Degree of participation in activities (n=27-1,100)

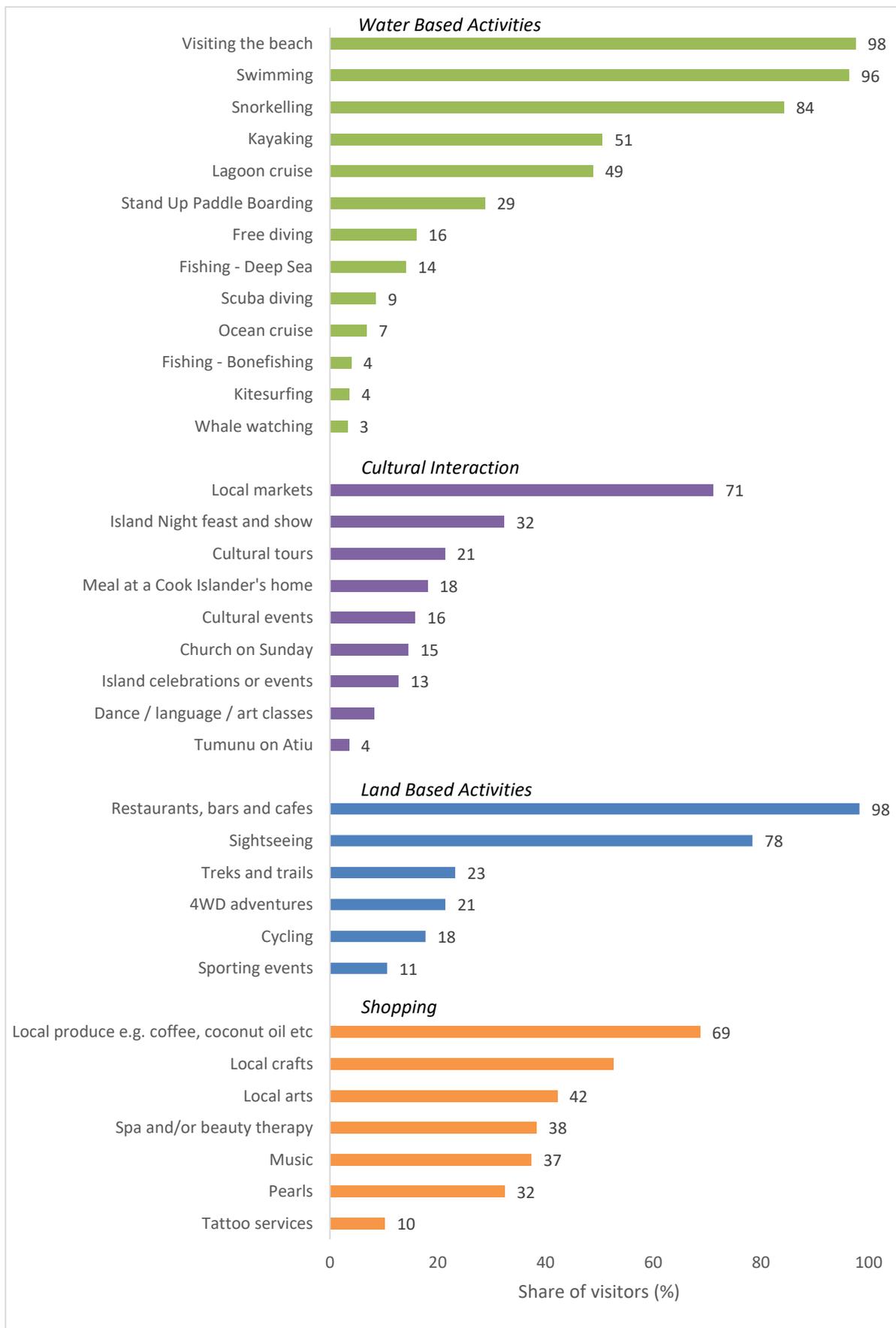
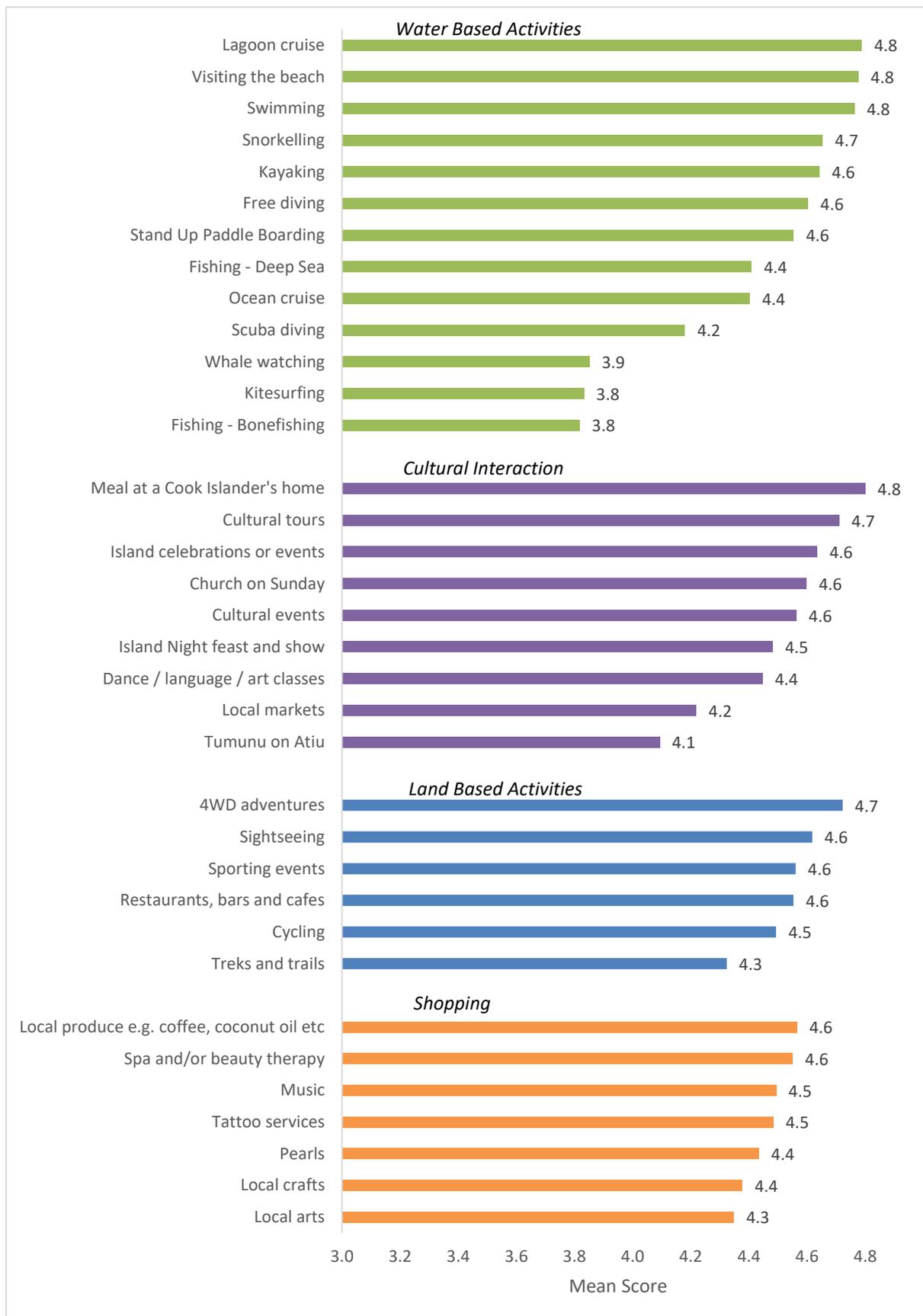


