



Cook Islands Visitor Survey Results

January – March 2016

Prepared for Cook Islands Tourism Corporation

by

New Zealand Tourism Research Institute
Auckland University of Technology

www.nztri.org

May 2016

Acknowledgements

NZTRI would like to acknowledge the support of numerous organisations in the Cook Islands in undertaking this ongoing research, and in particular the Cook Islands Tourism Corporation (special mention to Metua Vaiimene and Jake Numanga), the Cook Islands Statistics Office, Immigration Cook Islands, and Rarotonga International Airport. This report was prepared by Simon Milne and Mindy Sun with contributions from Tina Buch, Althea Johnson, Linh Duong, and Lélia Gillaizeau.

Executive Summary

This report focuses on the characteristics, expectations and expenditure patterns of tourists who visited the Cook Islands. The data presented is drawn from an online departure survey (<http://www.mycookislandsvisit.com>). The survey period covered in this report is 1 January to 31 March 2016. There were 820 individual respondents to the survey - representing a total of 1,592 adults and 221 children in the expenditure analysis (this equates to 9% of all visitors during the period – based on the 2015 visitor arrival data for the January to March period from the Cook Islands Statistics Office).

The majority (52%) of visitors surveyed come from New Zealand, 17% come from Australia. Visitors are well educated (70% of visitors have some form of tertiary education) with a relatively high annual household income (52% earn over NZ\$100,000 per year). Just over half of the visitors (52%) travel with one companion. Solo travellers are relatively rare (10%).

Over half of the visitors surveyed (62%) are first time visitors to the Cook Islands, a further 22% have visited once or twice before. The main purpose of the visit is holiday-making (75%). The average length of stay in the Cook Islands is 9.3 nights. The majority (88%) of the visitors stay either one or two weeks. Twenty one percent of the visitors surveyed visited Aitutaki in addition to Rarotonga.

Visitor spend prior to arrival in the Cook Islands (\$2,158 per person) has increased from the 2014/15 annual average (\$2,000 per person). Spend on the island (per person per day) is \$136 which is higher than the 2014/15 annual average of \$112, and higher than the same quarter for the previous year (\$113 for January to March 2015).

The average local spend per visitor during the whole trip is \$1,265. If the pre-paid spend amount and the local spend are combined, it is estimated that each visitor brings \$2,128 to the Cook Islands economy (or approximately \$229 per day). This figure is higher than the \$1,756 average for 2014/15, and higher than the \$1,799 for the same quarter last year (January to March 2015).

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

Overall satisfaction on the part of visitors is very high: 93% of those surveyed state that they want to return to the Cook Islands, and 97% would recommend the Cook Islands to friends or family. The overall satisfaction level is consistent with the previous year.

Table of Contents

Executive Summary.....	ii
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.....	27
Suggestions to improve the visit to the Cook Islands	36
Reasons to return to the Cook Islands and recommend to others.....	38
Final observations	42
Appendix – Cook Islands Visitor Survey	43

Figures and Tables

Figure 1: Country of origin (n=758).....	2
Figure 2: New Zealand visitors (n=392)	2
Figure 3: Australia visitors (n=129)	3
Figure 4: Distribution of age and gender (n=765)	3
Figure 5: Highest qualification (n=767).....	4
Figure 6: Annual household income in NZD (n=638).....	4
Figure 7: Main purpose of visit (n=820).....	5
Figure 8: Travelling with whom? (n=819)	5
Figure 9: Number of companions on trip (n=807).....	6
Figure 10: Number of visits to the Cook Islands (n=761).....	6
Figure 11: Number of previous visits to the Cook Islands – country breakdown	7
Figure 12: Length of stay in nights (n=815)	7
Figure 13: Mode of transport (n=815).....	8
Figure 14: Visited Islands (n=820).....	9
Figure 15: Average length of stay in the Cook Islands and on each island (n=820)	9
Figure 16: How did you find out about Cook Islands as a destination (n=819).....	10
Figure 17: How did you find out about Cook Islands as a destination – country breakdown.	11
Figure 18: How important were the following sources of information when planning your trip (n=745).....	11
Figure 19: How did you purchase your travel to the Cook Islands (n=819)	12
Figure 20: Amount of money spent per person prior to arrival (n=633).....	13
Figure 21: Items included in money spent prior to arrival (n=613).....	14
Figure 22: Amount of money spent per person (NZ\$).....	16
Figure 23: Overall satisfaction with experience of the Cook Islands (n=772)	17
Figure 24: Degree of participation in activities (n range=15-789).....	18
Figure 25: Degree of satisfaction in activities participated in (mean score out of 5)	19
Figure 26: 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=761)	21
Table 4: Least appealing aspects of the Cook Islands (n=707)	27

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 is needed to enable the effective planning and development of the tourism industry and to highlight its crucial role within the broader Cook Island's economy. Visitors to the Cook Islands are asked to complete a web-based survey within two weeks of the completion of their visit. The Cook Islands online International Visitor Survey has run since mid-2012 and is continuing through 2016-17.

This report presents the results from January to March 2016. Over this three month period, 3,608 visitors were contacted by email to take part in the survey, and 820 responses were received: a conversion rate of 22.7%. These responses cover a total of 1,592 adults and 221 children. The conversion rate for this period is slightly lower than the 2014/15 annual average (28%) and the January to March 2015 quarter (26.2%).

The data presented includes detailed information on:

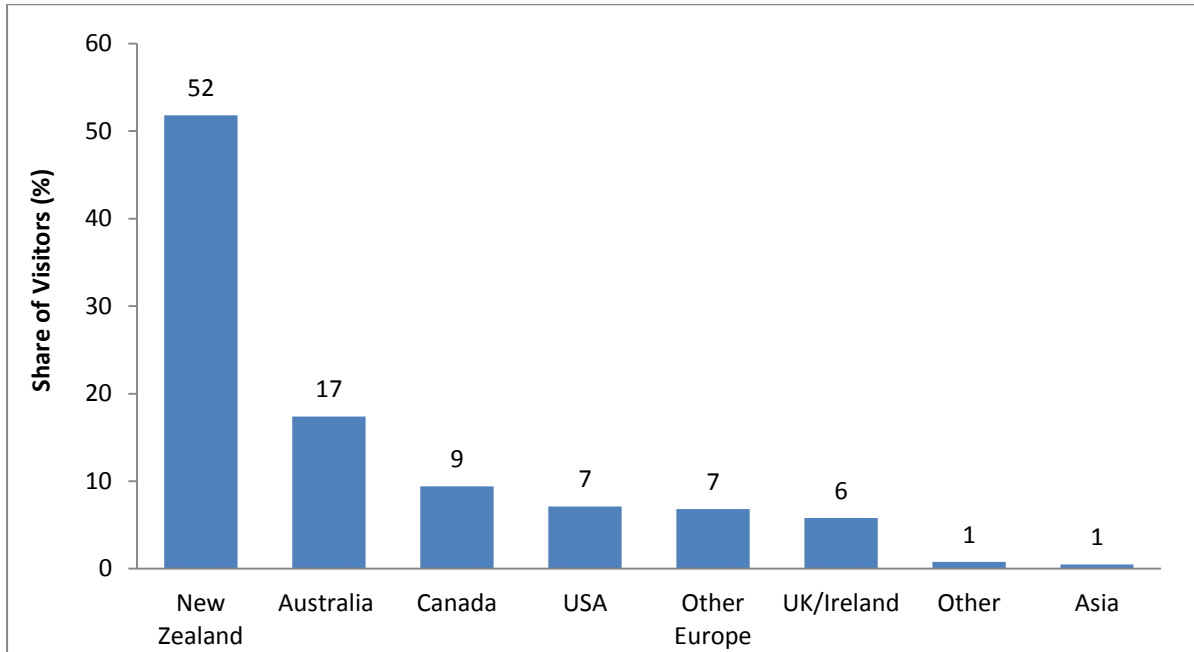
- The characteristics of visitors to the Cook Islands (age, gender, education, country of origin, income, purpose of visit, travelling companions, number of previous visits, length of stay, airline used, islands visited)
- Visitor information obtained about the Cook Islands, the factors influencing in 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 and/or notable variations from the 2014/15 annual averages or the 2014/15 January – March quarterly figures these are highlighted in the discussion that follows.

Visitor Characteristics

The majority (52%) of the visitors surveyed come from New Zealand (Figure 1). The second largest visitor group is from Australia, with 17% of respondents. USA, Canada, Europe and Great Britain represent the other main source markets.

Figure 1: Country of origin (n=758)



Auckland, Wellington, Canterbury, and Waikato account for 66% of the New Zealand visitors. For visitors from Australia, the regions of New Wales, Queensland, and Victoria generate the largest numbers of visitor arrivals (87%) (Figure 2-3).

Figure 2: New Zealand visitors (n=392)

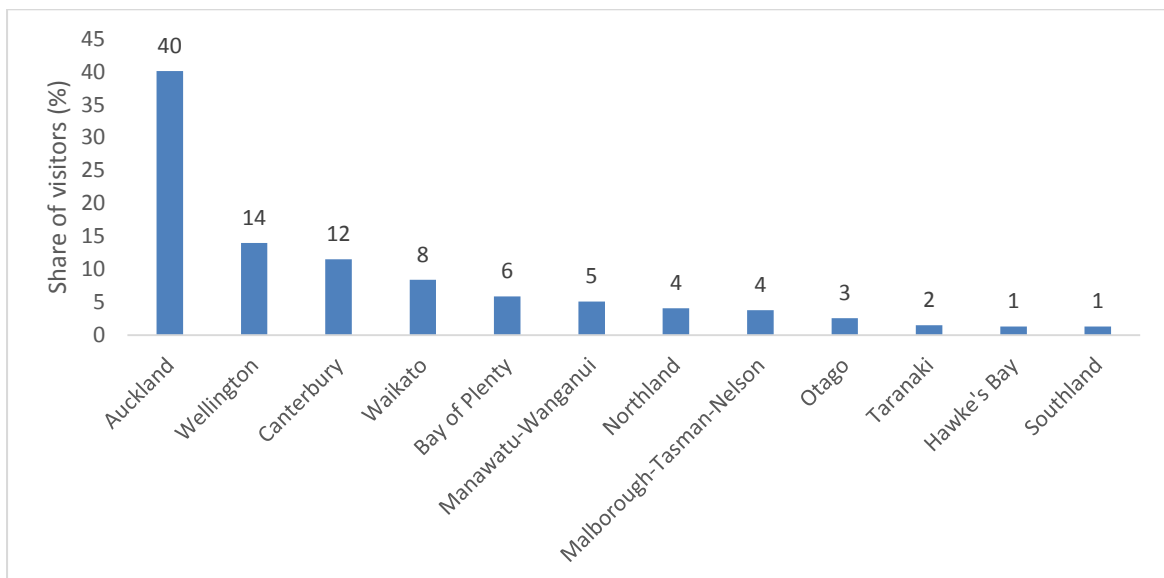
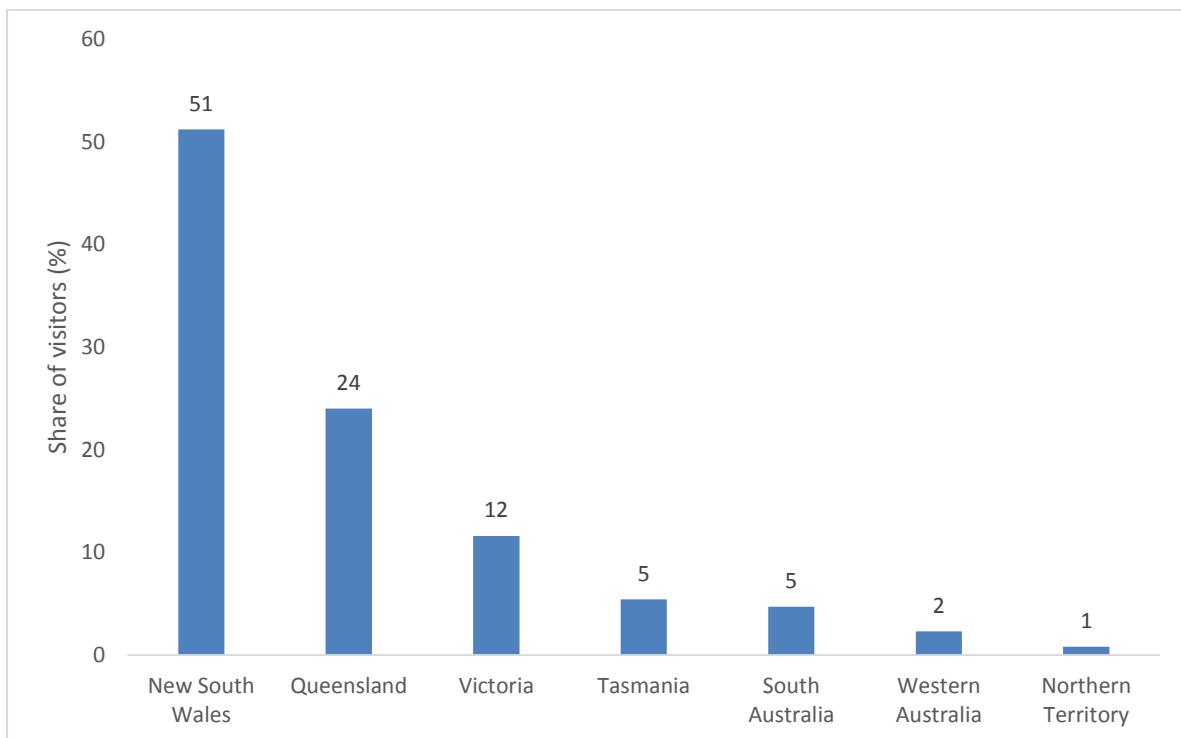
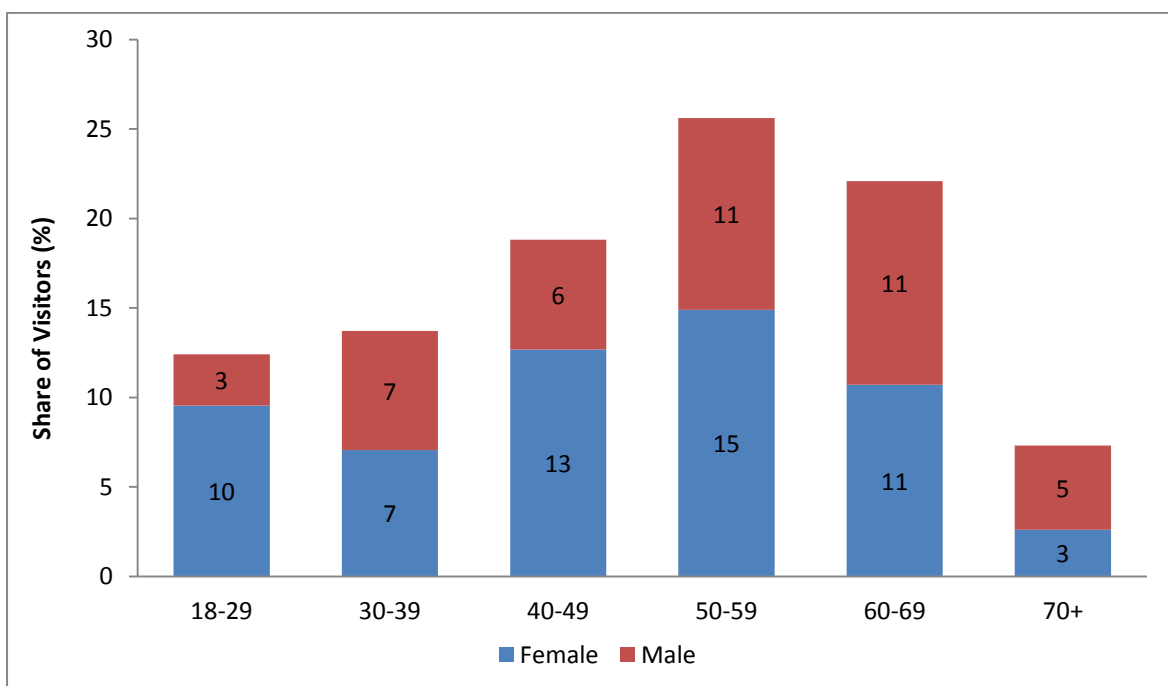


