



# The Cook Islands Visitor Survey Results

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**October – December 2018**

**Prepared for Cook Islands Tourism Corporation**

**by**

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[www.nztri.org](http://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 1 October and 31 December 2018. The data presented is collected from an online departure survey (<http://www.mycookislandsvisit.com>). There were 1,386 individual respondents to the survey - representing a total of 3,019 adults and 336 children in the expenditure analysis (this equates to 8% of all visitors during the period – based on the same period of 2017 visitor arrival data from the Cook Islands Statistics Office).

Over three in five (61%) of visitors surveyed come from New Zealand, 16% come from Australia. Visitors are well educated (69% of visitors have some form of tertiary education) with a relatively high annual household income (51% earn over NZ\$100,000 per year). Nearly half of the visitors (49%) travel with one companion. Solo travellers are less common (11%).

Nearly three in five (59%) of those surveyed are first time visitors to the Cook Islands, a further 26% have visited twice or three times before. The main purpose of visit is holiday-making (81%). The average length of stay in the Cook Islands is 8.7 nights. The majority of visitors (94%) stay either one or two weeks. A quarter of visitors surveyed visited Aitutaki (25%).

Visitor spend prior to arrival in the Cook Islands (\$2,015 per person) has increased slightly from the 2017/2018 annual average (\$1,967 per person) and the same quarter of 2017 (\$1,831). Spend on the island (per person per day) is \$165. This spend is significantly higher than the 2017/2018 annual average of \$149, and the same quarter for the previous year (\$142 for October to December 2017).

The average local spend per visitor during the entirety of their stay is \$1,435. When pre-paid spend and the local spend are combined, it is estimated that each visitor brings \$2,241 to the Cook Islands economy (or approximately \$258 per day). This figure is higher than the \$2,051 average for 2017/18 and the \$1,896 for the same quarter last year (October to December 2017).

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

The future intentions of visitors remain similar to those seen in the previous year: 92% of those surveyed state that they want to return to the Cook Islands, and 97% would recommend the country 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 the Cook Islands economy.

Visitors to the Cook Islands are asked to complete a web-based survey within a few weeks of the completion of their visit. The Cook Islands online International Visitor Survey has run since mid-2012 and is continuing through 2019.

This report presents the results from October to December 2018. Over this three-month period, 8,543 visitors were contacted by email to take part in the survey, and 1,386 responses were received: a conversion rate of 16%. The conversion rate for this period is higher than the 2017/18 annual average (14%) and the October to December 2017 quarter (15%). These responses cover a total of 3,019 adults and 336 children and it is this number that is used for the visitor spend analysis.

The data presented includes detailed information on:

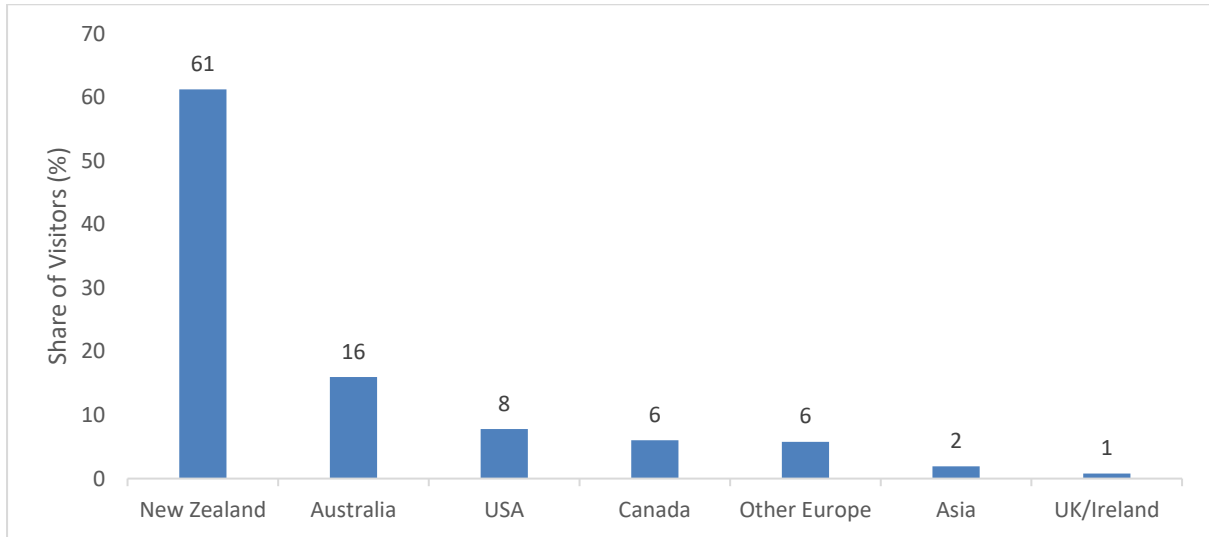
- The characteristics of visitors to the Cook Islands (age, gender, education, country of origin, income, purpose of visit, travelling companions, number of previous visits, length of stay, airline used, islands visited)
- Visitor information obtained about the Cook Islands, the factors influencing in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

