

The Cook Islands Visitor Survey Results

July – September 2018

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 July and 30 September 2018. The data presented is collected from an online departure survey (<http://www.mycookislandsvisit.com>). There were 1,377 individual respondents to the survey - representing a total of 2,799 adults and 585 children in the expenditure analysis (this equates to 6% of all visitors during the period – based on the same period of 2018 visitor arrival data from the Cook Islands Statistics Office).

Nearly three quarters (73%) of visitors surveyed come from New Zealand, 15% come from Australia. Visitors are well educated (67% of visitors have some form of tertiary education) with a relatively high annual household income (52% earn over NZ\$100,000 per year). Nearly two in five of the visitors (37%) travel with one companion. Solo travellers are less common (11%).

Nearly three in five of those surveyed (56%) are first time visitors to the Cook Islands, a further 26% have visited twice or three times before. The main purpose of visit is holiday-making (79%). The average length of stay in the Cook Islands is 8.3 nights. The majority of visitors (95%) stay either one or two weeks. Nearly a fifth of visitors surveyed visited Aitutaki (18%).

Visitor spend prior to arrival in the Cook Islands (\$1,885 per person) has decreased slightly from the 2017/2018 annual average (\$1,967 per person) and the same quarter of 2017 (\$1,911). Spend on the island (per person per day) is \$165. This spend is significantly higher than the 2017/2018 annual average of \$149, and the same quarter for the previous year (\$138 for July to September 2017).

The average local spend per visitor during the entirety of their stay is \$1,370. When pre-paid spend and the local spend are combined, it is estimated that each visitor brings \$2,124 to the Cook Islands economy (or approximately \$256 per day). This figure is higher than the \$2,040 average for 2017/18 and the \$1,906 for the same quarter last year (July to September 2017).

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

The future intentions of visitors remain similar to those seen in the previous year: 91% of those surveyed state that they want to return to the Cook Islands, and 96% would recommend the country to friends or family.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	ii
Executive Summary.....	iii
Introduction	1
Visitor Characteristics	2
Information Sources and Purchasing Behaviour	10
Visitor Expenditure	13
Visitor Satisfaction	17
Most appealing aspects of the Cook Islands.....	21
Least appealing aspects of the Cook Islands.....	31
Suggestions to improve the visit to the Cook Islands	43
Reasons to return to the Cook Islands and recommend to others.....	45
Final observations	46

Figures and Tables

Figure 1: Country of origin (n = 1213).....	2
Figure 2: New Zealand visitors (n = 882).....	2
Figure 3: Australia visitors (n = 176)	3
Figure 4: Distribution of age and gender (n = 1249).....	3
Figure 5: Highest qualification (n = 1248).....	4
Figure 6: Annual household income in NZD (n = 975)	4
Figure 7: Main purpose of visit (n = 1377).....	5
Figure 8: Travelling with whom? (n = 1812)	5
Figure 9: Number of companions on trip (n = 1112)	6
Figure 10: Number of visits to the Cook Islands (n = 1377).....	6
Figure 11: Number of previous visits to the Cook Islands – country breakdown	7
Figure 12: Length of stay in nights (n = 1345).....	7
Figure 13: Mode of transport (n = 1409)	8
Figure 14: Visited Islands (n = 1634)	8
Figure 15: Average length of stay in the Cook Islands and on each island (n = 3-1345)	9
Figure 16: How did you find out about Cook Islands as a destination (n = 1374).....	10
Figure 17: How did you find out about Cook Islands as a destination – country breakdown.	11
Figure 18: Importance of information source used when planning your trip (n = 960).....	12
Figure 19: How did you purchase your travel to the Cook Islands (n = 1372).....	12
Figure 20: Amount of money spent per person prior to arrival (n = 1005).....	13
Figure 21: Items included in money spent prior to arrival	14
Figure 22: Overall satisfaction with experience of the Cook Islands (n = 1253)	17
Figure 23: Degree of participation in activities (n range = 32-1332).....	18
Figure 24: Degree of satisfaction with activities participated in (mean score out of 5)	19
Figure 25: Degree of satisfaction with Cook Islands services (mean score out of 5)	20
Table 1: Average visitor expenditure in the Cook Islands (per person per day)	15
Table 2: Average expenditure per visitor per day by country of origin.....	15
Table 3: Most appealing aspects of the Cook Islands (n=1266)	21
Table 4: Least appealing aspects of the Cook Islands (n=1154)	31

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 the 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 has run since mid-2012 and is continuing through 2019.

This report presents the results from July to September 2018. Over this three-month period, 7,179 visitors were contacted by email to take part in the survey, and 1,377 responses were received: a conversion rate of 19%. The conversion rate for this period is higher than the 2017/18 annual average (14%) and also the July to September 2017 quarter (16%). These responses cover a total of 2,799 adults and 585 children and it is this number that is used for the visitor spend analysis.

The data presented includes detailed information on:

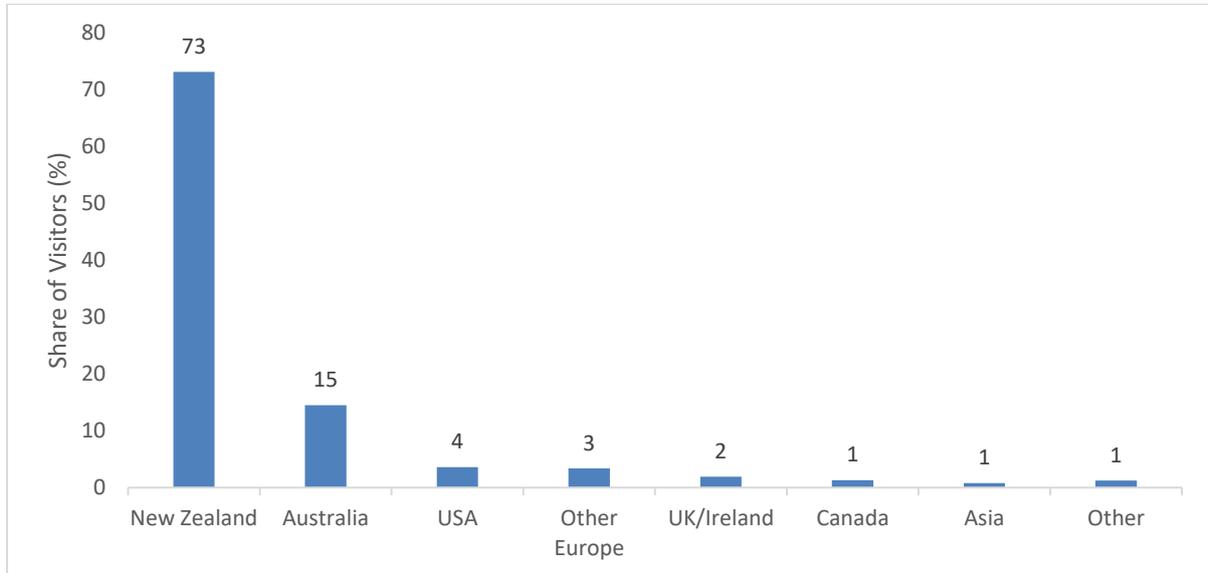
- The characteristics of visitors to the Cook Islands (age, gender, education, country of origin, income, purpose of visit, travelling companions, number of previous visits, length of stay, airline used, islands visited)
- Visitor information obtained about the Cook Islands, the factors influencing in 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 2017/18 annual averages or the 2017 July to September quarterly findings these figures are highlighted in the discussion that follows.

Visitor Characteristics

Nearly three quarters (73%) of the visitors surveyed come from New Zealand (Figure 1). The second largest visitor group is from Australia (15%). USA, other Europe, and UK/Ireland represent the other main source markets.

Figure 1: Country of origin (n = 1213)



Auckland, Canterbury, Waikato, Wellington, and Bay of Plenty account for 71% of New Zealand visitors. For visitors from Australia, the regions of New South Wales, Queensland, and Victoria generate the highest numbers of arrivals (85%) (Figure 2-3).

Figure 2: New Zealand visitors (n = 882)

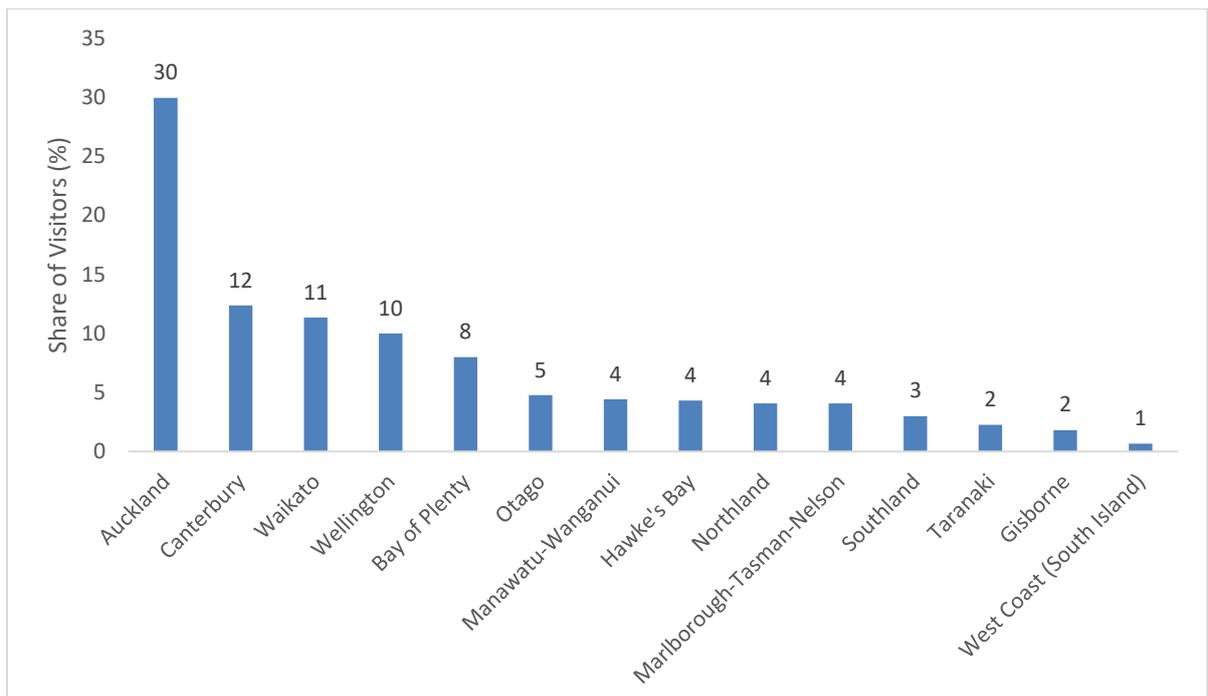
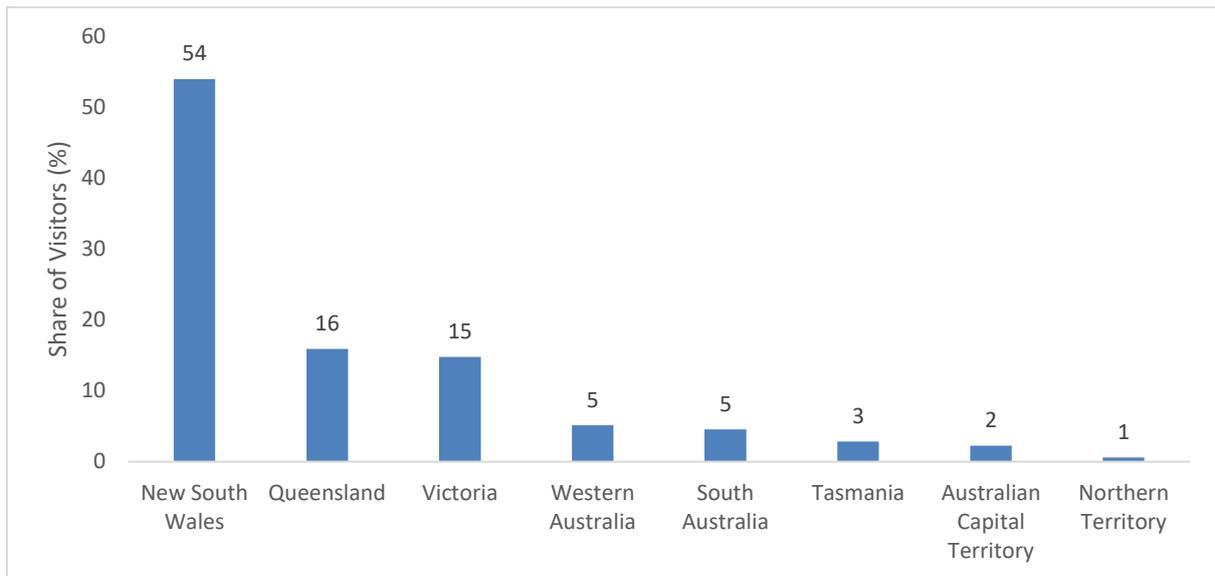
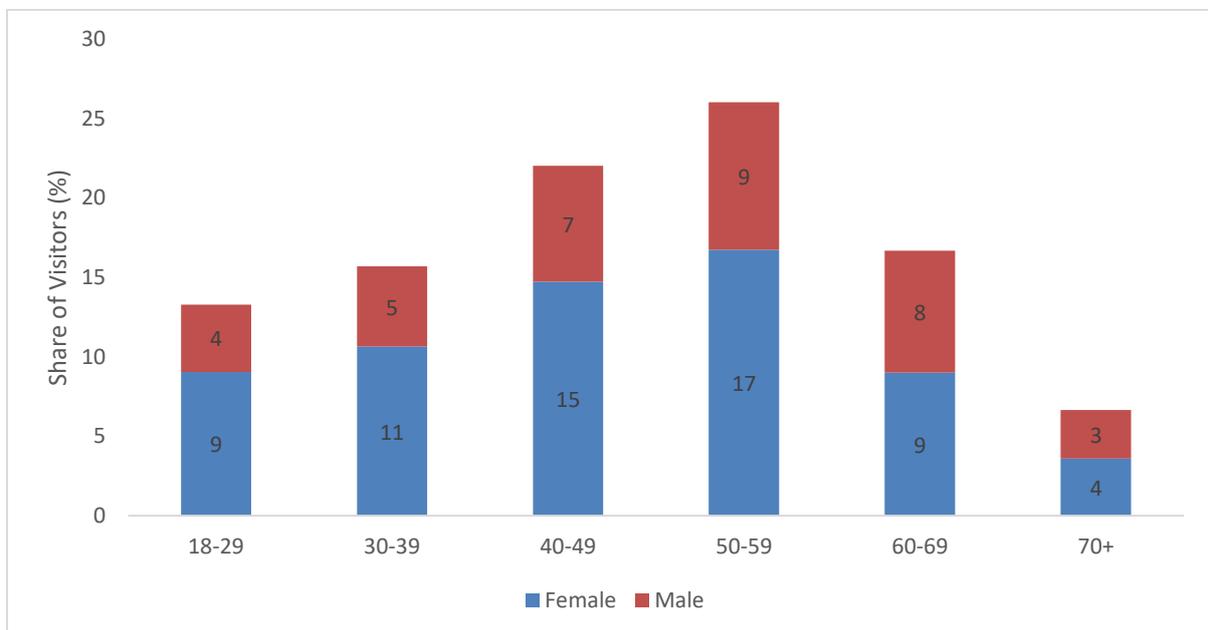