Figure 3: Australia visitors (n=129)



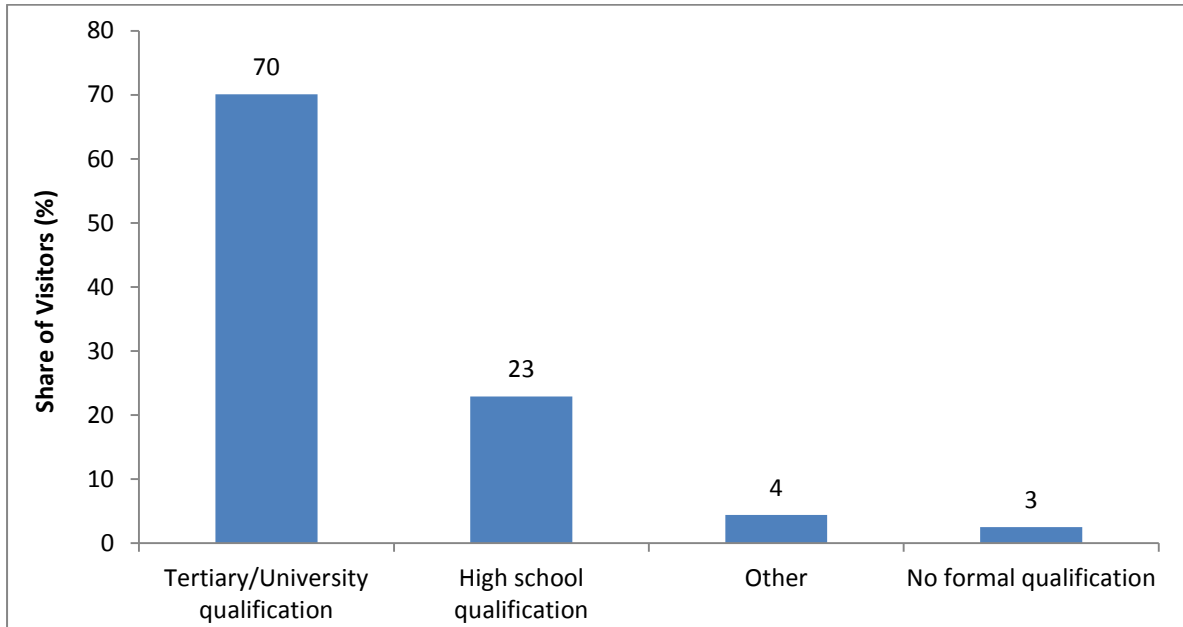
More women (58%) than men (42%) completed the survey (Figure 4). The most significant age group categories are the 50 to 59 year (26%) grouping, followed by those aged 60 to 69 (22%) and the 40 to 49 age group (19%). There are relatively few travellers in the 70 plus age bracket (8%).

Figure 4: Distribution of age and gender (n=765)



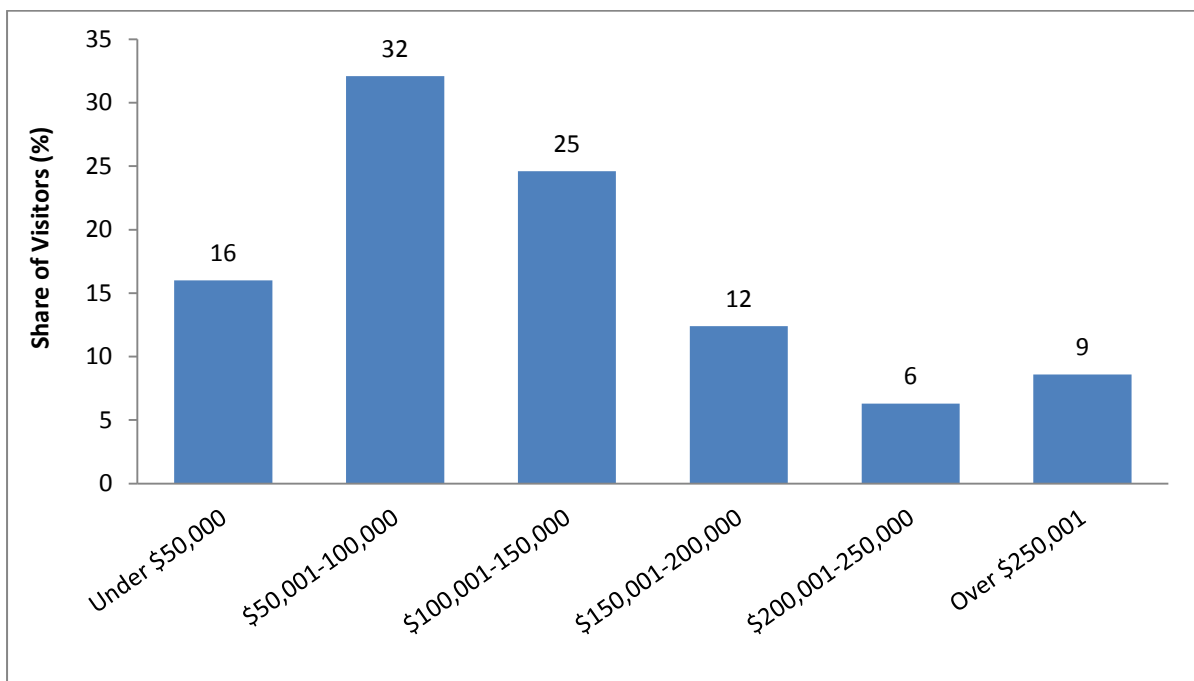
Visitors are well educated: more than two-thirds (70%) of those surveyed have some form of tertiary qualification, with a further 23% having completed a high school education (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Highest qualification (n=767)



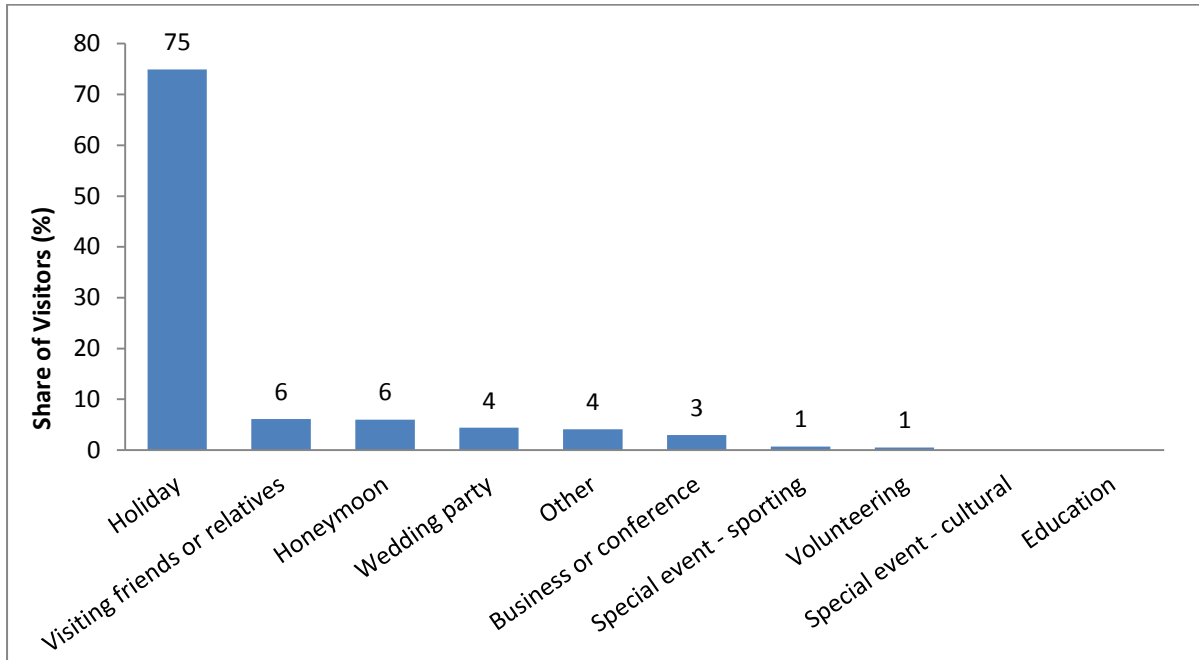
Nearly a third of visitors (32%) have an annual household income of between NZ\$50,001 and NZ\$100,000. A quarter (25%) of those surveyed earn between NZ\$100,001 and NZ\$150,000. A further 27% of respondents have a household income of over NZ\$150,000 per year (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Annual household income in NZD (n=638)



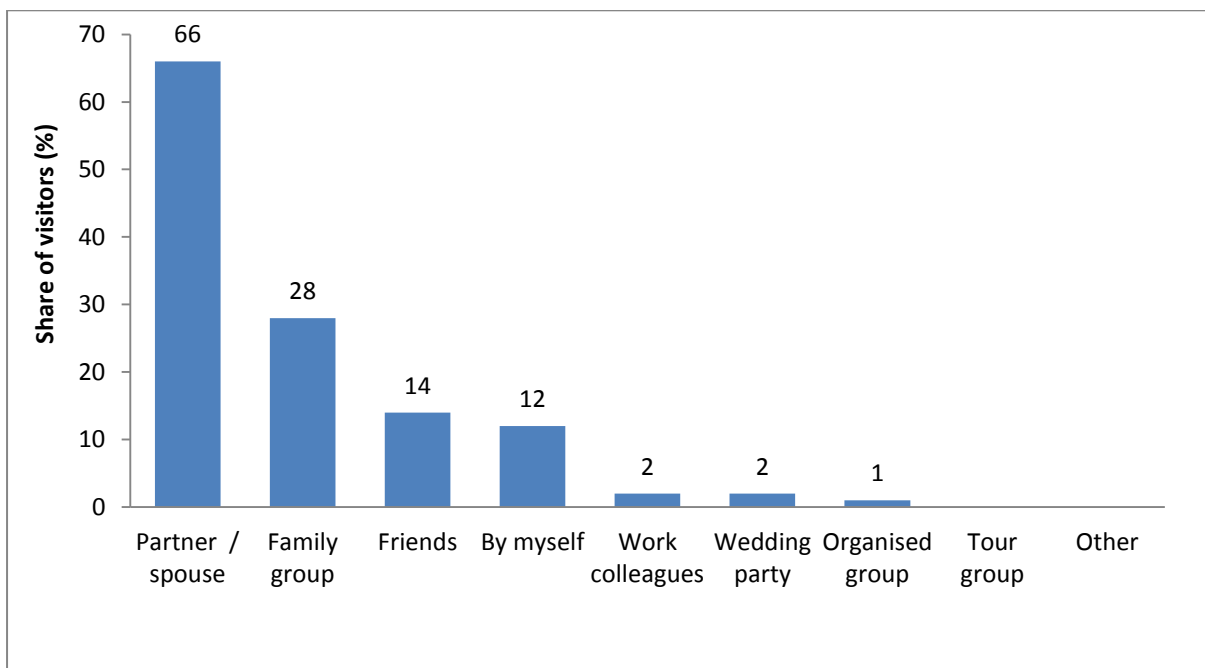
Just three quarters of visitors surveyed come to the Cook Islands for a holiday (75%). Other reasons given include visiting friends and relatives (6%), to attend a wedding (6%), for a honeymoon (4%), for business and conference (3%), (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Main purpose of visit (n=820)



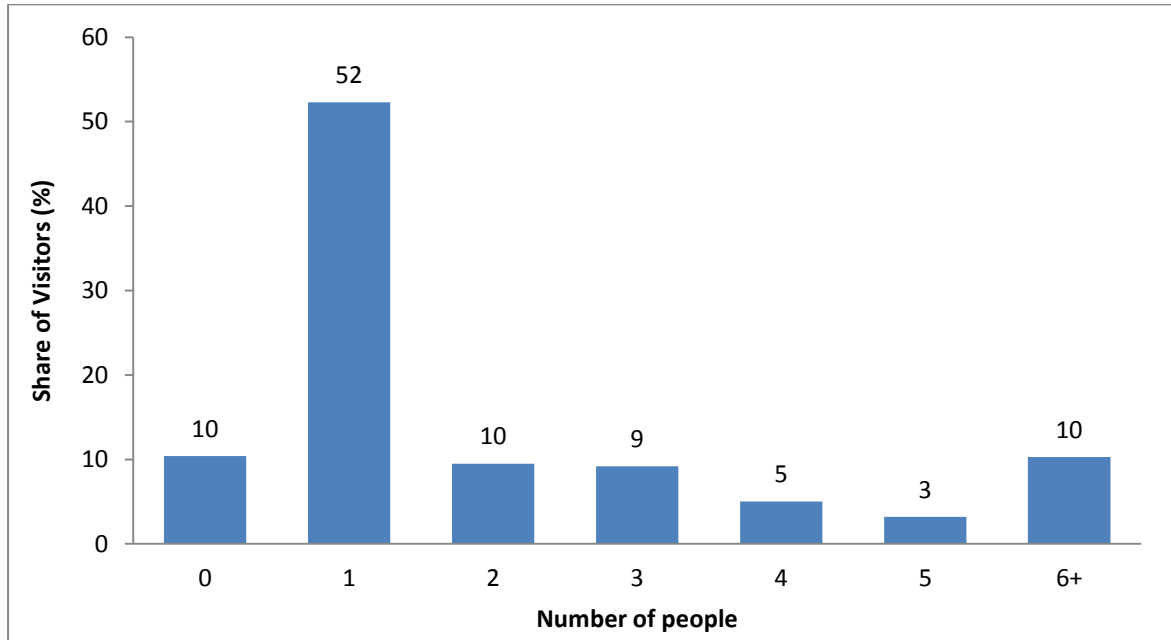
Most visitors (66%) surveyed travel to the Cook Islands with a partner or spouse. Visitors also often travel with other family members (28%), with friends (14%), or travel alone (12%). Those travelling with colleagues, in an organised group or as a part of a wedding party represent a smaller share of the sample (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Travelling with whom? (n=819)



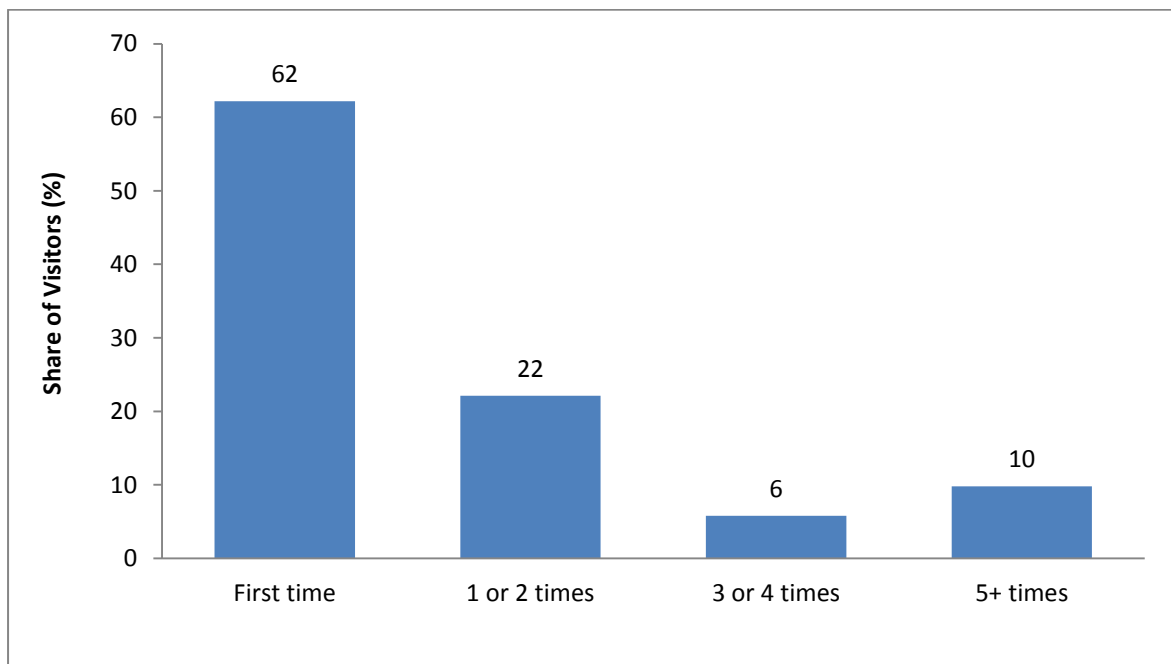
Over half of the visitors (52%) travelled with one companion on their visit to the Cook Islands (Figure 9). Travel groups larger than 4 people were not very common, with the exception of wedding parties.

