



The Cook Islands International Visitor Survey Report

May – June 2021

Prepared for Cook Islands Tourism Corporation

by

**New Zealand Tourism Research Institute
Auckland University of Technology**

www.nztri.org

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Acknowledgements

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Executive Summary

This report focuses on the characteristics, expectations and expenditure patterns of tourists who visited the Cook Islands between 17 May and 30 June 2021. This is the first post-COVID report and as such represents an important barometer of the post-pandemic performance of the industry. The data that underpins the report is generated by an online departure survey (<http://www.mycookislandsvisit.com>). There are 445 individual respondents to the survey - representing a total of 781 adults and 90 children in the expenditure analysis (this equates to 12% of all visitors during the period – based on the same period of 2021 visitor arrival data from the Cook Islands Statistics Office).

As a result of the border restrictions, nearly all (over 99%) of visitors surveyed come from New Zealand. Visitors are well educated (70% of visitors have some form of tertiary education) with a relatively high annual household income (61% earn over NZ\$100,000 per year). Sixty percent of visitors travel with one companion, solo travellers are less common (12%).

Over a third (35%) of those surveyed are first time visitors to the Cook Islands. The main purpose of visit is holiday-making (81%). The average length of stay in the Cook Islands is 9.1 nights. The majority of visitors (76%) stay within ten nights. Twenty seven percent of visitors surveyed visited Aitutaki.

Visitor spend prior to arrival in the Cook Islands (\$2,164 per person) increased from the same quarter in 2018/19 (\$2,092), but increased from the 2019/20 annual average (\$2,049 per person). Spend on the island (per person per day) is \$206. This spend is much higher than both the 2019/20 annual average of \$154 and also the same quarter for the previous year (\$154 for April to June 2019).

When pre-paid spend and local spend are combined, it is estimated that each visitor brings \$2,747 to the Cook Islands economy (or approximately \$301 per day). This figure is higher than the annual average for 2019/20 (\$2,129), and the April to June 2019 period (\$2,069).

Overall visitor satisfaction levels with services and experiences in the Cook Islands remain high. The most appealing elements are environment, cleanliness and weather; local people; activities, attractions, entertainment and events; and atmosphere. The least appealing elements are long waiting time when arrival, attractions and activities, some of the businesses were not open, the lack of public services, facilities and infrastructure, stray animals and mosquitos, and rubbish and natural environment care. In terms of the COVID-19 responses in the Cook Islands, visitors feel satisfied with easy access to hand and cleaning facilities (4.4 out of 5), and access to information about COVID-19 related business practices (4.3).

The future intentions of visitors remain high: 97% of those surveyed state that they would return to the Cook Islands, and 98% would recommend the Cook Islands to friends or family.

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Introduction

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

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

The spread of COVID-19 halted the tourism growth in the Cook Islands because the Cook Islands government issued border restriction from 16 March 2020. From 17th May 2021 (NZ time), the New Zealand and Cook Islands travel bubble commenced under a Quarantine-Free Travel arrangement. Over this two-month period, 2,152 visitors were contacted by email to take part in the survey, and 530 responses were received: a conversion rate of 29%. The conversion rate for this period is higher than the 2019/20 annual average (14%) and the Apr to June 2019 period (16%). This report focus on 445 responses who visited the Cook Islands from May to June period. Those 445 responses cover a total of 781 adults and 90 children when we examine visitor expenditure. As the first post-COVID period report, this report represents an important barometer of the post-pandemic performance of the industry.

The data presented includes detailed information on:

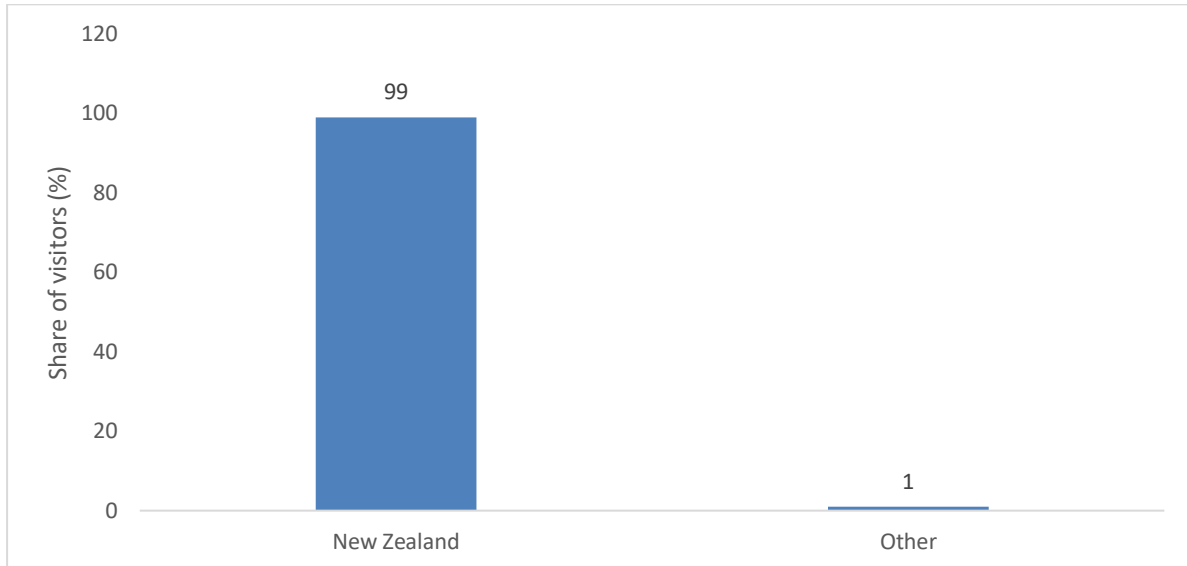
- The characteristics of visitors to the Cook Islands (age, gender, education, country of origin, income, purpose of visit, travelling companions, number of previous visits, length of stay, airline used, islands visited)
- Visitor information obtained about the Cook Islands, the factors influencing in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

Wherever there are significant or notable variations from the 2019/20 annual averages or the 2018/2019 April to June quarterly findings these are highlighted in the following discussion.

Visitor Characteristics

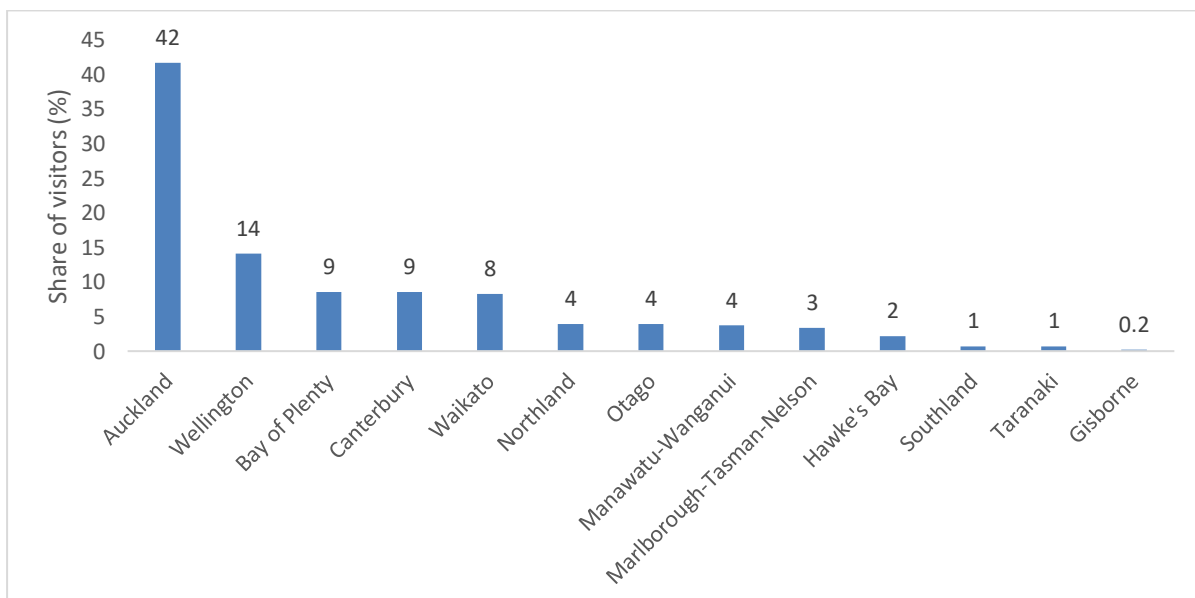
Nearly all (99%) of the visitors surveyed come from New Zealand (Figure 1). Less than 1% of the visitors come from Australia and UK.

Figure 1: Country of origin (n = 417)



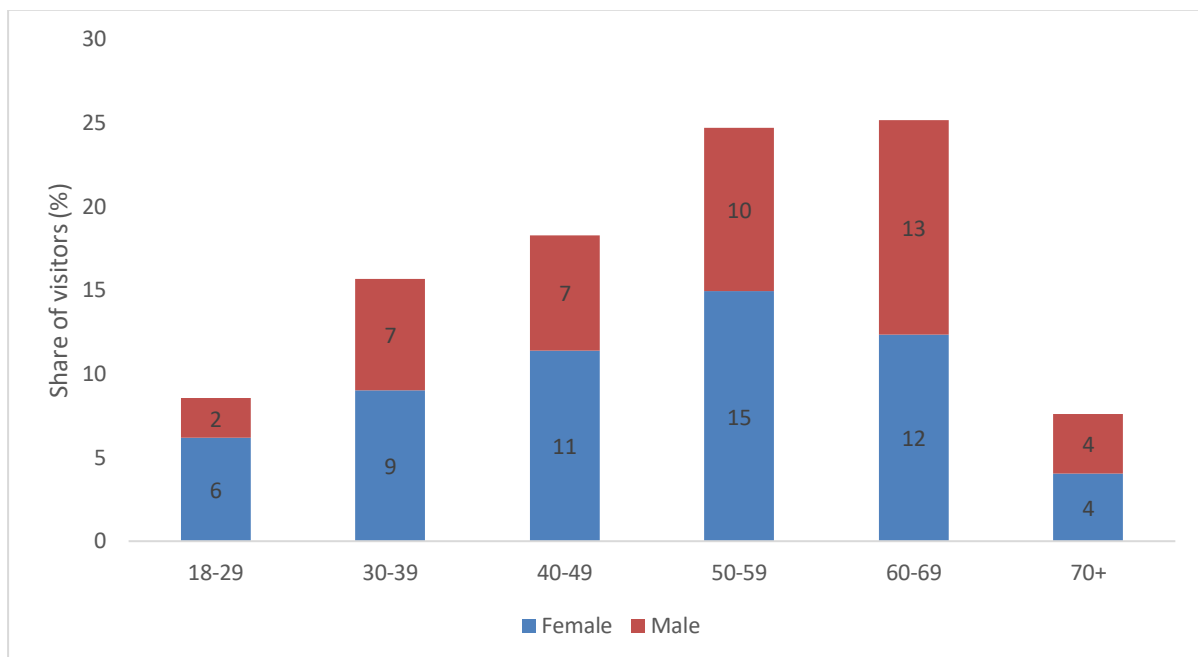
Auckland and Wellington account for 56% of New Zealand visitors (Figure 2).

Figure 2: New Zealand visitors (n = 410)



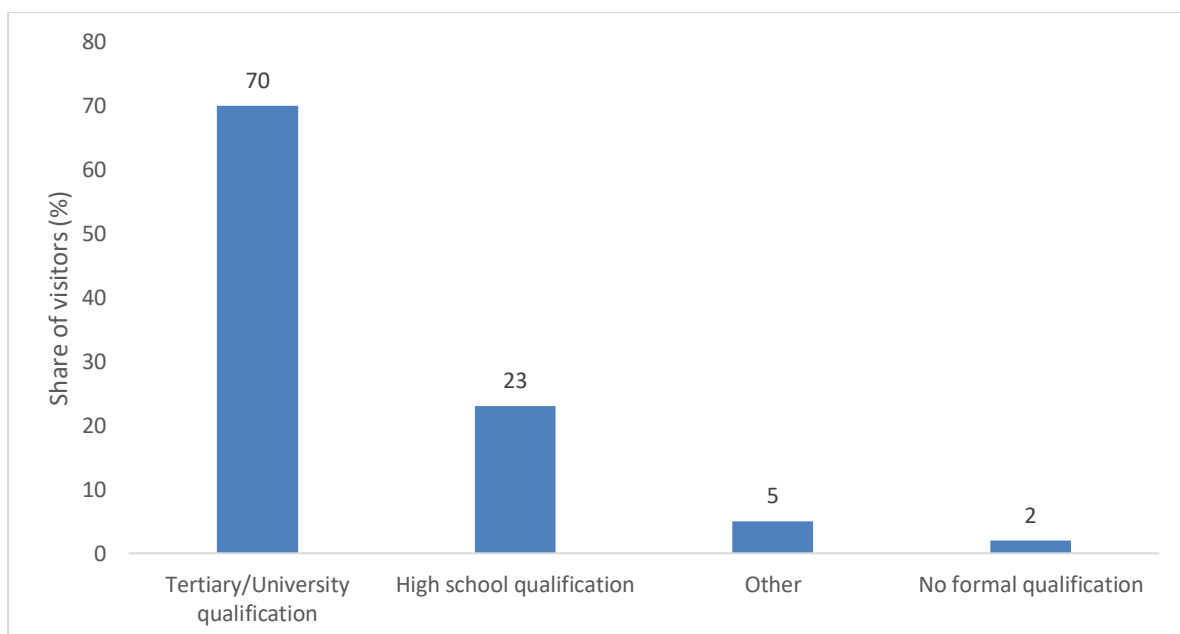
More women (58%) than men (42%) completed the survey (Figure 3). The most significant age categories are the 50 to 59 and 60 to 69 age groups (25%), followed by those aged 40 to 49 year (18%), 30 to 39 (16%), and 18 to 29 and 70+ groups (8%). Those under 18 are not surveyed for ethical reasons.