Figure 3: Australia visitors (n = 176)



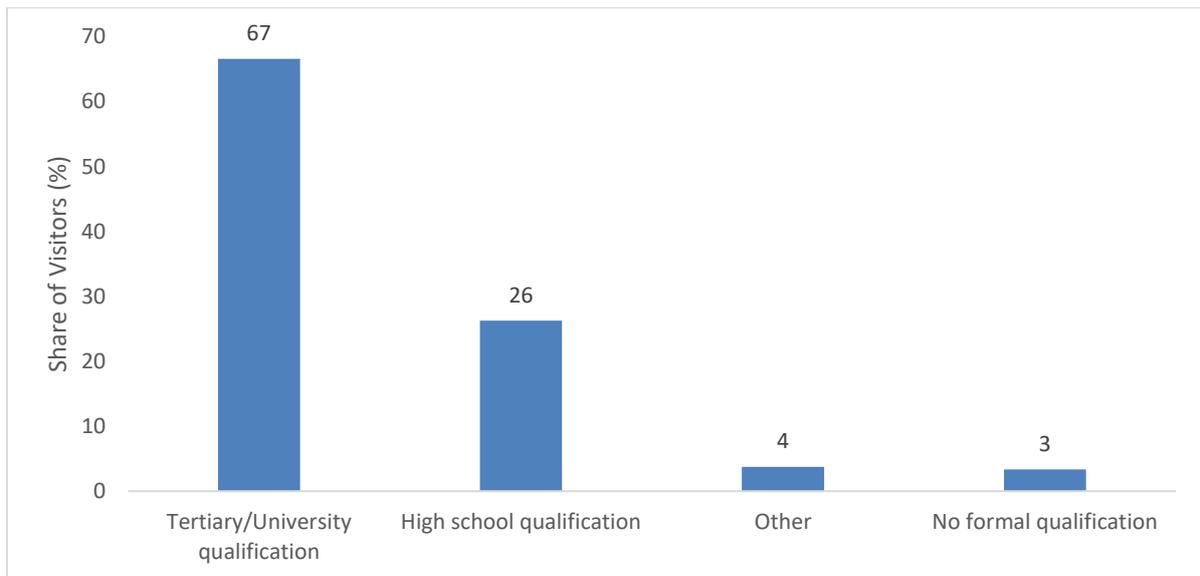
More women (63%) than men (37%) completed the survey (Figure 4). The most significant age categories are the 50 to 59 year (26%) grouping, the 40 to 49 year (22%) grouping, followed by those aged 60 to 69 (16%), 30 to 39 (16%), and 18 to 29 (13%). There are relatively few travellers in the 70 plus age bracket (7%).

Figure 4: Distribution of age and gender (n = 1249)



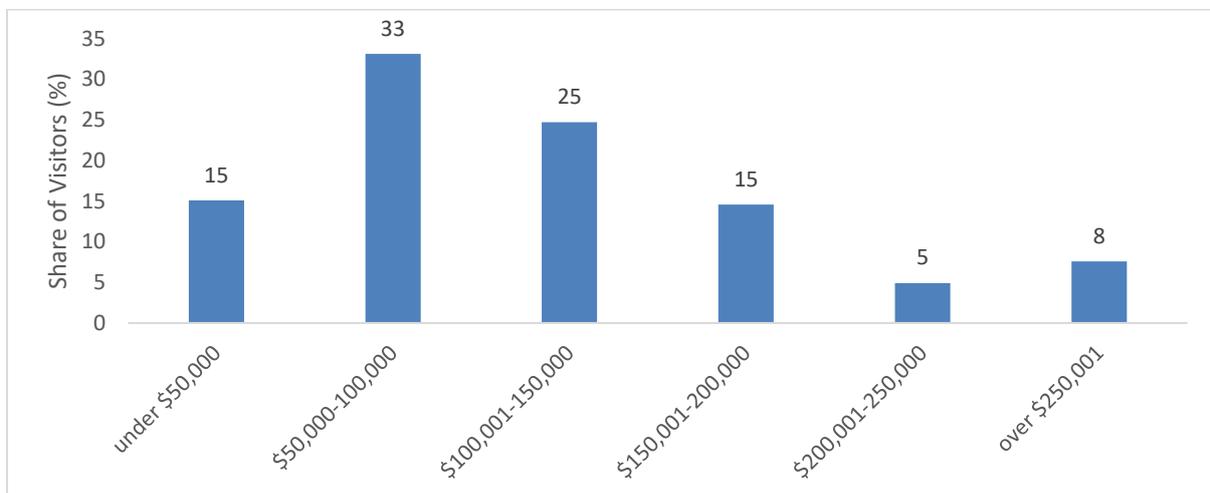
Visitors are well educated with over two-thirds (67%) of those surveyed having some form of tertiary qualification, and a further 26% having completed a high school education (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Highest qualification (n = 1248)



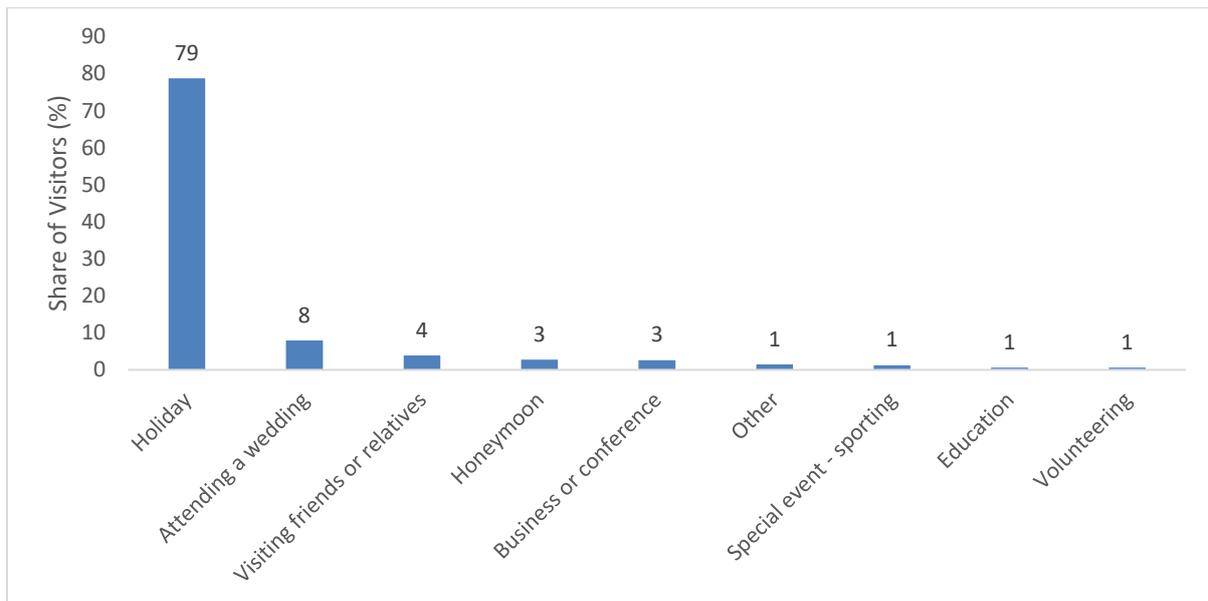
A third of visitors (33%) have an annual household income of between NZ\$50,001 and NZ\$100,000. A quarter (25%) of those surveyed earn between NZ\$100,001 and NZ\$150,000. A further 28% of respondents have a household income of over NZ\$150,000 per year (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Annual household income in NZD (n = 975)



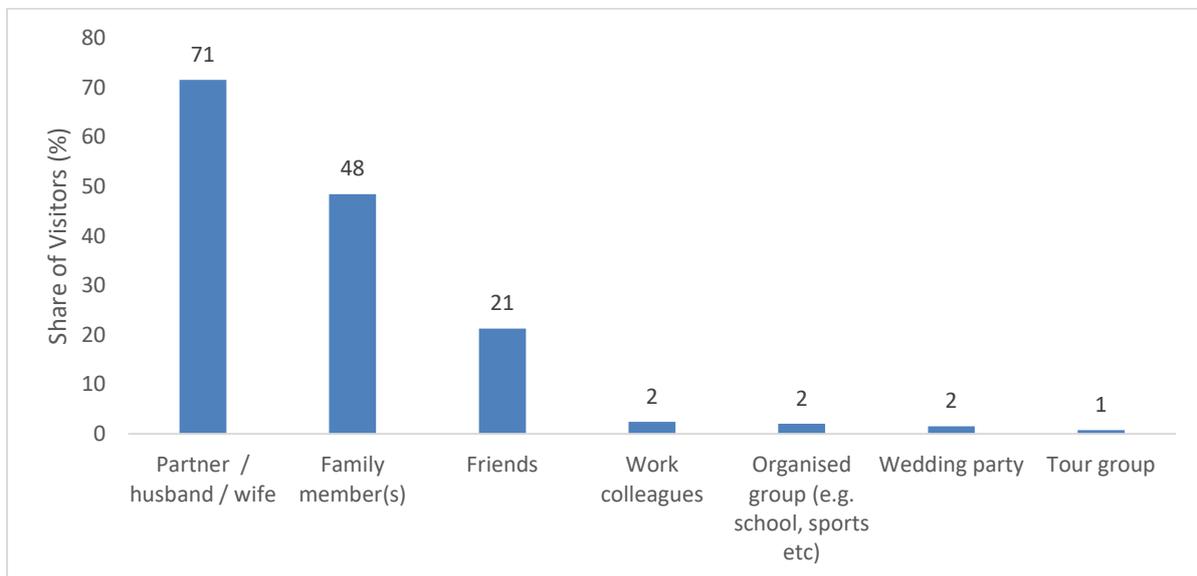
Nearly four in five respondents come to the Cook Islands for a holiday (79%). Other reasons given include attending a wedding (8%), visiting friends or relatives (4%), a honeymoon (3%), and for business and conference (3%).

Figure 7: Main purpose of visit (n = 1377)



The majority of visitors travel with companion(s) (89%). Among this grouping, most (71%) travel to the Cook Islands with a partner or spouse. Visitors also travel with other family members (48%), or with friends (21%). Those travelling with work colleagues, in an organised group, as part of a wedding party or in a tour group, represent a smaller share of the sample (Figure 8).

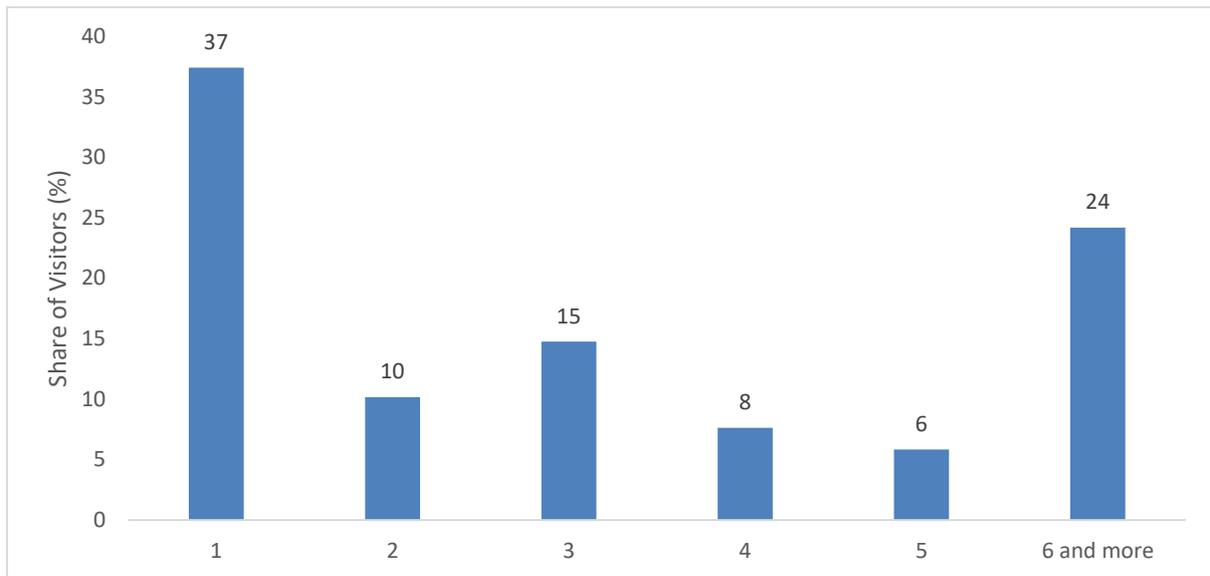
Figure 8: Travelling with whom? (n = 1812)



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

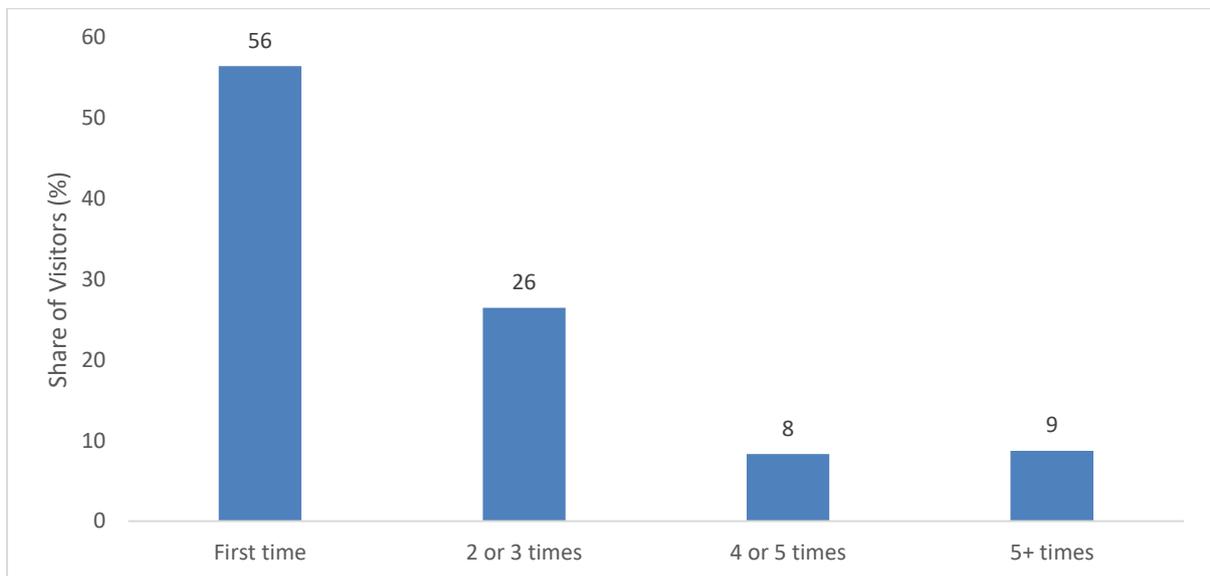
Over a third of the visitors (37%) travelled with one companion on their visit to the Cook Islands (Figure 9), and nearly a quarter of the visitors (24%) travelled with more than six people.