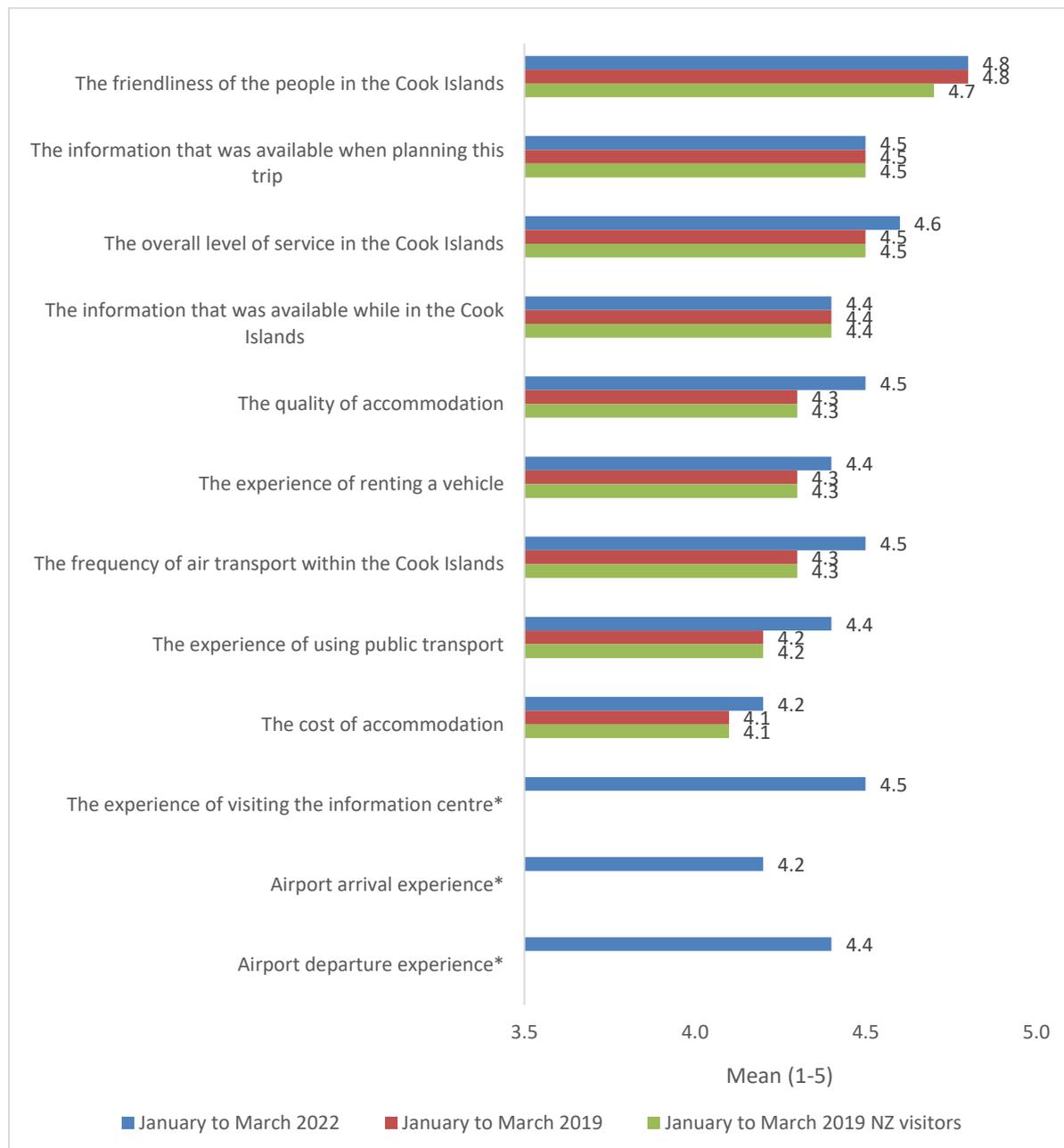
Figure 28: Degree of satisfaction with activities participated in



Visitors were asked to rate their level of satisfaction with nine different statements relating to their most recent visit to the Cook Islands. Responses from the period January to March 2022 are compared to the NZ visitors and all visitors of the same quarter of 2019 (Figure 29).

Respondents consistently highlight the friendliness of the people in the Cook Islands. As seen in the figure below, the degree of satisfaction with the majority of items is higher in January to March 2022 than for the same period in January to March 2019 (NZ visitors and all visitors). Satisfaction with the airport arrival and departure experience and visiting the information centre are new items added from 2021.