Figure 3: Distribution of age and gender (n = 421)



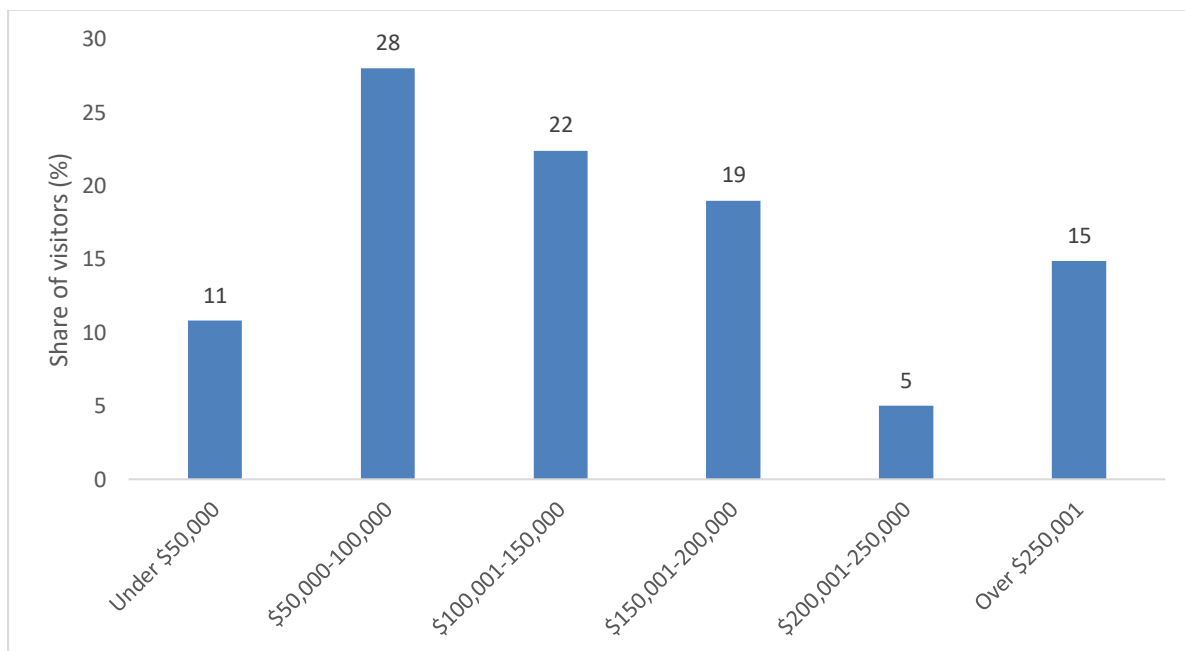
Visitors are well educated, with nearly three quarters (70%) of those surveyed having some form of tertiary qualification, and a further 23% having completed a high school education (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Highest qualification (n = 424)



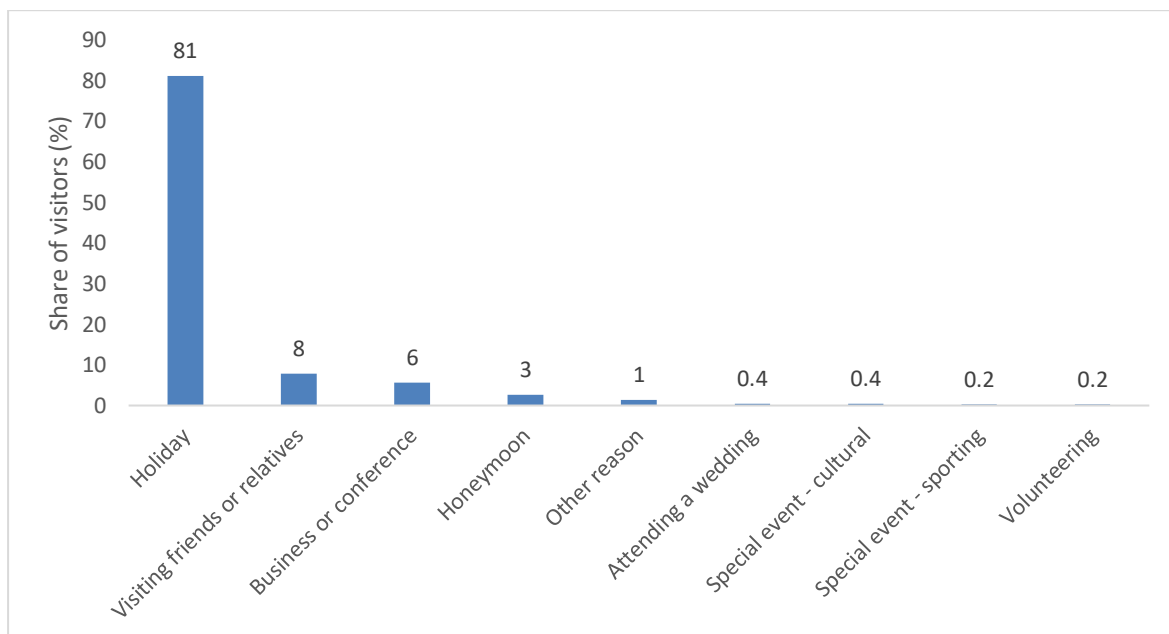
The average household income is NZ\$163,614. Over a quarter of visitors (28%) have an annual household income of between NZ\$50,001 and NZ\$100,000. A quarter (22%) of those surveyed earn between NZ\$100,001 and NZ\$150,000. A further 39% of respondents have a household income of over NZ\$150,000 per year (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Annual household income in NZD (n = 343)



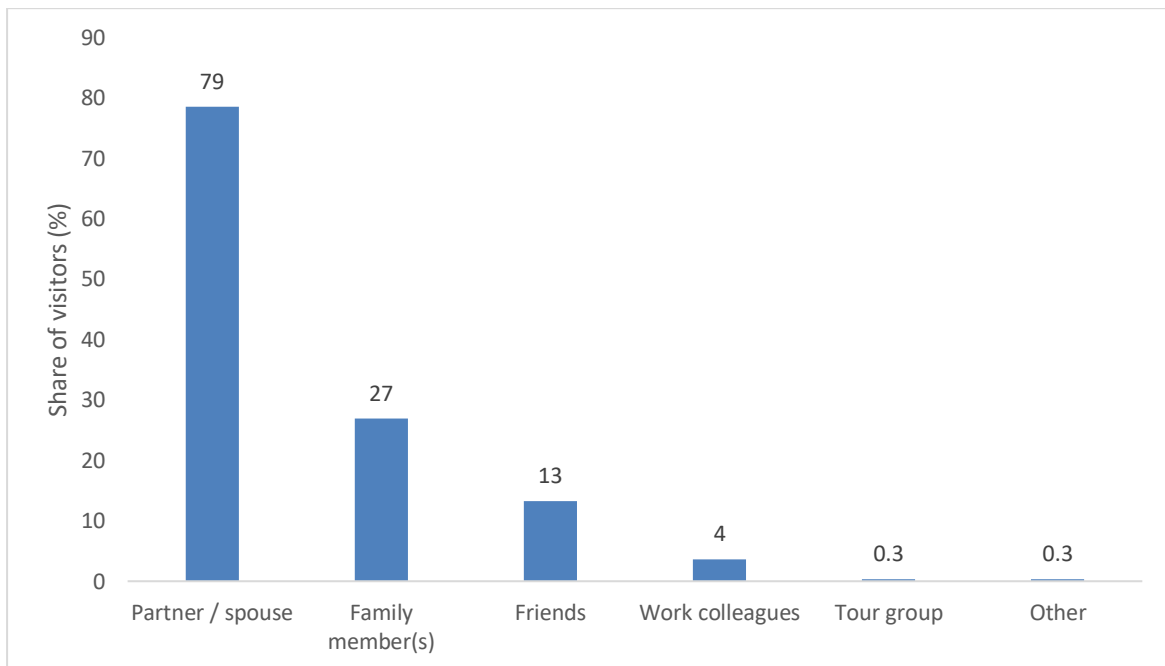
Over three quarters of (81%) respondents come to the Cook Islands for a holiday (Figure 6). Other reasons given include visiting friends or relatives (8%), for business and conference (6%), and for a honeymoon (3%).

Figure 6: Main purpose of visit (n = 445)



The majority (88%) of visitors travel with one or more companions. Among this group, most travel to the Cook Islands with a partner or spouse (79%). Visitors also travel with other family members (27%), with friends (13%), or with colleagues (4%). Those travelling in an organised group, with work colleagues, or as part of a wedding party represent smaller shares of the sample (Figure 7).

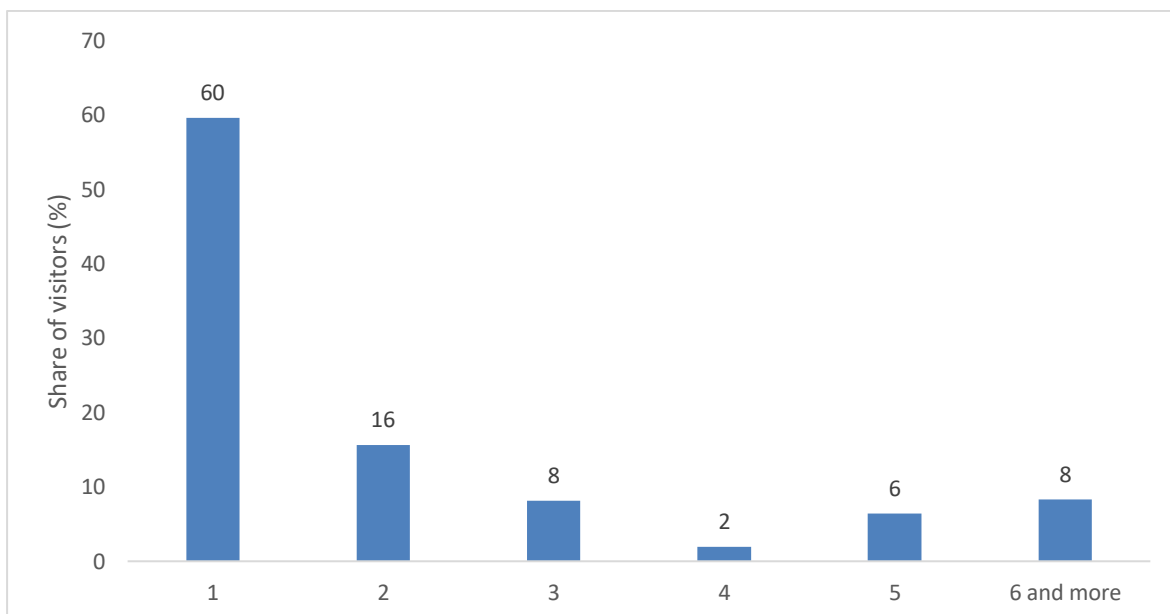
Figure 7: Travelling with whom? (n = 391)



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

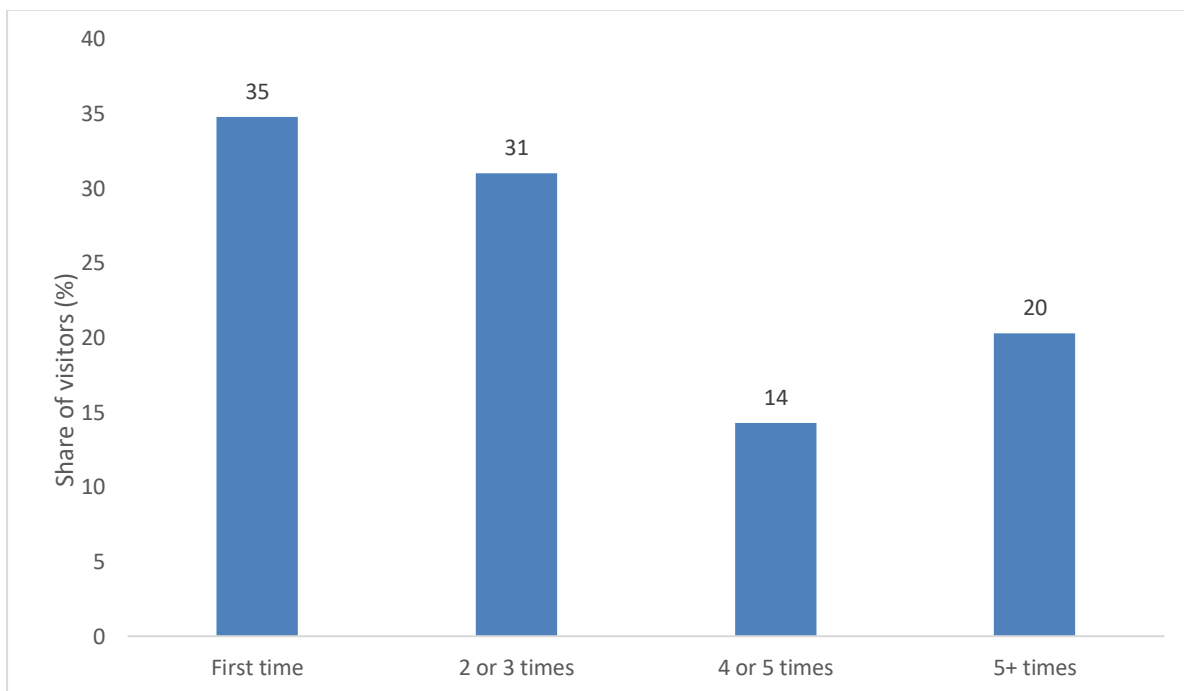
If we exclude those travelling alone, nearly two thirds of visitors (60%) travelled with one companion on their visit to the Cook Islands (Figure 8), and one quarter visitors (24%) travelled with two to three people.

Figure 8: Number of companions on trip (excluding those travelling alone) (n = 359)



Over a third of visitors (35%) are on their first visit to the Cook Islands. A further 30% have been to the Cook Islands two or three times before. Over a third (34%) have visited four or more times (Figure 9).

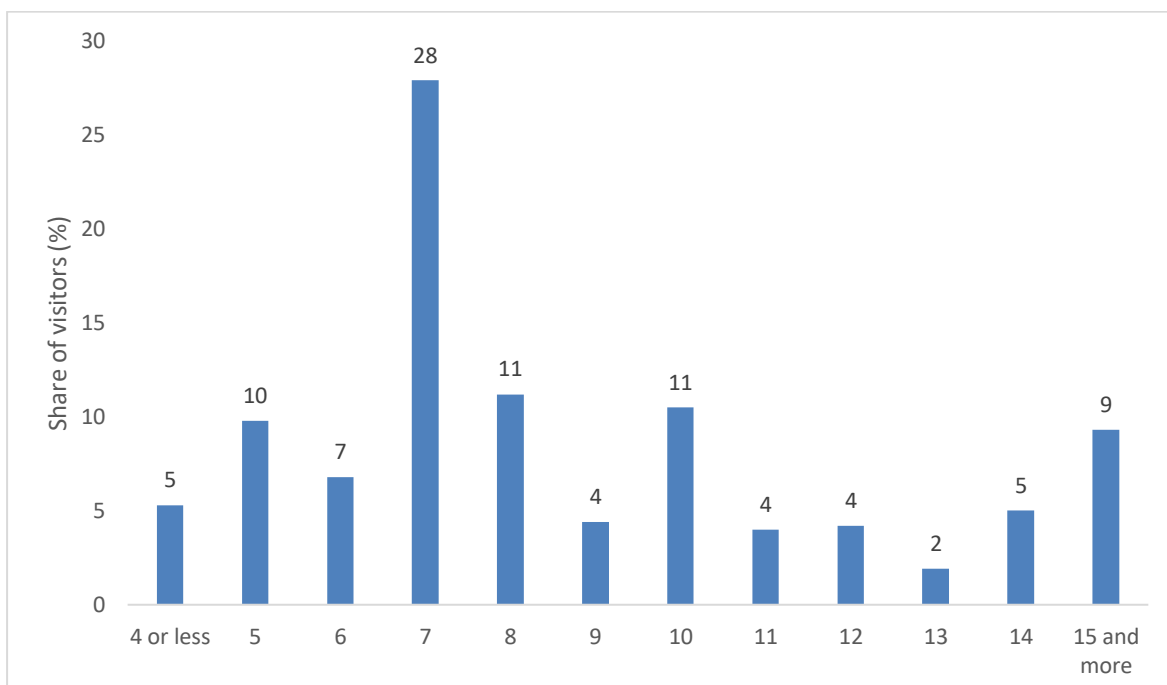
Figure 9: Number of visits to the Cook Islands (n = 419)



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

The average length of stay in the Cook Islands is 9.1 nights (median 8.0) with 76% of visitors spending ten or fewer nights in the country (Figure 10).