Figure 9: Number of companions on trip (n = 1112)



Nearly three in five of the visitors (56%) are on their first visit to the Cook Islands. A further 26% have been to the Cook Islands twice or three times before. A smaller group (17%) have visited four or more times (Figure 10).

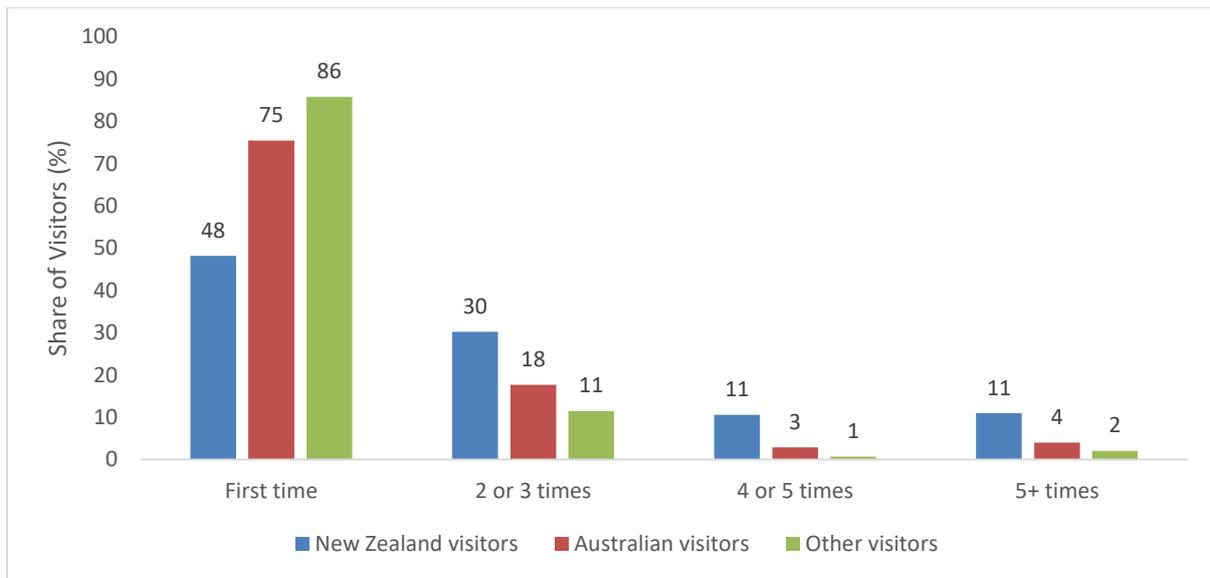
Figure 10: Number of visits to the Cook Islands (n = 1377)



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

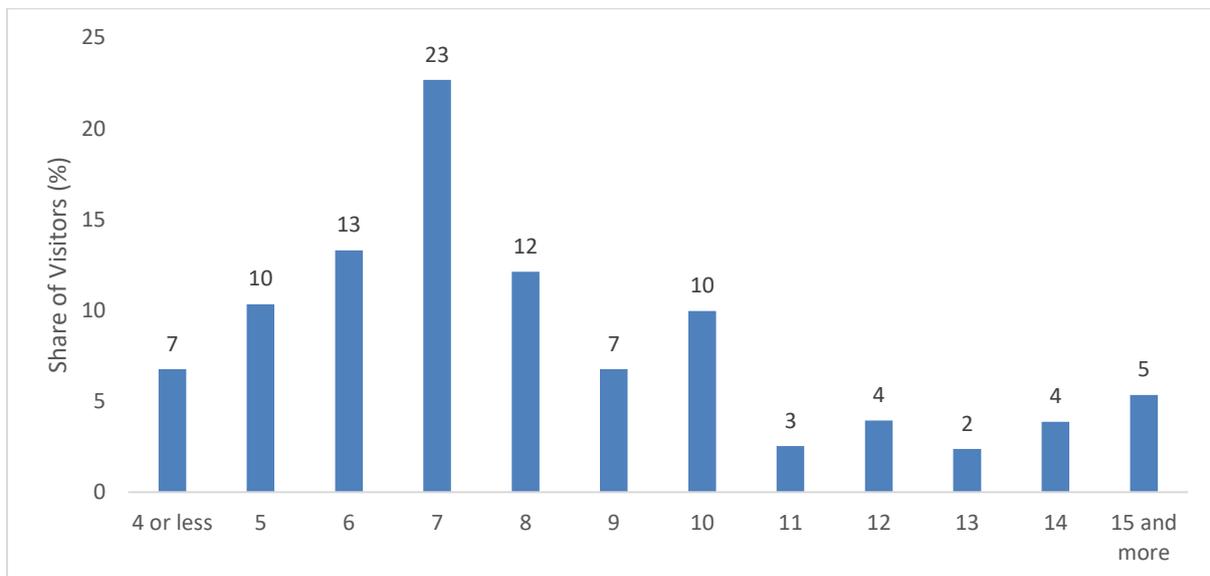
New Zealanders are more likely to be repeat visitors than those from other source markets (Figure 11). Over half of the surveyed visitors from New Zealand (52%) have visited the Cook Islands before compared to only 25% of visitors from Australia and 14% from other countries.

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



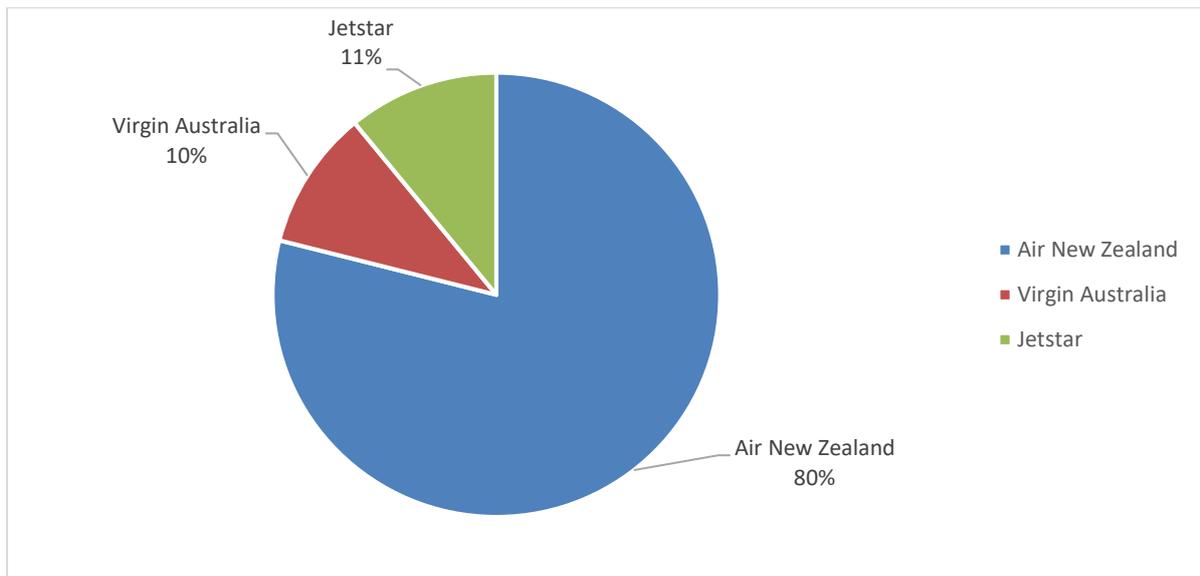
The average length of stay in the Cook Islands is 8.3 nights with 82% of visitors spending 10 or fewer nights in the country (Figure 12).

Figure 12: Length of stay in nights (n = 1345)



Four in five of visitors (80%) travel to/from the Cook Islands with Air New Zealand, a further 11% visitors fly with Jetstar, followed by ten percent of visitors travelling with Virgin Australia (Figure 13).

Figure 13: Mode of transport (n = 1409)

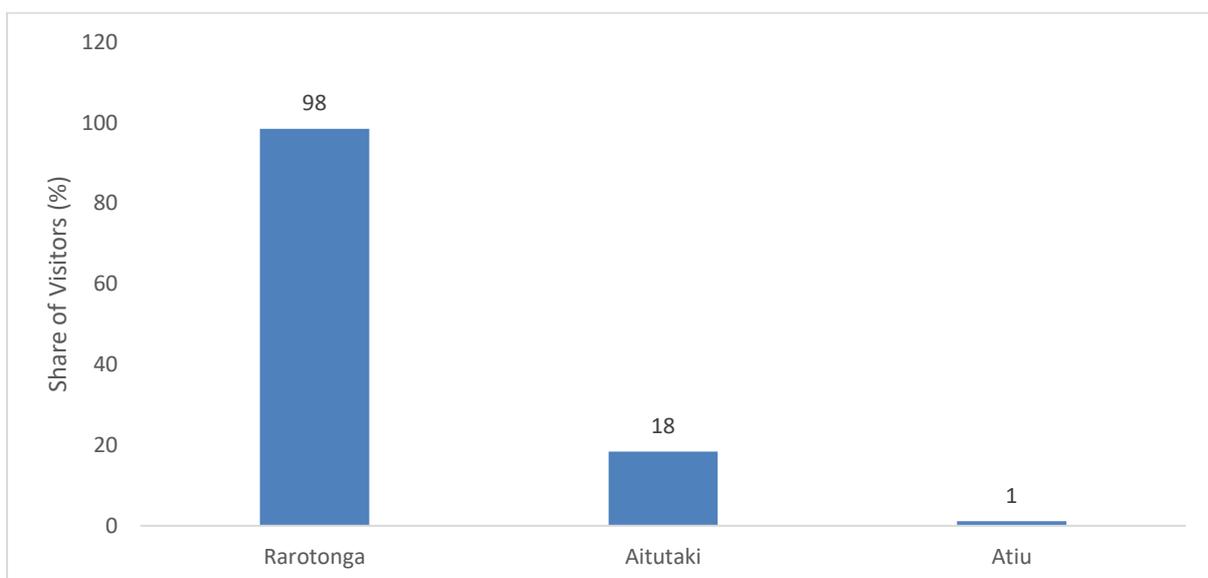


Note: Multiple responses, therefore total does not add up to 100%

For 89% of visitors, the Cook Islands is the sole destination for their trip. For 11% 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 their trip, the top destination mentioned was New Zealand (78%), followed by travel to Australia (32%), Asian countries (24%), United State of America (14%), other pacific countries (11%), and Europe (7%).

The vast majority (98%) of visitors to the Cook Islands spend time on Rarotonga, with Aitutaki being the second most visited island (18%) (Figure 14).

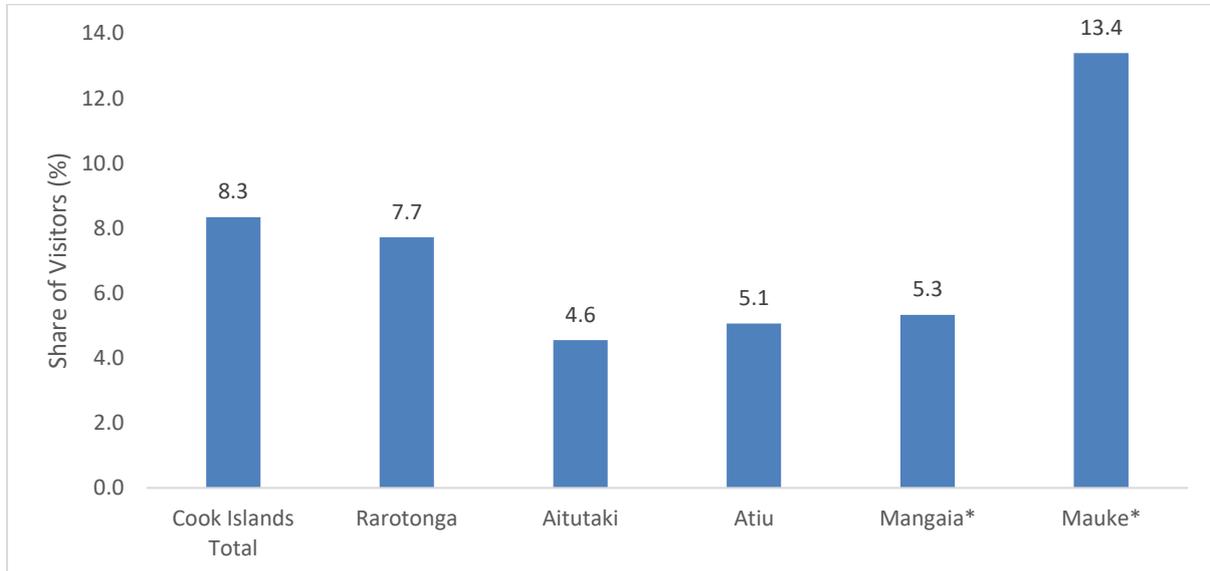
Figure 14: Visited Islands (n = 1634)



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

The average length of stay on Rarotonga is 7.7 nights (Figure 15). For the visitors that went to Aitutaki, the average number of nights spent on the island itself is 4.6. It should be noted that sample sizes for Mauke and Mangaia are very small.