Figure 9: Number of companions on trip (n=807)



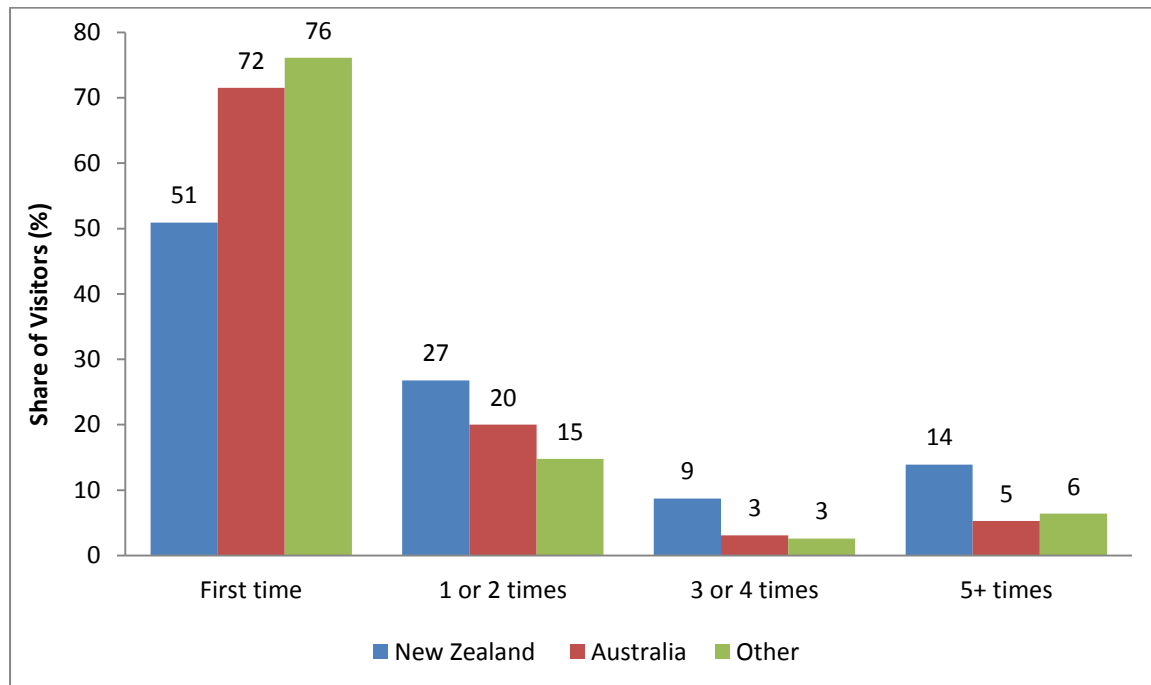
Nearly two thirds of the visitors (62%) are on their first visit to the Cook Islands. A further 22% have been to the Cook Islands once or twice before. A smaller group (16%) have visited three or more times (Figure 10).

Figure 10: Number of visits to the Cook Islands (n=761)



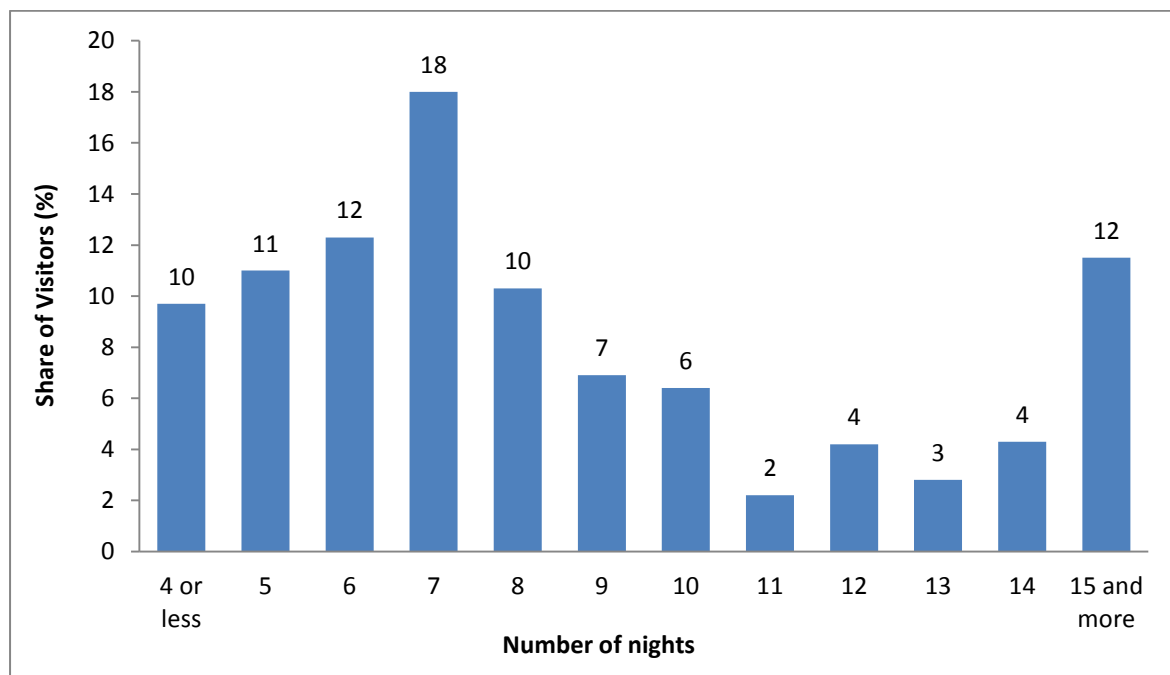
New Zealanders are more likely to be repeat visitors than those from other source markets (Figure 11). Half of visitors from New Zealand (50%) have visited the Cook Islands before compared to only 28% of visitors from Australia.

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



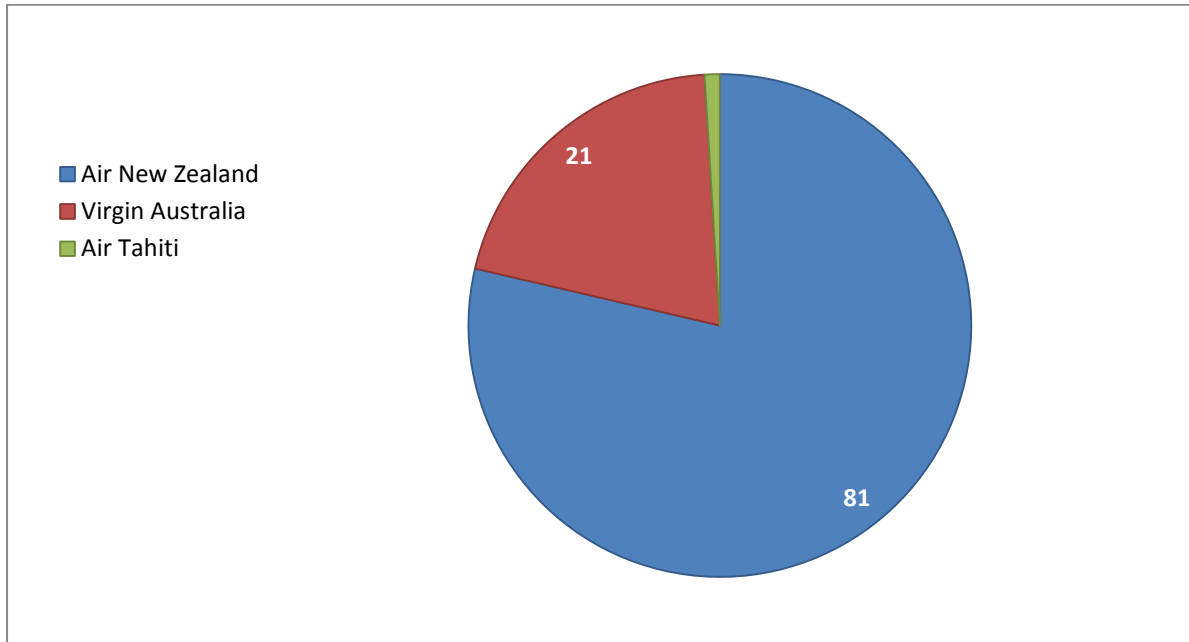
The average length of stay in the Cook Islands is 9.3 nights with 75% of visitors spending 10 or fewer nights in the country (Figure 12).

Figure 12: Length of stay in nights (n=815)



The majority of visitors (81%) travel to/from the Cook Islands with Air New Zealand, a further 21% visitors fly with Virgin Australia (Figure 13). One percent of visitors arrived by Air Tahiti.

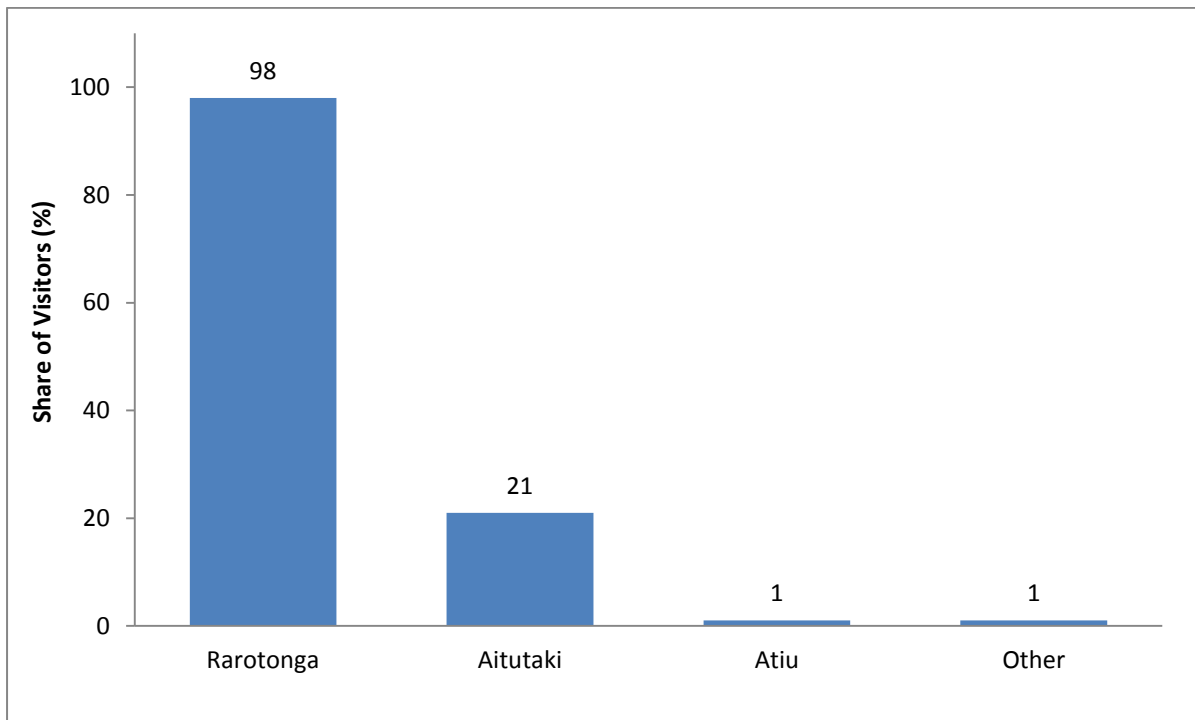
Figure 13: Mode of transport (n=815)



For 79% of visitors, the Cook Islands is the sole destination for their trip. For 21% of the visitors surveyed during the January to March period the Cook Islands is part of a larger journey, including some visitors who are on an around-the-world trip. For those travelling to other countries as part of their recent trip, the top destination mentioned was New Zealand (82%), followed by travel to Australia (35%), North America (22%), Asian countries (21%), and other pacific countries (10%).

The vast majority (98%) of visitors to the Cook Islands spend time on Rarotonga, with Aitutaki being the second most visited island (21%) (Figure 14). Other islands are rarely featured in the survey responses, with Atiu for example only receiving 1% of visitors.

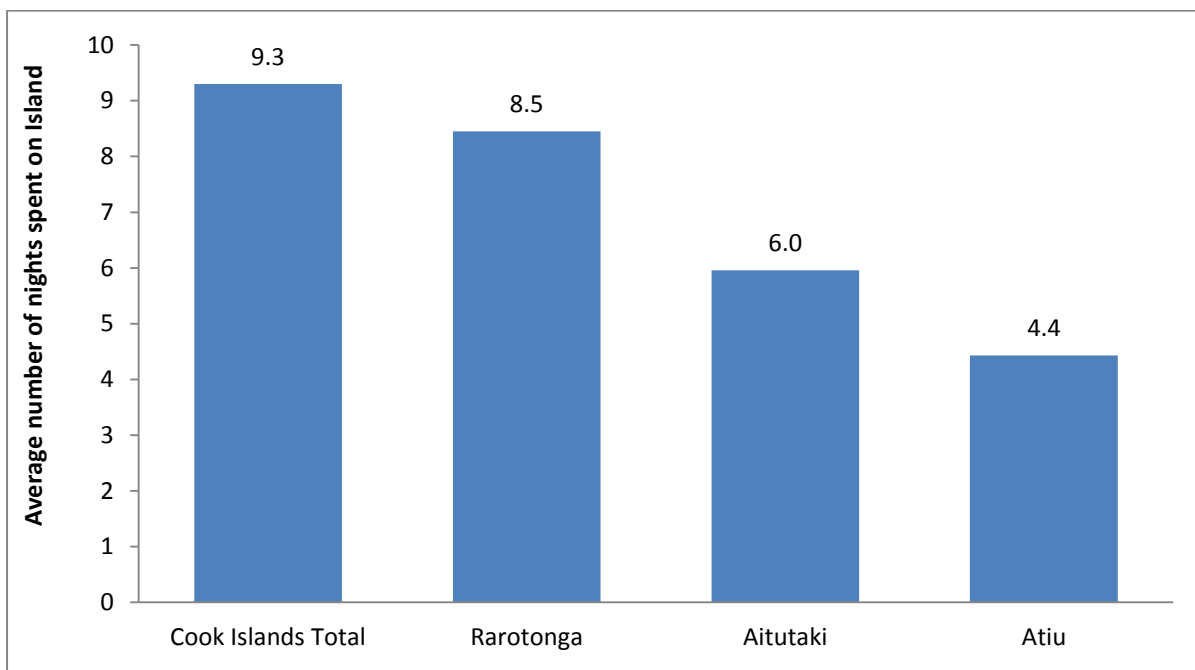
Figure 14: Visited Islands (n=820)



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

The average length of stay on Rarotonga is 8.5 nights (Figure 15). For the visitors that went to Aitutaki, the average number of nights spent on the island is 6.0. Visitors to Atiu spent an average of 4.4 nights.