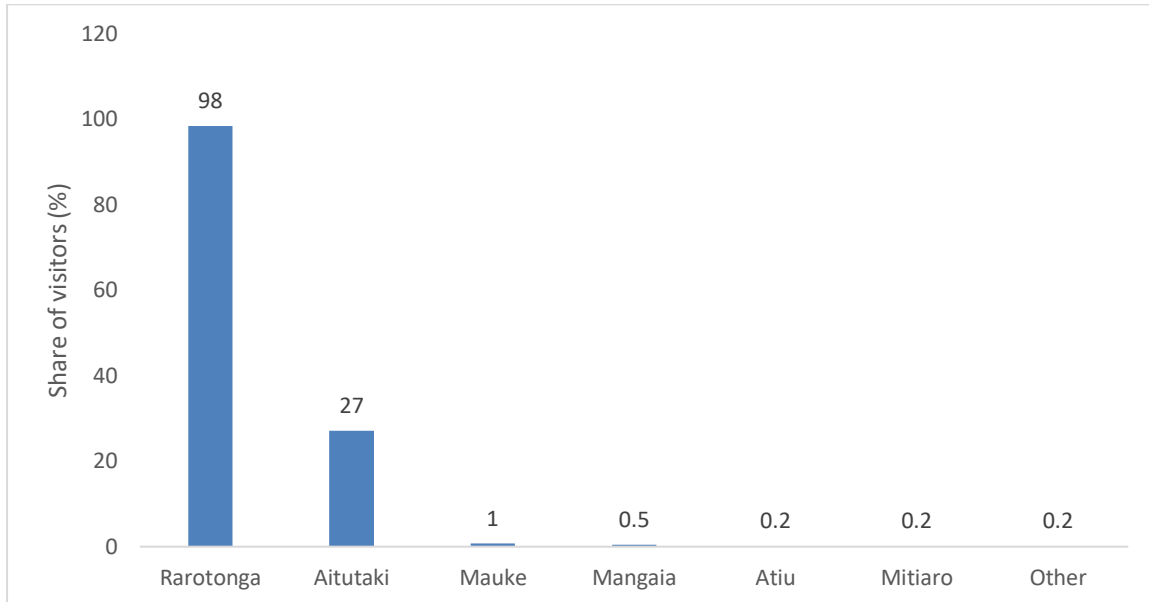
Figure 10: Length of stay in nights (n = 427)



Nearly all of visitors (99.8%) travel to/from the Cook Islands with Air New Zealand. The remainder traveled with other options, most commonly the Royal NZ Air Force.

The vast majority (98%) of visitors to the Cook Islands spend time on Rarotonga, with Aitutaki being the second most visited island (27%). Far fewer visitors spend time on Mauke (1%), and other outer islands (less than 1%) (Figure 11).

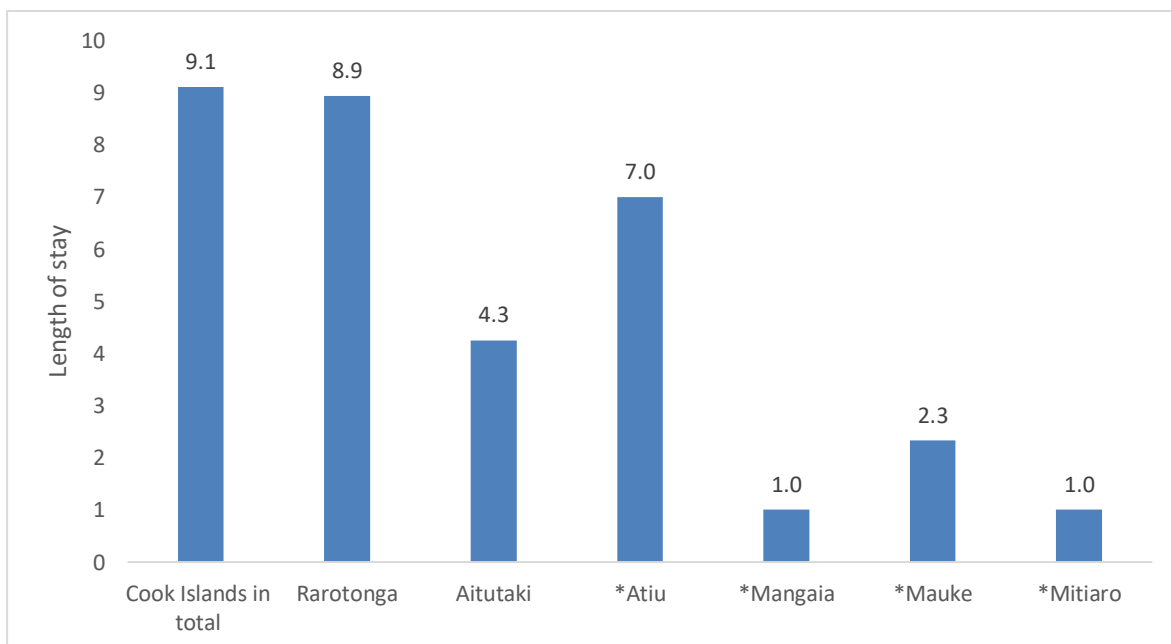
Figure 11: Visited Islands (n = 443)



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 8.9 nights (Figure 12). For the visitors that went to Aitutaki, the average number of nights spent on the island itself is 4.3. It should be noted that small sample sizes for Atiu, Mangaia and Mauke 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 = 4 - 425)

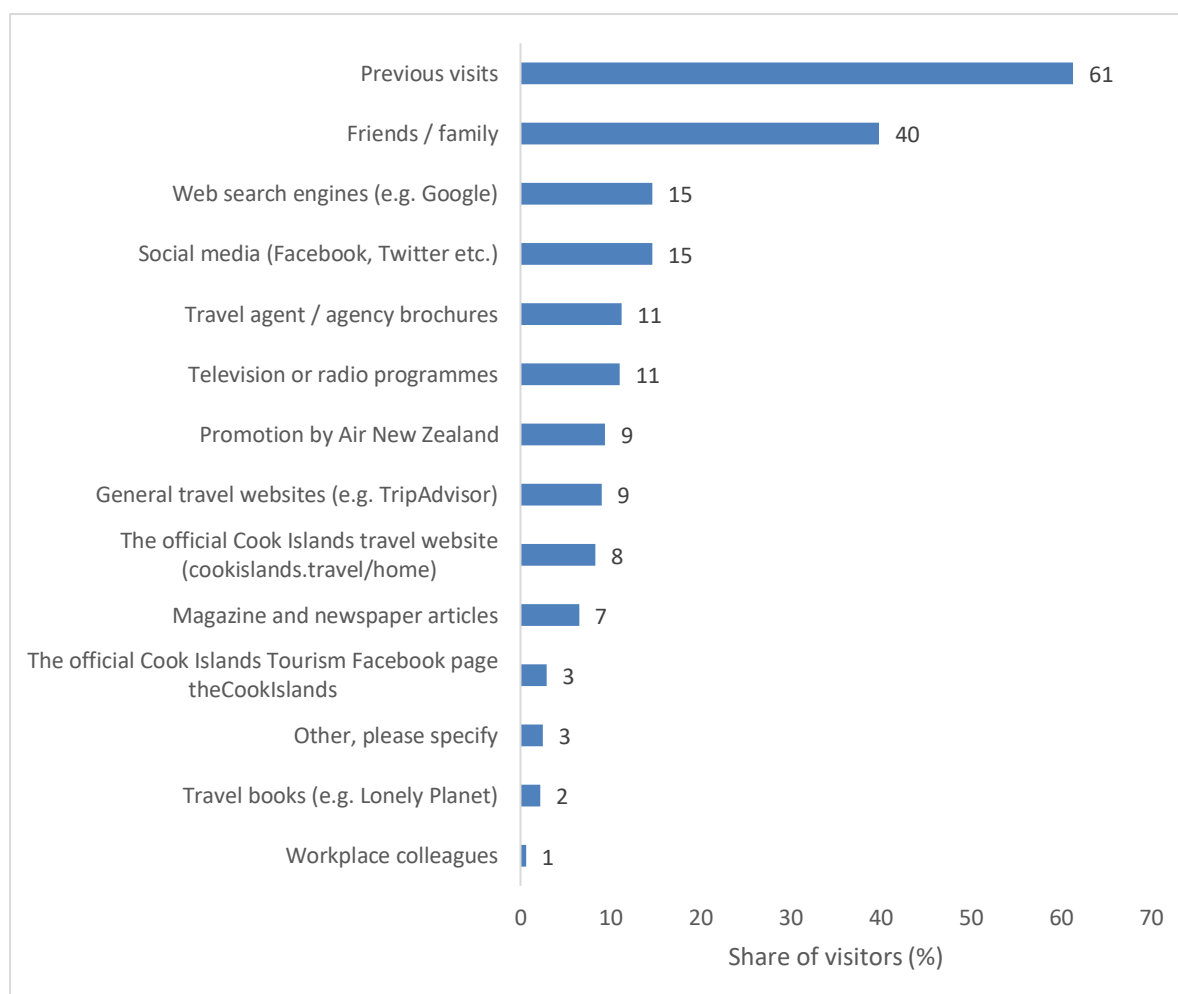


*Note: *n<10*

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 13). Over half (61%) of respondents ranked their previous visit as the most important influence, followed by word of mouth from friends and family members previous experience (40%), web search engines (e.g. Google) (15%), social media (Facebook, Twitter etc) (15%), travel agents/agency brochures (11%), television or radio programmes (11%), promotion by Air NZ (9%), general travel websites (e.g. TripAdvisor) (9%), and the official Cook Islands travel website (8%).

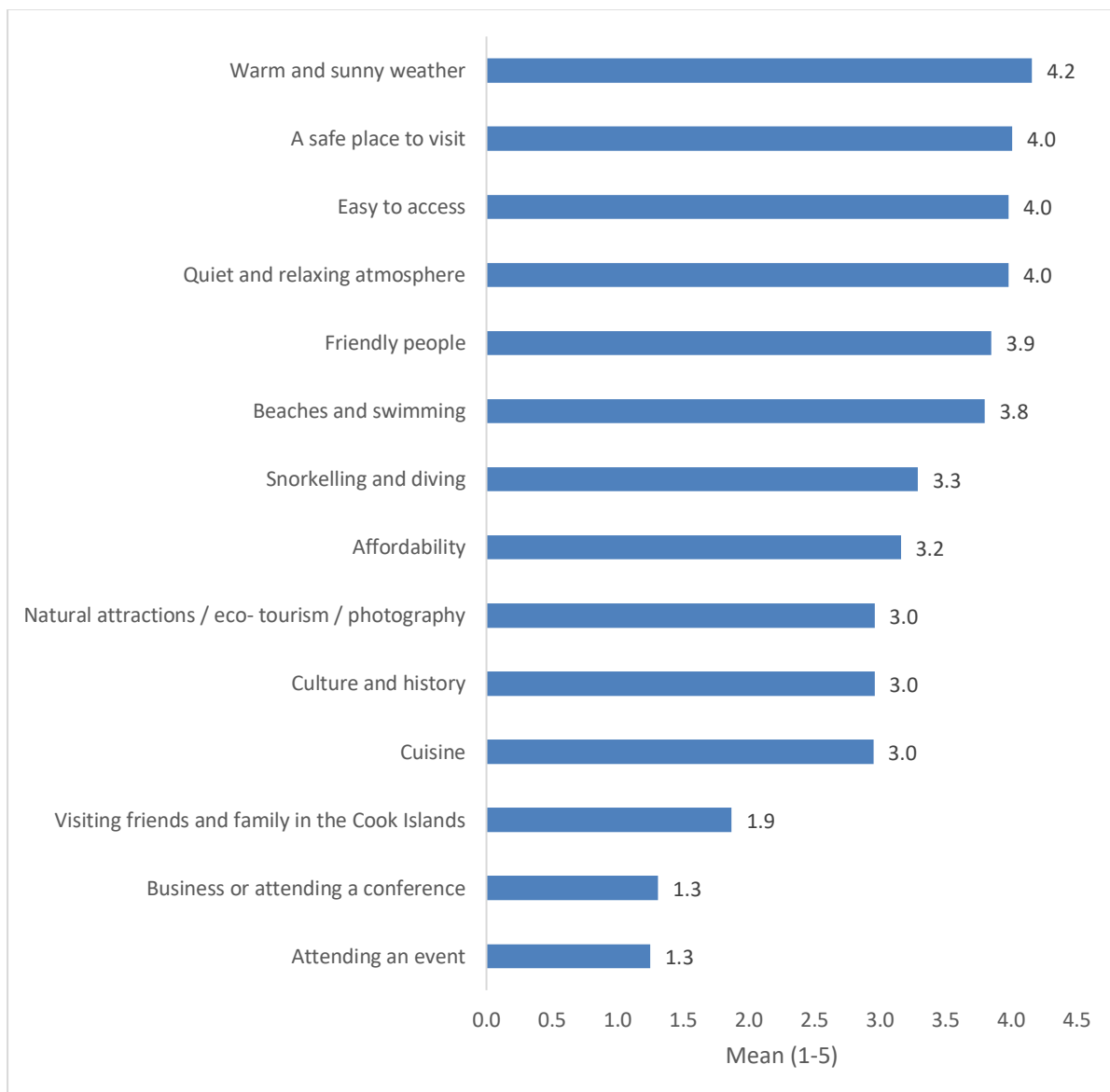
Figure 13: How did you find out about Cook Islands as a destination (n = 445)