Figure 15: Average length of stay in the Cook Islands and on each island (n = 3-1345)

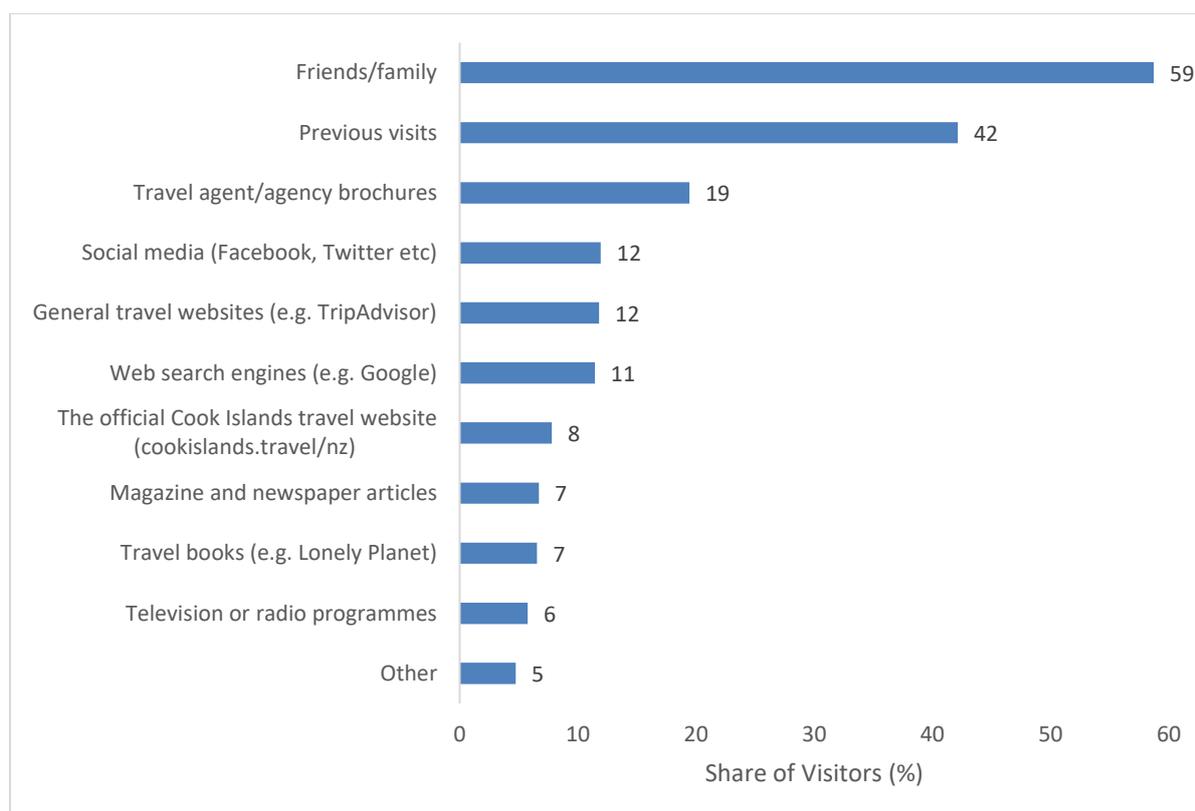


Note: *n≤5

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). Nearly three in five (59%) of respondents ranked word of mouth from friends and family members as the most important influence, followed by previous experience (42%). Travel agents/agency brochures (19%), social media (Facebook, Twitter etc) (12%), general travel websites (e.g. TripAdvisor) (12%), and web search engines (e.g. Google) (11%) played less significant roles.

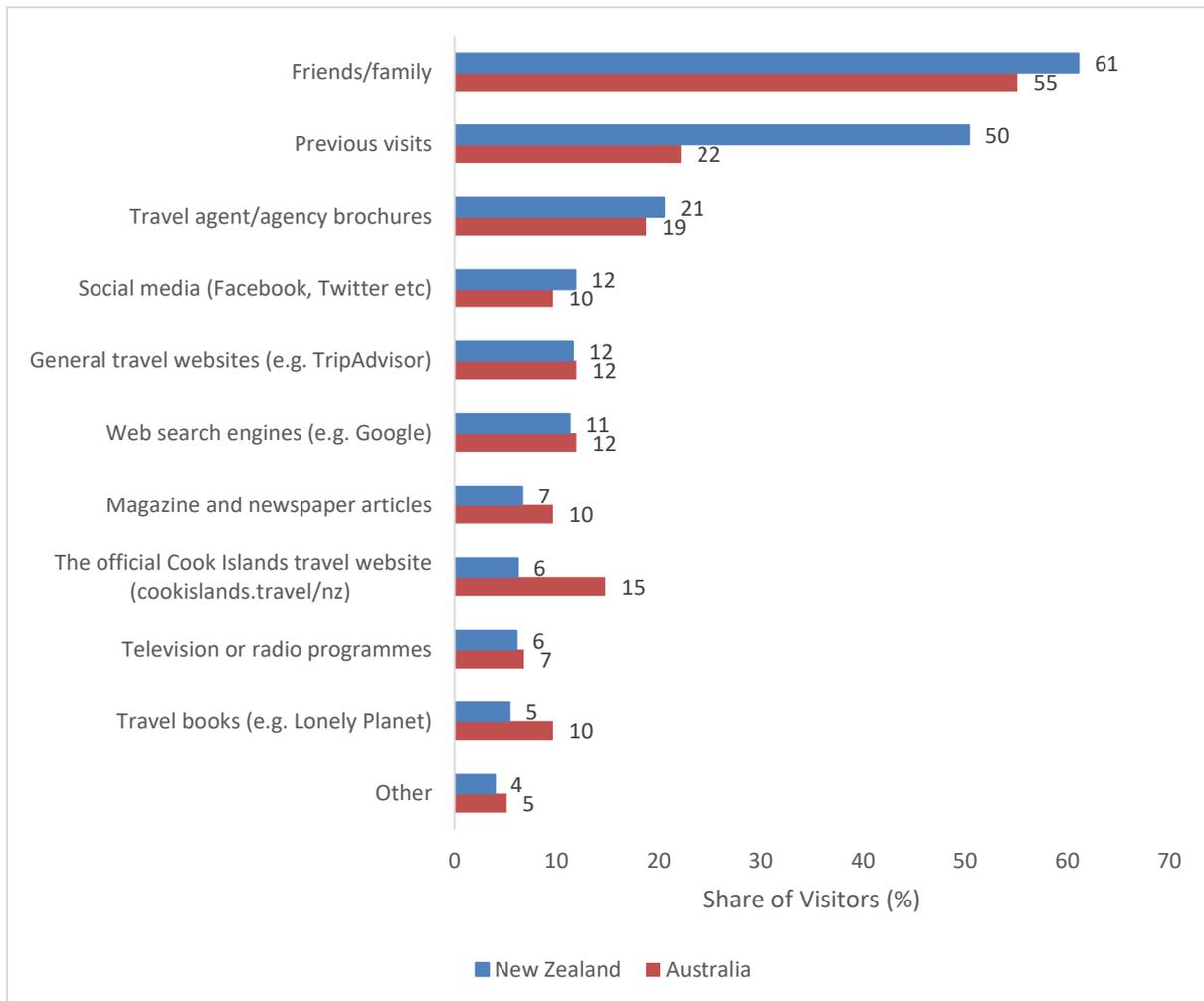
Figure 16: How did you find out about Cook Islands as a destination (n = 1374)



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 (61%). There are more repeat visitors from New Zealand than Australia and this is reflected by the fact that half of visitors from New Zealand ranked their previous visits as the most important information source (Australian visitors 22%). Australian visitors were more likely to rank the official Cook Islands travel website, travel books, magazine and newspaper articles, television or radio programmes, and web search engines as the most important influence.

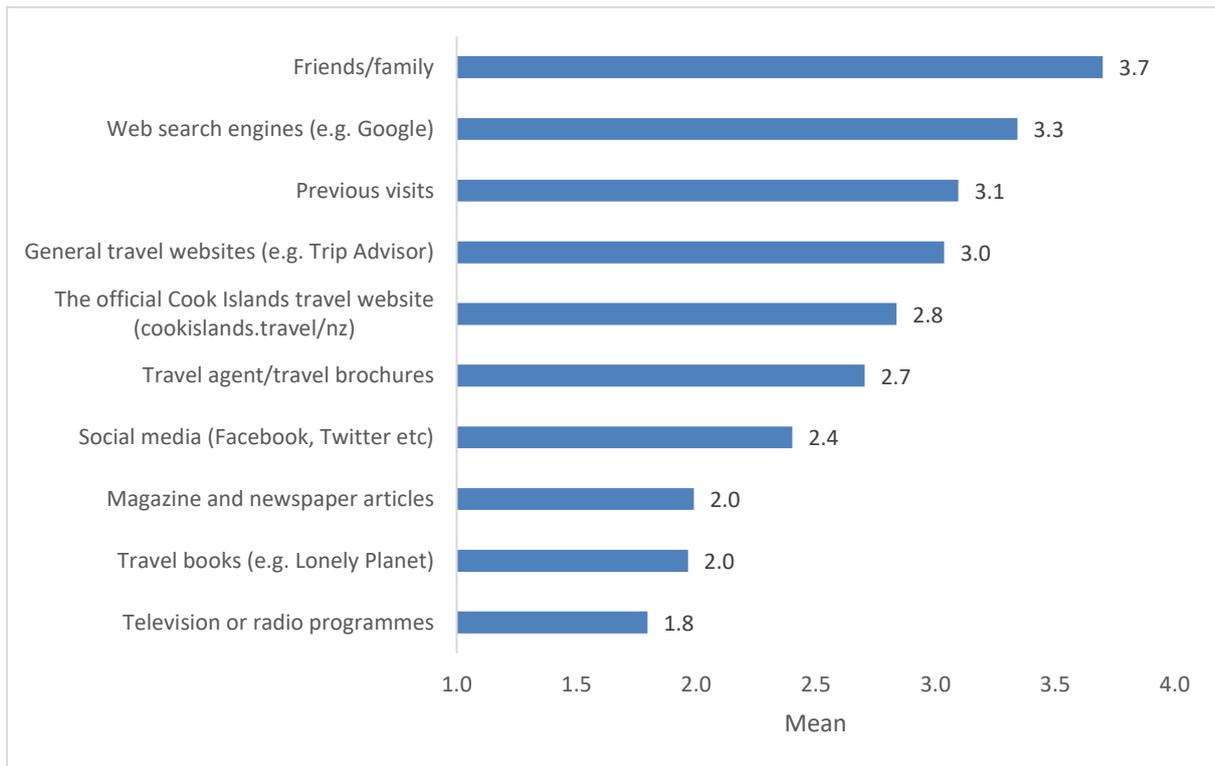
Figure 17: How did you find out about Cook Islands as a destination – country breakdown



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

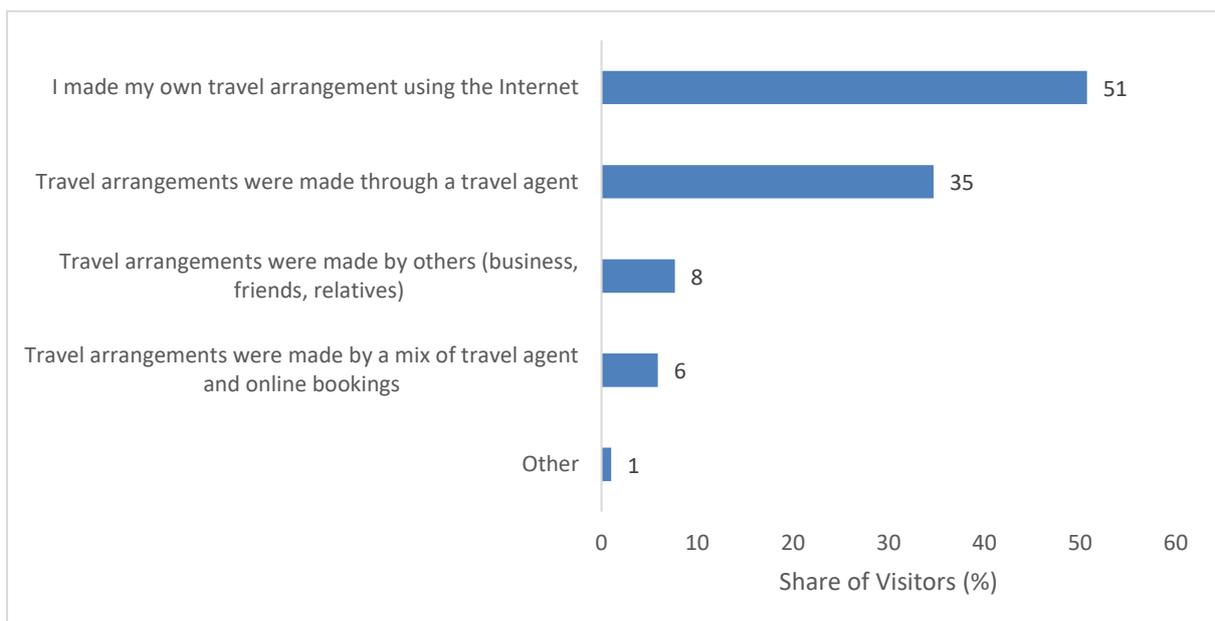
When visitors were asked to rank the importance of the listed information sources used to plan their trip, friends and family members are ranked as the most important source (3.7) (Figure 18). Other important information sources are web search engines (3.3), previous visits (3.1), and general travel websites (3.0).

Figure 18: Importance of information source used when planning your trip (n = 960)



Over half of visitors surveyed (51%) made their own travel arrangements through online websites (Figure 19). A smaller group of visitors surveyed (35%) purchased a pre-paid trip through the travel agent, followed by 8% of visitors whose travel arrangements were made by others such as business, friends, and relatives, or a mix of travel agent and online bookings (6%).

Figure 19: How did you purchase your travel to the Cook Islands (n = 1372)

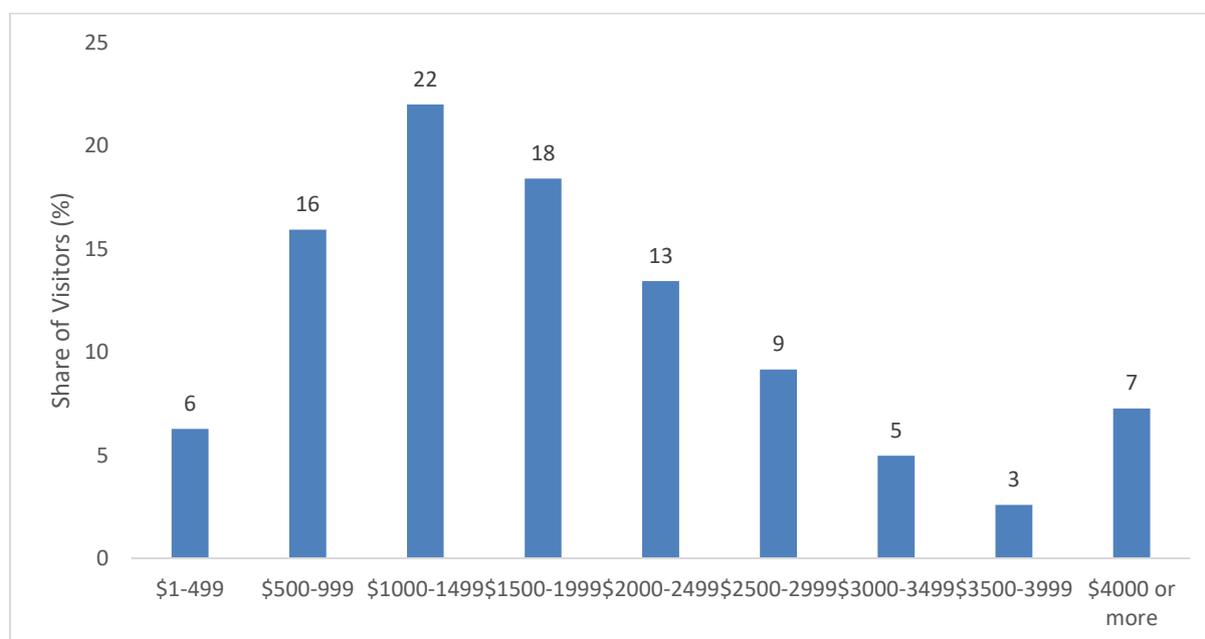


Visitor Expenditure

The survey 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: 3,460 people comprising 2,857 adults and 603 children.