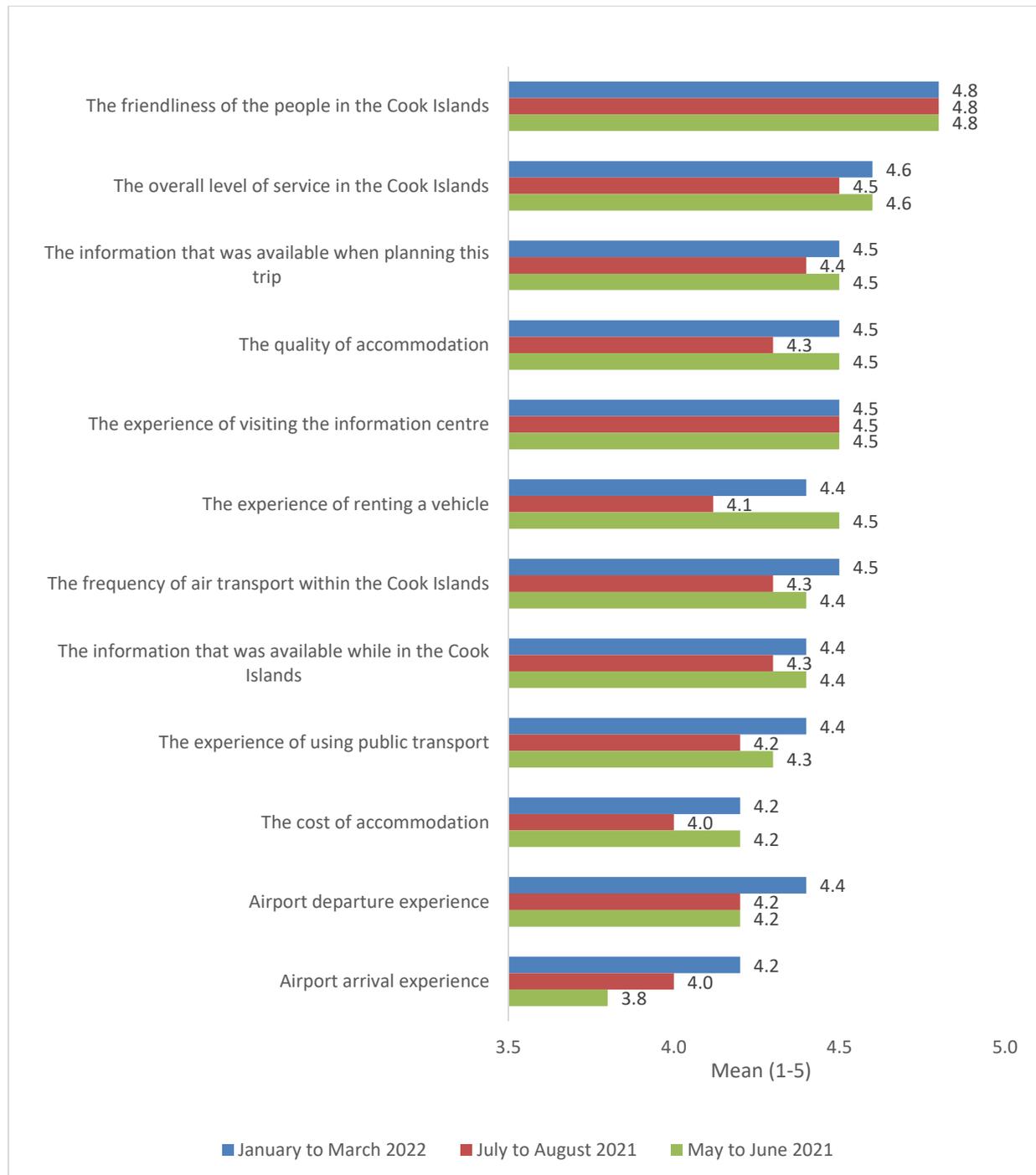
Figure 29: Degree of satisfaction with Cook Islands services – comparison with Q1 2019



Note: * New items from 2021

January to March 2022 visitors show either similar or higher levels of satisfaction with most of the items presented when compared with May to June and July to August 2021 visitors (Figure 30). It is pleasing to see a constant improvement on the airport arrival and departure experiences.

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



Most appealing aspects of the Cook Islands

Visitors were asked “What did you find most attractive or appealing about the Cook Islands on your most recent visit?” (Table 3). The most appealing elements based on their share of total respondent comments are the natural environment (47%), the friendly and welcoming local people (36%), the tourist attractions and activities on offer (28%) and the peacefulness and relaxing atmosphere of the country (21%). Smaller numbers of comments mentioned aspects such as food and beverage (18%), accommodation (8%), level of service (6%), and overall good experience (5%).

Table 3: Most appealing aspects of the Cook Islands (n=1,063)

Themes	Share of respondent comments (%)*
Environment, cleanliness & weather	47
Local people	36
Activities, attractions and entertainment, events	28
Atmosphere	21
Food and beverage	18
Accommodation	8
Level of service	6
Overall good experience	5
Convenience and safety	5
COVID resilience and travel availability	5
Being able to visit family or friends	3
Culture	3
Emotional connection	2
Un-commercial or touristy	2
Price of goods and services	1

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

Environment, cleanliness & weather

The beautiful scenery, natural environment, the beaches and lagoons, and warm weather in the Cook Islands were mentioned by almost half (47%) of respondent comments on the most appealing aspects of their trip. Words like ‘beautiful’, ‘tropical’, ‘tidy’, ‘gorgeous’, and ‘picturesque’ are used 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:

“I love how tidy people keep their property and the island itself. And of course the stunning beaches and water.”

“The warm weather, fabulous semi-cyclone storms.”

"The colours of the vegetation. The warmth. The overall beauty of the reef."

"Everything, the island itself was beautiful."

"Beautiful clean sandy beaches."

"Lovely hot weather for our 2nd week stay."

"The tropical plants and flowers stunning and the beaches breath-taking."

"Picturesque empty beaches."

"Natural beauty. Quality of the water."

"The beautiful views from every beach."