Wherever there are significant or notable variations from the 2017/18 annual averages or the 2017 October to December quarterly findings these figures are highlighted in the discussion that follows.

## Visitor Characteristics

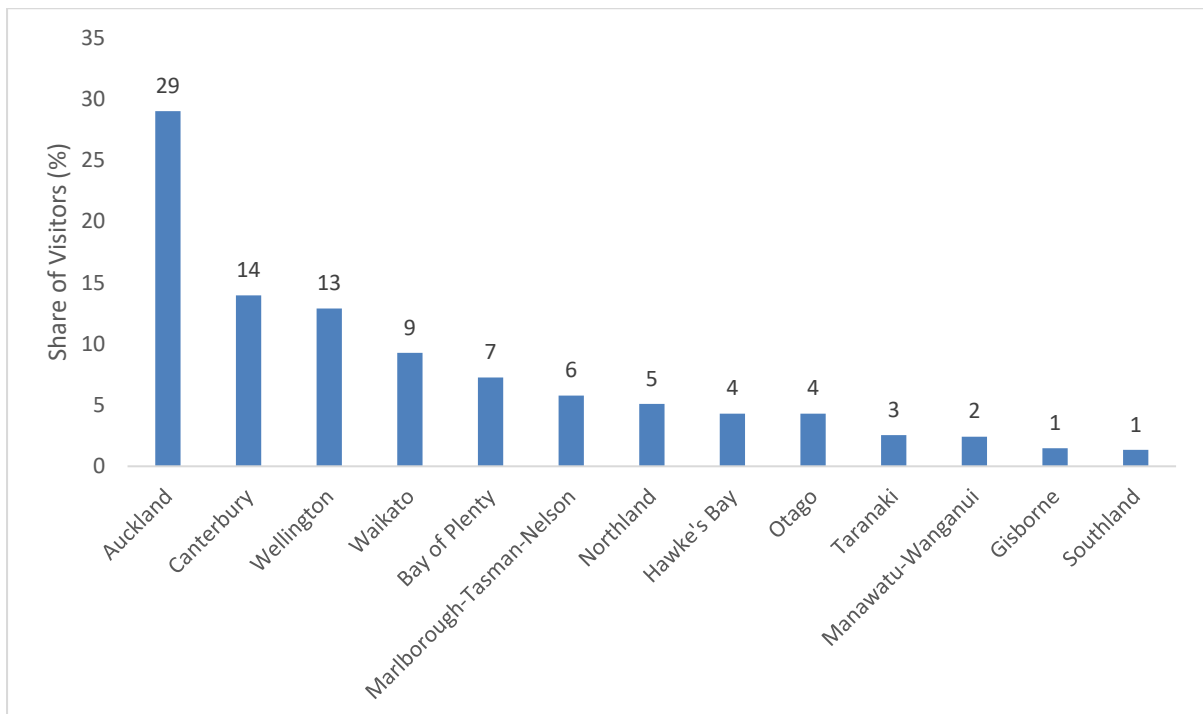
Over three in five (61%) of the visitors surveyed come from New Zealand (Figure 1). The second largest visitor group is from Australia (16%). USA, Canada, other Europe, Asia, and UK/Ireland represent the other main source markets.