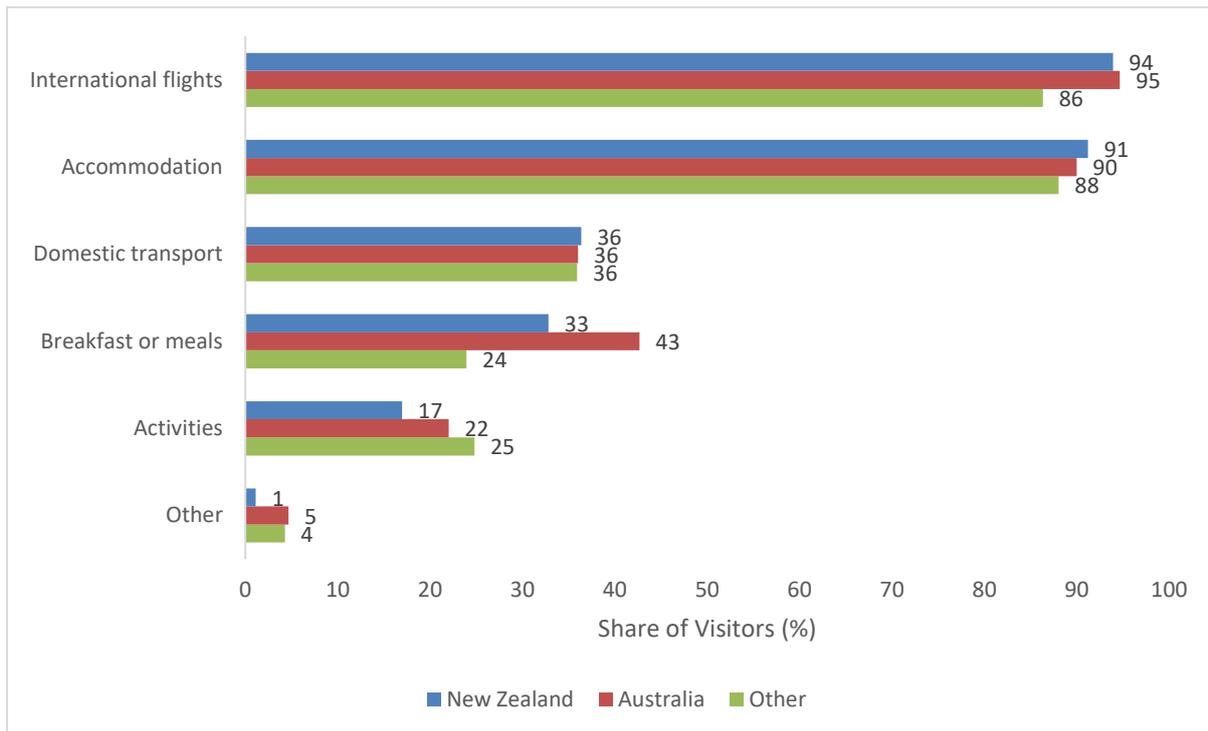
On average, visitors to the Cook Islands spend NZ\$1,885 per person prior to arrival. Over half (53%) of the visitors spend between NZ\$1,000 and NZ\$2,499 prior to arrival (Figure 20). The prepaid figure of per person is close to the same quarter for 2017 (NZ\$1,911) and slightly lower than the data from the previous full year (average prepaid spend of NZ\$1,967 for 2017/18).

Figure 20: Amount of money spent per person prior to arrival (n = 1005)



In addition to international flights and domestic transport, spending prior to arrival usually includes accommodation: in 91% of the cases for New Zealand visitors, 95% for Australian visitors, and for 86% of visitors from other countries (Figure 21). Over one third of visitors prepaid for breakfast and meals prior to arrival (33% for New Zealand, 43% of Australian visitors, and for 24% 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 assess that the pre-paid spend figure per day flowing back to local operators, excluding flights, is NZ\$91 and for the average total visit is NZ\$754 (8.3 nights).

The total spend per visitor per day while in the Cook Islands (excluding any pre-paid expenditure) is NZ\$165 (Table 1). This figure is higher than overall spend figure for 2017/18 (NZ\$149) and same quarter in 2017 (NZ\$138). The majority of money spent locally is on accommodation (45%), restaurants, cafes and bars (21%), and shopping (7%). These per person expenditure figures are based on 1,377 survey responses covering a total of 3,384 people (2,799 adults and 585 children).

By multiplying daily spend by the average stay (8.3 nights) we can see that spend per person per visit to the Cook Islands is on average NZ\$1,370. The total figure of what is spent locally and what flows back to the Cook Islands from pre-paid expenses is therefore NZ\$256 per visitor per day (\$165 + \$91), or NZ\$2,124 (\$1,370 + \$754) for each visitor.

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

Expenditure Items	n = 1377	
	<i>Mean (NZ\$)</i>	(% of spend)
Accommodation	75	45
Restaurant, cafes and bar	34	21
Shopping	12	7
Vehicle rental	10	6
Activities	10	6
Groceries	7	4
Domestic flights	7	4
Other	3	2
Cruising	2	1
Internet	2	1
Petrol	2	1
Public transportation	1	0
Total Expenditure	165	100

Table 2 provides an overview of the in-country expenditure by the visitor's country of origin. Visitors from the United State of America/Canada have the highest average spend per person per day at NZ\$192. New Zealand visitors spend on average at NZ\$170 per day, closely followed by Australia visitors (NZ\$162 per day). The European visitors during this period spent the least at NZ\$104 per day.

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

Expenditure Items	n = 121	n = 415	n = 2600	n = 97
	USA/ Canada	Australia	New Zealand	Europe
Accommodation	86	61	81	32
Restaurant, cafes and bar	32	39	35	24
Shopping	17	16	11	7
Vehicle rental	8	13	11	4
Activities	16	11	9	11
Groceries	7	7	7	8
Domestic flights	19	5	7	8
Other	2	3	3	3
Cruising	2	3	2	5
Petrol	1	2	2	0
Internet	2	2	2	2
Public transportation	1	1	1	1
Total spend (NZ\$)	192	162	170	104

The average spend of NZ\$192 for visitors from the United State of America/Canada for this period is slightly higher than the same quarter in 2017 (NZ\$183) and clearly higher than the

2017/18 average of NZ\$164. New Zealanders' spend of NZ\$170 per person per day is higher than the same quarter in the previous year (NZ\$141) and the average of \$148 for 2017/18. Average Australian spend per person for this quarter (NZ\$162) is a slightly lower compared to the 2017/18 average of NZ\$168, and the same quarter in 2017 (NZ\$166). European visitor spend at NZ\$104 per person per day is lower than the same quarter in the previous year (NZ\$124) and the average for 2017/18 of NZ\$133.

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). Nearly two thirds (64%) 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 out of 5) with their visit.

Figure 22: Overall satisfaction with experience of the Cook Islands (n = 1253)

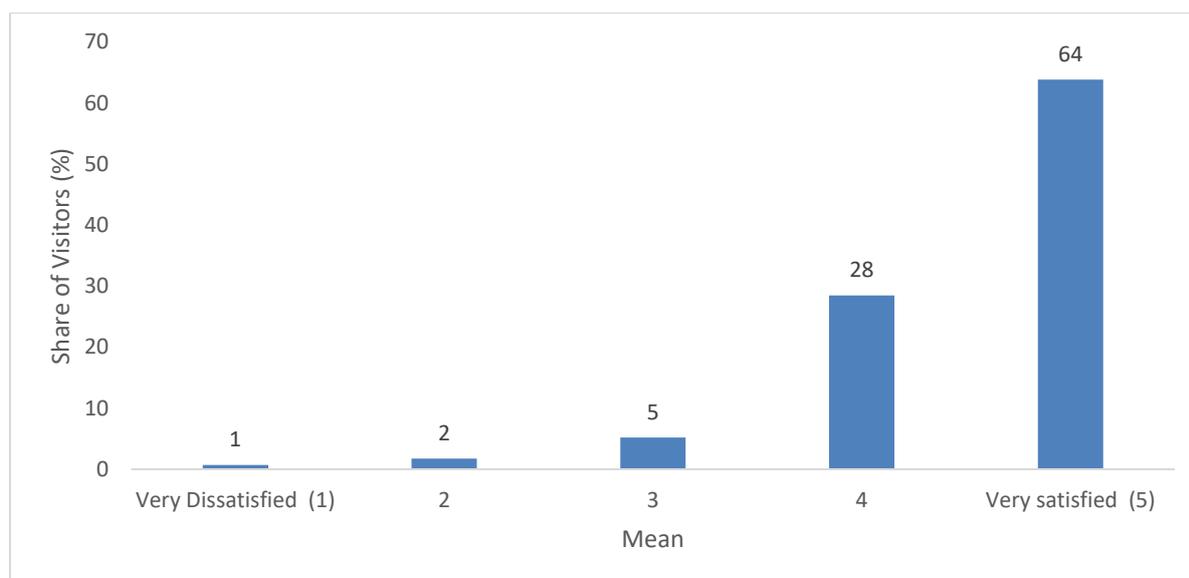


Figure 23 shows the percentage of respondents who undertook specific activities while on their visit to the Cook Islands. Almost all visitors visiting a beach (98%) and visit at least one restaurant or café (93%) during their trip. Most of the respondents (88%) visit a local market, and 60% of visitors experience an Island Night and Feast Show.

Visitor satisfaction is generally high for all activities undertaken (almost all registering more than 4 out of a possible high of 5 except bonefishing, and deep sea fishing) (Figure 23). Activities involving cultural interaction (average satisfaction of 4.6) rank the highest, followed by land-based products (4.4), shopping (4.4), and water-based experiences (4.3). It should be noted that some activities e.g., bonefishing, kitesurfing, and Tumunu on Atiu, are characterised by relatively low numbers of participants (n = 32-38).

Figure 23: Degree of participation in activities (n range = 32-1332)

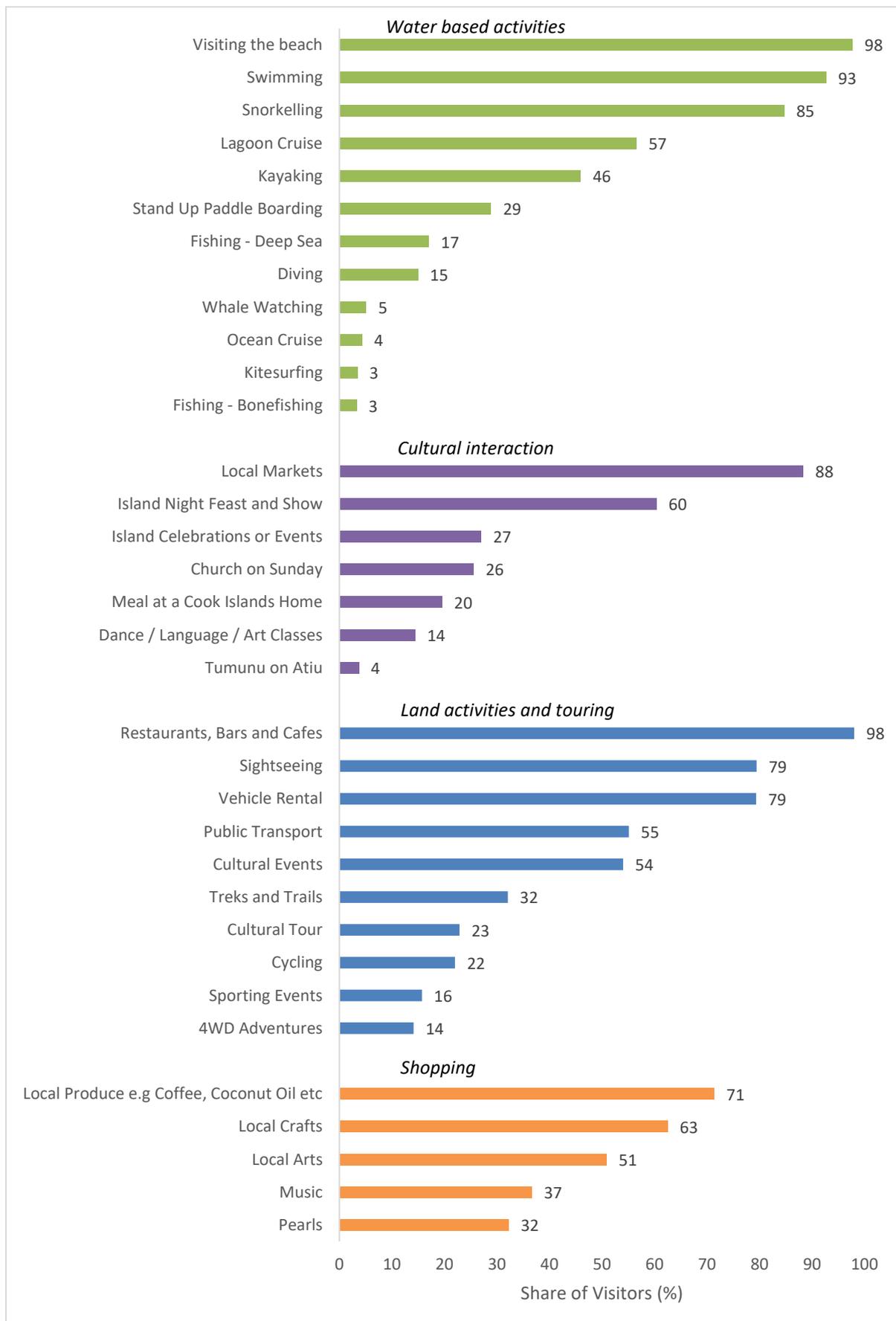
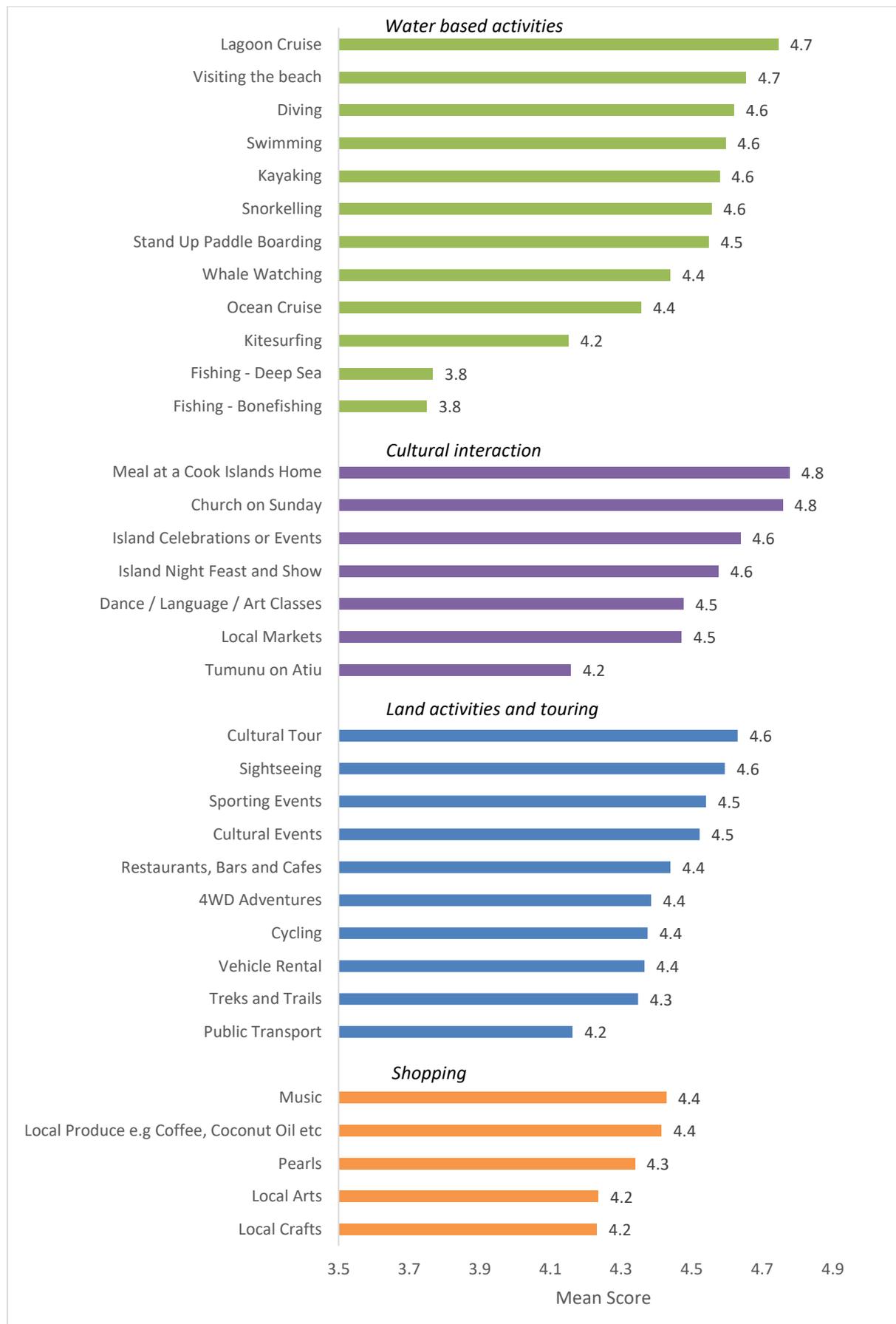