Local people

Over a third (36%) of comments expressed that the warmth and welcoming nature of local people was a most appealing aspect of their travel experience. Key words that dominated the responses include "friendly", "welcoming", "lovely", "beautiful", "helpful", "kind", and "wonderful". The resilience and friendliness of locals despite the challenges of COVID was often mentioned. Comments included:

"I really love the people, so friendly and helpful. There's a real sense of community."

"The people were still friendly and approachable."

"The people were so friendly & humbling for us to be there supporting them after COVID."

"The welcoming of us by the Cook Islanders during our stay."

"Friendliness of everyone. The gratitude of everyone having us supporting the economy."

"The Cook Islanders are some of the most friendly in the world. They are most welcoming."

"The people - no matter where we stay we always find the people are so friendly and accommodating."

"Friendliness of people and people just getting on with life, without complaining."

"Talking to the locals working at Muri Beach resort on how COVID has affected their own families and how they have had to leave the island to get work."

"The people and their kindness from bus drivers to resort staff."

"The warmth, friendliness and generosity of the Cook Islanders."

Activities, attractions, entertainment & events

Activities, attractions, entertainment, and events featured in twenty-eight percent of respondent comments on the most appealing element of their visit. The availability of water related activities including snorkelling, swimming, lagoon cruise, and diving are mentioned frequently. In addition, land-based activities like sightseeing/tours and buggy tours are also mentioned by many respondents. Comments included:

"The great variety of activities and tours we could enjoy."

"The lagoon day trip at Aitutaki."

"The thing I found most appealing was swimming with the turtles because it was an exciting new experience."

"The 4WD experience."

"Swimming activities in the Lagoon at Muri beach."

"Meal & show at the Edgewater."

"Snorkelling in the lagoon, although not as many fish around as a few years ago. We loved the Captain Tamas Lagoon Cruise. Best bang for money."

"Good yoga with at kite sup."

"The rehab bus, the buggies (awesome), relaxing fishing charters, riding around on my scooter."

"Charlottes tour - the tour guides made the whole experience. Massage at spa and massage place."

"Sea scootering with the turtles, kayaking, swimming, walking."

Atmosphere

The Cook Islands is described as a very peaceful, relaxing, and laid-back destination by respondents and this atmosphere is mentioned as an appealing factor in 21% of comments made. Some of the words used to describe the atmosphere in Cook Islands are "relaxing", "peaceful", "calm", "unwind", and "laid back". Comments included:

"Overall feeling of the whole island. So relaxed and friendly. Loved it."

"Not work and a break from real life."

"Peace and tranquillity and easy going."

"Laid back, tropical island vibes - just sand, sea and sun!"

"We take the time we need with the people we meet and the day is very relaxing."

"Peaceful experience of white sandy beaches. Perfect for a week get away from busy, working life."

"Total relaxation."

"Being able to relax and unwind without hustle and bustle of city life."

"Laid back lifestyle."

"The atmosphere & how relaxed everything/everyone was."

Food and beverage

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

"Excellent restaurant meals at the ones that were open."

"Fruit, water and people plus ika mata and coconut donuts and frozen Pina coladas."

"The fabulous food and coffee van thank you."

"Food was amazing with variety."

"Great food although lots of restaurants where closed."

"Missed some of our favourite cafe's not having opened yet but loved being able to pull into hotels/resorts and use their restaurants for brunch etc."

"Beachfront bars where we could have dinner and watch the sun go down."

"All the fresh fruit and produce growing everywhere!"

"The food was wonderful. It has improved so much since I was there last. Prices to eat out were reasonable."

"Visiting the resorts to try different cocktails etc during happy hour."

"Amazingly fresh food"

"The availability of food to buy and the good pricing. It was good to be able to buy our fish fruit etc from the markets or roadside stores."

"The local food was amazing particularly the fish."

Accommodation

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

“The accommodation and host was outstanding!”

“Friendly staff at the Edgewater, excellent customer services and wonderful resort to be at.”

“We had self-catering and also went to gym most days.”

“The little Polynesia had outstanding service, best I’ve seen in the pacific.”

“The relaxation at such a beautiful resort.”

“Staying at the little Poly was fabulous, the staff, food, accommodation made our trip!”

“Our hotel was beautiful, renovations were fantastic.”

“The overall experience at magic reef bungalows. Magical place to stay and the hosts are the best we have ever experienced.”

Level of service

Six percent of visitor comments emphasized the service and local hospitality they experienced as a positive appealing aspect of their visit. The quality of service at the accommodations, restaurants, and tours won recognition from some visitors. Comments included:

“The staff who were amazingly supportive and caring.”

“The staff were very friendly and the service was excellent. We hired a car from Go Cook Islands car rental that exceeded our expectation and was a very smooth process even though we arrived on a Sunday.”

“The staff at the resort and staff at places we went, 10/10.”

“Incredible service by all the friendly bartenders/waiters etc.”

“Helpfulness at tourist centre, and staff running sea scouter tours and mud buggies.”

“Amazing hospitality with the biggest smiles.”

Overall good experience

A number of visitor comments (5%) focused on the ‘overall experience’ when discussing appealing factors. Comments such as “everything” demonstrated the holistic nature of the positive experience gained:

“Everything. Best place in the world.”

“All of it. The beauty of the island, the beauty of the people, the ocean, it was magnificent...”

“Just loved the whole experience.”

“Although many activities like markets weren’t operating yet when we came we still lived the whole experience.”

“We enjoyed every experience we took part in.”

Convenience and safety

The convenience of the Cook Islands as a holiday destination was mentioned a few times, and occasionally there was mention of safety (5%). These usually referred to the currency, ease of travel around the islands, and accessibility from NZ. Comments included:

“The short trip from New Zealand.”

“Easy access around the island.”

“Able to use New Zealand currency was a bonus.”

“Feeling of being in a safe place.”

“Close to home, NZ currency, great beaches and you get to things outside the resort.”

COVID resilience and appreciation of travel availability

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

“Quarantine free travel to a stunning spot.”

“The border opening and being able to return home for a mini holiday. Was good to rest and relax after the last two years with COVID being highly stressful.”

“That the island was free of COVID. That only New Zealand tourists were travelling with strict rules implemented before being able to fly.”