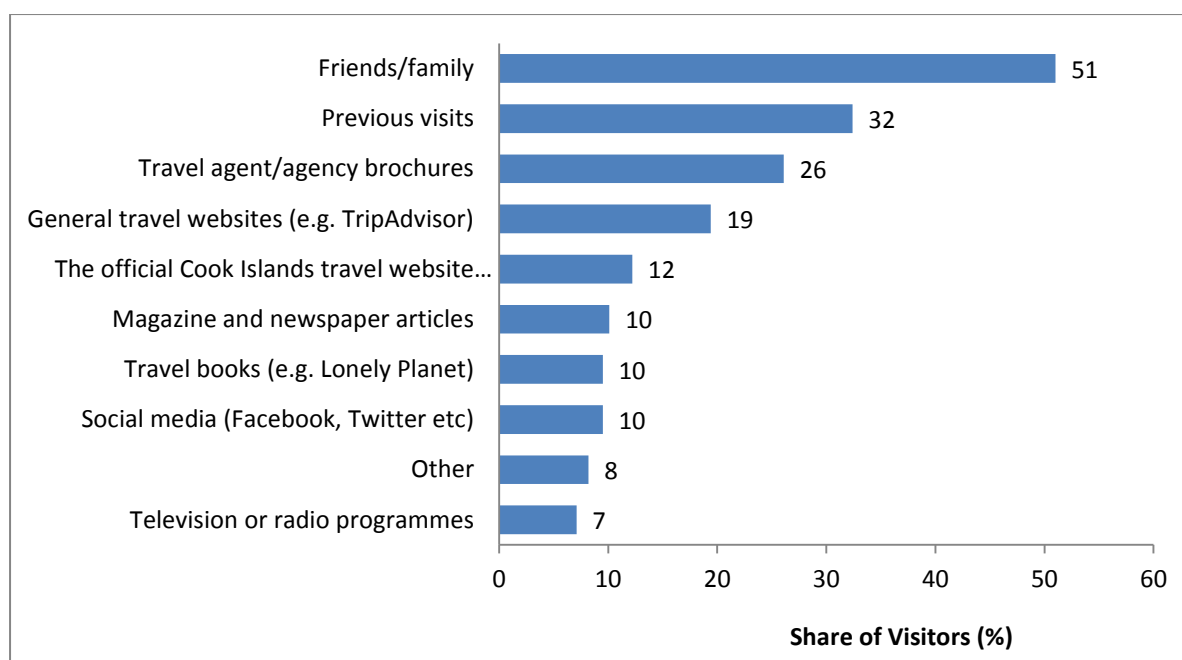
Figure 15: Average length of stay in the Cook Islands and on each island (n=820)



Information Sources and Purchasing Behaviour

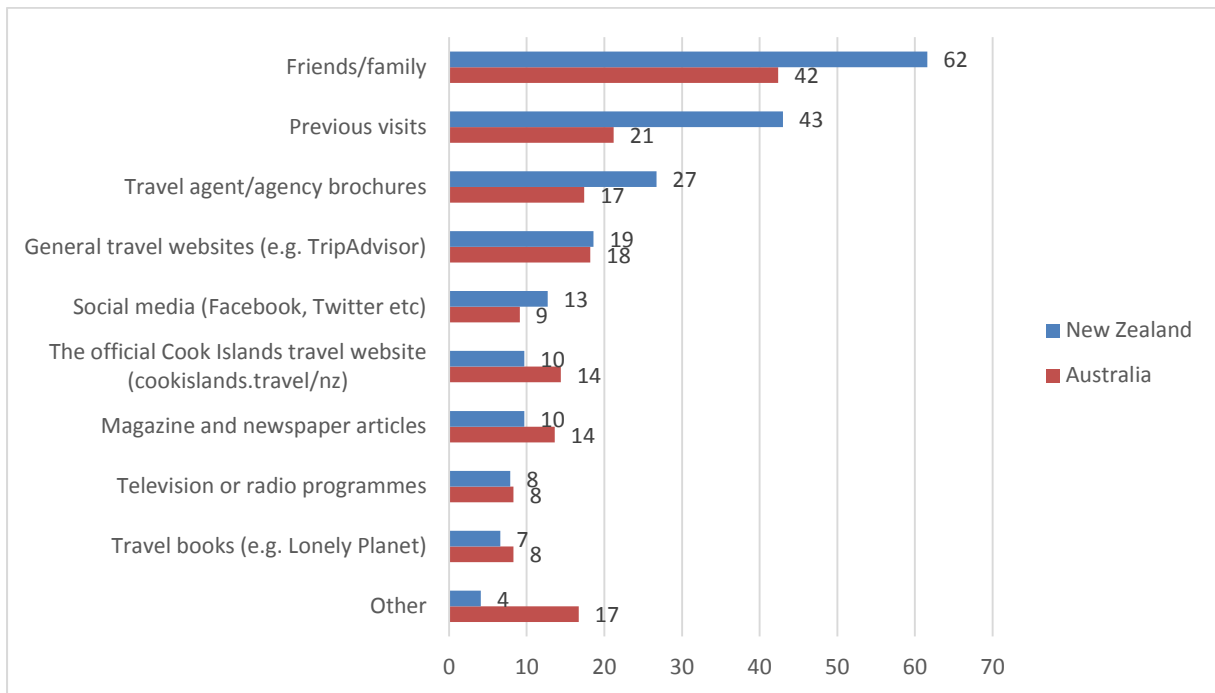
Participants were asked how they had found out about the Cook Islands as a holiday destination for this trip, and to rank the three sources of information that were most important in this respect (Figure 16). Just over half (51%) of respondents ranked word of mouth from friends and family members as the most important influence, followed by previous experience (32%), travel agents (26%), and general travel websites (e.g. Tripadvisor) (19%).

Figure 16: How did you find out about Cook Islands as a destination (n=819)



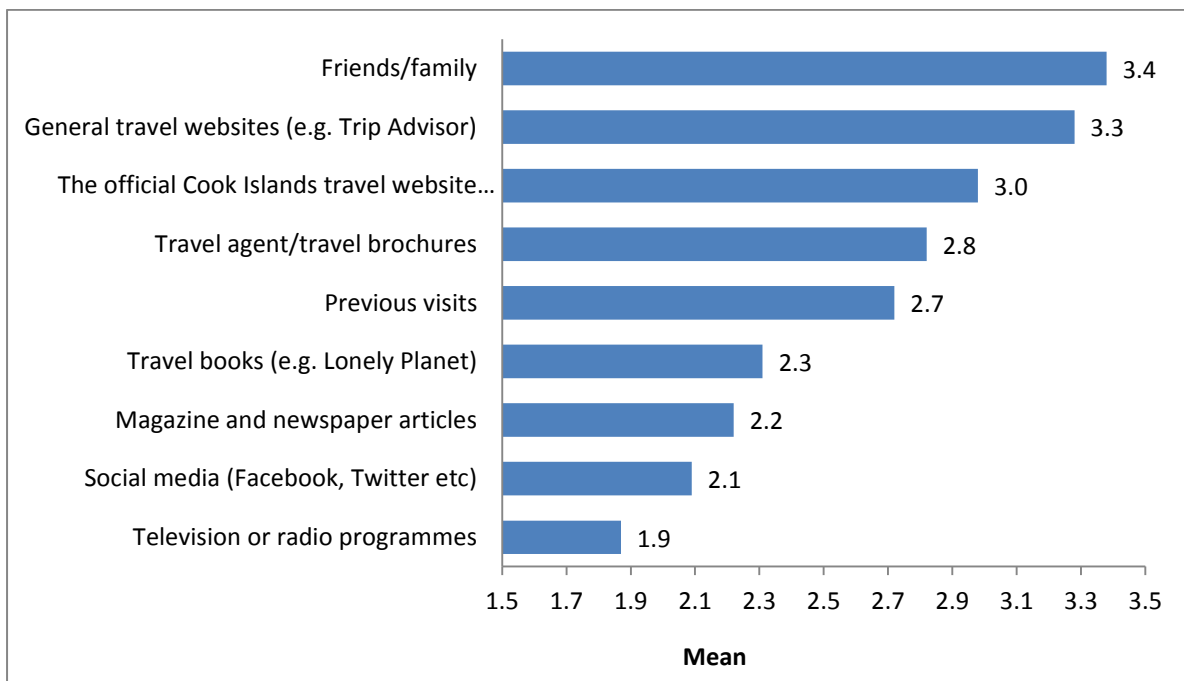
Visitors from New Zealand are more likely to seek information about a destination from word of mouth from friends and family members (62%). There are more repeat visitors from New Zealand than Australia and this is reflected by the fact that nearly half of visitors from New Zealand (43%) ranked their previous visits as the most important information source (Australian visitors 21%). Australian visitors were more likely to rank travel websites, magazine and newspaper, and travel books as the most important influence.

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



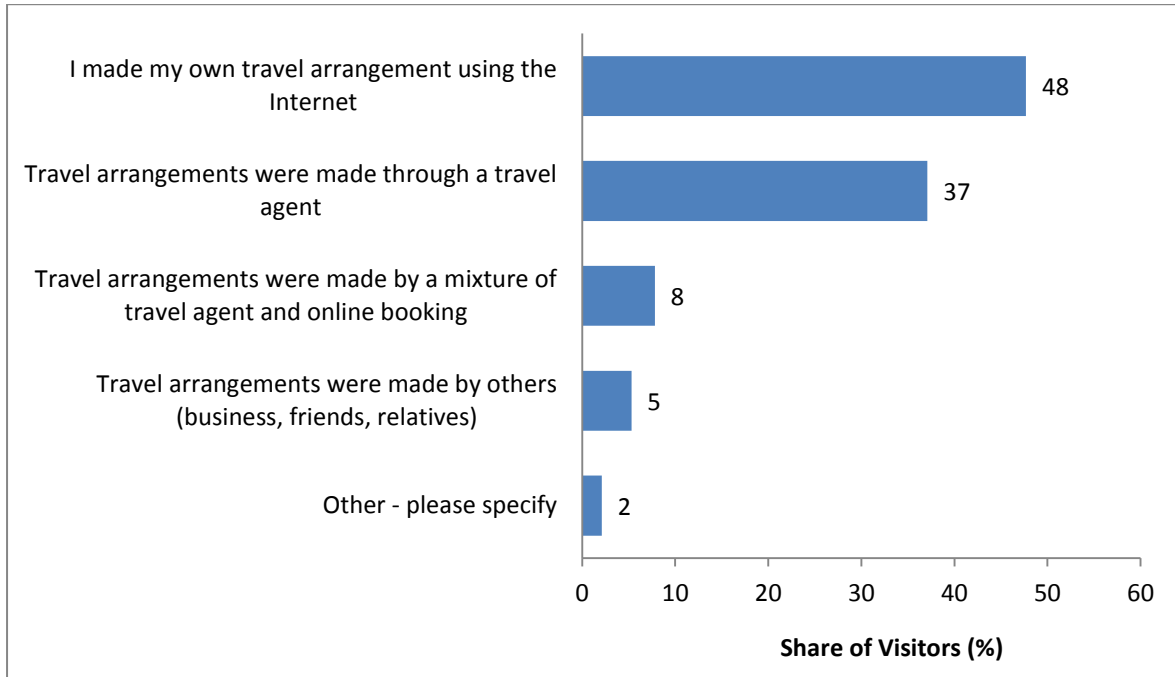
When visitors were asked to rank the importance of the listed information sources used to plan their trip, friends and family members are ranked as the most important source (3.4) (Figure 18). Other important information sources are general travel website (3.3), previous visits (3.0), the official Cook Islands travel website (3.0), and travel agent/travel brochures (2.8).

Figure 18: How important were the following sources of information when planning your trip (n=745)



Nearly half of visitors surveyed (48%) make their own travel arrangements through online websites or have booked directly with hotels or airlines (Figure 19). The smaller amount of visitors surveyed (37%) purchased a pre-paid trip through travel agents, followed by 8% of visitors whose travel arrangements were made by a mixture of travel agent and online booking.

Figure 19: How did you purchase your travel to the Cook Islands (n=819)

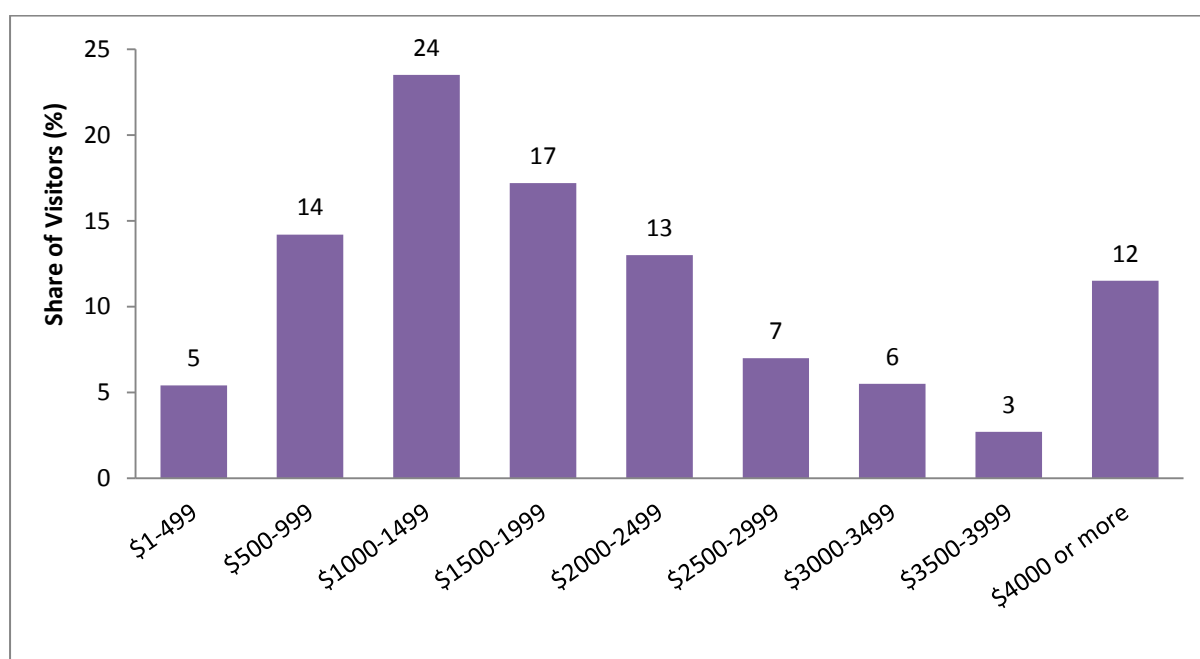


Visitor Expenditure

The survey asks a range of questions about visitor expenditure, both prior to arrival and while in the country. All the figures below are based on respondent estimates of their own spending and any others they spent money on (e.g. spouse, children). The following pre-paid expenditure section is based on the number of adults and children that respondents included in their cost estimates: 1,813 people comprising 1,592 adults and 221 children.