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

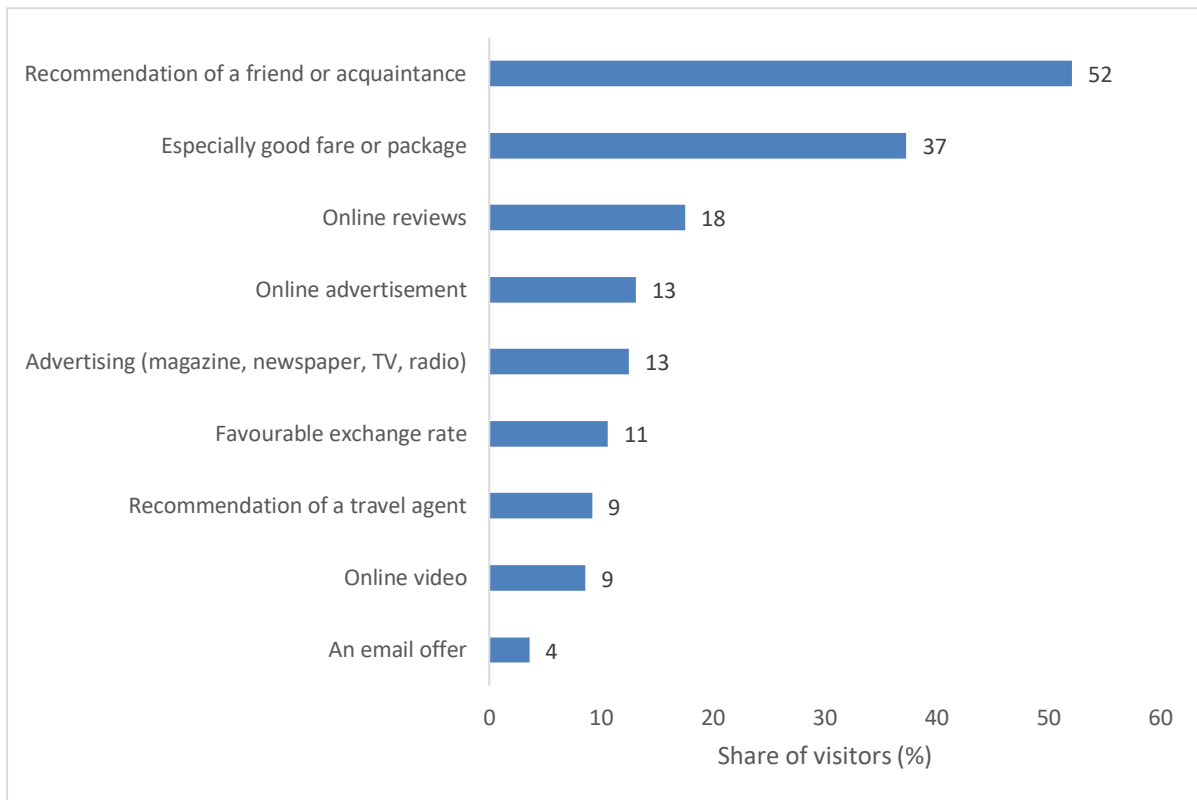
Visitors were asked to think about ‘the influential factors’ that led them to choose the Cook Islands. The warm and sunny weather is ranked as the most influential factor (4.2 out of 5), followed by a safe place to visit (4.0), easy to access (4.0), quiet and relaxing atmosphere (4.0), friendly people (3.9), beaches and swimming (3.8), snorkelling and diving (3.3), and affordability (3.2). Visiting friends and relatives (1.9), business or conference (1.3), and attending an event (1.3) were the least influential factors overall (Figure 14).

Figure 14: Influences on the decision to choose the Cook Islands (n = 435)



When it comes to the factors that led to the purchase of the trip to the Cook Islands, over half (52%) of visitors mentioned ‘recommendation of a friend or acquaintance’ as the most important factor (Figure 15). Over a third (37%) indicate that an ‘especially good fare or package’ is important for them in selecting the Cook Islands, followed by online reviews (18%), online advertisements (13%), traditional advertising (magazine, newspaper, TV, radio) (13%), favourable exchange rates (11%), the recommendation of an agent (9%), online videos (9%), and email offers (4%).

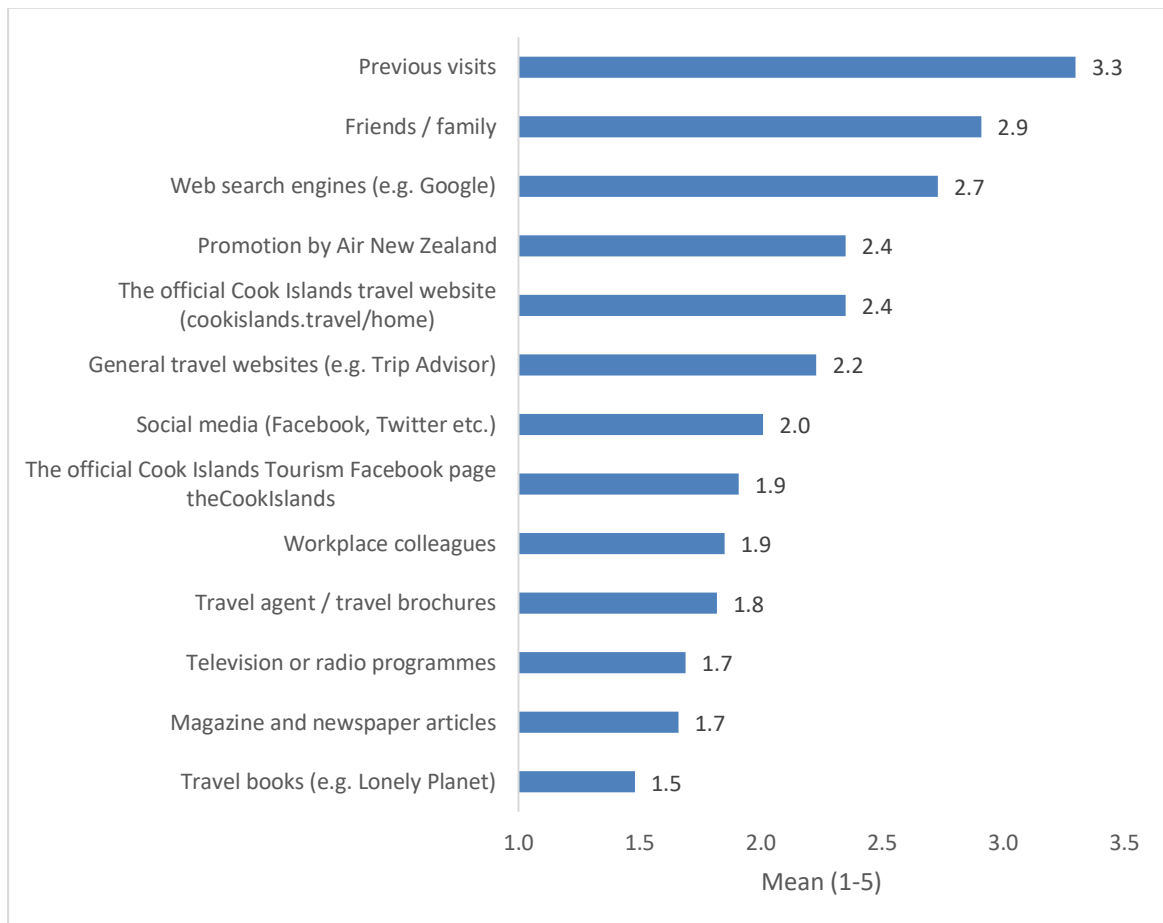
Figure 15: Which factors influenced your selection of the Cook Islands? (n = 359)



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

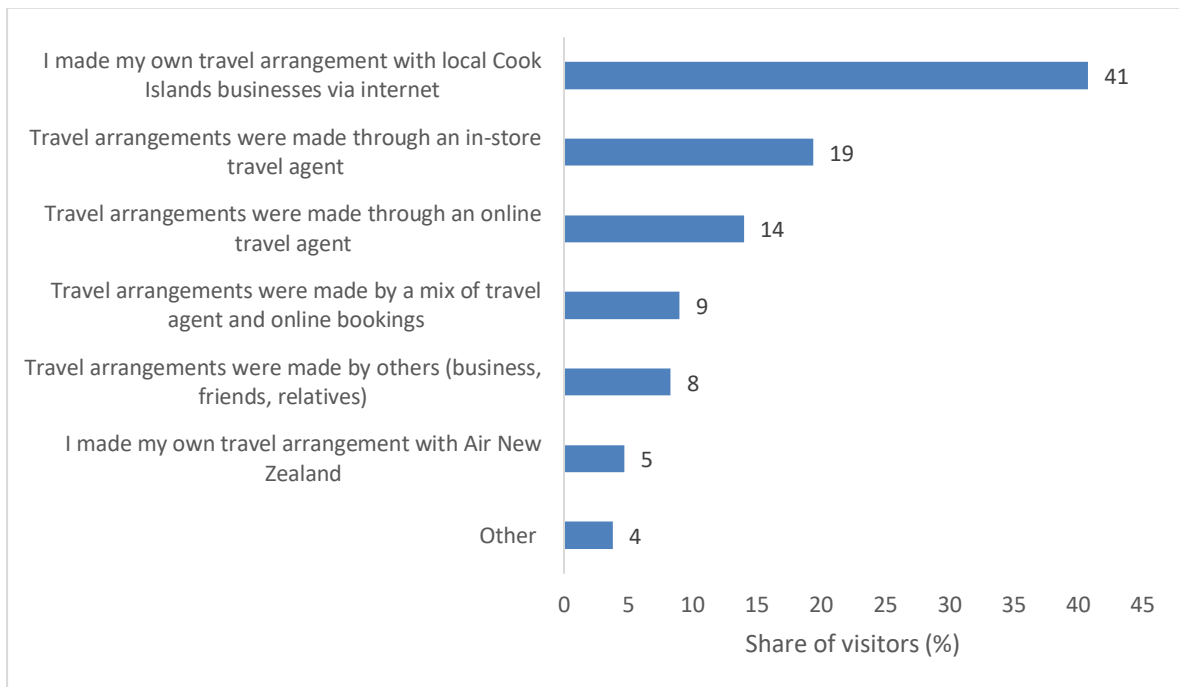
When visitors were asked to rate the importance of the listed information sources used to plan their trip. Previous visits ranked as the most important source (3.3), closely followed by friends and family members (2.9) web search engines (e.g. Google) (2.7) (Figure 16).

Figure 16: Importance of information source used when planning your trip (n = 394 - 423)



Forty-one 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 (19%) purchased a pre-paid trip through an in-store travel agent, followed by 14% of visitors whose travel arrangements were made by online travel agent, or who used a mix of travel agent and online bookings (9%), for 8% of visitors travel arrangements were made by others (8%). Another 5% mentioned they made the booking with Air New Zealand. Other arrangements include online bookings through other channels or through travel brokers.

Figure 17: How did you purchase your travel to the Cook Islands (n = 444)

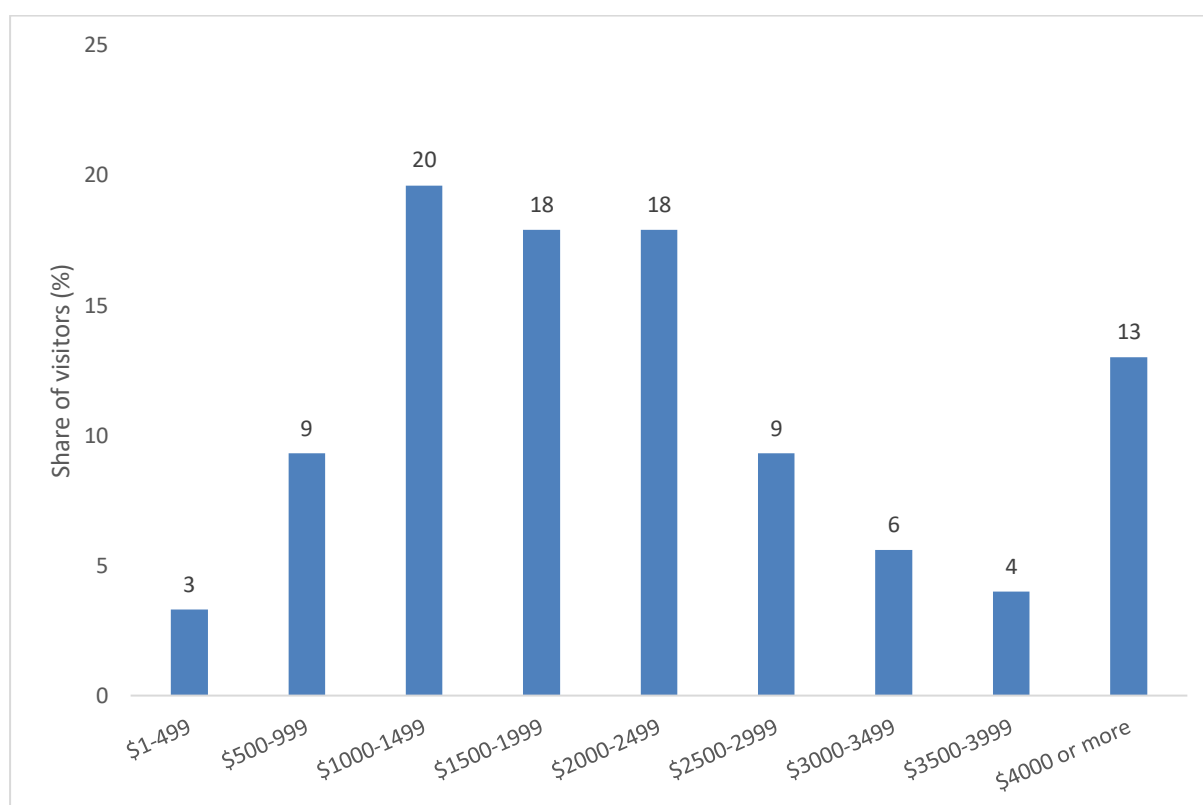


Visitor Expenditure

The IVS asks a range of questions about visitor expenditure, both prior to arrival and while in the Cook Islands. All the figures below are based on respondent estimates of their own spending and any others they spent money on (e.g., spouse, children etc.). The following pre-paid expenditure section is based on the number of adults and children that respondents included in their cost estimates: 726 people comprising 652 adults and 74 children.