“People happy to have tourists.”

“It was wonderful to visit again after 3 years unable to. I loved that the Cook Islands has reclaimed the country and it is my absolute wish that all future tourists realise it is a privilege to visit; not a right. We must respect this beautiful country, not take it for granted.”

“The fact that we could travel quarantine free from NZ was the biggest attraction

after two years of not being able to go anywhere.”

Being able to visit family or friends

Three percent of the comments discussed links being strengthened with family and friends in the Cook Islands as a most appealing aspect of their visit, expressing their happiness of being able to visit family members after the bubble open. Comments included:

“Seeing my grandchildren.”

“Visiting family and friends after nearly 2 years.”

“Seeing sick father.”

“Spending time with our family.”

“Whanau.”

Culture

Three percent of respondent comments emphasized the 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. Comments included:

“It is a Pacific Island nation with a strong cultural element.”

“Cultural connection - it was the launch point for settlers of Aotearoa (loved the similarities in language!)”

“Experience the Cook Islands culture.”

“The culture is stunning.”

Emotional Connection

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

“It was just so nice to return (15th visit) - feels like coming home. My son in law's first overseas trip, he didn't want to leave and is already planning his return visit!”

“This was my 3rd trip - I love Rarotonga & the people there. I was really excited to bring my husband as I knew he would also love it & agree to return regularly- which he has :)”

“As I have been coming to the Cook Islands for 13 yrs for work and leisure I have many very good friends on the Island and have always found Rarotonga and the Outer Islands a beautiful place to visit and have recommended it to many of my

friends and am currently planning on bring my family over for a 10-day stay.”

Not too commercialised nor touristy

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

“The island was a lot quieter than previous visits which was fantastic for us.”

“Love that there is no big chain food outlets and locals provide food options not multi nationals.”

“Not too many tourists. You don’t need Americans or Aussies.”

“Nice that the resorts were thinly occupied.”

Price of goods and services

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

“The clothing deals.”

“Value for money while visiting.”

“Reasonable prices for dining and dining out.”

“Good value for money.”

Least appealing aspects of the Cook Islands

Visitors were asked: “What did you find least attractive or appealing about the Cook Islands on your most recent visit?”. Table 4 summarizes key themes respondents felt were least appealing. Major themes included the poor weather (16%), issues with public services, facilities and infrastructure (12%), things not being open or fully operational (12%), stray animals and mosquitos (8%), and rubbish and natural environment care (7%).

Table 4: Least appealing aspects of the Cook Islands (n=1,004)

Themes	Share of respondent comments (%)*
Poor weather	16%
Public services and facilities and infrastructure	12%
Not open or not ready for full operation	12%
Stray animals and mosquitos	8%
Rubbish and natural environment care	7%
Attractions and activities	5%
Price of goods and services	5%
Accommodation	4%
Food and beverage	4%
Customer service	3%
Lack of information	3%
Flight related issues	2%
Rental cars or scooters	2%
Labour shortage	1%
Local people	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%.

Poor weather

Sixteen percent (16%) of visitor comments mentioned poor weather while in the Cook Islands. More specifically, visitors complained about the cyclone, rain, wind, and humidity but several also acknowledged that the weather was seasonal and nobody’s fault. Comments included:

“The weather but you can't control that and we knew that. Also find the dog situation very sad and would like to see more awareness with the locals.”

“The weather (tropic depression and lots of rain for a few days).”

“Tropical cyclone.”

“Nothing you can control - just some bad weather!”

“That there was a mini cyclone in the middle of our stay.”

“Unfortunately the cyclone hit a couple of days after our arrival so a number of things we had hoped to do were cancelled understandably for health and safety reasons. This could not have been helped.”

“Cyclone experience but can't help the weather.”

“The cyclone and awful weather that caused us to get stuck an extra night.”

“Tropical storm so was unable to get out and about or to any markets.”

“The weather!!! Rained the entire time!”

Public services, facilities, and infrastructure

Twelve percent of respondent comments mentioned the destination’s public services and facilities as being the least appealing aspects of their Cook Islands experience. Most comments focused on the length of the waiting time at the airport. Other comments include the facilities of the airport, road conditions and water supplies, limited and unreliable public transport, and poor internet connection. Feedback included:

“The long processing at the airport. We were all double checked and proved it in NZ so why do it all again. Processing took over 2 hours and was hot and uncomfortable. We felt like criminals rather than welcomed visitors.”

“I've visited 4 times, and every time the arrival process in the airport is terrible. They need more staff to process visitors more quickly. To be honest it will affect our decision to go back again.”

“The queue in the arrival hall was very long and took a long time to get through with no way to keep cool or social distancing.”

“The airport experience in both directions was poor. The Flight information texted regarding our rescheduled flight was incorrect, there was no one at the airport to assist and there were long queues at both ends.”

“I dislike the processing of people through passport control at the Cook Islands. The length of time that you have to stand waiting in the queue to get through. I have been coming to Rarotonga for the past 20 years and this aspect of the trip has not changed.”

“Arriving at the airport in a huge crowd, being herded like cattle.”

“The long queue in the heat at the airport upon arriving!”

“The main shopping centre and markets were very poor and outdated, the road also is in very very poor condition to cycle around or scooter around.”

"The roads are in bad shape."

"The state of the roads, they are terrible they need to be fixed properly."

"I was disappointed the public busses were very hard to find. It said online they operate every hour clockwise on a Sunday. we waited and waited and nothing. We had to rent a car because we didn't want to be let down again."

"Poor internet service, very long wait in the airport for entry."

"Signage for walks."

"The public transport could be better."

"Some of the road surfaces still need to be upgraded."

"Limited Wifi, no cell phone roaming available."

Not open or not ready for full operation

Another twelve percent of respondent mentioned businesses/attractions in the Cook Islands being 'not open'. Respondents lamented that they would like to spend more time/money, and some activities/services that were not available during their visit. Many visitors expressed that it was understandable because of the COVID impacts. Comments included:

"1st tourists in after COVID not many attractions open."

"Not a lot of cultural events were on."

"No cultural show available. We were on only the 2nd plane landed so understandable."