On average, visitors to the Cook Islands spend NZ\$2,158 per person prior to arrival. Over half (54%) of the visitors spend between NZ\$1,000 and NZ\$2,500 prior to arrival. These figures are higher than the data from the previous year (average spend of NZ\$2,000 for 2014/15) and in the same quarter for 2014/15 (NZ\$2,019) (Figure 20).

Figure 20: Amount of money spent per person prior to arrival (n=633)



In addition to international flights and domestic transport, spending prior to arrival usually includes accommodation: in 87% of the cases for New Zealand and Australian visitors and for 95% of visitors from other countries (Figure 21). Approximately half of visitors prepaid for breakfast and meals prior to arrival (42% for New Zealand visitors, 54% for Australian visitors, and for 44% of visitors from other countries) which is higher than the data from the previous year and in the same quarter for 2014/15. Activities are much less likely to be included in pre-paid expenses.

Figure 21: Items included in money spent prior to arrival (n=613)



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\$93 and for the average total visit is NZ\$863 (over 9.3 nights).

The total spend per visitor per day while in the Cook Islands (excluding any pre-paid expenditure) is NZ\$136 (Table 1). This figure is higher than overall spend figure for 2014/15 (NZ\$112) and the same quarter in 2014/15 (NZ\$113). The figure reflects the increase in in-country spend seen in the previous two quarters (July-December 2015) where the figure was \$152 and \$144 respectively. The majority of money spent locally is on accommodation (41%), restaurants, cafes and bars (21%), and shopping (9%). These per person expenditure figures are based on 678 survey responses covering a total of 1,771 people (1,572 adults and 199 children).

By multiplying daily spend by the average stay (9.3 nights) we can see that each visitor spends on average NZ\$1,265 during their time in the Cook Islands. The total figure of what is spent locally and what flows back to the Cook Islands from pre-paid expenses is therefore NZ\$229 per visitor per day (\$136+\$93), or NZ\$2,128 (\$1,265+\$863) for each visitor.

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

Expenditure Items	Overall n=1771	
	Mean (NZ\$)	(% of spend)
Accommodation	56	41
Restaurant, cafes and bar	28	21
Shopping	12	9
Groceries	8	6
Vehicle rental	8	6
Activities	8	6
Domestic flights	6	5
Other	3	2
Internet cost	2	1
Cruising	2	1
Petrol	2	1
Public transportation	1	1
Total Expenditure	136	100

Table 2 provides an overview of the in-country expenditure by the visitor's country of origin. Visitors from Australia have the highest average spend per day at NZ\$163. By comparison, New Zealanders spend on average NZ\$30 less per day (NZ\$131).

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

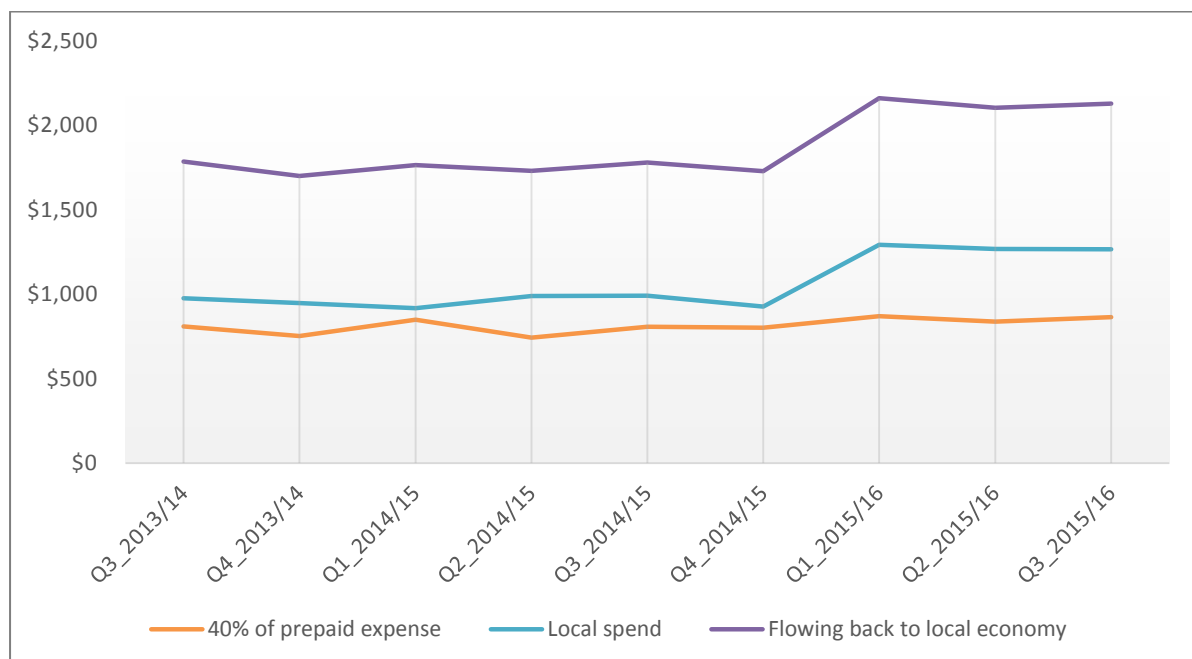
Expenditure Items	n=106	n=124	n=359	n=71
	USA/ Canada	Australia	New Zealand	Europe
Accommodation	57	70	53	63
Restaurant, cafes and bar	24	36	27	35
Shopping	11	17	11	14
Vehicle rental	7	6	10	8
Activities	6	8	8	5
Groceries	10	9	8	8
Domestic flights	7	6	6	11
Other	4	3	2	1
Petrol	2	2	2	1
Internet cost	2	2	2	3
Cruising	1	2	2	3
Public transportation	1	1	1	1
Total spend (NZ\$)	\$130	\$163	\$131	\$152

Average Australian spend per person for this quarter (NZ\$163) was higher compared to the 2014/15 average of NZ\$115, also higher than the same quarter in 2014/15 (NZ\$101). New

Zealanders' spend of NZ\$131 per person per day was up from the average of \$111 for 2014/15 and the same quarter in the previous year (NZ\$116). European visitor spend at NZ\$152 per person per day was up from the average for 2014/15 of NZ\$115, and NZ\$129 for the same quarter in the previous year. Visitors from USA/Canada spend of NZ\$130 for this period was higher than the 2014/15 average of NZ\$125, but lower than the same quarter in 2014/15 (NZ\$146).

Overall these spend figures reinforce the general increase in visitor yield over 2014 and the first half of 2015 (Figure 22) shows the trend since the third quarter of 2013/14 (January to March 2014). Visitor yield has increased significantly from the first quarter of 2015/16 (July to September 2015). The increase in yield is largely accounted for by increased in-country spend but there has also been some growth in prepaid spend.

Figure 22: Amount of money spent per person (NZ\$)



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 23). Over two thirds (66%) of the visitors surveyed were 'very satisfied' with their overall experience of the Cook Islands. Very few visitors (2%) were unsatisfied with their visit (a score of 2 or lower out of 5).

Figure 23: Overall satisfaction with experience of the Cook Islands (n=772)

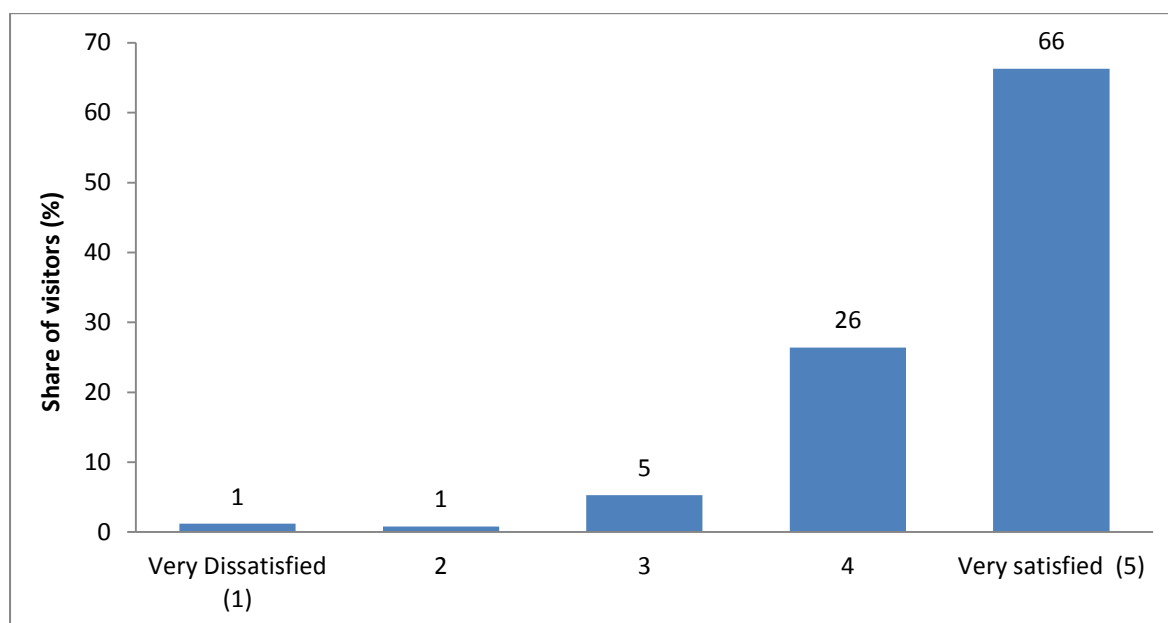


Figure 24 shows the percentage of respondents who undertook an activity while on their visit to the Cook Islands. Almost all visitors participate in water activities and visit at least one restaurant or café during their trip. Most of the respondents (84%) visit a local market, and 60% of visitors experience an Island Night and Feast Show.

Figure 25 shows their level of satisfaction with these activities. Visitor satisfaction is generally high for all activities undertaken (all registering more than 4 out of a possible high of 5). Activities involving water-based experiences (average satisfaction of 4.6), and cultural interaction (4.6) rank the highest, followed by land-based products (4.4) and shopping (4.3). It should be noted that some activities e.g. kitesurfing, bonefishing, ocean cruise, whale watching, Tumunu on Atiu, are characterised by relatively low numbers of participants (n=15-20).

Figure 24: Degree of participation in activities (n range=15-789)

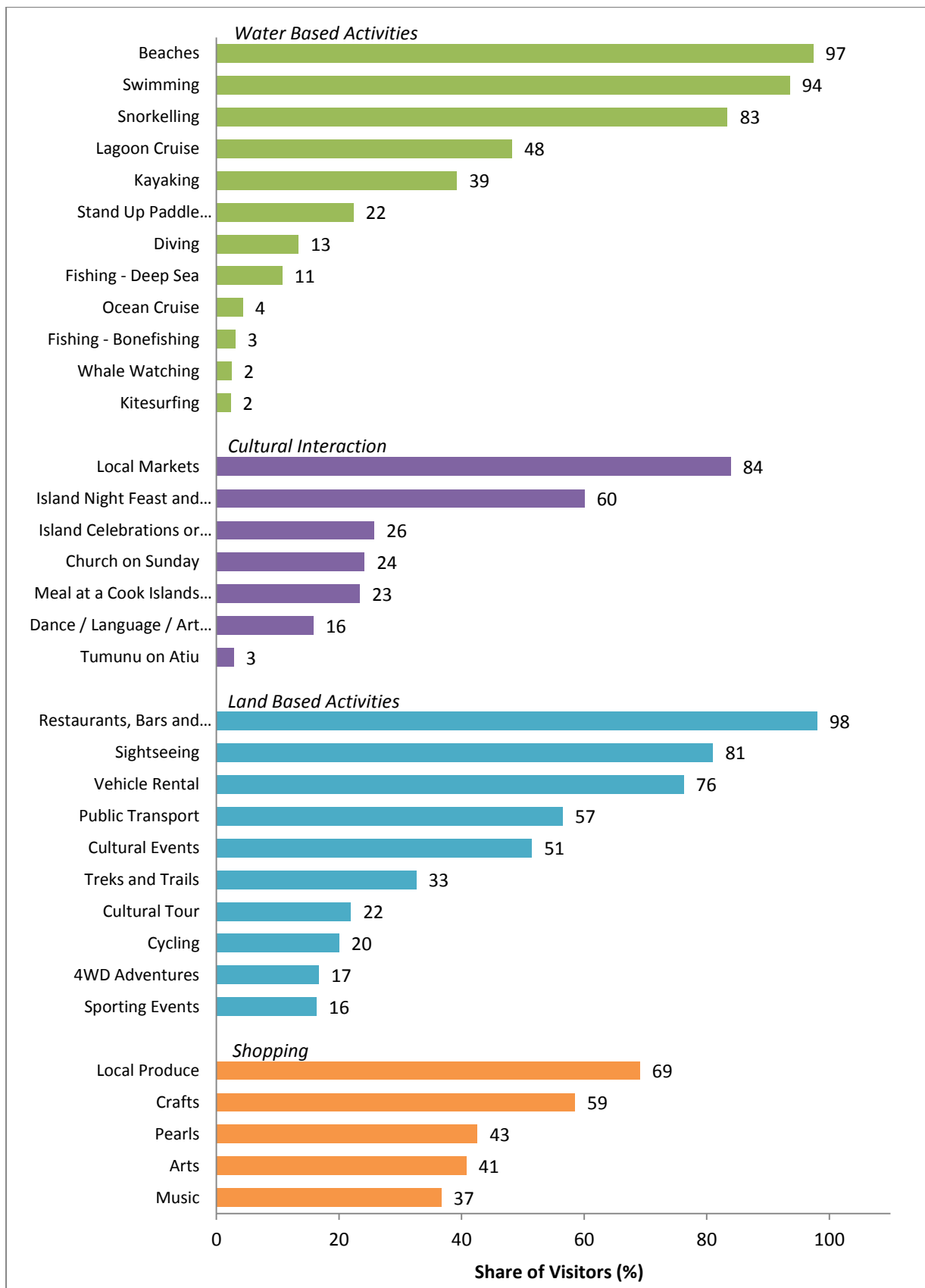
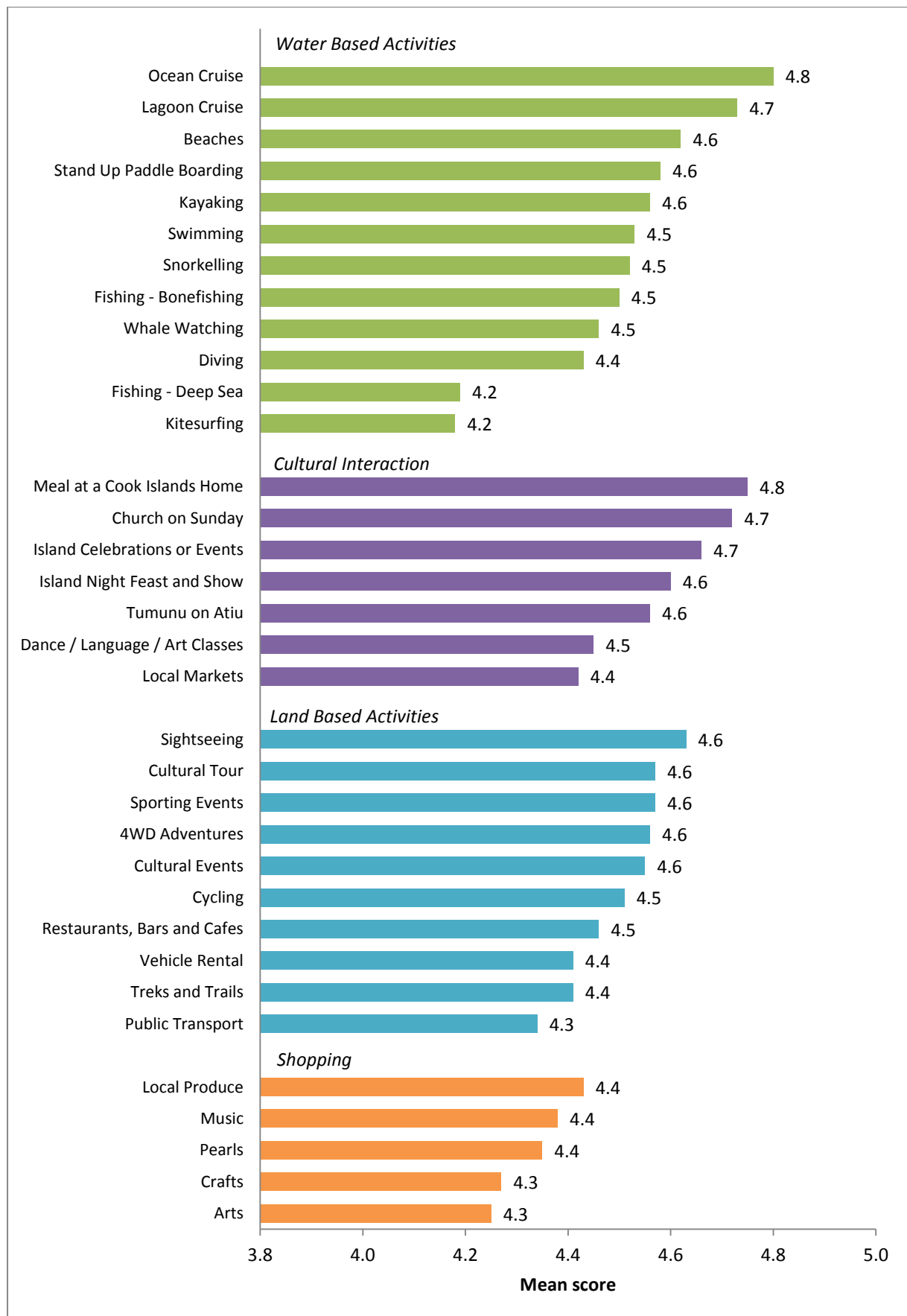