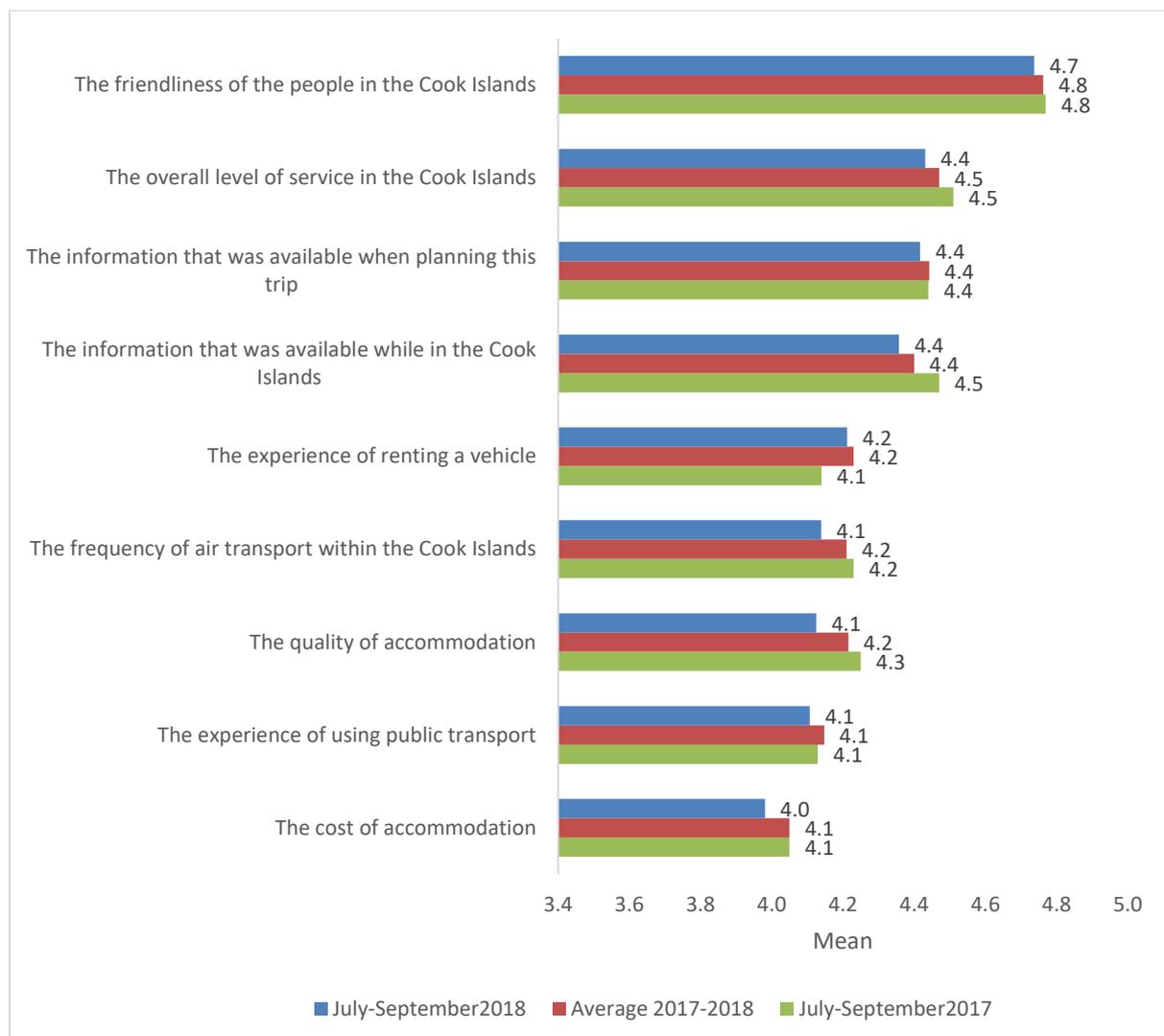
Figure 24: Degree of satisfaction with activities participated in (mean score out of 5)



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 July to September 2018 are compared to the annual average for 2017/18, and the same quarter for 2017 (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 information available when planning this trip and the experience of using public transport are the same as the annual average for 2017/18 and the same quarter for 2017. Visitor satisfaction with the friendliness of the people in the Cook Islands, the overall level of service in the Cook Islands, the frequency of air transport within the Cook Islands, the quality of accommodation, and the cost of accommodation are slightly lower than the average 2017/18 and the same quarter in 2017. The degree of satisfaction with the information that was available while in the Cook Islands is same as the average for 2017/18, but is slightly lower than the same quarter for 2017. The level of satisfaction with the experience of renting a vehicle remains the same as the average for 2017/2018, but is slightly higher than the same quarter for 2017.

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 were the beautiful and clean natural environment, the friendly and welcoming local people, the peacefulness and relaxing atmosphere of the islands, and the tourist attractions and activities on offer. Smaller numbers of visitors mentioned aspects such as food and beverage (13%), convenience and safety (7%), culture (6%), and accommodation (4%).

Table 3: Most appealing aspects of the Cook Islands (n=1266)

Themes	Share of respondents (%)
Environment, cleanliness & weather	46
Local people	41
Atmosphere	31
Activities, attractions and entertainment, events	24
Food and beverage	13
Convenience and safety	7
Culture	6
Accommodation	4
Level of service	3
Un-commercial	3
Overall good experience	2
Family and Friends	1
Price of goods and services	1
Others	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 gardens in the Cook Islands are mentioned by nearly half of the respondents (46%) as the most appealing aspects of their trip. Words like ‘beautiful’, ‘clean’, ‘paradise’, ‘beach’, ‘weather’ and ‘flowers’ 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 weather, the scenery, and the landscapes of the islands in general. Comments included:

“The scenery and the people.”

“The beach.”

“The ocean.”

“The beautiful islands are a lovely destination, you feel safe, there is a lot to do for everyone.”

"The weather was nice when I was there."

"The peace and quiet while roaming the island. We were able to observe the beauty of the island instead of feeling rushed and needing to do/see everything."

"Beautiful waters and scenery, the friendliness of people and the lack of high rise over development."

"Natural beauty and the weather and NZ currency a plus."

"Temperature."

"Heat. Loved day trip to Autitaki."

"The weather and the snorkelling."

"The cleanliness of the beach and water."

"Island time and sunshine."

"The sea views and breeze."

"Warm, beautiful beach. Idyllic restaurant setting at pacific resort."

Local people

The second highest area of appeal for the visitors was their interaction with local people in the Cook Islands. Forty one percent of the respondents expressed that the warmth and welcoming nature of local people was an important factor of having a positive travel experience. Key words that dominated the responses included 'friendly', 'helpful', 'welcoming', 'simply', 'happy', 'relaxed', 'smile', 'nice', and 'warm'. Examples of comments included:

"The friendly, laid back people and dogs on the beaches."

"Laid back relaxed atmosphere, warm people (and climate), warm water. Catching up with whanau and friends."

"The people were incredibly friendly and went above and beyond to make the trip lovely."

"The friendly ness of staff and locals. And also the beautiful lagoon!!"

"Laid back attitude and friendliness of the people."

"People are very kind and friendly."

"The local people are incredibly friendly and welcoming."

"Friendliness of the people and felt safe travelling round the island."

"The Cook Islanders."

"Beautiful island, lovely people. The snorkelling was amazing and Aitutaki was a highlight. Loved meeting the locals and the relaxed vibe, would definitely visit again."

"The friendly, welcoming people. It feels very safe."

"How friendly the people are."

"The laid back life style of the people."

"The lovely people and laid back lifestyle."

"The charm and friendliness of the people, the non-commercialization of the island. It is brilliant that the government refuses to allow any tall buildings and maintains the architectural integrity of the south pacific island genre."

Atmosphere

The Cook Islands was described as a very peaceful, quiet, relaxing, and laid-back destination by tourists and this atmosphere was an appealing factor for nearly one third of visitors surveyed (31%). People were amazed by the pace of local life and used the words 'relaxing', 'calm', 'chilled', 'tranquil', and 'laid back' to describe the overall atmosphere. The notion of 'island time' and 'laid back vibe' was also mentioned. Comments included:

"The weather and the relaxed atmosphere."

"Swimming relaxing."

"Laid back relaxed atmosphere, warm people (and climate), warm water. Catching up with whanau and friends."

"The people and the atmosphere, we go to stop and relax. It's heaven."

"I enjoyed listening the local people speaking the language. I could relax and do things at my pace."

"Relaxing - peaceful place to stay."

"The peace and quiet while roaming the island. We were able to observe the beauty of the island instead of feeling rushed and needing to do/see everything."

"The atmosphere, the people and the very relaxed lifestyle."

"The people and the climate. Very laid back and relaxed as was expected."

"The peace and tranquility being able to do our own thing."

"Temperature and relaxed atmosphere."

"Loved the ability to relax."

"The quietness of the island."

Activities, attractions, entertainment & events

Activities, attractions, entertainment, and events were mentioned by 24% of respondents as the most appealing element of their visit to the destination. Most comments in this category focus on water-based activities such as swimming, snorkelling, diving, fishing, and kayaking. Land-based activities like hiking, walking, cycling, and markets were also mentioned by respondents. Aitutaki lagoon is one of the most outstanding attractions of the Cook Islands. Comments included:

"Lagoon cruises through Aitutaki. Number of good quality cafes and restaurants. Local markets."

"Live show & going to a local fishing club."

"Warm water, weather, treks and hikes, markets, snorkelling, beach, relaxed atmosphere."

"Warm relaxed environment with plenty to do if we wanted to do stuff or we could just laze around and do nothing. Muri night food market was a great place for an evening meal. Great coffee and Brunches available from cafes and restaurants."

"Food markets, paddle boarding."

"Very relaxing, can do as little or as much as I wanted to do. Many events on Rugby qualifier with Hong Kong."

"Warm weather, snorkelling and swimming every day eating at local markets."

"Having been before, including a week on Aitutaki, we just wanted to go snorkelling, tour the island (Roratonga) and visit the market and town, Avarua and Muri lagoon. And relax a bit...while enjoying walks and the interaction with local people."

"Vili's Burger Joint is a must stop. The fishing trip was great but caught nothing at all - some refund might have been nice. Lagoon Cruise and viewing the fish, walk up to

the Needle was great but some work on the track would be even better. Muri Beach Resort's night show and meal was awesome. Being able to talk with local people not involved with business gave us a taste of the Island 's real ppl. Amazing people."

"Cultural events attending the Maeva Nui and BCI trade days."

"Hiking, snorkelling, not crowded, not touristy, night market food."

"The cultural aspect such as traditional dancing at the local markets."

"Night life Great tourism Night food market Weekend markets."

"Relaxed way of life and great snorkelling at Aroa coast."

"Aitutaki was amazing and our children (8 and 10) loved it."

"Lovely and relaxing, great place for our birthday celebrations."

Food and beverage

Food and beverages was identified as a most appealing aspect by 13% of respondents. Comments focused on the quality and range of fresh food available in the Cook Islands. 'Amazing', 'excellent', 'high standard/quality', 'well priced', 'delicious', 'authentic' and 'fresh' were some frequently used terms to describe the attraction of food. Many visitors mentioned the local sea food and fruit. Restaurants in the Muri beach area and the Progressive Dinner won tourists' praise. Comments included:

"Great food, beautiful weather, Saturday market and Muri food market."