"Because we were so early after COVID most things not open. Weather was changeable. Not much can be done about weather. Missed the cultural aspect."

"Not a lot was open this time. We have been there 8 times now and I think the same feeling about the place had gone, a lot of the locals didn't really want us back and it came across which we have never felt before."

"Many establishments were not yet geared up for influx of tourists."

"Many of our favourite things to do were not happening. Got the feeling places were still gearing up. Hard to know when they were open."

"A lot of things we went to do were shut still from COVID: Muri night markets, then markets and Te Vaunu Cultural Show. Also because the weather was so bad our Lagoon cruise was cancelled."

"Closed shops, venues, markets because of extreme low pressure cyclone."

"The fact a lot of activities were still not operating."

"Sadly markets not up and running but very understandable with the bad weather and the fact we were one of the first lot of tourists in from NZ since lockdowns."

"The COVID restrictions and the fact that so many restaurants and places were not open yet. We were only the fourth plane to arrive since the border reopening so it was to be expected. We still had a fabulous time."

Stray animals and mosquitos

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

"I really struggled with the number of stray dogs EVERYWHERE we went. They seemed like beautifully natured animals and it broke my heart to see the state they were in and how badly they were treated. I saw a number of local people kicking them for which I was disgusted. I have to say that would probably stop me from returning to Rarotonga."

"Trying to walk around the island with lots of dogs running up and barking at you. quite scary."

"Aggressive dogs on Rarotonga (was chased and attacked)."

"Unfortunately there were packs of dogs roaming on the beach again, this was resolved the last few times we visited."

"There were more bugs (e.g. mosquitos) than usual, I think following the recent floods."

"The mosquitoes."

"The roosters."

Rubbish and natural environment care

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

“Noticing more rubbish on beaches and public spaces compared to previous visits.”

“I was disappointed by the amount of glass on the beaches, there has not been tourism for a long time now so cannot all be left by tourists. Look after what you have it is extremely precious.”

“The plastic, the single use cups, the lack of encouragement to use your own BYO cups, containers etc.”

“I the environment and I’m particular, Muri Lagoon has degraded significantly.”

“Pollution around Muri and dead corals in lagoon.”

“Muri Lagoon - sea slugs and sad state of lagoon.”

“The coral degradation in the lagoon was disappointing to see.”

“People burning garbage on the island.”

“Would like to have seen more rubbish bins around the island especially by the water fall as there was a lot of rubbish which was sad to see.”

“Face masks tossed on the ground.”

“The rubbish on the beach and side of roads.”

Attractions and activities

Five percent of respondent comments mentioned attractions and activities as the least appealing aspect of their Cook Islands visit. Their concerns focused on the limited range of attractions and activities available, and poor activity experience (snorkelling, swimming, fishing, etc.). Many visitors complained that they could not participate more activities because the businesses were not open or fully open due to the COVID impacts. Comments included:

“The lack of activities in Aitutaki a lot of tours/excursions were not available.”

“Because we were so early after COVID most things not open...Missed the cultural

aspect.”

“Lack of information on fishing charter costs for single people.”

“Range of options available were few as most facilities were not yet operational (e.g. cultural nights, some of the lagoon cruises). Massages were all booked out.”

“Hotel staff were not very aware of what tourist activities were still operational and what food places were open or closed.”

“Lack of things to do and what was available was only running one or two days a week.”

“Lack of night cultural shows.”

Price of goods and services

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

“There were a couple of times we felt we were overcharged, and the attitude was ‘its ok they are tourists not from here and can afford it’.”

“The price of basic foods in the supermarket.”

“Accommodation costs.”

“The prices of restaurants and limited availability of local foods.”

“Costs of food items.”

“Very expensive compared to other options (when they are available eg Hawaii).”

Accommodation

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

“Accommodation cost and quality.”

“The lack of maintenance of my hotel and hotel service.”

“The property which we were staying at was in a state of being repaired, which we

did not know, and the price we paid should have partially reflected this.”

“Out accommodation on Aitutaki had clearly suffered through COVID. Pillows were musty. Tea bags in room were musty and old. However fresh fruit and cheerful staff offset these minor things and we completely understood the impact on COVID.”

“Lots of mosquitoes and bugs indoors (in accommodation).”

“Maintenance in accommodation.”

Food and beverage

Another four percent of respondent comments noted that food and beverage offerings in the Cook Islands were a least appealing aspect of their visit. Comments tended to focus on the limited food choices, the high prices and lack of local produce. Comments included:

“Limited casual food available on Aitutaki.”

“Variety of the food was uniformly disappointing. Menus even at the five-star resorts were very similar.”

“COVID having an effect on goods available and restaurants not open.”

“Cuisine, didn't find much in the way of island fare, and really struggled to get local beer.”

“The food places were disappointing compared to previous several times.”

“Lack of fresh fish available in Aitutaki.”

Customer service

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

“Not that it can be controlled, but the understaffing in many areas meant long waiting times.”

“Some of service providers are not friendly.”

“Some shop assistants think we are locals (we are Māori from NZ) and expect us to know what to do. The way they speak to us is quite abrupt/rude as if we were to know better.”

“The immigration lady who we had the misfortune of dealing with. She was absolutely revolting and totally unprofessional. However, I hasten to add, all other airport staff were just great and so were all the other people we met on the island. I have several resident friends who always look after us and spoil us on our visits.”

“The locals providing service were particularly rude and unwelcoming.”

Lack of information

A lack of available information was mentioned by three percent of visitor comments. Areas discussed included: information updates since COVID-19, lacking included transportation, activities and safety signs. Comments included:

“Because things were not yet opened up, it was very difficult to get suitable information on what was open. This of course made it very difficult to support the local people. I found tipping heavily on leaving was the only way to guarantee locals got the boost I went to support them really.”

“The pandemic has impacted many businesses in the Cooks, some of the websites of local businesses were out of date. eg opening times and availability of services eg bike hire.”

“Very difficult to find adequate information on how to meet the pre-departure requirements. Was very sad to see returning family's being turned away at the NZ airport as they did not realise they had not met the requirements (i.e. document giving full information on their pre-departure swabs).”