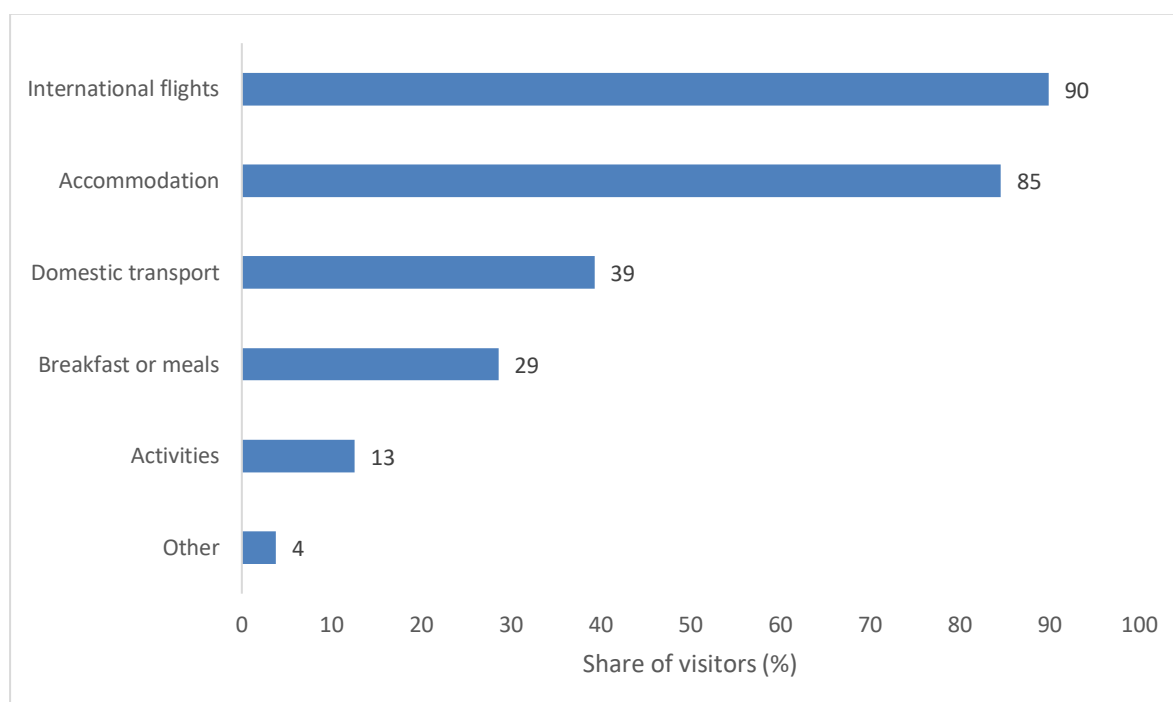
On average, visitors to the Cook Islands spend NZ\$2,164 per person prior to arrival. Over half (56%) of the visitors spend between NZ\$1,000 and NZ\$2,499 prior to arrival (Figure 18). The prepaid figure per person is higher than Apr to June 2018/19 (NZ\$2,092), while higher than the previous year (average prepaid spend of NZ\$2,049 for 2019/20).

Figure 18: Amount of money spent per person prior to arrival (n = 301)



In addition to international flights, spending prior to arrival includes: accommodation (85%), domestic transport and airport transfers (39%), and meals and breakfast (29%) (Figure 19). Activities are far less likely to be included in pre-paid expenses (13%).

Figure 19: Items included in money spent prior to arrival (n = 318)



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\$206 (Table 1). This figure is much higher than both the overall spend figure for 2019/20 (NZ\$154) and the same 4th quarter IVS survey period in 2018/19 (NZ\$154). The majority of money spent locally is on accommodation related services (45%), restaurants, cafes and bars (23%), and shopping (7%). These per person expenditure figures are based on 445 survey responses covering a total of 871 people (781 adults and 90 children).

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

Expenditure Items	n = 871	
	Mean (NZ\$)	(% of spend)
Accommodation	93	45
Restaurant/Café/Bar	48	23
Shopping	15	7
Vehicle rental	11	5
Groceries	11	5
Domestic Flights	9	4
Water-based Activities	8	4
Other	4	2
Land-based Activities	3	1
Petrol	2	1
Internet	2	1
Public Transport	0	0
Total spend (NZ\$)	206	100%

It is difficult to estimate accurately the proportion of the pre-paid spend that flows to the Cook Islands. For the purposes of this study, and based on previous research in the region, we conservatively estimate that 50% of the pre-paid spend is allocated to airfares. Of the remaining 50% of the pre-paid spend, 80% of this flows back to local operators. In total this means that for every pre-paid dollar, 40 cents flows to the Cook Islands. We estimate that the pre-paid spend figure per day flowing back to the local economy is NZ\$95 and for the average total visit is NZ\$866 (9.1 nights).

By multiplying daily in-country spend by the average stay (9.1 nights) we can see that spend per person per visit while in the Cook Islands is on average NZ\$1,881. The total figure of what is spent locally and what flows back to the Cook Islands from pre-paid expenses is therefore NZ\$301 per visitor per day (\$206 + \$95), or NZ\$2,747 (\$1,881 + \$866) for each visitor. Table 2 shows that 2021 visitors contribute considerably more to the local economy compared with 2019/20 annual and April to June (4th Qtr) 2019 periods.

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

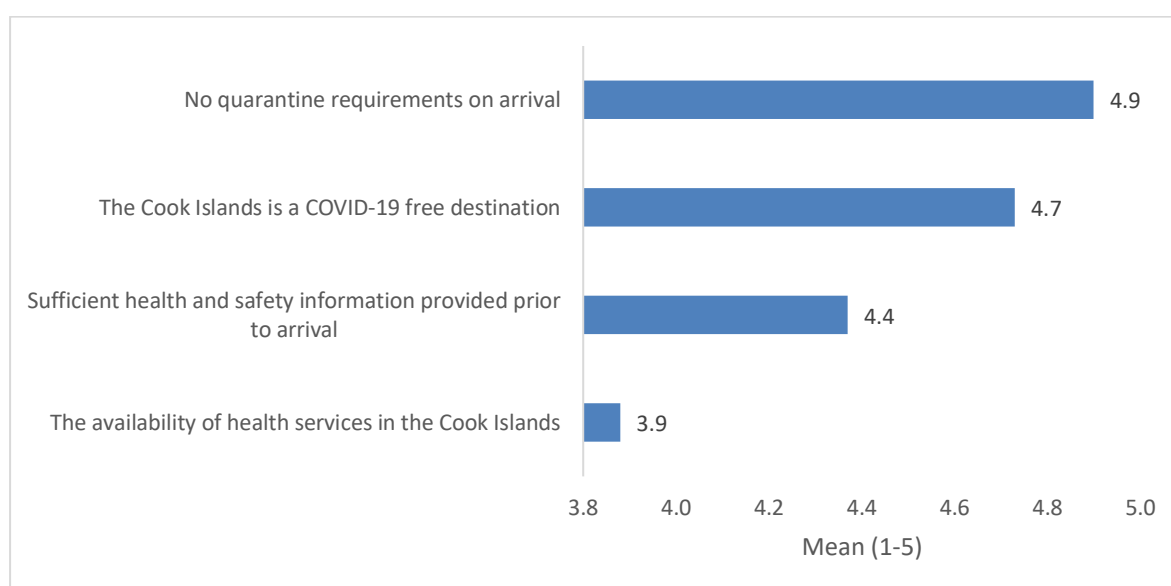
	May-Jun 2021	2019-20 annual	Apr-Jun 2019 (4 th Qtr)
Average Spend Prior to arrival (NZ\$)			
Per Person Per Trip	\$2,164	\$2,049	\$2,092
Flowing into local economy rate – estimated 40%			
Per Person Per Trip	\$866	\$820	\$837
Per Person per Day	\$95	\$96	\$105
Length of stay (nights)	9.1	8.5	8.0
Average Local Spend			
Per Person Per Trip	\$1,881	\$1,309	\$1,232
Per Person per Day	\$206	\$154	\$154
Total Economic Impact-Per Trip	\$2,747	\$2,129	\$2,069
Total Economic Impact-Per Day	\$301	\$250	\$259

Perception of COVID-19 impact and responses

Although the Cook Islands is a COVID-19 free destination, the travel bubble with New Zealand is subject to a set of criteria including airline and airport preparedness, necessary protocols and frameworks. In order to understand the 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 International Visitor Survey in 2021.

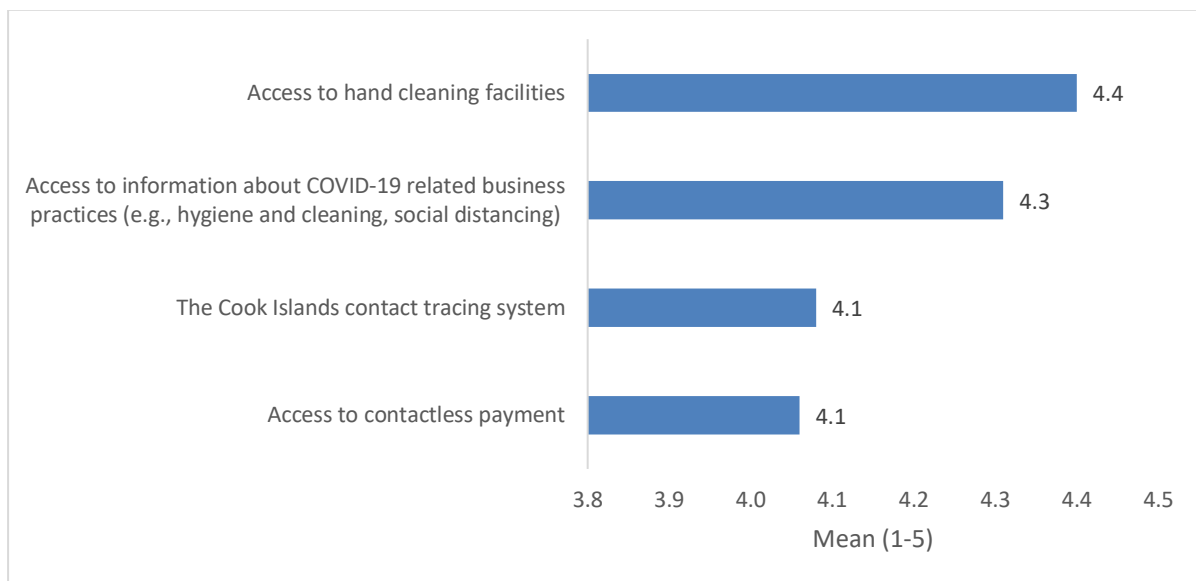
When asked about the important COVID-19 related factors influencing the decision of travelling to the Cook Islands, "no quarantine requirement on arrival" was ranked as the most important factor, followed by "the Cook Islands is a COVID-19 free destination" (Figure 20).

Figure 20: The important factors in your decision to travel to the Cook Islands (n=395)



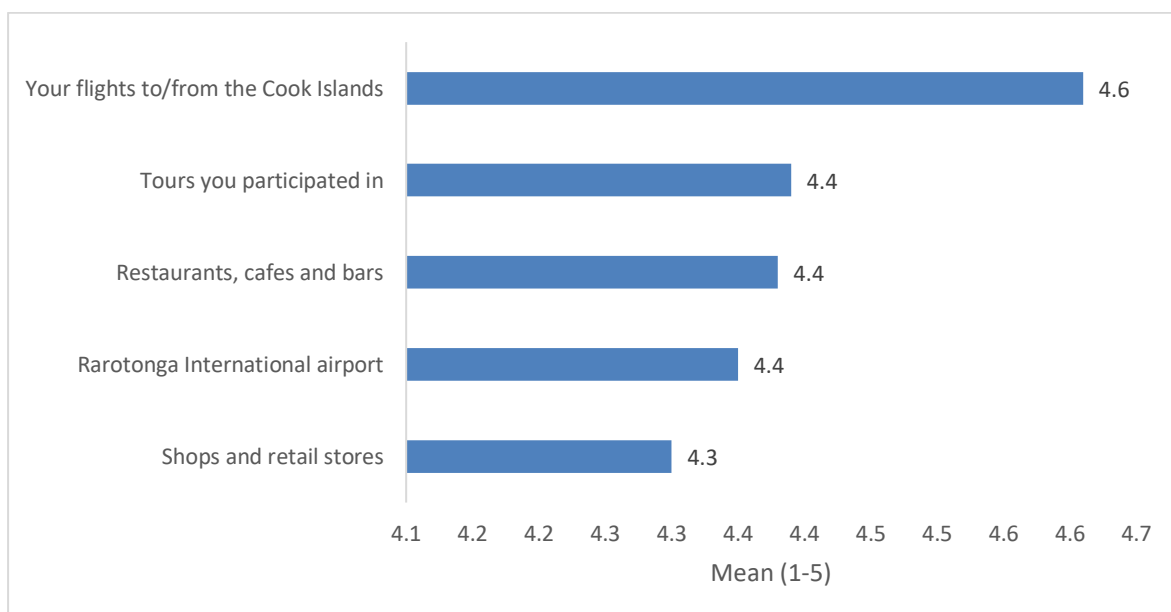
In terms of the COVID-19 responses in the Cook Islands (Figure 21), visitors feel satisfied with easy access to hand and cleaning facilities (4.4 out of 5), and access to information about COVID-19 related business practices (4.3). Visitors expressed a relatively lower level of satisfaction with contact tracing system and access to contactless payment options (both 4.1).

Figure 21: Degree of satisfaction with COVID-19 responses (n=393-413)



Visitors were asked to rate their level of satisfaction with health and safety measures in the Cook Islands (Figure 22). Overall, respondents give high scores (all above 4 out of 5) across a range of locations and sectors. Shops and retail stores received the lowest score..

Figure 22: Degree of satisfaction with health and safety measures (n=227-421)



Some respondents provided further comments about their perceptions of COVID-19 and its management during their time in the Cook Islands. Among those comments, over half (51%) are positive in nature, including: appreciation of the well managed COVID-19 precaution system; amazement at the high vaccination rate among Cook Islanders, the ease of using the COOKSAFE card, and the fact of being able to travel to the Cook Islands easily and directly from NZ. Over a third (37%) of comments were clearly negative in nature and included:

problems using the COVID scanning card and confusion or concerns over certain COVID-19 protocols. A further set of comments gave suggestions for improving the process.

Comments include:

Well managed; no issues

"Very good local awareness and proactive management by Govt."

"All involved with Covid work in the Islands are doing a great job."

"A well balanced approach that was appropriate and not over the top."

"Doing a great job protecting the people of the Cook Islands."

"I was very impressed with how well it was being managed locally."

"Rarotonga has done very well in getting everything in place before the boarder opened. Well done!"

"I felt very safe and found free information from the Cook Islands Times important too!"

"Every shop had hand wash facilities & contact tracing , was very good!"

Contact tracing or scanning

"My Covid scanning card that was issued to me didn't work at a few places we visited and some shops didn't even have the scanner (phone) at all for tracing purposes."

"As a tourist in a beachy and water environment having to carrying the paper Covid QR code to scan everywhere (of which retailers require a device) is impractical. Not sure why the nz scanning system was not replicated?"

"You need to do the online declaration on a computer to hard to do on your phone."

"Very favourably impressed with ease of use of the COOKSAFE card."

"A lot of places didn't have anywhere to scan in."

"We were told we could use our NZ app before leaving but that's not the case - no bar codes."

"We weren't given the Cook Save scan card when we landed we had to go to the Tourist Information to get one."

"Better explanation re COVID tracing systems in cooks should have been circulated prior to departure so could source and understand ap prior to boarding. System was not well explained on board. We should have researched better ourselves before departing."

“Didn’t realise you had to have the card as well as the bluetooth app need to make more clear.”

“I entered at least two stores that when I asked about been able to scan in - they said that their equipment wasn't working.”

Poor protocols, confusion, concerns

“Air NZ should not have allowed a conspiracy theorist on the plane who refused to wear a mask the entire flight.”

“The flight was very full each way which did concern me a little.”

“Before departing Auckland I received an alert with a link attachment reminding me to fill in the Covid online arrival form. However I didn't receive this departing Rarotonga. Not a big deal but could be something to look at.”