"We travel to the Cooks at least once, sometimes twice a year, and have been doing so for 20 years, just to relax, by swimming, snorkelling and sitting on the beach. The cafes and restaurants we use are excellent."

"The freshness variety and presentation of the food."

"Great food and hospitality everywhere."

"The ease of being able to get to any resort for a meal and a drink."

"Yummy food, cheap drinks, nice people!"

"How friendly and laid back all the locals are. How they bend over backwards to accommodate you and the food. All the glorious food."

"The prices of products/produce at the supermarkets were very reasonable. The very reasonable prices at restaurants and cafes for meals, specialised coffees and donuts

etc. The locals are always so friendly, very helpful and approachable.”

“Clean and tidy, quality and pricing of food were very good. People really friendly.”

“There are some new cafes we went to that had opened”

Convenience & Safety

The convenience and safety of the Cook Islands as a holiday destination was mentioned by 7% of respondents. They referred to the accessibility and ease of getting around the islands. Language, the availability of public transport including scooter, as well as the circulation of the New Zealand dollar were seen as appealing factors. Some tourists emphasised safety, particularly feeling safe at night. Comments included:

“Quietness, beaches and lagoons, friendly people, easy to get around.”

“Short flight, massage at Rumours and snorkelling.”

“Natural beauty and the weather and NZ currency a plus.”

“Ready access to self-catering facilities and ease of travel within the island.”

“The size and the ease of getting around the island. The relaxing atmosphere. Nothing is out of the way, everything is easy to get to.”

“Easy to get around and safe for family. Great range of accommodation options.”

“Relaxing, safe and easy to holiday there.”

“The Cook Islands is just easy to visit. Its clean, safe and great value.”

“Easy going, easy to get to (from Australia), great people.”

“Proximity to New Zealand and cheap flights.”

“The beautiful islands are a lovely destination, you feel safe, there is a lot to do for everyone.”

“The friendly people, stunning scenery and safe swimming.”

“The friendliness of the people. The care the inhabitants take with their surroundings. The tropical vegetation. The fishing. A safe and friendly atmosphere for families with little children.”

“Safe and genuine.”

Culture

The island's unique local culture was mentioned by six percent of the respondents as an appealing aspect of their Cook Islands visit. Comments included:

"The people and the spiritual feeling and connection to the land."

"The culture and atmosphere."

"The people, the environment, good food, cultural pride of the Cook Islanders."

"Opportunities to experience Cook Island culture."

"Relaxed people and their helpfulness, nature, slowness and distance from the 'everyday life', Sunday church and reception."

"The local people and their culture."

"The lifestyle and the people."

"Nice easy-going lifestyle."

"The overall experience and culture."

"Great culture, rich in history, very relaxed, wished I could stay longer."

"Community based culture."

"Learning of another culture."

Accommodation

Four percent of respondents expressed that the accommodation they stayed in was one of the most appealing aspects of their visit to the Cook Islands, with a focus on facilities offered, location, the environment, and the friendly and supportive staff. Comments included:

"The weather, the small restaurants we visited, the beach just out the door of our accommodation, the fascination of being so close to the end of the runway. The friendliness of the people we met including the owners of our accommodation."

"Swimming and snorkelling from just outside accommodation."

"The low-key vibe and attitude. And staying on Muri Beach was incredible! Also very family friendly."

"The relaxed atmosphere with top service for holidaymakers at our resort made more appealing with warm sunny weather."

“The limited amounts of tourists on Atiu, tours on Atiu and Aitutaki and having the possibility of renting a cabin in a bi remote location.”

“The quality of the accommodation and the friendliness of everyone on the islands.”

“Resort and food at the resort restaurant, and the local people, where-ever we met them.”

“We rented a house that was through AirBnB that is not listed. It was probably the nicest place on the island of Rarotonga.”

Level of service

Three percent of visitors commented on the service they experienced while travelling in the Cook Islands. Respondents provided positive comments about the ‘friendly’ and ‘helpful’ local staff. The quality of service at the accommodations, restaurants, and resort won high recognition from these visitors. Comments included:

“The level of service and island as a whole were amazing and beautiful!”

“The friendly locals. Nothing was a problem. Everyone was willing to help.”

“Hospitality. Friendliness. Interaction with local residents the warm welcomes from staff restaurants. Resorts.”

“Relaxing space to be in with great customer service and friendly people...loved our time there.”

“Lovely friendly people, went to island local progressive tea and for me that was the highlight, everyday people showing hospitality, and what we had in common with Islands over the pacific. Enjoyed it - well worth extra cost. Kindness always appreciated.”

“Friendly service.”

“Scenery, friendliness, service, helpfulness of the locals and staff.”

Not too commercialised

Three percent of the survey participants expressed the fact that the Cook Islands is appealing because it is not over-commercialised or too touristy. Some visitors believed that the rawness of the islands brings tourists ‘calm’ and ‘escape’ from the business of life. Comments included:

“The feeling is very natural, it hasn't become completely commercialised.”

“Rural not over crowded. Unique culture remains strong. Everyone so helpful and

happy.”

“The relaxed environment - no traffic, no crowds, no rushing around.”

“It is still relatively unspoilt and people are very friendly and helpful.”

“Not too many tourists, clean beaches, no dogs, fresh fruit and vegetables available (healthy food), reasonable prices available e.g. cheap meals.”

“The limited amounts of tourists on Atiu, tours on Atiu and Aitutaki and having the possibility of renting a cabin in a bi remote location.”

“The cleanliness and amazing colour of the water - the island appears to manage tourism well to ensure the beauty of the island and the experience is not lost or over-commercialised.”

“Very laid back easy living, friendly people and did not feel like it was full of tourists.”

“The warm gracious people, the beautiful island, ease of getting around, lack of crowds, beautiful water and beaches.”

Overall good experience

Two percent of visitors investigated had a satisfactory trip and believed that their whole experience was a good one. The comments such as ‘everything’ and ‘it was all so amazing’ demonstrated their overall good experiences. Comments included:

“Everything it was just beautiful.”

“Everything is great it is our 5th visit.”

“The overall experience and culture.”

“I can't pick a favourite! I loved everything about the Cook Islands - the people, the scenery, the shopping, the events...even the dogs & chickens!! :)”

Family and friends

A very small group (1%) of the respondents commented on links with family and friends in the Cook Islands. Comments included:

“Meeting old friends and family, friendly interactions with waitresses and hotel staff, cruising around the island on motor cycles enjoying the views and changes to island landscape, the welcome to church, some new roads, improvements to hospital, hearing Jake sing at airport.”

“Time spent with family coming together from all over the place to celebrate an important birthday. The warm weather and the ability to get around the island in a large group.”

“Had no expectations, so everything was excellent. Having a nephew living there was good.”

Price of goods and services

A small group (1%) of the visitors expressed the value and or price of goods and services within the Cook Islands. Comments included:

“The Cook Islands is just easy to visit. Its clean, safe and great value.”

“The prices of products/produce at the supermarkets were very reasonable. The very reasonable prices at restaurants and cafes for meals, specialised coffees and donuts etc. The locals are always so friendly, very helpful and approachable.”

“Clean and tidy, quality and pricing of food were very good. People really friendly.”

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?” Nearly a quarter (22%) of the visitors surveyed, mentioned “nothing” was least appealing. Table 4 summaries key themes respondents felt were unappealing. Comments ranged from issues with public services and facilities, price of good and service, poor weather, stray animals and mosquitos through to disappointment with the safety issues.

Table 4: Least appealing aspects of the Cook Islands (n=1154)

Themes	Share of respondents %*
Public services and facilities and infrastructure	13%
Price of good and service	12%
Poor weather	10%
Stray animals and mosquitos	10%
Rubbish and natural environment care	9%
Accommodation	8%
Food and beverage	7%
Attractions and activities	6%
Customer service	5%
Flight related issues	5%
Too touristy or commercial	4%
Rental cars or scooters	3%
Lack of information	2%
Local people	2%
Law and legislation	2%
Safety	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

Thirteen percent of respondents considered the destination’s public services and facilities to be the least appealing aspects of their Cook Islands experience. Most comments here focused on road conditions, lack of street lights, limited public transport, heavy traffic, poor internet, and delays at airport immigration. Comments included:

“The bus was hard to rely on!!”

“The roads were shocking, very bad.”

“The condition of some of the roads, big potholes making it uncomfortable sometimes on motorbikes.”

“Lack of money machines.”

"The difficulty of walking at night time i.e. generally no footpaths."

"Lighting on the roads at night."

"No troubles- road quite bumpy, did not feel so safe driving at night."

"Frequency of bus transportation, especially in Sundays/holidays, adequately filtered drinking water only in supermarket, expensive domestic flight, No public transport in Aitutaki."

"Lack of public toilets at various locations around the island (Rarotonga). Where there were toilets they were not working properly or needed a good clean."

"Public transport was not on time."

"Taxis unreliable even when booked in advance; variable pricing/quality."

"Lack of taxi transport, we called taxis on several occasions and they never turned up."

"We always look forward to riding around on scooters when we visit, but the roads were so busy and crowded, we didn't feel safe on a scooter."

"Public transport (the bus didn't turn up several times we tried to catch it)."

Price of goods and service

Twelve percent of the respondents noted that the least appealing part of their visit was the price of goods and services with comments about food, transfers, accommodation, flights, and internet. Key words that dominated the responses included 'costly', 'expensive', 'overpriced', and 'poor value'. Comments included:

"Expensive WIFI."

"Price of food and drink. Limited public transport and cost of taxis."

"Prices have increased significantly since my visit 5 years ago seemingly aimed at tourists."

"Cost of food."

"Everything super expensive, not easy to be a backpacker."

"Poor WIFI and expense of internet. But were not really there for internet- food was expensive and not much fresh fruit available to buy."

“Things are quite expensive.”

“Local Bus fare seems a little excessive for the quality of transport.”

“Price and availability of upper mid-range accommodation”

“We found the price is on the high side, across the board (Including flights). If compared with other island destinations we have been to.”

“It's a very expensive destination.”

“Expensive internet and phones. Bookings for activities needed internet or phone hence did not participate in many activities due to this limitation and expense.”

“Tour prices were expensive.”

“Price overall of items.”

“Cost and complexity of mobile phone network. Not many fish in the reef compared to my first visit. Building around the perimeter of the island and silty runoff. Dreadful AirBnB at Muri beach Expensive boring food.”

“Quite expensive to visit the other island so we were not able to visit them.”

“It was packed. Too many tourists. Felt like we were intruding on the lives of private people because too many of us. Maybe a little more expensive and a little less people would be advantageous.”

“Quite expensive (plane tickets and accommodation).”

Poor weather

Ten percent of visitors commented on poor weather while in the Cook Islands. In particular, complaints were made about the rain and wind, although some respondents acknowledged the weather was seasonal and cannot be changed. Comments included:

“Bad luck with weather.”

“It rained every day which spoilt things a little. The way goats are tied up without water and have no shade or shelter. No improvement there over the years. I support Te Are Manu and SPCA.”

“Poor weather but I don't blame anyone for that!”

“It rained most of the week.”

"Four days of rain on Rarotonga."

"Whether not too much activities in the evening."

"Had massive floods, but that's mother nature."

"Probably just the pot holes in the roads and the floods, where water has nowhere to go."

"The wind! I don't think there's enough information available about what the weather may be like in particular months of the year."

Stray animals and mosquitos

Stray animals, noisy roosters, chickens, mosquitoes / insects and sea cucumbers were mentioned by 10% of respondents. In particular, they complained that the dogs roaming on the streets, mosquitoes and the roosters made their trip miserable at the Cook Islands. Respondents used a variety of words to describe this theme including 'annoying', 'off putting' and 'excessive'. Comments included:

"All the critters living in the hostel; cockroaches, fleas on dogs and chickens that came into the kitchen and other areas of the hostel etc."

"Rarotonga: Too many dogs!! They follow you everywhere, even to your hotel terrace. The lagoon seems to be less clean, the corals look damaged. We love chicken - but not chicken-shit everywhere (hotel facility and grass)."

"The dogs all over Muri Beach and at the Muri Beach night markets, very shocked to see the amounts of stray dogs all over the beach."

"Dogs defecating on beach."

"Animal welfare - especially malnourished dogs."

"The roosters that crow very early in the morning, every morning."

"Roaming Dogs, 3 Legged Dogs, Barking Dogs in Middle of night, Rough Roads."

"Rats running around the shops in Avarua."

"The number of dogs roaming around, especially when the dogs are roaming around in a group."

"Too many dogs wandering around. One of our group was attacked by one and suffered a puncture wound."

Rubbish and natural environment care

Rubbish and natural environment care were mentioned by 9% of respondents as the least appealing elements of their visit to the Cook Islands. Comments focused on the poor condition of the lagoons and beaches, polluted water, degraded coral reefs, algae, burning of rubbish and threatened marine life. Comments included:

"Muri Beach needs grooming more and tidied up as there was green slimy seaweed which was starting to smell."

"Rubbish not picked up on sides of roads."

"I love to go snorkelling right off the beach. This was essentially infeasible here: in the Muri Lagoon and the Aitutaki Lagoon (near the beaches) I did not see the usual tropical corals and fish. Most are dead."

"The alarming amount of pollution."

"Rubbish especially plastic on road side."

"Lack of recycling initiatives. Overuse of plastic straws, so sad to see all the straws in the sand"

"Bit disappointed with rubbish in waterways around towns. Less fish life in lagoon compared to 10 years before."

"The ongoing rubbish issues, especially at the beaches."

"Consistent burning smell of rubbish."

"Some litter especially on the roads/fields, too many wild cats (starving, unwell) - makes me feel sad about them and they kill the local birds, damaged coral (tourists running paddle boards and kayaks into the coral)."

"The burning off of vegetation."

Accommodation

Eight percent of visitors surveyed focused on accommodation of the Cook Islands. Visitors mentioned that the cost of accommodation is expensive for the value received, and that some accommodation is in need of an upgrade of facilities and service. Comments included:

"Resort was a bit outdated and small option of breakfast foods."

"Price and availability of upper mid-range accommodation."

“Quality of accommodation could be slightly modernised.”

“Very old accommodation, bad maintenance, food service extremely slow and expensive.”

“The price of accommodation – exorbitant.”

“Some of the hotels need a little upgrade.”

“Aitutaki too expensive. Limited accommodation catered to solo travellers.”

“The accommodation is expensive and can be run down.”

Food and beverage

Seven percent of respondents noted that the food and beverage in the Cook Islands was the least appealing aspect of their visit, referring to the high prices, the lack of local produce (especially fresh fruit, veggies and fish), limited food choices, poor customer service, food poisoning, and the opening hours of restaurants. Comments included:

“Availability of fresh food.”