**Figure 1: Country of origin (n = 1246)**

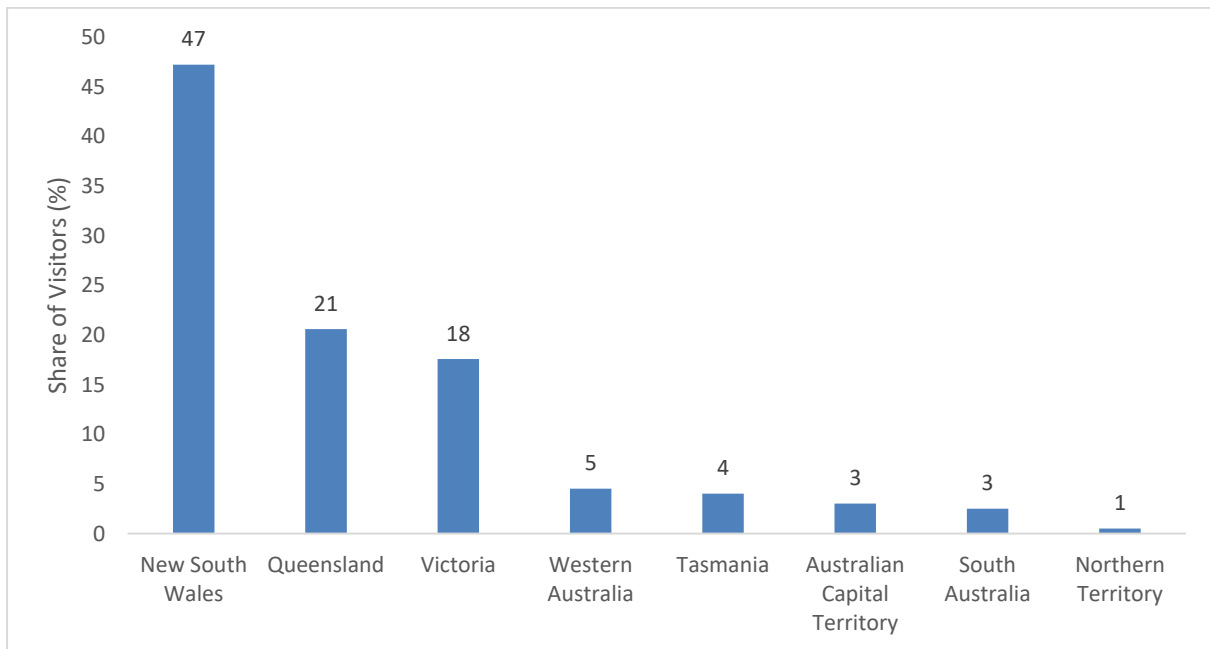


Auckland, Canterbury, Wellington, Waikato, and Bay of Plenty account for 72% of New Zealand visitors. For visitors from Australia, the regions of New South Wales, Queensland, and Victoria generate the highest numbers of arrivals (86%) (Figure 2-3).