“We rented a van, No one at the rental place explained to us that there was a cyclone coming and its not recommended to park under trees (which is something the locals would know ‘what not to do’). This would have been valuable information. The resort could've improvised with the bad weather and organised fun cultural night or Karaoke or even a night of card game or history. They also seemed very short staffed.”

“It was a little trickier than other times to access information about opening times/days & menus. I have dietary allergies so it would have been great to access this information really easily like before.”

Flight related issues

Two percent of comments mentioned flight related issues as the least appealing aspect of the visit to the Cook Islands. Visitors mentioned flight cancellations, COVID-19 testing requirements, airport arrival and departures. Comments included:

“The hoops we had to jump through to get on the plane, the fact that the rules for travel with Air NZ kept changing, the 48 hours to get a PCR test result which actually you have to get in way less because of the flight times (we were at the airport at 6.15am to travel, the testing place wasn't open that early so had to get written results the night before) the fact that these places are charging around \$300 per person and even then taking no responsibility for getting the results on time, failing to put times on the results so being told we couldn't travel, seeing others in tears as they weren't allowed on the plane etc etc. All in all a very stressful situation that could be handled much better with clear rules and guidance.”

“Air New Zealand from Auckland were really difficult to deal with, made the experience such a stressful way to travel.”

“The cyclone and flight cancellations causing a lot of stress.”

Rental cars or scooters

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

“The 4WD quad bikes were old and broke down a lot, needs government funding to get decent new ones, it only turns away the tourists.”

“Car rent was very poor and the car was unsafe.”

“The process to go through to get a scooter license when already have a learners license from NZ.”

Labour shortage

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

“Under staffed but understandable in COVID times”

“Activities weren't operating due to lack of staff...”

“Staff leaving to come to NZ because of the low minimum wage in Rarotonga so Pilipino taking their place who are friendly and efficient but can never be the same as local Rarotongan's.”

Local people

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

“Mixed feeling from locals happy to see us, then those that weren’t. Unfortunately, not everyone was friendly and they showed that with disdain. The amount of staff was an issue at most places, we understand though as really tough time for getting people to work as there was a lot coming to NZ for work. We felt for you and didn’t like to be petty or too annoying with requests while we were there.”

“The people. Encountered the rudest people who seem very anti tourists. This attitude was confirmed by other people we spoke to. Even a kid yelled out at us you bring the COVID when we first arrived.”

“We found that some locals weren’t the happiest to have us on numerous occasions.”

Suggestions for improvements

When asked if there was anything that could have improved their visit to the Cook Islands 44% of visitors took the time to make a comment. Suggestions mentioned by respondents focused on public services and infrastructure, mainly airport arrival and departure processes (24%), businesses fully operational (14%), , the need for better information (11%), quality and price of food & drinks (10%), the need for more entertainment, activities, transport (9%), safety and animal care (9%), better value for money (7%), the attitudes of locals and customer services (6%), availability, accommodation (6%), COVID practices (5%), and suggestions on flights (1%) and booking prior to arrival (4%). Comments on these themes included:

“No night bus, we understand it wasn’t worth having as the border had just opened.”

“Airline information regarding flight cancellation and rescheduling. The arrivals area being faster at the I ternary I always airport. Over an hour to clear customs in the heat with small children is terrible.”

“The ability to have a COVID test that didn't cost up to \$350 per person. This doesn't actually stop you bringing the virus into the Cook Islands, because within the 47 hours after you are tested you don't isolate at home, you can go to work, on public transport or into a shopping mall and catch the virus before leaving the country.”

“The Cooksafe app was not always available around the island because of internet cover. On departure back to NZ we couldn’t show our health certificate because there was no internet going at the time of check in. Our records were held in cloud storage and could not be accessed.”

“More information on the COVID card that wasn't very clear online that is and app and a card.”

“Cafes and restaurants open on the days they advertise to be operating. A number of times we were caught out where a few operators did not open, even though the information with their new operating hours listed them as open.”

“Given the anticipated return as a holiday destination, I feel more could have been done to ensure all attractions, restaurants and facilities were open to enhance the holiday opportunity.”

“An update on your website of what businesses are operating and their hours to save many phone calls.”

“We had booked to go to Aitutaki but unfortunately due to the COVID case our trip was cancelled. Air Rarotonga made no attempt to contact us to let us know and left us standing at the pickup for over an hour. We ended up driving ourselves to the

airport to find everything was closed and cancelled. We were not the only ones who did the same. It would have been nice to of been contacted."

"Make it more known that people can be in a quarantine predicament due to being close contacts as what happened with us. The advertising keeps saying 'no quarantine' which is largely true however if you are in the unfortunate situation we found ourselves in, we had to quarantine. It was a waste of a holiday."

"Improving the isolation process. I understand that TMO resources and staff can be exhausted in this time but communication needs to be improved on their side."

"Maybe some local food to be served at restaurant like seafood, breadfruits, cooked banana and plantain and to offer tourist the richness of Rarotonga and its local food and seafood."

"...and better system for getting scooter licences, I think something to do online before you travel and then arrive to do practical. Our tests all up took 4 hours so imagine if it had been busy?"

"A commercial zip line in the hills would be great as there is limited / nothing to do besides relax at the beach or snorkel. need a non water-based tourist activity. also need an upmarket day club or bar."

"It was really hard to work out where good snorkelling was for those who want to snorkel without a tour. Kept getting pointed to Muri which is dangerous swimming and not good snorkelling. Should promote fruits of Rarotonga and similar."

"People stop walking all over the coral in Muri lagoon its killing the coral and making snorkelling very poor, you're killing your main attraction."

"Significant changes need to be made with a focus, on restoring and protecting the marine life in the lagoon. This could be a huge tourist attraction but was a by disappointing."

"Total fishing ban in the stressed and dishevelled lagoon. More conservation effort and better management of tourists (they don't know they are harming the lagoon unless you tell them)."

"I think overall affordability of the accommodation offering will be a challenge as other international options become accessible to NZ as I don't think the Value prop position is right. Quality vs value is not evident."

"Things were a bit slow at the resort but we could see everyone was over worked. People were happy to wait, be kind."

“Customer services in general could be improved. Would rate 5/10 for customer service.”