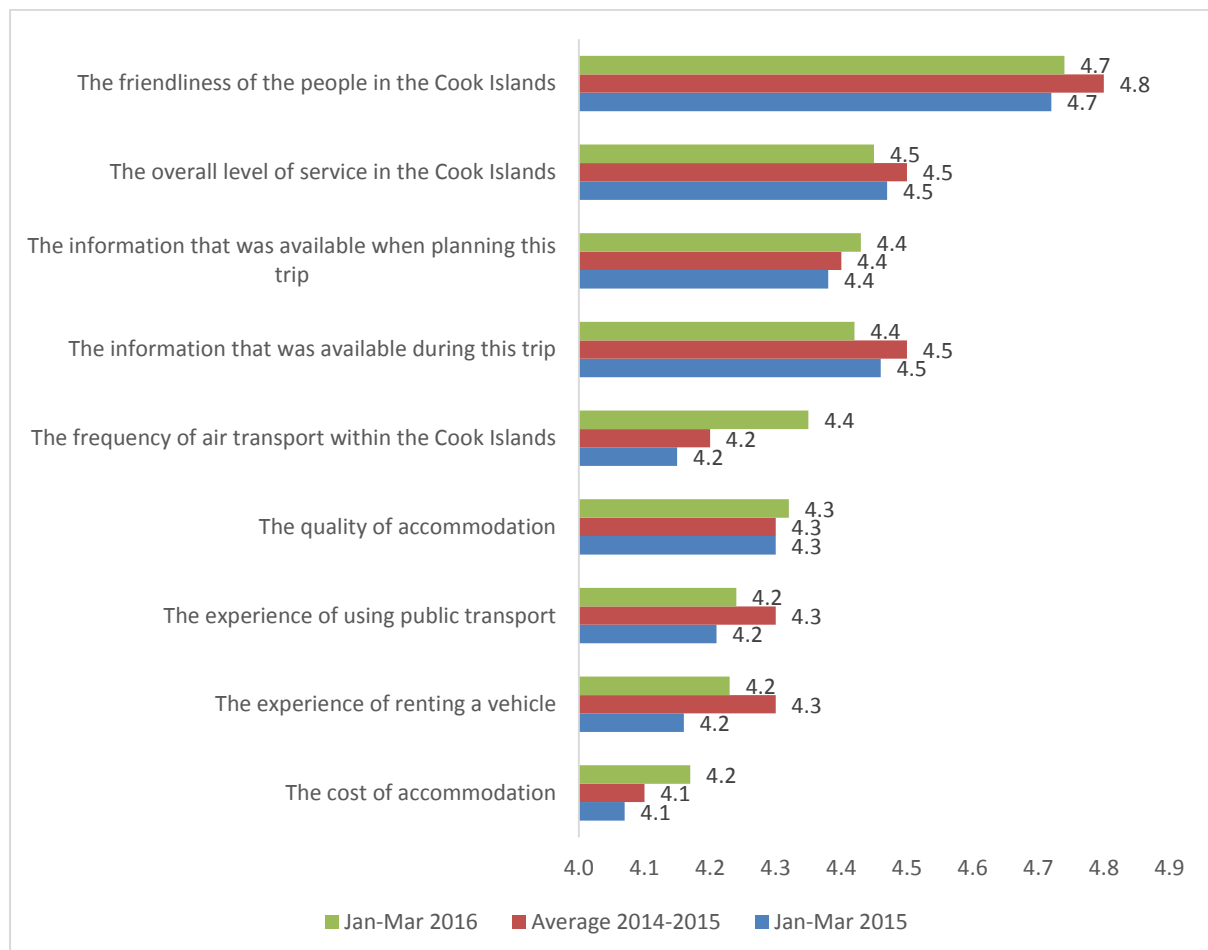
Figure 25: Degree of satisfaction in activities participated in (mean score out of 5)



Visitors were asked to rate their level of satisfaction with nine different statements relating to their most recent visit to the Cook Islands. Responses from the period of January to March are compared to the annual average for 2014/15, and the same period of 2014/15 (Figure 26). Respondents have consistently given the friendliness of the people in the Cook Islands the highest score.

This quarter also shows a slight upward trend in the level of satisfaction with the information that was available when planning this trip, the frequency of air transport within the Cook Islands, and the quality and the cost of accommodation compared to the average for 2014/15 and the same quarter of 2014/15. Visitor satisfaction levels with the friendliness of the people, the overall level of service, the information that was available during the trip, the experience of using public transport and renting a vehicle are slightly lower than the annual figure of 2014/15, but fairly consistent with the same quarter in 2014/15.

Figure 26: Degree of satisfaction with Cook Islands services (mean score out of 5)



Most appealing aspects of the Cook Islands

Visitors were asked “What did you find most attractive or appealing about the Cook Islands on your most recent visit?” (Table 3). The most appealing elements of the Cook Islands experience are the beautiful and clean natural environment (53%), the friendly and helpful local people (43%), the peacefulness and relaxing atmosphere of the islands (32%), and the tourist attractions and activities on offer (20%). Smaller numbers of visitors mentioned aspects such as food and beverage (11%), the convenience and safety of the Cook Islands (7%), accommodation (6%), culture (4%), and the level of service experienced (4%). These figures are consistent with the annual average for 2014-2015 where respondents rated the top three most appealing aspects as the ‘environment’ (52%), ‘local people’ (43%) and ‘atmosphere’ (29%).

Table 3: Most appealing aspects of the Cook Islands (n=761)

Themes	Share of respondents (%)
Environment, cleanliness & weather	53%
Local People	43%
Atmosphere	32%
Activities, attractions, and entertainment & events	20%
Food and Beverage	11%
Convenience & Safety	7%
Un-commercial	7%
Accommodation	6%
Culture	4%
Level of service	4%
Overall good experience	4%

* 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%.

Environment, cleanliness & weather

Over half of the respondents (53%) considered the destination’s ‘beautiful’ and ‘clean’ natural environment, and the warm waters and climate to be the most appealing aspects of their Cook Islands experience. Visitors used words such as ‘awesome’, ‘fantastic’, ‘stunning’, ‘amazing’, ‘lovely’, ‘and ‘unspoilt’ to describe the environment. Most comments here focused on the beauty and the cleanliness of the beaches and lagoons, the weather, the pristine water, and the beauty of the islands in general. Comments included:

“The people's generosity and smiles. The environment that is so pleasant and beautiful. The colours, scenery so amazing and fresh. Waking up to the fresh gardenia perfume of the morning and evening and the amazing evening entertainment.”

“It was a small island and very clean, easy to get around. People are helpful and friendly. The beaches were clean and water was clear and lots of fish. The weather although there was nearly a cyclone was great...”

“The beauty of the island. Breathtakingly beautiful from many vantage point.”

“...the island, the climate. We were blown away by the experience.”

“The beautiful beaches and the water on Maina and Honeymoon Island. I love that it is so clean everywhere you go!”

“The environment colours match the advertisements - totally real! The marine life!”

Local people

Just under half of the respondents (43%) noted that the most appealing part of their visit was their interaction with local people in the Cook Islands with comments about the friendliness, welcoming nature and helpfulness of local people. Key words that dominated the responses included ‘friendly’, ‘warm’, ‘helpful’, ‘beautiful’, ‘genuine’, and ‘welcoming.’ Comments included:

“The vibe, people, music and attractions were all amazing, very welcoming, beautiful scenery, nothing seemed to be an issue for the people, always very helpful.”

“The people were so friendly. We'd go back to hang out with people we met.”

“The beautiful, friendly and happy people of the Cook Islands make this a very, very special place in the world. The culture is also beautiful.”

“The people are fantastic, everyone we met was friendly and welcoming and the island is just beautiful.”

“The genuine warmth of all the people we dealt with.”

“The people definitely. They are friendly, open, warm and welcoming, and love to laugh. I really appreciated their willingness to share their lives and their culture so openly. There are other beautiful tropical islands that we could visit, but the people are the real beauty of this island.”

Atmosphere

A third of visitors surveyed (32%) focused on the relaxed atmosphere of the Cook Islands. They considered the Cook Islands to be very peaceful, relaxing, and laid-back, which made it a good destination to ‘rest’ and ‘unwind’. Respondents used words such as ‘quiet’, ‘relaxing’, ‘laid back’, ‘easy’, and ‘slow pace’ to describe the overall atmosphere of the Cook Islands. The notion of ‘island time’ was also mentioned. Comments included:

“How welcome we felt in Raro. The relaxed lifestyle.”

“Island Time ‘loved it’”

“Relaxed environment and non-commercial aspect of the island. It has everything you need but without feeling too touristy. Get a sense of real life on the island.”

“How quiet and peaceful it was, and the ability to snorkel from our hotel.”

“Quiet peaceful relaxed pace”

“The laid back attitude made for a very relaxing holiday.”

Activities, attractions, entertainment & events

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

“...riding around on scooter, swimming at the beaches, bars and clubs are fun, laid back and safe.”

“Landscapes, views, night SUP in muri was amazing, muri night market and the day market in town was really good!”

“The beaches are beautiful. We also enjoyed renting a motor scooter and exploring the inner roads. It was so different from the outer road. We enjoyed seeing the different flowers and crops growing.”

“...friendly, excellent snorkelling (and well-marked), good food.”

Food and beverage

Just over one in ten respondents (11%) mentioned food and beverage as the most appealing aspect of their trip. Their comments focused on the quality and range of food and beverages available in the Cook Islands. They used words such as ‘great’, ‘beautiful’, ‘lovely’, and ‘fresh’ to describe the food. Many visitors commented on the selection of good cafes and restaurants, and on the availability of great fruit. Comments included:

“The variety of food crops at the market. The many food stalls around Rarotonga”

“Aitutaki lagoon and the lagoon in front of Little Polynesia resort. The island night performances. Local food presentation.”

“Improved litter control and better maintenance of gardens around the main road. More everyday options for casual dining and civilised drinks on Sunday.”

“Friendly people and the general less commercialisedness of the island making the whole experience feel more natural. Most things we visited or experienced were run or

owned by locals such as coffee shops and restaurants making the island feel different and special not just a nameless resort that could be anywhere in the world."

Convenience and safety

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

"Natural setting, friendly people, well organized, safe."

"The water activities, friendly people, access and ease of getting around the island."

"Laid back, clean, ease to get there from NZ"

"The people. The entire island is friendly, helpful and approachable. On Rarotonga more so than Aitutaki, it was very easy to get around the island using public transport and everyone was more than happy to help when it was needed."

Un-commercial

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

"Relative natural state of the environment - no high rise etc - the development was very much in sync with the environment..."

"We have been visiting the islands for 30 years now. For us it is such an easy holiday, no stress with many ways to spend your time. Over the years the island has been able to preserve the 'untouched' feeling."

"We enjoyed the small scale...no high rise buildings make the Cook Islands the best place to visit...it is not over run and crowded like Hawaii and that is a good thing!"

"It is unspoilt by tourism. Natural, raw and more beautiful because it is not overcrowded, not jam packed with plush hotels. It is very relaxed there, no one was trying to force us to 'have a good time' by laying on entertainment we couldn't get away from such as loud music and aqua aerobics etc. I loved the way the chickens and dogs were allowed to roam freely over the island and the way the islanders are fiercely proud of their traditions..."

Accommodation

Another 6% of respondents noted that the accommodation they stayed in was an appealing aspect of their visit to the Cook Islands, referring to the quality of the offering, the setting, the level of service, and the warm welcome from their hosts. Comments included:

"... we stayed at a great resort with great staff."

"Accommodation at Sea Change Villas and their incredibly friendly/helpful Staff...Plus--the lagoon and beach directly adjacent to Sea Change Villas."

"The level of accommodation right on the beach front - muri shores is in a prime location!"

"The accommodations were spectacular, and we loved the laid back island life!"

Culture

The island's unique local culture was mentioned by four percent of respondents as an appealing aspect of their Cook Islands visit. Respondents referred to the artisanal products, local events, and singing experiences in addition to referencing the overall enjoyable aspects of Cook Islands culture. Comments included:

"The beaches, the people, snorkelling, lagoon cruise, food & overall cultural experience."

"The unique culture of the people, the interesting lifestyle of the islands."

"... The possibility to watch the artists, get in touch with them and buy locally produced products."

"How immersed in natural beauty the culture is, friendliness of locals, nature, lots of dogs"

Level of service

Another four percent of visitors commented on the service they encountered while in the Cook Islands as being an appealing feature of their trip. Respondents had positive things to say about the local hospitality they experienced, especially mentioning the friendly and helpful staff at the restaurants, bars, hotels, and resorts. Visitors also emphasised the lack of pressure to buy which made them feel comfortable. Comments included:

"The beaches, the people, the service in restaurants, bars etc., the airport staff, the beauty."