**Figure 2: New Zealand visitors (n = 745)**

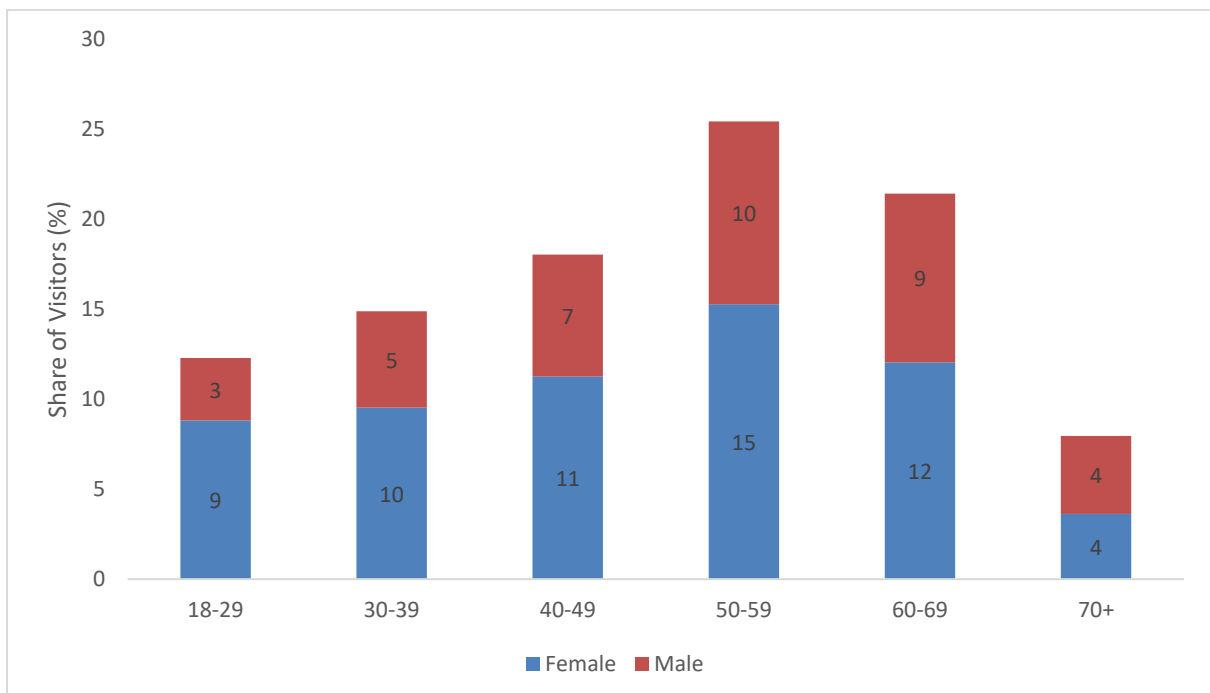


**Figure 3: Australia visitors (n = 199)**



More women (61%) than men (39%) completed the survey (Figure 4). The most significant age categories are the 50 to 59 year (25%) grouping, the 60 to 69 year (21%) grouping, followed by those aged 40 to 49 (19%), 30 to 39 (15%), and 18 to 29 (12%). There are relatively few travellers in the 70 plus age bracket (8%).

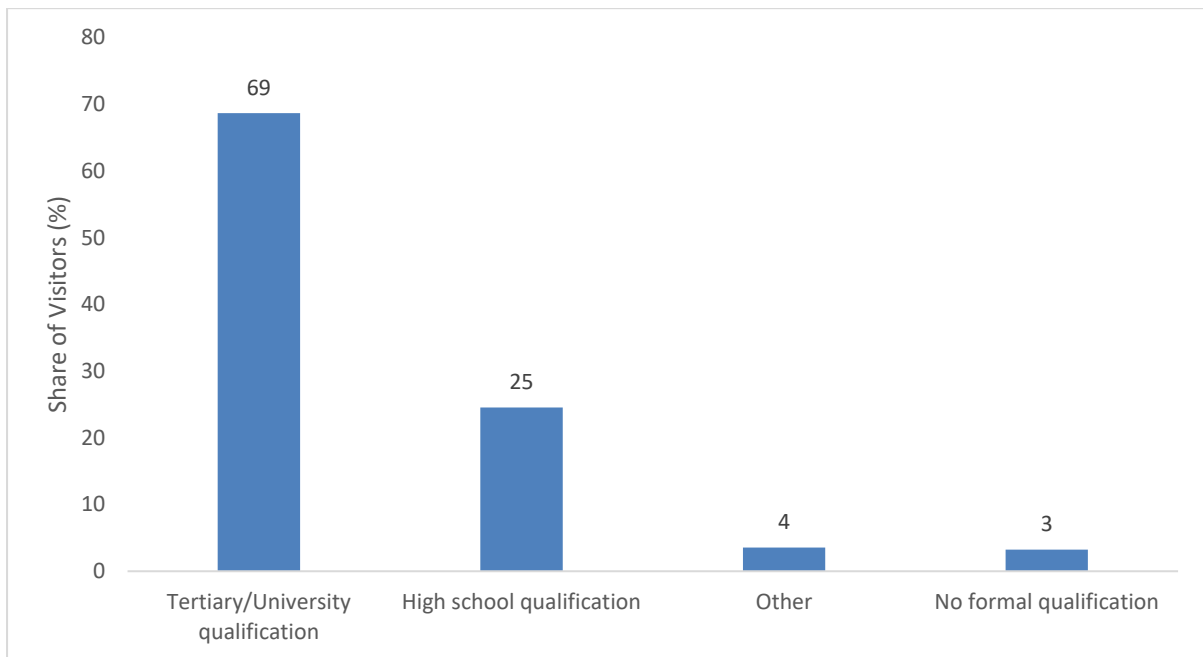
**Figure 4: Distribution of age and gender (n = 1270)**



Visitors are well educated with over two-thirds (69%) of those surveyed having some form of tertiary qualification, and a further 25% having completed a high school education (Figure 5).