“They did try, but the execution was poor & not well thought out.”

“Pre filled the online forms but had to complete by hand again on the plane.”

“The apps to complete the online surveys were not that easy to find. We should have of course done them before going to the airport, but forgot and the access to / from the Cook Is web site did not have a DIRECT LINK to the survey.”

“Maybe signs to indicate where you should go if u have any covid symptoms.”

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 23). Over three quarters (77%) of the visitors surveyed were 'very satisfied' with their overall experience of the Cook Islands. Very few visitors (3%) were unsatisfied (a score of 2 or lower) with their visit.

Figure 23: Overall satisfaction with experience of the Cook Islands (n = 428)

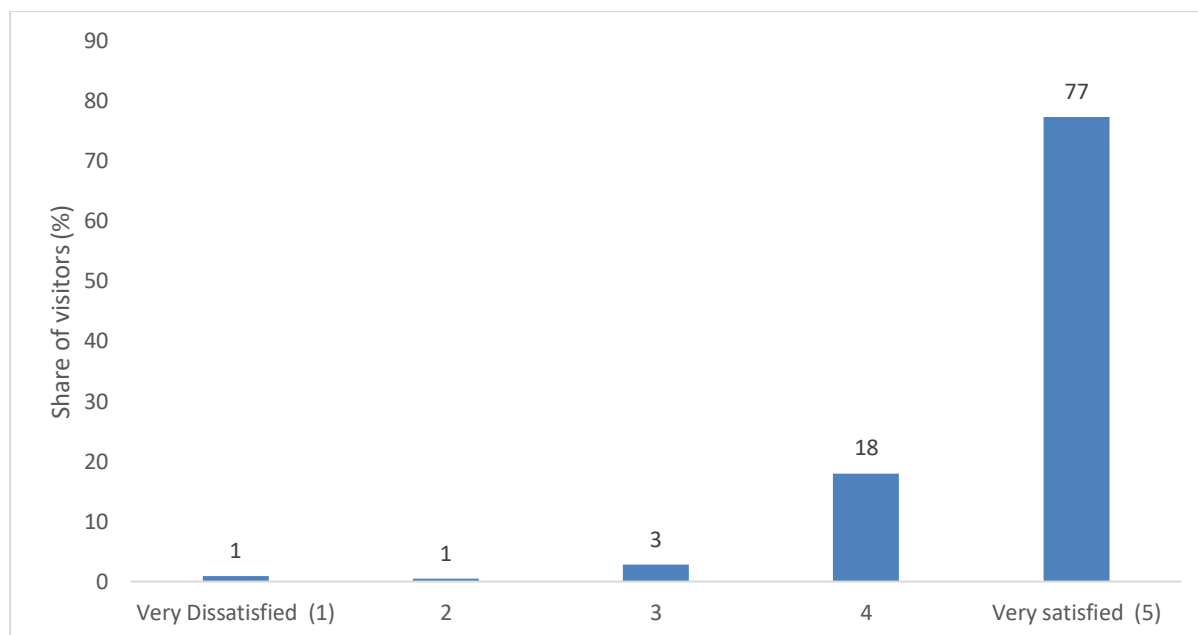


Figure 24 shows the percentage of respondents who undertook specific activities while on their visit to the Cook Islands. Almost all visitors visited a beach (96%) and frequented at least one restaurant or café (99%) during their trip. Most of the respondents either go swimming (93%) or visit a local market (80%), and 78% of visitors have done snorkelling.

Visitor satisfaction is generally high with all activities undertaken (almost all registering more than 4 out of a possible high of 5) (Figure 25). Activities involving cultural interaction (average satisfaction of 4.5) rank the highest, followed by land-based products (4.4), shopping (4.4), and water-based experiences (4.4). It should be noted that kitesurfing, whalewatching, Tumunu on Atiu, and bonefishing are characterised by relatively low numbers of participants (n = 11-13).

Figure 24: Degree of participation in activities (n range = 11-432)

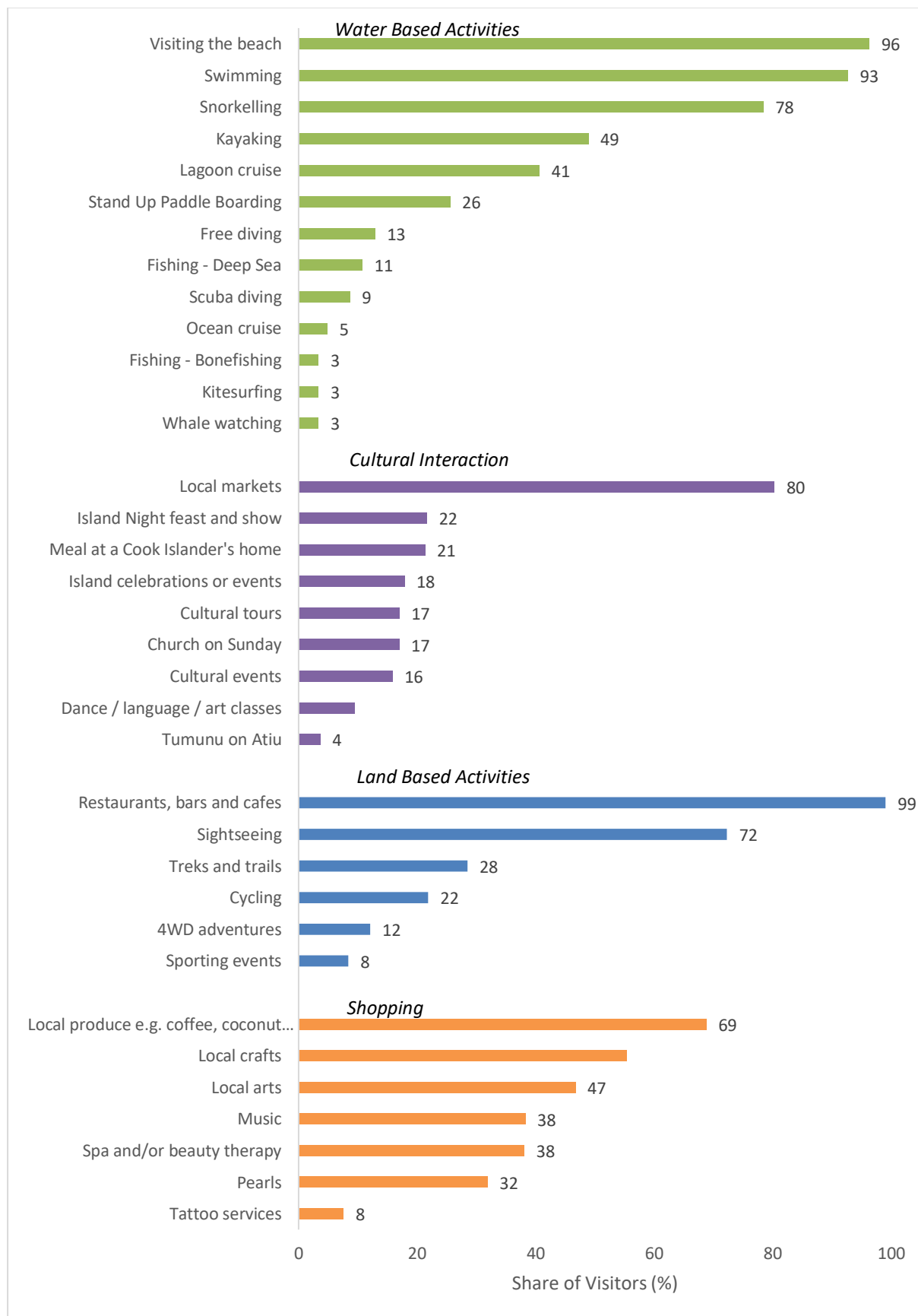
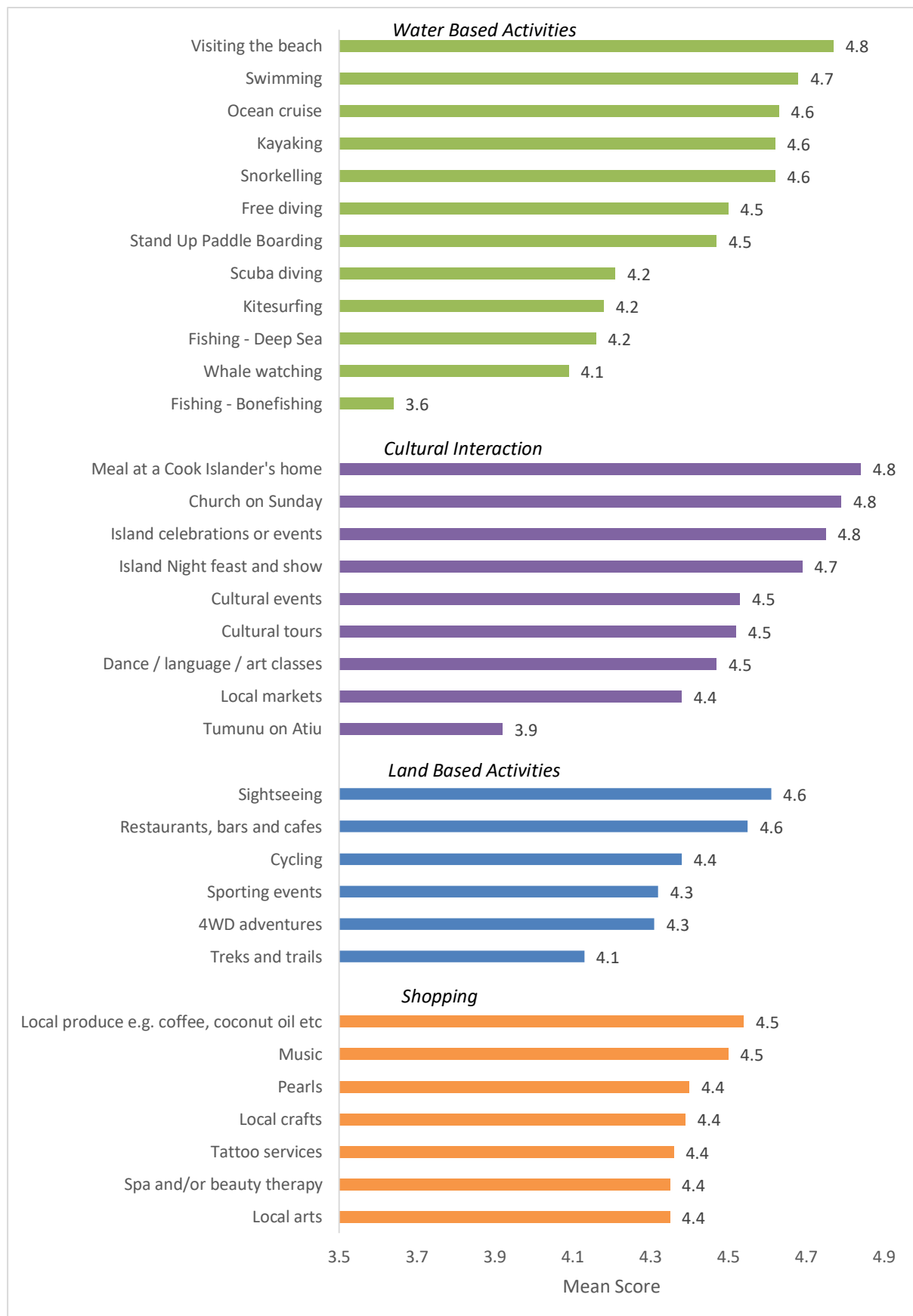


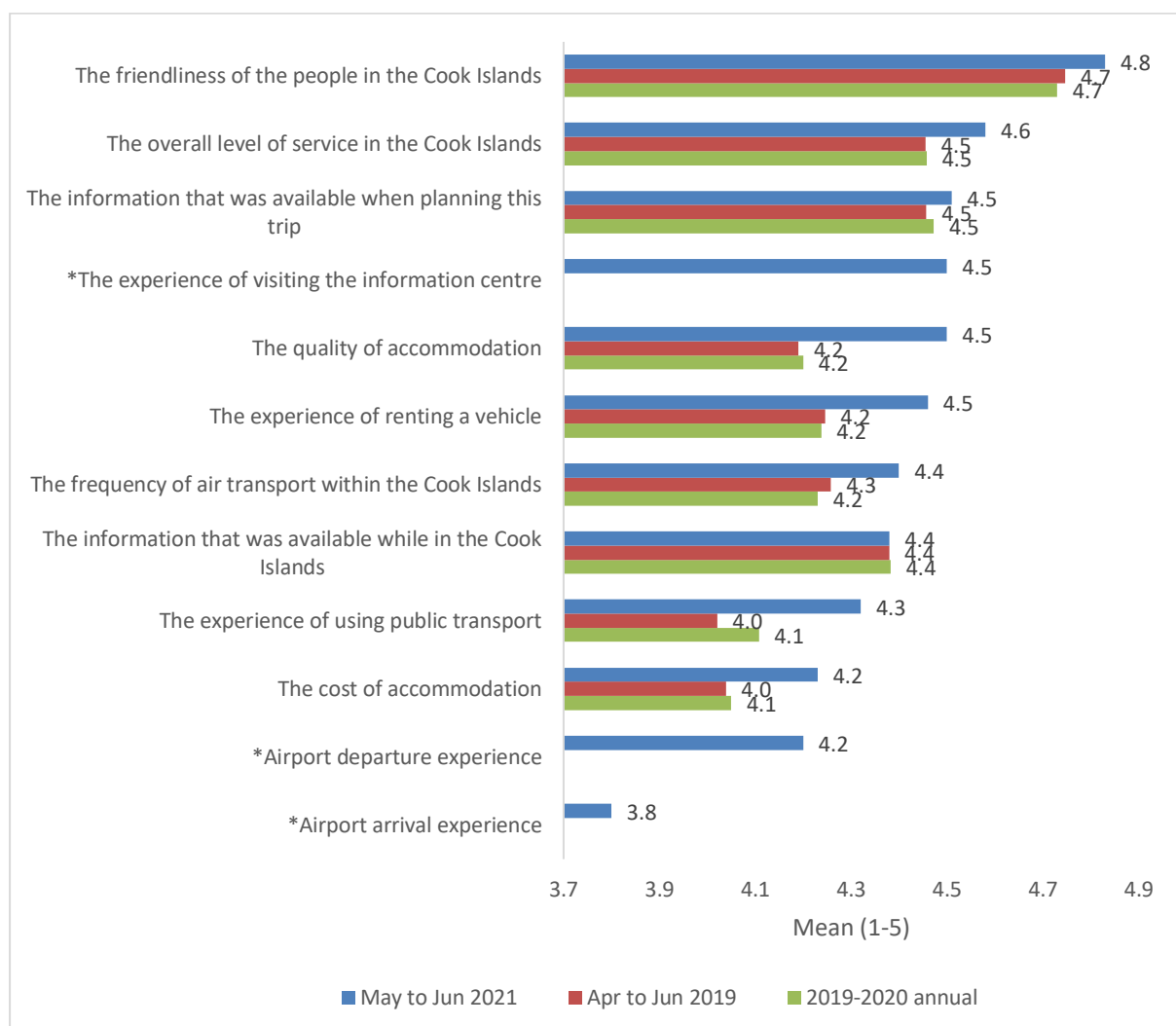
Figure 25: Degree of satisfaction with activities participated in



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 of January to March 2020 are compared to the annual average for 2019/20, and the same quarter of 2018/19 (Figure 26).