“I feel that if attitudes don’t change when the world reopens people will choose places like Bali and Thailand over Rarotonga.”

Reasons to return to the Cook Islands and recommend to others

Nearly all visitors (96%) indicated that they would consider re-visiting the Cook Islands in the future. This figure is higher than in the same quarter of 2019 (NZ - 94%, all visitors - 93%). Of the four percent of visitors who indicated they would not want to return to the Cook Islands, the majority stated that did not wish to return because the perceived poor value for money, high cost for PCR test, and wanting to explore more destinations in future. Comments included:

“Accommodation too expensive also restaurants not good enough quality.”

“Didn’t feel very well treated. Rarotongans are not making much effort for tourists.”

“Not for a long time. It may be the time of year; this is our third time and the weather is really average on all occasions. Raro itself is pretty run down, the people are great. Would recommend Aitutaki and the Pacific Resort to friends. Only went due to the travel bubble.”

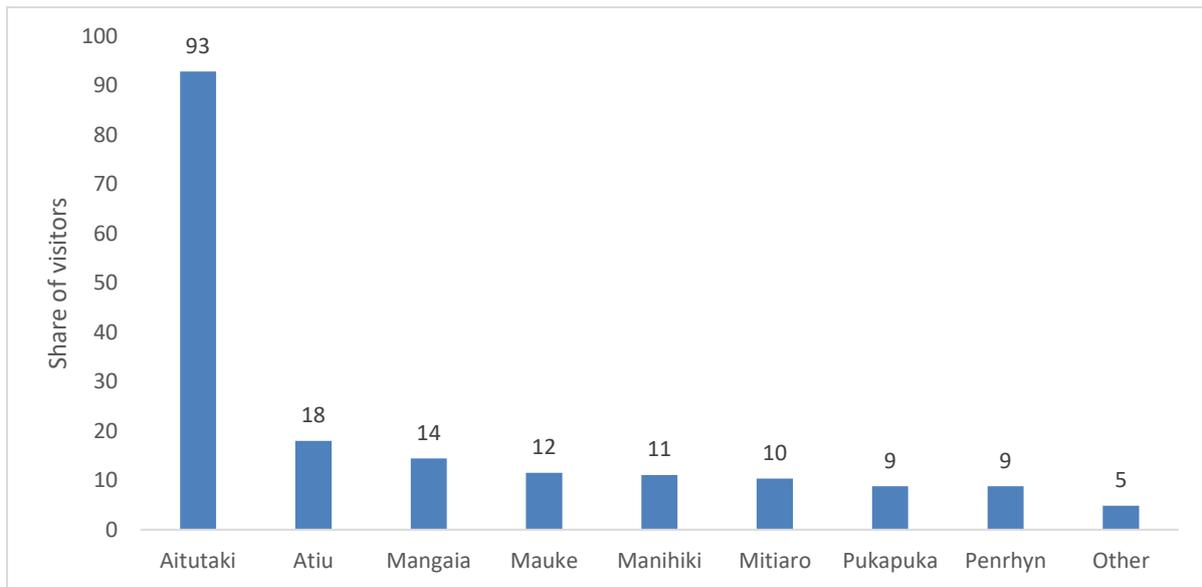
“Not if there is still the added cost of a PCR test.”

“This was our second trip. The first a few years ago we found to not be too much to our liking. We found Rarotonga to be not well maintained and the level of restaurants offering generally low level food quality and service and we didn’t like the many dogs peeing on people sitting at beach bars and barking at us as we walked along the beaches. This time we stayed at Aitutaki which we liked better, however compared to other destinations like Thailand, it seems the locals aren’t really interested in investing in themselves as the quality and affordability of better accommodation, food and service in Thailand leaves Rarotonga in the dark ages.”

“Too many other places on the planet to visit and Cook Islands have much to do to get back up to a value for money standard.”

Over half (54%) of the visitors among those who said they would return stated that they would definitely include the outer islands on their next visit. A further 42% of visitors indicated they would “maybe” visit outer islands next time. Of those who said they may visit outer islands the next time, most (93%) mentioned they would like to include Aitutaki. Atiu was the second most mentioned island at 18% (Figure 31).

Figure 31: Islands that visitors said they would include on their next visit (n=928)



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

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

“No marine life and sad state of conservation.”

“No, we been there twice and tried the main Island and Aitutaki, but we’re unlikely to return and recommend to anyone. In fact one of our friends called us regarding our recent Rarotongan trip and we didn’t recommend.”

“Not really the Cook Island is not really too much different to where I live and due to the weather I was unable to do anything on my wish list and I ended up saving about \$2000 that I had to spend on activities I wanted to do.”

“Not until COVID is sorted it was a big effort to get there, swabs, paperwork, moved flight costs etc. The place was looking a little run down compared to the photos for advertising and there wasn’t much to do as mostly closed due to COVID and weather.”

“Yes I would recommend this but we are warning everyone about the PCR costs and extra admin.”

Final Observations

This report shows that the Cook Islands tourism industry performed extremely well during the survey period of January to March 2022. Overall visitor satisfaction levels and the desire to recommend the destination to others have remained consistently high and even increased slightly. Clearly the destination is making a generally positive impression on visitors. Visitor spend has also increased dramatically from the same quarter in 2019.

Despite the overall positive performance, this report highlights that there is room to enhance the visitor experience and to increase the economic yield and broader community benefits associated with tourism. Bad weather, for example, highlighted again the importance of having alternative product offerings available, and business closures mean that increases in visitor spend could have been even higher.

Visitors were generally impressed with COVID protocols and procedures. While the research highlights some issues, for example, long waiting times during the arrival process at the airport, it is pleasing to see levels of COVID-related satisfaction improving over the period since May 2021

It is vital to continue to build on this overall positive industry performance and to convert it into even greater economic benefits for local people. It is critical to now find ways to build on and develop the visitor experience in a manner that enhances local economic linkages.

This report reinforces the fact that cost effective on-line research can generate information that is of value to both the tourism industry and government policy makers. As the survey continues we will be able to explore in more detail on the characteristics of different market segments as they return to the Cook islands and the overall impacts and performance of the industry.