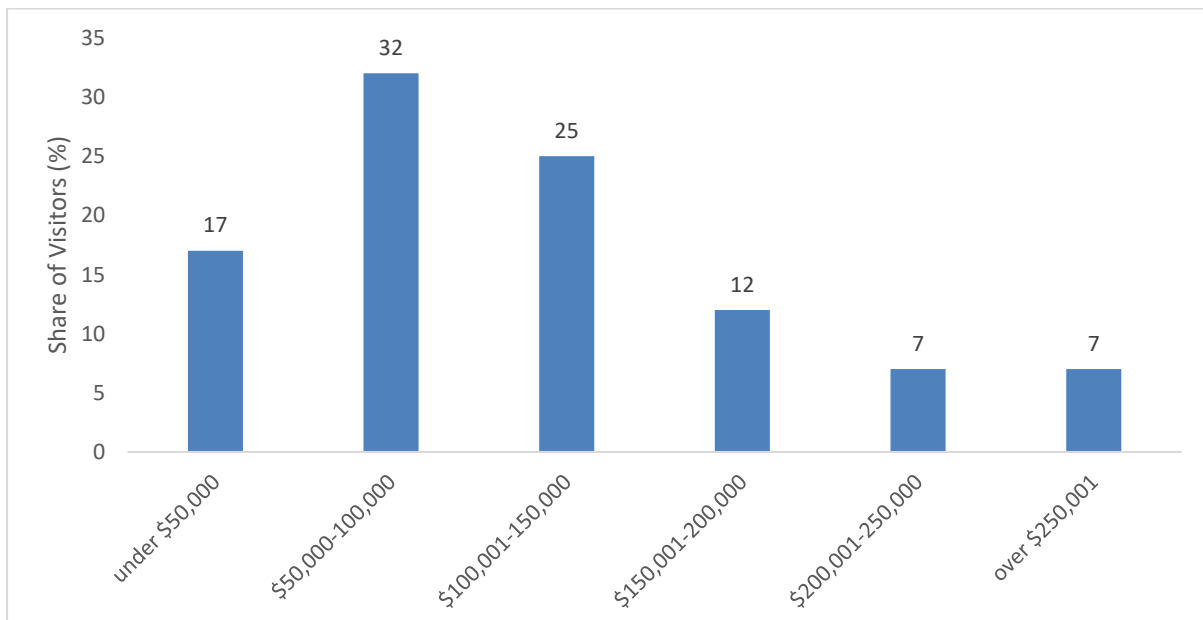


**Figure 5: Highest qualification (n = 1267)**



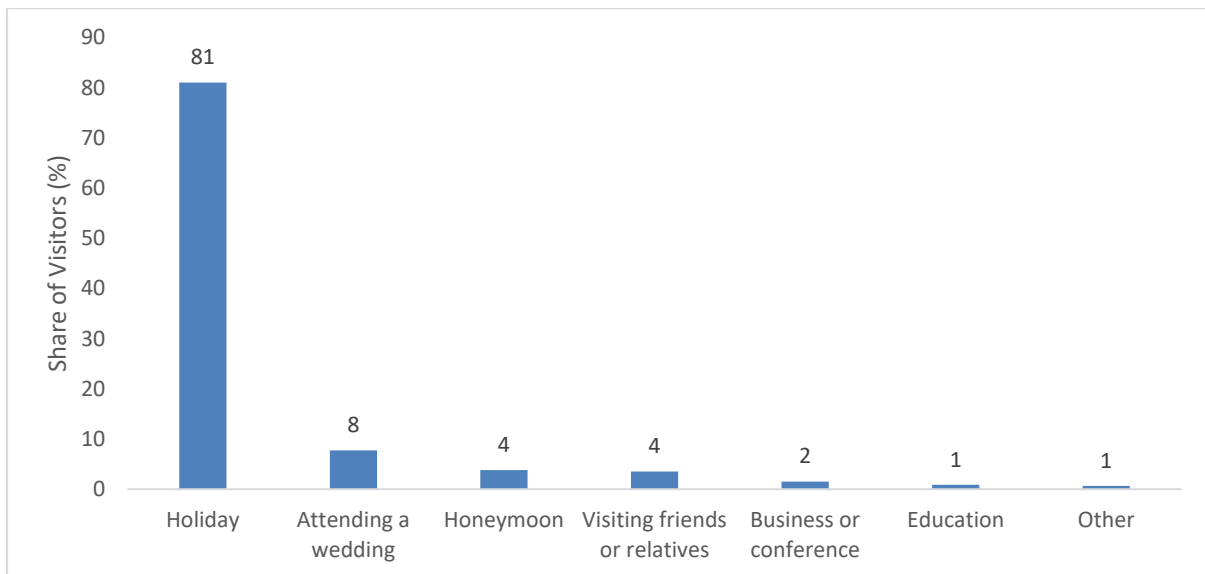
Nearly a third of visitors (32%) have an annual household income of between NZ\$50,001 and NZ\$100,000. A quarter (25%) of those surveyed earn between NZ\$100,001 and NZ\$150,000. A further 26% of respondents have a household income of over NZ\$150,000 per year (Figure 6).