Respondents consistently highlight the friendliness of the people in the Cook Islands. As can be seen from the figure below, the degree of satisfaction with the majority items is higher in 2021 than for April-June 2019 and the annual average for 2019/20. Satisfaction with the airport arrival and departure experience, and visiting the informations centre are new items added from 2021.

Figure 26: Degree of satisfaction with Cook Islands services



Note: New items from 2021

Most appealing aspects of the Cook Islands

Visitors were asked “What did you find most attractive or appealing about the Cook Islands on your most recent visit?” (Table 3). The most appealing elements of the Cook Islands experience are the natural environment (47%), the friendly and welcoming local people (43%), the tourist attractions and activities on offer (27%) and the peacefulness and relaxing atmosphere of the country (25%). Smaller numbers of comments mentioned aspects such as food and beverage (16%), accommodation (8%), COVID resilience and travel availability (5%), overall good experience (4%), level of service (4%), family or friends (4%), emotional connection (3%), culture (3%), convenience (2%), and price of goods and services (2%).

Table 3: Most appealing aspects of the Cook Islands (n=427)

Themes	Share of respondent comments (%)*
Environment, cleanliness & weather	47
Local people	43
Activities, attractions and entertainment, events	26
Atmosphere	25
Food and beverage	16
Accommodation	8
COVID_resilience and travel availability	5
Family or friends	4
Less crowded	4
Overall good experience	4
Level of service	4
Culture	3
Emotional connection	3
Price of goods and services	2
Convenience	2

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

Environment, cleanliness & weather

The beautiful scenery, natural environment, the beaches, and gardens in the Cook Islands were mentioned in nearly half of the respondent comments (47%) about the most appealing aspects of their trip. Words like ‘beautiful’, ‘tropical’, ‘paradise’, ‘tropical’, and ‘pristine’ 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:

“The clear waters during scuba diving and in the lagoon.”

“How much pride the locals have in their surroundings - clean and tidy roadways etc. Weather, heat and scenery.”

"The weather and natural beauty."

"Warm weather friendliness cleanliness of the town and roads ... never saw any dog pop."

"Weather, relax, warm temperature, snorkeling, really beautiful beach."

"The climate was perfect and the environment was astoundingly beautiful."

"Beautiful and clean. I've been to the Cook Islands so many times and I love how clean it is even when I was swimming at the beach there was a local kid cleaning up around the coconut trees picking up bits of rubbish it was so great to see."

"Greenery of the lush forest the amazing colours of the lagoon water and sea turtle."

"Seeing a vast improvement in lagoon water clarity, increased coral growth, fish life. The economy has obviously suffered hugely from lack of tourism, but the lagoon has been revitalised."

"The beautiful sunsets and sunrises. Not a lot of tourists as it was just recently opened since Covid. It's our happy place to visit as it's so relaxing 😊. Will definitely be back. Love the warmer climate."

Local people

The second most significant attraction for the visitors is their interaction with local people in the Cook Islands. Over forty percent 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", "happy", "kind", "accommodating", and "wonderful". Comments included:

"Arriving on the first flight from New Zealand and being treated like royalty from everyone in Rarotonga."

"Everyone was so welcoming, even general people in town."

"The people, always smiling and friendly."

"The lovely lady who stopped and gave us a lift to a working cash machine."

"The hospitality from the locals was exceptional. Such a friendly and welcoming place."

"While a business trip I always enjoy re-connecting with the locals."

"The friendly smiles and conversations with the local people."

"The people were fantastic. Friendly and went out of their way."

"The people were really nice, and I loved their sense of humor."

“Really felt like locals appreciated us coming back.”

“Lovely to see the kind and happy locals open to having to tourists again. All very warm & welcoming.”

“The local people were valued as they contributed to the survival of business during COVID I feel I interacted more with locals than before.”

Activities, attractions, entertainment & events

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

“Warm, clear water for swimming.”

“The beauty of Aitutaki.”

“Easy access to many wonderful beaches and snorkelling.”

“Snorkeling was fantastic, food was great, swimming with turtles amazing.”

“Aitutaki Lagoon cruises was a hoot and so much fun.”

“Koka Lagoon was a highlight.”

“Being able to relax by the beach and go snorkeling.”

“Amazing colours of the lagoon water and sea turtle...”

“The lagoon rolling mountains.”

“Day trip to Aitutaki.”

“Spending time in Aitutaki. A quiet and private place. The landscape, the lagoon, and the little island.”

“Markets and shopping.”

“The Edgewater outdid themselves with the cultural night. Was so much fun.”

“The lagoon was full of fish. It should be on your advertising. While you were away guess who came to stay!”

“kite surfing with family.”

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 a quarter of comments made. Visitors love the slower pace of local life, which they mostly refer to as 'island pace'. Some of the words used to describe the atmosphere in Cook Islands are "relaxing", "peaceful", "chilled", "tranquillity", and "laid back". Comments included:

"Being able to relax."

"the relaxing and laid back atmosphere. I can actually read a book from cover to cover."

"No hustle or bustle."

"It's such a relaxing place to be surrounded by lovely local people. I really enjoy nobody is "hassling you."

"chilled out atmosphere on the island."

"The opportunity to just kick back and relax in the balmy climate."

"a peaceful and quiet environment."

"The general vibe and relaxing feel throughout the whole trip. Was so relaxing!"

"An easy laid back holiday can always be had here - perfect place to recharge your batteries whilst escaping NZ winter."

"...island time."

Food and beverage

Food and beverages were identified as an appealing aspect in sixteen 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", "delicious", "awesome", "local" and "fresh" are some frequent terms to describe the attraction of food for tourists. Many visitors mentioned local sea food and fruit. Comments included:

"The majority of eating establishments were fantastic and the food was divine..."

"The great seafood."

"The good food (especially fresh fish) at a range of cafes, restaurants etc."

"Lots of fish, fruit & vegetables."

"Reasonably priced and very good quality food and drinks."

"The selection of restaurants and variety of food sent me to heaven and back."

"Fantastic food and coffee, really good business start ups."

"Bars/restaurants at night with local music."

Accommodation

Eight percent of respondent comments featured the accommodation they stayed in with people referring to the privacy, environment, luxury, and in-house restaurant and cafes, and the friendly and supportive staff. Comments included:

"I had excellent accomodation in a villa."

"We stayed at the Serenity Villas - it was beautiful accommodation, we have already booked again for next year."

"The quality of the hotels I stayed in. By the way the Aitutaki one was Aitutaki private beach resort."

"Genuine staff, clean facilities and streets. Muri Beach Club were super super generous!! We thank you from the bottom of our hearts and in fact recommended friends who booked immediately and stayed there returning this week back to NZ. Vouchers for cooked breakfast, dinner and free tasting cocktails. Well done Muri Beach Club this is the best experience we have ever had plus got a beach front upgrade WOW thank you ... You and your staff are so kind and warm hearted!!."

"Beautiful Muri Beach and our accommodation (Crystal Blue Lagoon Villas)."

"Pacific resort treated us like family."

COVID resilience and appreciation of travel availability

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:

"Friendly islanders, service caring and applicable to our needs, community responses to Covid."

"Covid free, sunshine, relaxing."

"Well prepared for covid and keeping locals and tourists safe."

"Being able to travel to a covid free country."

"Low tourist numbers, high level of covid awareness."

"In these uncertain times the ability to escape somewhere other than NZ."

“Being able to travel internationally again and get sunshine.”

“The fact that we could finally visit. Had booked accommodation early in 2020.”

“The fact we could travel without quarantining on way home.”

“Peoples resilience to the pandemic.”

Family or friends

Four percent of the comments discussed links being strengthened with family and friends in the Cook Islands as a most appealing aspect of their visit, expecially expressed their happiness of being able to visit family members after the bubble open. These visitors mentioned words like “family”, “friends”, and specific family members. Further comments included:

“Primary purpose was Business but had a lovely stay and caught up with old friends.”

“Visiting my mother, resident of Rarotonga. Stayed at our family home with Mum and my 9 year old son. We were on the first travel bubble flight into Rarotonga on the 17th May.”

“Ability to visit family and friends.”

“Seeing our friends & family again after the Cooks had been closed off for so long.”

“It is my heritage, so was nice to go back to somewhere I used to go as a kid and see family and friends.”

Less crowded

Four percent of respondent comments expressed enjoyment of the fact that there were fewer tourists around during this bubble period. Comments included:

“The borders being open to limited visitors in these Covid times allowing us to visit from NZ and having very few people on the beaches and tours.”

“Due to it having been the first flight on the travel bubble the island wasn’t overrun by tourists which was very nice.”

“NZ had just created the bubble so the resorts did not have a lot of visitors. So not crowded.”

“Fewer tourists! we were the 4th flight up there, so good not to have hundreds/thousands of other tourists around.”

“There were mainly NZ people as tourists and I feel they are more culturally aligned with the islands. Some mass tourists are not fun to be with, they can be rude and not understanding of island lifestyles and culture. I liked that there were not too many people so the locals weren't sick of tourist behaviours yet.”

Overall good experience

Four percent of visitor comments focused on the 'overall experience' when discussing appealing factors. Comments such as "everything" and "general" demonstrated the holistic nature of the positive experience gained. Comments included:

"Everything."

"The whole trip was amazing thanks to the Pacific Muri, they were so welcoming and treated us like royalty. Definitely going back for our 1 year anniversary to have our honeymoon."

"All round a very satisfying holiday."

"This was my first visit to the Cooks and I loved it!"

"We just love the island."

Level of service

Four percent of visitor comments emphasized the service and local hospitality they experienced. The quality of service at the accommodations, restaurants, and tours won recognition from some visitors. Comments included:

"The staff in the shops were so friendly and pleased to have us visiting. One shop keeper of ladies fashion thanked me very much for supporting her shop."

"Service caring and applicable to our needs."

"The resorts we stayed at were stunning especially the level of service at pacific resort Aitutaki."

"The aitutaki day tour was top quality service! Absolutely amazing tour guides and hosts."

"...but full and very friendly service."

"We had a great time and everyone was so professional and accommodating."

"The staff at KAPs Matavera and Prime Meats most helpful and friendly. Plse pass this on to managers."

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:

"The wonderful newish museum in Rarotonga."

"Bars/restaurants at night with local music."

"Local music."

"... the cultural experiences."

Emotional Connection

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

"We have visited 21 times over 21 years. The Cook Islands are very dear to us particularly Rarotonga."

"we have been coming to the Cook Islands over many years. This was our 22nd visit. We love it. We truly have a holiday. That's why we keep coming back."

"The island in general! My home away from home!"

"We fell in love with the cook islands over 20 years ago, so always enjoy the place."

Price of goods and services

A small number of the respondent comments (2%) focused on the price of goods and services in the Cook Islands as being a most appealing aspect of their visit. These visitors mentioned words like "affordable", "good value" and "cheap". Further comments included:

"... affordable rental cars."

"Reasonably priced and very good quality food and drinks."

"The quality and value of the food and beverages."

"The price of the local lager :)"

"Good value."

Convenience

The convenience of the Cook Islands as a holiday destination was mentioned a few times (2%). These usually referred to the currency, ease of travel around the islands, and accessibility from NZ. Comments included:

"Easy access from NZ."

"NZ currency."

"Low stress and an easy place to travel."

"...easy access to many wonderful beaches and snorkelling."

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 for comments included issues with public services, facilities and infrastructure, attractions and activities and things not being open. Stray animals and mosquitos, rubbish and natural environment care and accommodation also feature in the upper segments of the list.

Table 4: Least appealing aspects of the Cook Islands (n=403)

Themes	Share of respondent comments (%)*
Public services and facilities and infrastructure	23
Attractions and activities	13
Not open	10
Stray animals and mosquitos	8
Rubbish and natural environment care	7
Accommodation	7
Food and beverage	6
Customer service	6
Poor weather	6
Price of good and service	3
Rental cars or scooters	2
Safety	2
Lack of information	1
Local people	1
No welcome-back greeting since 2020	1
Flight related issues	1

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

Public services, facilities, and infrastructure

Nearly one quarter (23%) 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 lengthy waiting time at the airport. Other comments include the facilities of the airport, infrastucture like road conditions, limited and unreliable public transport, and poor internet connection. Feedback included:

“The arrival airport. Was too busy and too long to wait. There were not enough people to make everyone get through fast enough. With children this was really difficult.”

“Arrival process long & slow! 2-3 hours not good enough for customs & bag collection with only one flight arriving for the whole day.”

“Airport arrival was the slowest I've experienced in the world. I would live to visit

again but would be unlikely to come back if I have to wait in that long queue again, I also found the immigration staff to be unfriendly and intense. Just because Covid is a serious matter, doesn't give them the right to behave in that manner."

"Airport arrivals. Crowded, slow process etc."

"Departure from the Airport where we were forced to fill out a NZ Gov Covid departure card - online only without sufficient internet service - The information required was nothing more than what was on the Cook Island Covid Card - The same info - Name Passport etc was then collected at Immigration."

"Roads could be better for cycling."

"Pot holes in roads."

"Perhaps more efforts to be placed in maintaining and promoting walking tracks over the island."

"Better public transport to enable safe transport particularly in evening."

"Public transport reliability."

"Public transportation was insufficient. night bus was not working and no one knew about it, so we've spent one hour standing outside waiting until we had to take a taxi."

"Poor WiFi."

"The public toilets need to be cleaned more often. It was disgustingly dirty and horrible even in some of the eateries."

Attractions and activities

Thirteen 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, mainly due to the COVID-19, poor activity experience (snorkelling, swimming, fishing, etc.) and the access to the waterfall and beaches. Some comments focused on the poor selection of shops and the fact that shops and stores close on weekend/holiday. Comments included:

"Limited things to do due to COVID."

"A few places and activities we enjoyed previously were closed but that's totally understandable given the covid situation."

"there weren't many local crafts etc available to purchase, BUT the bubble had only been open for 3 weeks, & they were also awaiting shipments to come in."

"Less activities with the roadside small stall houses."

"No night market. Thought could then see cultural show on Aitutaki as the night we stayed should have been on but that canx too."

"Stores closing early."

"The beach was not as nice to swim in as expected."

"Not many great swimming spots, very shallow and lots of coral."

"I expected the snorkelling to be a bit better."

"Everything is closed on sunday."

"Muri beach was not as nice as on previous holiday, looked degraded."

"Vegetable market hardly had anything there."