“... The service was great and the choice in restaurants was superb. We visited 16 years ago and the service, choice of food and conditions of hotels etc was greatly improved. We had a great time and just loved Rarotonga.”

“The service staff were awesome.”

“...extremely high level of service everywhere from everyone.”

Overall good experience

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

“We love the cook Islands we would go back every year if we could. We go there to relax and do nothing.”

“Rarotonga is absolutely beautiful, the beaches and people there are just amazing. Everything was just perfect!”

“Pretty much everything was fantastic. I want to move there :) The people where so friendly and accommodating.”

“The Cook Islands is such a remote and unknown country and that is what fascinated me the most. The Cook Islanders are the most beautiful people I have ever met in my life. The island is absolutely amazing and I enjoyed every minute!”

Least appealing aspects of the Cook Islands

Visitors were also asked “What did you find least attractive or appealing about the Cook Islands on your most recent visit?” Nearly a quarter (22%) of the visitors took the trouble to note that they found nothing was ‘unappealing’, that ‘everything was lovely’, or that the only unappealing aspect was that they ‘had to leave’. These visitors expressed that they “loved it all” and that they “enjoyed every minute”. There were, however, a number of areas that did attract comments (Table 4). These comments ranged from the issues of rubbish and natural environment care, the lack of public services and facilities, to fears that the Cook Islands are becoming too commercialised/ touristy. Each theme is discussed in more depth below the following table.

Table 4: Least appealing aspects of the Cook Islands (n=707)

Themes	Share of respondents (%)
Rubbish and natural environment care	20
Public services, facilities and infrastructure	16
Price of good and service	12
Accommodation	10
Food and beverage	10
Stray animals and mosquitos	9
Attractions and activities	7
Poor weather	7
Shops	6
Flight related issues	5
Local people	5
Rental cars or scooters	5
Level of service	4
Too touristy	2

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

Rubbish and natural environment care

Some visitors (20%) mentioned waste management and the lack of care of the natural environment in the Cook Islands as unappealing factors. This figure is the highest we have seen since the survey commenced and reflects a steady upward trend that has been observed over the past year (Qtr 3 2014/2015 8%; Qtr 1 2015/16 11%; Qtr 2 2015/16 15%). The poor condition of the lagoons and beaches, erosion, polluted water, degraded coral reefs, and threatened marine life concerned a group of visitors. In particular many visitors mentioned algal blooms and unpleasant smells at the Muri lagoon area. Rubbish on the beaches and streets, the burning of trash, and the abandoned buildings were also commented upon. Comments included:

“Very sad to see the state of Muri Beach: the weed. In the end we didn’t go swimming in the lagoon. In addition the modern apartments popping up on the beach are not in keeping with the environment.”

“The Muri lagoon had a really unpleasant seaweed growth in it, caused by inadequate septic tanks from the hotels and houses on the lagoon. I only went swimming once, and after that avoided the lagoon. It needs to be cleaned up.”

“The desecration of the once beautiful Muri beach and lagoon by ill thought out development. The place has lost its soul. Great ugly concrete hotels built right up to the beachline. We won’t be back”.

“Muri Beach needs urgently cleaned. The algae and its smell had been really disturbing. Also at Fruits of Rarotonga the algae started to be disturbing. The street area around Avana Fishing Club was stinking a lot”.

“This was our 6th time and we were devastated to see the algae in the Muri lagoon and the mess on the beach. In 26 days we only went in the Muri lagoon twice, once to try and swim the other to snorkel. It was not pleasant. We had to drive 15 minutes to go swimming and snorkelling that we normally could just walk out our door to enjoy. We came to Rarotonga for the lagoon so would have not spent 27 hours travelling to get there if we had known what had happened to it. We hope that it can get clean up and back to the paradise we once knew. We understand that part of the problem is the septic systems so hope that the government gets tough and makes the businesses along the lagoon upgrade their systems. We will not return until the problem is fixed.”

“The algae in the lagoon. There is so much less coral and tropical fish life whilst snorkelling and diving. It was very sad to see as we are regular visitors to Rarotonga, and noticed a huge change.”

“Algae in Muri lagoon was awful to look at and get tangled in. Quite a difference from my last visit 9 years ago and very disappointing to see that it's also affected marine life in the area (there used to be great snorkelling out by the motu). Rubbish at lack Rock. “

“I loved it but the weed in the lagoon spoiled the snorkelling somewhat.”

“Pollution needs to be addressed, more people, more pollution, it is eventually going to kill the surrounding lagoon and ocean. I noticed a huge difference in the lagoon with fish and coral from 6-8 years ago.”

“Lack of rubbish bins and recycling bins.”

“The burning of garbage.”

“The beaches - when you actually get there and see all the waste. Actual rubbish; plastic bottles, beer cans and glass bottles, food packaging... Then marine waste i.e. the algae from muri that apparently ends up on beaches right around the around the

island. Would be swimming and you'd have bits of algae floating around you. Didn't have that happen 10 years ago. Lack of respect for our environment. Lack of respect for our future generations. This stems from a lack of education on rubbish and its effects on the earth and our island."

Public services, facilities and infrastructure

One of the least appealing aspects for visitors is the lack of public services, facilities and infrastructure in the Cook Islands (16%). Many of the comments were about the poor condition of the local roads with on-going road works, speeding traffic, and the dangerous pot holes, especially for scooters at night. Some people also complained about the lack of safe, well-formed footpaths. Others expressed their disappointment with the lack of Internet/phone access, poor public transport and the lack of facilities including public toilets. Comments included:

"Internet and phone access."

"Litter in waterfront parks, absence of functioning public toilets."

"The concept of island time when waiting for transport to arrive at a certain time."

"The public transportation could use some more improvements and frequency."

"Unfortunately we had a bad experience in trying to get a licence for a scooter. The policeman did not explain what had to be done on both the written and the practical tests and seemed to make it difficult for anyone wanting to get a licence."

"Safety on the roads and unfinished buildings."

"Possibility to walk along the road."

"Bad roads congested with large 4WDs and inconsiderate scooter riders."

"Loved getting on the bus to hear Mr Hopeless (he's amazing) but the buses are getting a little tired. There's an 'island charm' about the road (its pot holes, uneven surface, slow scooters) but not when you are having to stand on an overcrowded rickety on bus. Maybe more frequent bus service during peak hours (ie. everyone exiting at the close of the Saturday market so the next bus was swamped)."

"Lack of bus transportation on Sundays."

Price of goods and service

A number of visitors (12%) mentioned the price of goods and services as the least appealing aspect during their stay in the Cook Islands. These visitors made comments about the price of things, especially on items such as accommodation, internet/phone, food in stores and restaurants, public transport, cost of living, flights and cultural show. Comments included:

"Cost of things there, for example milk, general products."

“The cost or lack of Wi-Fi and the cost of phone calls and texts is terrible.”

“We found it more expensive than we expected. We would have done more tours and adventure activities if they were more reasonably priced.”

“Costs of meals, groceries and liquor.”

“Public transport, most mainstream accommodation is quite expensive and you don't know what the quality of the 'unknown' accommodation is like. Internet is really expensive.”

“Telephone charges by Vodafone upon returning to NZ. They are far too excessive and I would not use them over there again.”

“Very very expensive. Accommodation is more expensive than other comparable islands, as are the restaurants and even the bus and taxi.”

“Many of the restaurants charge a high price for meals which are not of a great standard. I feel if I go to a restaurant and pay \$30.00 for a main, I expect the food to be of that standard.”

“I liked the simple life but the cost of living there was expensive. The supermarkets are very poor and the cost of food is high and the quality generally not high.”

“The cost of the cultural show. It was way too expensive.”

“Domestic flights between islands are too expensive.”

Accommodation

The high cost and poor quality of accommodation was a concern for a number of visitors (10%). Visitors mentioned that the cost of accommodation is expensive for the value received, that some accommodation places are in need of an upgrade of facilities and services, and occasionally safety issues are mentioned. Some comments focused on theft from hotels. Comments included:

“Accommodation was comparatively expensive for the standard of facilities. Resort was missing some of its key advertised attractions. Accommodation had no air con and staff did not realise that this needed to be fixed.”

“It's a minor grumble. Although I get the concept of "island time" there's some places where it's used an excuse for poor service or laziness i.e. when you are the only 10 people in a resort bar and it takes 30 minutes to get a round of drinks served - that's poor service! If the service was more efficient, none of the charm would be lost, and tourists like us would have been able to spend more money!”

“We flew in on new year's eve late so our first day was on new year's day, we had no food or drinks yet as we had only arrived late and nothing was open, didn't even have

a vending machine in the hotel, we had to walk 45-60 min to Muri to find food and water but nothing was open, we felt almost as if we were homeless, the hotel should be serving food and water 24/7 whether it's at the restaurant, at the reception or even in a vending machine, it was not good enough."

"Price and quality of food available at accommodation."

"The resort was OK although we did feel it was over-priced considering how dated it was. It wouldn't take much to make it really very good, such as new linen (sheets etc.) new furniture in both bungalows and communal areas, plus update the water sports equipment (windsurfers, sail boats etc.)"

"Sometimes the level of service was not good and staff were not helpful. Our departure transfer to Rarotonga airport did not arrive at all and the staff were not very helpful in organizing alternative transport. We were very fortunate and thankful to a local who drove us to the airport."

"Hospitality staff need better training."

"Theft of items in our room - waking up at 1:30am to find someone in our room that stole laptop and hard drive very disappointing and my wife felt very unnerved".

Food and Beverage

A number of visitors (10%) commented on the cost, quality and availability of food and beverage in the Cook Islands. Respondents complained about the price and quality of food, the lack of local produce (especially fresh fruit, veggies and fish), and the limited eating options available outside the resorts. Some visitors also mentioned the poor customer service in restaurants and the recurrent closed establishments such as shops and restaurants. Responses covered food and beverage options, such as restaurants, resort dining, shops and markets. Comments included:

"Most eating establishments closed very early."

"Lack of shopping/cafes etc at certain times."

"Cost of roadside fruit and veggies, although fresh and delicious, paid at least 5 times as much for it as in NZ, which meant we bought it once to be polite but did not return for more."

"We were last there 2 years ago and since then some of the local food prices seemed to have gone up be at least 10%."

"Too much western-style food, didn't have enough chance to sample local delicacies."

"Lack of restaurants with local food."

"The lack of fresh produce."

"The food. Too much of the same menu in all the restaurants. We enjoy eating out,

but by the end of our stay we found it difficult to enjoy our meals. Quality with both food and service was disappointing. Some days, the meals at one restaurant would be amazing... the next, it was horrible. Prices were extremely high compared to North American standards."

"We were missing a real supermarket with a wider choice. The local mini markets have a limited choice of goods when you are self-catering, which sometimes made it difficult to get even some basic stuff, like bread, potatoes or tomatoes. This really surprised me as the local climate should cater for growing such vegetables on the island. Fortunately, we found an old lady who was growing veggies and salad and sold us what we needed."

Stray animals and mosquitos

The stray dogs, noisy roosters and mosquitoes continue to be an annoyance or a worry for 9% of respondents during their time spent on the islands. Respondents used a variety of words to describe this theme including 'annoying', 'worrisome', 'roaming and 'uncared'. The comments are mostly focused on stray dogs. Comments included:

"Being bitten by insects - even though I used repellent."

"The rosters crowing all night."

"All the bugs in the room."

"Roaming packs of dogs."

"Wandering dogs are a serious problem. On my first morning beach walk, I was challenged by two large aggressive dogs. We were also kept awake by continuous dog barking at night."

"Dogs. I love dogs but I got bitten by one and had to go to hospital. I was just walking past a house and it bit me."

"It was very sad to see horses and dogs with mange and I wonder why there are so many dogs when volunteer vets offer free de-sexing."

Attraction and activities

Some visitors (7%) indicate that attractions and activities are one of the least appealing aspects because of several reasons: limited attractions and/or activities, swimming/snorkelling because of the environment issues, not updated brochures, services and cultural shows. Comments included:

"Very limited in things to do."

"Information on brochures incorrect or not up to date."

"We wanted to do all by foot or local transport as we were traveling by car 3 months in Australia and New Zealand. Rarotonga was our final point before going home. It was the best decision. However, the cross island track is not maintained, the ropes

were worn or not there anymore, the signage was difficult. Please take care for this trail, it is so beautiful :-)”.

“I only scored the deep sea fishing low as we did not catch a thing for a day excursion.”

“Unreliable and unfair character of a man renting kitesurfing gear at Aitutaki.”

“The cultural tour at Muri was disappointing. The dancing was not cultural - it was just wiggling hips for the effect. I have done belly dancing and there is so many moves in dancing than wiggling hips. The couple we sat next too ran into us a couple of days later and they did not like it either, but they went on the one up in the mountain and said it was really good and cultural.”

“We found the cruise trip to be a disappointment. Hearing about it from other visitors, even ones that had been on it the day before, we were looking forward to being entertained. We instead felt like it was a day out for the family members of the crew with. When we talked with other people staying at the resort, their experience was quite different. Comparing notes, after our swim in the lagoon, we only were given a demonstration on how to wear local clothing, a light meal and then left to loll in the water. None of the entertainment, like music demonstration, coconut swinging, etc. that was experienced by other visitors. We felt very let down.”

“The guy that ran the activities booth at the resort. He was rude, aggressive and sometimes quite intimidating. But only to the ladies.”

Poor weather

A small number of survey respondents (7%) expressed their disappointment with the weather conditions on the Cook Islands. In particular complaints were made about the amount of heat, wind and about cyclones, although some respondents acknowledged the weather was seasonal and cannot be changed. Comments included:

“This year there was more rain than usual, and lots of wind due to the cyclone that got close to Rarotonga. As you know, it takes days for the lagoon to quiet down.”

“Unfortunately it was windy which cancelled our fishing trip.”

“We were there when a couple of cyclones were in the vicinity & water-based activity was out for most of the week (boats out of the water). That was beyond anyone’s control of course. “

“Unfortunately cyclone came through so limited time to get outdoors.”

“The extreme heat!”

“Humidity.”

“Too hot.”

“That we got there during cyclone season.”

Shops

Six percent of visitors surveyed complained about the shops during their visit in the Cook Islands. Visitor commented about customer services, the cost, the opening of the shops and the limited products. Comments included:

“Lack of business open over the holiday period.”

“Why does everything close at 4.30pm?”

“Customer service skills from many of the shops in town was very poor! No greeting, no smiling, no interaction... Something that really needs to be taught. I understand the wages aren't that great, but a smile would have been nice.”

“Retail premises where staff were unhelpful.”

“Service standards by some locals were very casual, i.e. more important to attend to customer in the shop than text or chat to friends.”

“Shopping not easy to get to.”

“Lack of information on opening times etc.”

“I found that many of the shops sold the identical items. I would be good to see more of a range.”

“Perhaps a few more shops.”

Other unappealing aspects

Other unappealing aspects mentioned by visitors include: flight/airline-related issues (influent, cost, arrival and departure times, service), local people (unfriendly, hard to get involved with them, local craft work, obesity), rental cars and scooters (quality, licence, cost, service, behaviours of others transport users), the level of service (unfriendly, not good services) and the fact that the destination is becoming too commercialised/touristy (over-developed, loss of authenticity).