“Price of food lack of vegetables.”

“The quality of the food at the resort left much to be desired. So much so that we rented a car to explore other food options. They were better, but the food quality isn't on par with the other islands we've visited around the world.”

“No real cuisine food wise.”

“Not easy to buy local fruits.”

“Lack of variety of fish available on the menu.”

“Restaurants were expensive and the meals were pretty ordinary.”

“Lack of fresh produce in supermarkets.”

“Food- we expected more local variety but it was catered for tourists very western food”

Attractions and activities

Six percent of respondents mentioned attractions and activities as the least appealing aspect of the Cook Islands. The focus was on the limited attractions available and/or activities such as swimming/snorkelling that were affected by environment issues, weather, lack of information and poor levels of service. There were also a number of comments focused on

what appeared to be ad-hoc charges to access natural attractions such as waterfalls. Comments included:

"The lack of fishing, we paid a lot of money for a fishing charter and got one bite, no fish. It is a very sad situation."

"Unreliability of lagoon cruise. Went three times and no one turned up."

"Unfortunately, our day fishing on the boat was a bust - not a bite. Overfished?"

"They don't cater for large elderly people who want to snorkel - get longer ladders that go further down into the water for easy access perhaps."

"A lady was collecting money at the entrance of the waterfall otherwise she wouldn't let you pass. This didn't seem legitimate and the waterfall was non-existent."

"We went to do a walk by the waterfall and someone was parked up and demanding money for us to do the walk. I have done it previously so knew that it was free... just someone trying to take advantage of tourists for nature which was intimidating and unpleasant."

"Being charged by a car blocking the road to visit the Waterfall, which was very underwhelming, felt it was unprofessional, almost intimidating and unexpected."

"We attended a show. The show was inside a crowded dining area and I did not like it at all. Too touristy and rather fake. Extremely exorbitant prices for inferior cocktails. I would have rather seen authentic dancing and music outdoors."

"Very limited range of things to do, places to eat etc BUT that is no fault of the Cook Islands, it is just the way it is for a small island in the Pacific."

Customer service

One in twenty (5%) of respondents mentioned customer service as the least appealing aspect of their trip to the Cook Islands. Their comments often focused on customer service at the accommodation, transport, airport and restaurants. Most visitors used words such as 'no response', 'long waits', 'rude', 'poor attitude', 'unfriendly' and 'least impressive' to describe the services. Comments included:

"When the water started to rise and flood and when our flight was cancelled and the airlines wouldn't help to sort out accommodation for us. We had to do it ourselves at 2.30am in the morning."

"Grumpy rude fishing charter from Muri."

“Lack of signage on the Island to find things. Poor service on public transport. Poor quality hire vehicle, and lack of acknowledgement from service provider that the service was substandard.”

“Not always friendly service, part cultural, not all locals value or wish to be in the tourist business, which most inevitably are? High cost food and transport - high cost taxi on first day of arrival (Sunday), night markets quite expensive.”

“The hotel staff at the resort were terrible. It made my trip unpleasant.”

“Went on a fishing charter and the crew totally destroyed the belief in the Cook Islands people as being friendly and engaging”

“Having to wait in long queues at the airport on arrival and at the mobile phone office when I wanted to buy a local SIM card. The SIM card was also quite expensive.”

Flight related issues

Five percent of respondents mentioned flight related issues as the least appealing aspect of their visit to the Cook Islands. Visitors mentioned poor frequency, cost, arrival and departure times, customer service, lost luggage, and airport facilities. Comments included:

“Limited convenient flight options.”

“On my flight to Aitutaki I was seated in a very small plane without air-conditioning and it got pretty hot inside. That's the only thing that could be improved, besides that my stay was absolutely amazing!”

“The awkward flight arrival time in the middle of the night.”

“Some of the flights in/out are at unappealing times (Air NZ).”

“The flights get in first thing in the morning and leave first thing in the morning (both about 1-2am), it's a total rort with the hotels who charge for a full night accommodation both sides. It's not a full night and is simply a money-making scheme. It leaves a sour taste in my mouth, so next time I'll be going to Niue, Tonga or Samoa where it's just as beautiful but better because you don't get ripped off/extorted with accommodation.”

“The lack of direct flights to Australia made the journey with a young family very long and this would be our only reservation about returning to Rarotonga.”

Too touristy

Four percent of respondents mentioned the Cook Islands as being too touristy, commercialised, and overcrowded with visitors. Visitors also mentioned some negative behaviour on the part of other visitors. Comments included:

“Rarotonga has lost its idyllic island feel due to poor roads, too many commercial properties and generally too crowded (too many vehicles/tourists).”

“Too many tourists!”

“It was packed. Too many tourists. Felt like we were intruding on the lives of private people because too many of us. Maybe a little more expensive and a little less people would be advantageous.”

“Other tourists who were very rude, impatient and lacking respect for locals and culture.”

“Seems that the Island can't cope with increased visitor numbers.”

“We have been 5 times now and we find it loses a bit the flare due to too many tourists coming now. It gets a bit too busy for our taste.”

“The amount of tourist related businesses.”

“It is becoming too commercial.”

Rental cars or scooters

Three percent of respondents mentioned rental cars and scooters as least appealing aspects of their Cook Islands visit. Respondents referred to the vehicles as being over priced, unreliable service, or old, some also complained about the process of getting a scooter licence. Comments included:

“Poor quality hire vehicle, and lack of acknowledgement from service provider that the service was substandard.”

“That we could not rent a scooter due to not having a full motorbike license from our home country.”

“The grubby little rental car. We managed to swap it for a ‘better’ after a few days.”

“Renting a vehicle was arduous and expensive.”

“Car hire--old and weird model, average service.”

“We had to wait several days to get a motorcycle licence (didn’t know it closed midday Saturday, Lonely Planet was wrong) and arrived about 15 mins before closing. Then had to wait Sunday and Monday (Queen’s Birthday) and then my 45-year old husband failed the test on the Tuesday because he hadn’t hired a scooter in advance (since he didn’t have a licence) but then borrowed one and wasn’t 100% sure on how it worked so they failed him! By then we were fed up so gave up!”

“Waiting to get a scooter licence. It would be good that if once you got it that you should only have to do a refresher next time. The fee should remain the same.”

“I tried to hire a vehicle but this was unsuccessful.”

“Unhelpful car/scooter hire companies.”

Lack of information

A lack of available information was mentioned by two percent of visitors surveyed. Areas where information was lacking included attractions/activities available, events, public transport, and directional information. Comments included:

“Lack of information (most hotel staff assume tourists know how things work): a welcome package should be made available in all accommodation explaining opening / closing times of restaurants, where to get cash from, how to circulate around the islands if you don't have a rental car or a bike pre-hired. Especially as I arrived late in the evening on both Rarotonga and Aitutaki and I was left with no information re: where to grab dinner or how to get cash out for my lagoon cruise the following day).”

“The cross island trek was really poorly marked and hard to follow, the bus times could be more easily findable.”

“The lack of a centralised online information system - searching for local products and services is haphazard and clunky.”

“Little information about public transport.”

“I did not enjoy the cross island walk - it was not well sign posted and nowhere on anything I read beforehand did it say how hard it was. I thought it would be a bush walk being more steeper when you got closer to the top but it was climbing tree roots all the way and was quite dangerous in places.”

Local people

A small group of respondents (2%) noted that the least appealing part of their visit was their interaction with local people in the Cook Islands. Common themes the unhelpfulness and rudeness of local people, and some visitors also mentioned social issues. Comments included:

“Bad attitude of some islanders.”

“We were targeted by a local guy claiming to be a police officer, with a fake badge. He tried to enter our van and also threatened that he had a gun and would shoot us if we didn't take him with us. We reported this to the police the next day.”

“Some of the locals were incredibly rude (e.g. the bus driver, sellers at the local markets) and obviously did not like tourists. We expected to be able to purchase items at the local markets but most of the stands sold the same items over and over again, and we were disappointed that most items for sale were cheap and 'Made in China'. It was hard to find a real genuine souvenir that didn't look like junk from a \$2 shop.”

“Some of our interactions with the locals were unpleasant. We are Canadian and found that when we spoke French, we were treated better than when we spoke English.”

“Some locals not very friendly.”

Law and Legislation

Two percent of visitors surveyed simply stated that their whole experience was disappointing due laws and regulations. Comments included:

“A lot of things closed on a Sunday.”

“Early shop closing hours.”

“The use of helmets, we have been driving motorcycles for years and one of the great opportunities on Rarotonga has always been driving around the island with the wind in your hair - really disappointed that the rules have changed for tourists but not locals or that a few accidents have ruined it for everyone. The roads have become super busy and trying to find parking is not fun. I can stay in traffic anywhere else in the world, Rarotonga has lost that magic of freedom.”

Safety

The safety of the Cook Islands as a holiday destination was mentioned by just one percent of respondents. In particular, this group referred to an increase in the crime rate and low road safety as being a problem on Rarotonga. Comments included:

“First time we've ever heard of burglaries.”

“Our house was burgled.”

“We always look forward to riding around on scooters when we visit, but the roads were so busy and crowded, we didn't feel safe on a scooter.”

“Three arson attacks on food stores, disturbing.”

“We had our wallet stolen with all our cash in it.”

“Being broken into whilst we were sleeping.”

“The roads are quite bad and dangerous to drive on. If they were good quality, I don't think helmets would be necessary!”

Suggestions to improve the visit to the Cook Islands

When asked if there was anything that could have improved their visit to the Cook Islands 40% of visitors made a comment. Of those that that made suggestions several focused on public services and infrastructure (20%), accommodation (14%), entertainment, activities, transport (11%), availability, quality, and price of food and drinks (10%), attitude of locals and service levels (10%), a longer stay or to visit more places (10%), weather (9%), value for money (8%), environment/safety/animal care (7%), availability of and flight schedules in and out of the Cook Islands (5%), information (2%), and nothing or keep the way (2%). Comments on these themes included:

"The roads have pot holes in some areas making it dangerous for all traffic."

"Some sort of footpath or trail around the island would be great especially at Muri Beach."

"Better internet access at a more reasonable rate."

"Better system in place for locals to leave their rubbish outside to wait for pick up."

"We wanted to climb the highest peak and spent a long time driving around trying to find the entrance because many roads do not have street signs."

"Update website for Aitutaki, a few Wifi spots with a couple of free MB every day."

"A few more recycling bins in public areas in Rarotonga."

"More affordable accommodation. I would stay longer and visit more often if this were the case."

"More accurate and honest description of accommodation. It is the second time we have booked through a website for accommodation where by the accommodation is not described as it actually is. It does not matter how much research you do on the accommodation, I have been disappointed both times and so have several other family and friends who have travelled at different times to different accommodation."

"More local crafts at market, not stuff from other islands."

"Providing basic first aid supplies and training."

"Service industry very slow."

"The snorkelling is one of the main reasons to go to Rarotonga and it is deteriorating. It's due to fishing and being walked on. To keep the coral and fish more work needs to be done on marine reserves and conservation."

"A few more opportunities to engage in local activities such as sport or craft."

“Such limited food options for people that want to make their own.”

“Local fish market would be great on Aitutaki as it was difficult to get fresh meat or fish.”

“More lighting, more fruit at markets, more good island food not European food.”

“Like in NZ all dogs should be on a leash and have a collar - was quite scary sometimes when walking or on the beach away from the crowds - it put me off walking around the island or exploring further.”

“Being able to have an uninterrupted sleep. Those roosters are a curse.”

“An accurate and up to date list advising what restaurants are open on what nights, was frustrating to drive to a restaurant only to find out it was closed.”

“Air NZ cancelled our flight and we had a delay of over 11 hours. It would seem from talking to people all the airlines are cavalier in their attitude towards delays and cancellations in flights to and from the Cook Islands.”

“An accurate and up to date list advising what restaurants are open on what nights, was frustrating to drive to a restaurant only to find out it was closed.”

“More widely available information for opening and closing times of business (especially police station to get licenses, we only got this information by word of mouth).”

Reasons to return to the Cook Islands and recommend to others

The majority of visitors (91%) indicated that they would consider re-visiting the Cook Islands in the future. This figure is slightly lower than that of the 2017/18 annual average (93%) and the identical quarter in 2017 (93%). Of the nine 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. Some visitors commented that a holiday to the Cook Islands is relatively expensive (especially accommodation and food) and that it is not good value for money. A few visitors said that they 'had been there and seen it all'. Other factors given for not wishing to return included the degraded lagoon condition, a lack of activities, and poor service. Comments included:

"Not enough to do in regards of value for money."

"We came because of the snorkelling and diving but within one year the fish were depleted to such an extent that there is no point in coming back! We will look to go elsewhere!"

"Not a lot to do when travelling alone with a child, quite expensive on the ground, service not always friendly, not always made to feel welcome, limited activities for my family group."

"Need to address run off into the marine sanctuary, the run off pipe was right next to our resort, Muri Lagoon was very dirty and polluted reef was mostly dead."

Under half (43%) of the visitors mentioned that they would definitely include the outer islands in their next visit. A further 53% of visitors indicated they will 'maybe' visit outer islands next time. Of those who said they would or maybe visit outer islands next time, most (93%) of mentioned they would like to include 'Aitutaki'. 'Atiu' was the second most mentioned island at 30%; another 21% of visitors stated that they would like to visit Mangaia, 18% of the respondents would like to visit Mauke. A small number of visitors mentioned Manihiki, Palmerston, Penrhyn, Pukapuka. A few mentioned the high cost of visiting outer islands as a barrier to visiting.

Nearly all visitors surveyed (96%) said that they would recommend the destination to their family and friends which is consistent with previous survey periods. Only 4% of visitors would not recommend the Cook Islands to others and this is largely based on the high prices, low level of infrastructure and poor accommodation quality, stray dogs, and a lack of environmental care.

Final observations

This report shows that the Cook Islands tourism industry generally performed well during the survey period of July to September 2018. Visitor satisfaction levels and the desire for return visitation have remained very high, and it is clear that the destination is making a generally positive impression on visitors. Visitor spend has increased from the same period last year and it will be important to see if this trend is sustained for the rest of the year. However, the level of satisfaction with public services, facilities and infrastructure declined slightly.

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 price of goods and services in the Cook Islands. There are also some concerns about stray animals and mosquitos, environmental degradation, and accommodation provided.

Overall visitor satisfaction and willingness to return are high and the majority of respondents expressed an interest in visiting one of the outer islands next time. It is vital now to build on this positive 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. By improving public services, facilities and infrastructure, developing new product offerings, and more importantly, enhancing the quality and 'value added' of existing activities and experiences, the tourism industry can increase visitor satisfaction, and enhance the generation of positive economic outcomes for the local population.