Not open

Ten percent of respondent comments mentioned businesses/attractions in the Cook Islands being 'not open', even though they would like to spend more time/money, and some attactivities/services that were not available during their visit. Comments included:

"Some of the places were not open as we were the first flight over."

"Unfortunately a lot of places were still shut by the time I travelled."

"It would have great to have more restaurants and experience open however understand we were only the second flight to arrive from NZ after our bubble opened so it was very early days."

"Not many restaurants open."

"Not all facilities operating."

"A shame not everything was open, but natural due to the recent Covid situation."

"Bar, cafe and restaurants closed or open for short time (but maybe just because was soon after 1 year of lockdown)."

"Was looking forward to spending more time (and money!) looking at the market and local shops on Saturday but everything seemed to close by 12!"

"A lot of the shows etc hadn't started back up yet."

"The fact that many places were still closed and I had to change my plans because I could not do about 25% of the planned activities."

"Lots of the amenities still closed (not their fault due to Covid)."

"There were some services that were not available but I understand that this is

because of the industry having been in hibernation for so long, e.g. there are some staff shortages, so I wasn't worried by this at all."

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:

"The dogs in the road."

"Dogs attacking."

"Dogs on the beach."

"Dogs barking all night and acting threating during the day, and I love dogs!! Too many roosters but less I think than on previous visits."

"The Roosters! The dogs wandering on Rarotonga."

"Roosters were really noisy where we stayed. Would take ear plugs in future."

"The island alarm clocks before dawn...the crowing of the many roosters and the barking of the dogs... awesome fresh sounds..."

"Mosquitos."

"Wasps."

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:

"Found some bits of plastic on the beach shores sometimes, had to pick them up wherever I went."

"Rubbish and pollution and so much plastic."

"Lack of fish in lagoon & on snorkelling trip. Coral not in good health."

"Rubbish at beach."

"Litter."

"Locals having fires in their gardens why do they need to burn garden waste and put on rubbish so much smoke drafting over the house we stayed in."

"The smell of burning rubbish."

"Too many garden fires. I expected clean fresh air but it was difficult to sleep with open windows as the smell of smoke was really bad."

"Some public areas were a bit dirty."

"Glass bottles on the beaches and broken glass."

Accommodation

Seven percent of visitor comments mentioned their accommodation while in the Cook Islands as being a least appealing aspect of their stay. Some visitors rated the cost of accommodation as expensive for the value received, lother mentioned a lack of staff, and some also pointed out that some accommodation needed an upgrade of facilities and/or services. Respondents used a variety of words to describe accommodation including "expensive", "disappointed", "terrible", "dated", and "poor". Comments included:

"Accommodation was expensive for the standard provided."

"Cost of accomodation."

"Expensive accommodation and menu and drinks expensive and no extras given at all."

"The price of accommodation in Aitutaki was surprisingly high compared to Raro but understadn difficult times."

"No snorkel equipment at our hotel on Aitutaki!"

"Low standard of accommodation compared to other countries for money."

"My room leaked during a rainy night. Wifi not very reliable and not knowing that we needed to fill out an online form before leaving, causing a huge queue of frustrated people with no data not knowing what to do."

"Hotels trying to make western food instead of making the most of local produce."

"Some of the service at the Resort."

"Lack of skilled staff at resorts due to Covid exodus to NZ."

"Lack of maintenance on resorts in Rarotonga. Autataki was great."

Food and beverage

Six percent of respondent comments noted that the food and beverage in the Cook Islands was the least appealing aspect of their visit. Comments tended to focus on the lack of local

produce (especially fresh fruit, veggies and seafood), the high prices, and limited food choices. Comments included:

"The cost of food."

"Cost of food was too high."

"Could do with some healthier food options at the local markets - fresh fruit cut up less fried foods ! Poke bowls - salads and fish etc."

"Booked cultural dinner but as we arrived found it was cancelled."

"The food. Hard to find anything other than unhealthy food."

"Food is crap, all imported & expensive."

"The food could be improved, both in terms of diversity and quality."

"Food - too much European food. Had to search for seafood and local food."

Customer service

Six 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 at the airport, followed by complaints about the service at restaurants, accommodation and transport. Most visitors used words such as "very slow services", "appalling", "unhelpful" to describe the services. Comments included:

"Some customer service was not the nicest."

"I understand the border has been closed but some hospitality front staff need to up their game. I have written on trip advisor so hope this happens."

"The service at one of your restaurants was appalling, we won't be going there again."

"The complacent attitudes amongst some of the retail staff."

"I also found the immigration staff to be unfriendly and intense. Just because Covid is a serious matter, doesnt give them the right behave in that manner."

"The manager in the larger duty free shop in the departure lounge. She is totally out of her depth and condescending. She spoke very negatively about the tourist customers in the reo. She is an extremely poor choice to work face to face with the people that pay large sums to visit."

"I would like to see local Cook Islanders employed in the customer service industry. One of the resorts I visited a resort and it appeared to have only Fijian staff. I visited a restaurant for a meal and all of the service staff were from the Philippines."

“The service was terrible, understaffed or people just weren’t interested in working, extremely dissapointing.”

“There were some services that were not available but I understand that this is because of the industry having been in hibernation for so long, e.g. there are some staff shortages, so I wasn't worried by this at all.”

Poor weather

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

“Was windy this time around.”

“Weather was variable compared to Fiji and less hot and more windy but not much can do about that.”

“The weather (very tropical stormy).”

“The weather - windy, cold, raining. From previous visits, we anticipated some bad weather but not right thru our visit!!! Had to cancel activities like swimming with the turtles and the cross-island walk!!”

“Unfortunately it was windy early June, so the snorkeling wasn’t as good as we’ve had on previous visits. Still that’s only nature so didn’t matter.”

“Poor weather, but this isn't anyone's fault, obviously!”

“The weather! Rain and wind the whole time.”

“Weather was disappointing.”

“The weather was very bad so it affect our enjoyment.”

Price of goods and service

Three 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:

“Overpriced pearls, the same pearls from a reputable supplier in Auckland are half the price.”

“The cost of food.”

“Cost of food was too high.”

“Prices advertised at rental cars place outside were different to what they were charging.”

“Still quite expensive.”

“Price of food is very dare.”

“Coconuts were too expensive (3 to 4 dollars each!).”

“Cost of flights and accommodation.”

“And as I had booked with Hotels.com last year, I had to use their voucher within a year of issue or I would lose my money. And then when I used the voucher, I was charged a further \$400 taxes and fees even though I was charged for them on the original booking.”

“The cost of data on the island was really out of expectation.”

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:

“Changes to the tourist motorbike drivers license. I used to be able to get a five year license so that I didn't have to visit the police station every time i visit. Now with one month visitor licenses i will have to visit the police every time i visit (usually annually). I don't mind paying extra for a visitor license but requiring me to spend about 30min at the police station every time I visit is an unnecessary annoyance that we don't face at other island destinations.”

“Not able to hire scooters easily on Raro.”

“Prices advertised at rental cars place outside were different to what they were charging.”

“Renting a Scooter the entire experience & that the Police station is closed on the weekends yet the bike company enabled us to book a bike for pick up on a Saturday! Had to come back Monday and the whole process still took 3 HOURS.”

“Quality of cars.”

“Trying to book a scooter.”

Safety

A small percentage of visitors comments (2%) mentioned safety in the Cook Islands as a least appealing factor. In particular, this group referred to COVID-19 scanning, and poor safety while on the road and water. Comments included:

"Dengue fever."

"Lack of locals scanning in on the covid tracer app."

"Covid app use when departing was unclear and a mess but that was NZ 's issue."

"Medical vacilities were needed when we were there but too long to be seen."

"Going to the hospital to stay with my mum."

Lack of information

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

"Finding out what was up and running and what wasn't since Covid 19 reopen."

"... and it could be a bit frustrating to get the right information about what was open when etc. This was just after the bubble opened though and I'm sure the supply and other teething problems have been worked out by now."

"Things could be a long walk away and they had incorrect or not updated opening times online."

"In Raro, maybe a map in every hotel to learn about the public bus stops?"

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 travel bubble and the return of visitors. Comments included:

"...some elderly people in town were not so happy about the bubble and I totally understand their fears."

"Hearing that some of the Cook Island locals didn't want New Zealand tourists, despite the fact they have been living off wage subsidies for the past 15 months, ultimately paid by New Zealand tax payers."

"A lot of the locals weren't yet properly set up to receive tourists."

"The people are unwelcoming ..."

No welcome-back greeting since 2020

One percent of comments focused on the lack of a welcome-back cultural greeting at the airport. Comments included:

“That there was no real cultural greeting.”

“We were disappointed that being the first flight back to the Cook Islands since 2020, that there was no cultural group performing or even drummers and dancers to welcome us. There was a Cook Island group at Auckland airport of all places to farewell us!!”

“I understand the border has been closed but some hospitality front staff need to up their game. I have written on trip advisor so hope this happens.”

Flight related issues

Another further one percent of comments mentioned flight related issues as the least appealing aspect of the visit to the Cook Islands. Visitors mentioned the cost and lack of capacities. Comments included:

“Was on first flight from NZ , not all stuff was up an running , but loved having the island to ourselves.”

“Cost of flights.”

Suggestions for improvements

When asked if there was anything that could have improved their visit to the Cook Islands 48% of visitors took the time to make a comment. Suggestions mentioned by respondents focused on the public services and infrastructure (36%), the need for more entertainment, activities, transport (15%), improvements to the environment, safety and animal care (9%), availability, quality and price of food & drinks (8%), the need for better information (8%), weather (8%), the attitudes of locals and customer services (8%), accommodation (6%), contact tracing (3%), flights (2%), better value for money (1%), and the law and legislation (1%). Comments on these themes included:

"Airport arrival was hot and long and masks made it even worse. More boarder staff to process people quicker would have been great (by contrast departure area is great)."

"The arrival lounge is too small. We had a one and half hour wait to get out."

"The food options in the departure lounge were nonexistent. More selection of anything other than toasties would be great. Apart from that....nope."

"Look forward to the markets being open next time :)"

"Have bus running again."

"Add more events for night life."

"The internet is still prohibitively expensive of course!"

"Internet cheaper and more available, ie roaming with Vodafone."

"Safe and well formed walking tracks."

"Some areas looked run down."

"There should have been more effort shown to the tourists. It was if nothing had changed."

"Genuine service doesn't have to be friendly but at least useful. We notice the mumbling under the breath."

"More cheerful looking staff :)"

Reasons to return to the Cook Islands and recommend to others

The majority of visitors (97%) indicated that they would consider re-visiting the Cook Islands in the future. This figure is higher than the 2019/20 annual average (92%), and the identical quarter in 2018/2019 (89%). Of the three percent of visitors who indicated they would not want to return to the Cook Islands, the majority stated that did not wish to because of a desire to visit another destinations in the future and because they had found very little to do as many places were closed. Comments included:

“Weather not as reliably good as other island countries.”

“Didn’t feel they wanted tourists, enjoyed the last year not working and having the island to themselves.”

“Most likely no, unless the bonefish fishing improves.”

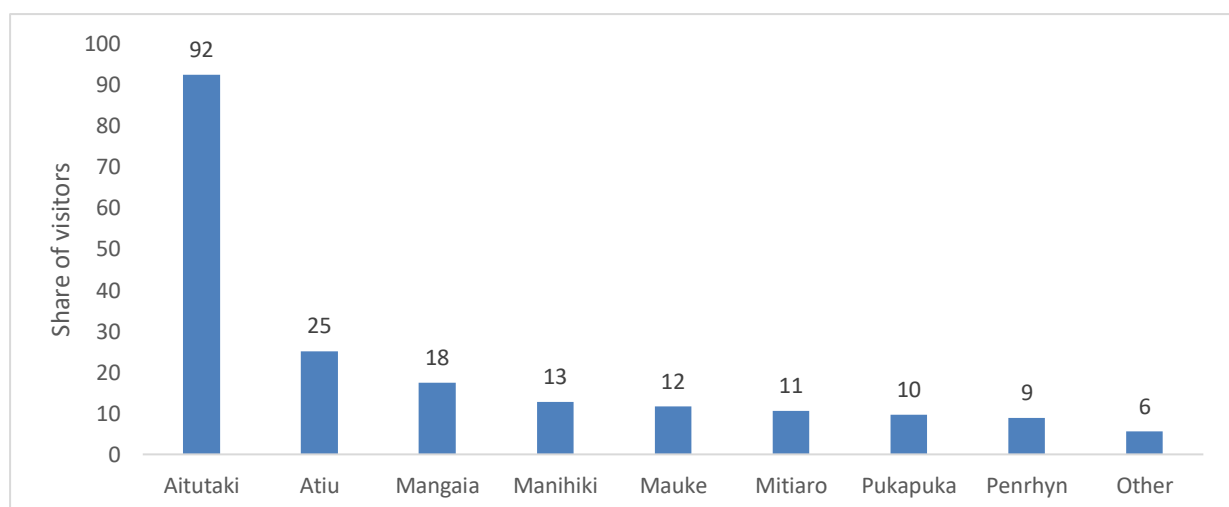
“Too expensive. The COVID must have closed many restaurants and other tourist attractions.”

“Too small, not enough good hotels and restuarants.”

“Yes, but I think having a lot more people there would be a problem to enjoyment. Hard to beat our 1st visit.”

Over half (55%) of the visitors among those who said they would return stated that they would definitely include the outer islands in their next visit. A further 42% of visitors indicated they would “maybe” visit outer islands next time. Of those who said they would or may visit outer islands the next time, most (92%) mentioned they would like to include Aitutaki. Atiu was the second most mentioned island at 25% (Figure 27).

Figure 27: Islands that visitors would like to include next time (n=395)



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 and this is largely based on poor value for money, negative airport experiences, and a desire to explore other destinations. Comments include:

“Airport arrival experience - that queue is too long.”

“Services not fully up and running yet. Would recommend in 6-12 months time.”

“The cost is too high for what it is.”

“There are many other islands to explore once the COVID is gone.”

“Yes to normal tourists, no to fly fishermen.”

Final observations

This report shows that the Cook Islands tourism industry performed exceptionally well during the survey period of May to June 2021. Overall visitor satisfaction levels and the desire to recommend the destination to others have remained consistently high, and it is clear that the destination is making a generally positive impression on visitors. The tourism industry continues to make a vital contribution to the Cook Islands economy. Indeed visitor spend both prior to arrival and in-country is considerably higher than the similar period in 2019.

As this is the first report since border restrictions were imposed in March 2020, there is a clear message that visitors felt very pleased to be able to visit the Cook Islands again and that they were impressed with the overall COVID response. Nevertheless visitors did highlight some areas for improvement, for example, long waiting times during the arrival process (due to the new health requirements), several businesses not being open, and problems relating to the usability of the COOKSAFE card.

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. The international visitor survey provides a snapshot of how the industry was performing just as the travel bubble opened. As the survey continues we will be able to explore in more detail the the overall impacts and performance of the industry as it builds back from COVID-19.