Comments included:

Flight-related issues

“Domestic flights between islands are too expensive.”

“Waiting for three hours at the airport for connecting flight to Aitutaki. Nothing to look at and limited options for refreshments.”

"Disconnect in package deal between hotel exit time (10am) and same day inclusive transfer to airport at 9pm. To make use of package in this format would require late checkout, costing additional \$185."

"Flight times."

"We tried to change our plans and stay an extra night on Aitutaki. The hotel were happy to accommodate us, the airline (Air Rarotonga weren't and insisted we paid a full extra fare). Our travel agent said this wasn't necessary. Hence we did not stay our extra night. A loss for Aitutaki."

"Stolen goods from my luggage at Air Raro."

Local people

"The service from half of the locals was rude."

"The local people seemed quite rude on this trip. We definitely felt singled out by being a tourist and we made an effort to be polite."

"People were a bit stand offish."

"There were a few worrying signs of what the price of progress might bring to the island. There was a tour we did that was run by a lady who had spent quite a bit of time in NZ and I felt that she would sell her soul in pursuit of money. I do not begrudge the island financial prosperity, but the islanders need to ensure that they don't ruin what is special about this place in pursuit of the money that tourists bring in. It is too special for that. Other places have lost their soul to tourists and I pray that this beautiful place does not do that."

"We did notice that the people are not as friendly or happy as on our first visit in 2002. This could be due to the number of tourists on the frequently on the Island but the we were so pleased that the lovely gentleman still sings and plays the ukulele at the airport it is welcome and good-bye and he is a treasure to our experience every time we visit Rarotonga. Thank you."

"People more overweighed than our first visit (1995)."

Rental cars and scooters

"The fact that the first day we were there the whole island was out of rental cars and the system of getting a bike licence."

"The driver's license process and operators (Police). Unless you have had a license previously, you MUST book to be tested. I did not know this going in, and after filling in the form, then waiting in line for some time, I was told the earliest time would be 3 days (into my 5 day trip) before I could get a spot, so I did not bother. Next visit, I will get it booked in early if possible or just hire a car."

"Safety aspect - scooter/motorcycle riders without helmets and possible drink driving at night."

"The slow and complicated system at the police station, to get the license to use the scooter. We ended up taking the scooter back and getting a car."

"Car rental- car very run down."

Level of service

"We also had difficulties with the scooter rental company with rude service at the store and a flat tire and no roadside assistant ever coming after repeated calls on my Australian Mobile phone at international roaming costs."

"Customer service skills from many of the shops in town was very poor! No greeting, no smiling, no interaction... Something that really needs to be taught. I understand the wages aren't that great, but a smile would have been nice."

"Tinned pineapple served for breakfasts when pineapples were available!!! Having to wait for 2 hours for a meal to be served at Tamanu. I discuss this the next day with the manager and was happy with the solution reached but a restaurant in Rarotonga also had us waiting nearly a similar time. Patrons should be told if there was going to be a long wait and nibbles provided."

"Service standards by some locals were very casual, i.e. more important to attend to customer in the shop than text or chat to friends."

"Treated really nicely in some resorts and not others."

"The service at shops and tourism office were poor."

Becoming too commercialised/touristy

"The Island night show was too commercialised; would have preferred something more down to earth."

"Rarotonga seems already too busy. The development seems random - any kind of building anywhere. That's the kind of situation we visit your island to get away from."

"The cultural dislocation due to colonisation the trip was all westernised."

"Other rude tourists."

"Tourists walking on the coral. Locals fishing in raui zone."

"Other Tourists who were rude, and did not treat the local people or hotel staff with respect."

Suggestions to improve the visit to the Cook Islands

When asked if there was anything that could have improved their visit to the Cook Islands, just under half (48%) of respondents said 'yes'. Suggestions mentioned by respondents focused on public services and infrastructure (20%), environment/safety/animal care (14%), entertainment, activities and transport (14%), a longer stay (11%), accommodation (10%), friendliness of locals and service levels (10%), flight schedules in and out of Cook Islands (7%),

quality/cost of food and beverages (7%) and weather (4%). Comments on these themes included:

"The tar sealed main road should be white lined on each sides all round the island. It's not safe to drive without the white lines."

"The bus service was poor quality, unfriendly, difficult to find out about and expensive."

"Cheaper internet so I can instagram the place while I'm there. Even with infrequent public transport, it just adds to the fun. My postcard never arrived from One Foot Island."

"Signage is very much lacking to trails, to ID beaches and locales, etc - the public beach/rest areas as very much lacking - no garbage cans, poor facilities, lack of signage, etc."

"Please, please clean the wonderful sea and stop farms and hotels to use the water for their garbage."

"Be seen to do something about the algae. We even tried cleaning some up ourselves!"

"If a dog is fierce it shouldn't be able to run out of it property and bite you. I'm so lucky I wasn't a little kid."

"Not allowing tourists to be robbed in their room the last night. Not just us but the other couple who took the shuttle to the airport the next morning was also robbed. This sounds like a setup."

"On Aitutaki we wanted to hire a car to see cultural events at Christmas but no cars available even though there were no people either. We missed the dancing and money collecting which we had wanted to attend."

"Oh, one more thing, they have to create more events to draw more tourists to our beautiful country. Thank you."

"We love hiring the scooters however this time round they were a little more ratty than our previous visits. I suppose we could have swapped if it worried us that much."

"More information on arts classes/activities would have been nice. More information on the walking trails/trip up the mountains/hills would have been nice also."

"Accommodations, need to be reviewed as its cost a bit high, that why some tourists diverted their holidays to Fiji and other pacific islands coz they are much cheaper, however, the Cook Islands is the best place to relax."

"Customer service was lacking in some areas. Found people very rude and not interested in helping us in any way."

“We were looking forward to trying local cuisine but could only find it at the cultural shows. Heaps of European fast food everywhere.”

“More affordable domestic flights so that we could have visited Aitutaki or other islands.”

Reasons to return to the Cook Islands and recommend to others

The majority of visitors (93%) indicated that they would consider re-visiting the Cook Islands in the future. This figure is the same as the 2014/15 annual average of 93% and the identical quarter in 2015 (93%). The main reasons given by the visitors to return to the Cook Islands are the peacefulness and relaxing atmosphere of the islands (31%), the beauty of the islands and the great weather (30%), and the overall great experience that the islands offer and the wish to experience this again (28%). Other reasons are the friendly local people, the tourist attractions and activities on offer, the convenience with regards to travel time, and the opportunities of visiting friends and relatives.

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

“To have a break away from work, to enjoy the hospitality of the Cook Islands people, to visit and sight see.”

“I like the relaxed lifestyle without the hype of expensive shops. A truly relaxing holiday.”

“Atmosphere of a not over commercialized country. We will be back next year.”

“Loved the friendly atmosphere and the ease it was to relax into Island Time.”

The beautiful natural scenery and the warm climate of the islands are mentioned by almost one third of the visitors (30%) as a reason to return to the Cook Islands. Key words used to describe the scenery include ‘beautiful’, ‘brilliant’, ‘unspoilt’, ‘enjoyable’, and ‘fantastic’. Comments include:

“Unspoiled nature, easy going life, cleanliness of the landscape, drinking water.”

“Beautiful beaches, white sand and nice sunny weather and Hula bar \$3.50 beer and Rehab bar was off the hook!”

“Beautiful Island which makes a great stop over on Trans Pacific flights. It’s cheaper than Tahiti and not as commercialized as Hawaii.”

“I would return for the beautiful people and water activities and scenery however I wouldn't stay at Muri Beach again unless the weed was rectified.”

Over a quarter (28%) of the comments by visitors were about how great the islands were, that they ‘just loved it’ and that the Cook Islands are the best place for a holiday. Comments included:

“Because it was perfect! Very romantic but familiar at the same time....Magical place.”

“I love Rarotonga and is always on our to do list at least once a year.”

“We are already planning next trip for next year. Loved it.”

“STILL THE MOST BEAUTIFUL OF ANY TROPICAL PARADISE WE HAVE EVER VISITED.”

“Loved every moment of it. Was our first time and we were sad to go and were immediately thinking when we could return :)”

“This is one of our favourite places to visit and is now even more special to us having just got married there, can’t wait to have some babies and bring them there to share the amazing things Raro has to offer!!”

The friendly local people are mentioned by 19% of the visitors as an important reason for their desire to return. The visitors mentioned the friendliness and helpfulness of the local people during their stay on the islands. Words used to describe the local people of the Cook Islands are ‘friendly’, ‘welcoming’, ‘amazing’, and ‘lovely’. Comments include:

“The people, in fact the people are Rarotonga.”

“The happy, kind, wonderful people.”

“The people were amazing very friendly and did everything they could to help you in our resort.”

Attractions and activities that the Cook Islands can offer or the wish to explore the islands further are mentioned as a reason to return, especially snorkelling and fishing.

“We liked it very much and want to come back for fishing.”

“I would return for the beautiful people and water activities.”

“Lots of water activities. We like to kayak, swim, snorkel, dive and see a part of the world that is so different from where we live.”

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

“Flight times from NZ are short, dollars/currency is NZ, English is spoken so no communication issues and main reason.”

“A viable alternative to Bali. Loved the direct daytime flight back to Australia, flights from Asia to Sydney are all overnight and you return having not slept.”

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

and the long distance to the Cook Islands.

“Never say never but we have been to the Cook Islands several times so we would probably go elsewhere.”

“Only if the lagoon is cleaned up. The hotel on the Muri beach side charge more because of the location but now it's not worth it to stay on that side of the island. If we ever do go back we would try someplace else on the island that is not on Muri Beach so we did not have to drive to swim and snorkel.”

“Prices are too high. Inter islands flights to expensive. Seychelles are better.”

“It didn't hit the wow factor. The beaches on Rarotonga were not as shown in photographs of the Cook Islands.”

Under half (46%) of the visitors mentioned that they would definitely include the outer islands in their next visit. Half (50%) of visitors indicate they will “maybe” visit outer islands next time. Most (91%) of the visitors surveyed in this quarter mentioned they would like to include ‘Aitutaki’ in their next visit to the Cook Islands. ‘Atiu’ was the second most mentioned island at 36%; another 24% of visitors stated that they would like to visit Mangaia, 18% of the respondents would like to visit Mauke. Only four percent mentioned the high cost of visiting outer islands as a barrier for not visiting.

Nearly all visitors surveyed (97%) said that they would recommend the destination to their family and friends which is consistent with previous survey periods.

Over a third (42%) of visitors surveyed stated they would recommend the Cook Islands to others because of the ‘atmosphere’: this was again described as ‘relaxing’, ‘peaceful’, ‘quiet’, ‘low key’, ‘not commercialised’ and with a ‘laid-back’ lifestyle. Respondents felt that the Cook Islands was a great place to ‘relax’ and ‘unwind’, and said they would recommend the Cook Islands as a good holiday destination for those who are looking for a ‘relaxed atmosphere’ or ‘good winter break’.

Thirty seven percent of respondents said that the ‘beautiful’ and ‘untouched’ natural environment of the Cook Islands was a reason to recommend the island nation to others – including the beautiful natural environment, great beaches, the nice weather, and its natural attractions. Visitors particularly mentioned they would recommend Aitutaki definitely because of its stunning natural beauty.

Just one in five respondents (20%) mentioned the ‘friendly’ local people as a reason to recommend the Cook Islands to friends and relatives. Other words used to describe the local Cook Islanders included ‘lovely’, ‘beautiful’, ‘great’, ‘wonderful’, ‘welcoming’ and ‘amazing’.

Just under a fifth of visitors (18%) surveyed would recommend the Cook Islands to others based on their overall ‘great holiday experience’. These visitors described the Cook Islands as

a 'great place', and said that it is a 'fantastic holiday'. These respondents also often described the Cook Islands as a 'paradise', and 'enjoy everything to offer'.

Other themes that were mentioned included the attractions and activities available (12%), the convenience of the islands as a destination – especially for New Zealanders and Australians (11%), the affordability of the holiday and good value for money (6%), food and beverage options (4%), the fact that the Cook Islands are not too touristy or over-commercialized (3%), the islands being a family-friendly destination (6%), the choice of accommodation available (2%), and the Cook Islands culture (1%).

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

"Relaxed way of life really makes you feel like you're on holiday."

"Good for a getaway and for something not very commercialised."

"The climate where one can swim all year around."

"Everyone is friendly the weather is warmer than NZ and cruising on island time beats the rat race in the city."

"It's beautiful and peaceful and off the beaten track/not the obvious choice for Australian/Canadian tourists."

"The interaction, everyday lifestyle as people go about their normal life is what I wanted to see."

"Compared with all the other South Pacific tourist destinations the price-performance ratio is realistic."

"A good and safe family destination."

"We have recommended the Cooks to lots of people for over 24 years."

Only 3% of visitors would not recommend the Cook Islands to others and this is largely based on the high prices, personal negative experiences, and the current condition of Muri lagoon.

Final observations

This report shows that the Cook Islands tourism industry generally performed well during the January to March 2016 period. Visitor satisfaction levels and the desire for return visitation have remained very high, and it is clear that the destination is making a generally positive impression on visitors. Visitor yield has remained relatively high after the significant increase seen in the previous (July-December 2015) quarters and it will be important to see if this trend is sustained for the rest of the year. The increase in yield over the mid 2014- mid 2015 period is largely accounted for by increased accommodation spend.

Despite the growth in visitor spend this report again highlights that there is room to enhance the visitor experience and to increase the economic yield and broader community benefits associated with tourism. As with previous reports, this quarter's research highlights issues around environmental degradation that should be monitored and managed carefully. In particular concerns over the condition of Muri lagoon have featured in visitor comments, and we have seen a worrying overall rise in the percentage of visitors stating that environmental factors are one of the least appealing aspects of their visit. There are also some concerns from visitors around the lack of public services, facilities and infrastructure in the Cook Islands, and the value for money/quality of service provided by accommodation and food/beverage operations that need to be addressed. The on-going concerns around stray dogs should also be noted.

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

Appendix – Cook Islands Visitor Survey



Cook Islands Visitor Survey

Information for Participants

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

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

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

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

This survey will take approximately 15 minutes to complete.

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

[Take the survey](#)

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

For further information about this research contact:

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

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

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

ABOUT YOUR VISIT:

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

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

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

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

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

3. What was the main purpose of your visit?

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

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

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

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

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

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

6. How many people accompanied you on this trip?

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

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

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

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

Previous visits (1)

Friends/family (2)

Travel agent/travel brochures (3)

Social media (Facebook, Twitter etc) (4)

Television or radio programmes (5)

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

Magazine and newspaper articles (6)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The level of service provided at this accommodation (1)

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

The overall value for money (3)

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

Water based activities:

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

Cultural interaction:

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

Land based activities and Touring:

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

- i) Vehicle Rental
- j) Public Transport

Shopping:

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

Please tell us about any other activities you participated in:

SPECIAL EVENTS

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

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

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

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

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

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

- a) No
- b) Yes

EXPENDITURE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

- a) Yes

b) No

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

a) Yes

b) No

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

Aitutaki (1)

Atiu (2)

Mangaia (3)

Mauke (4)

Other (5) _____

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

a) Yes

b) No

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

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

ABOUT YOU

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

26. Your age group:

a) 18-29

b) 30-39

c) 40-49

d) 50-59

e) 60-69

f) 70+

27. Your gender:

a) Female

b) Male

28. What is your highest qualification?

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

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

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

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

Survey Powered By Qualtrics