**Figure 6: Annual household income in NZD (n = 1001)**



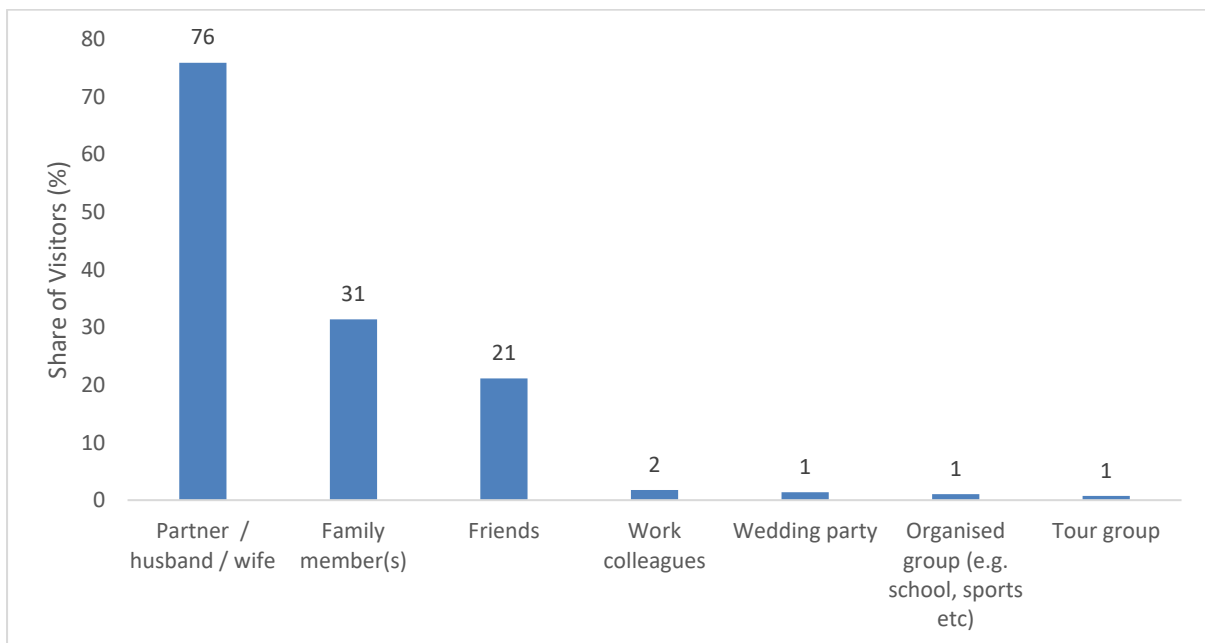
Over four in five respondents come to the Cook Islands for a holiday (81%). Other reasons given include attending a wedding (8%), a honeymoon (4%), visiting friends or relatives (4%), and for business and conference (2%).

**Figure 7: Main purpose of visit (n = 1386)**



The majority (90%) of visitors travel with companion(s). Among this grouping, most (76%) travel to the Cook Islands with a partner or spouse. Visitors also travel with other family members (31%), or with friends (21%). Those travelling with work colleagues, as part of a wedding party, in an organised group or in a tour group, represent a smaller share of the sample (Figure 8).

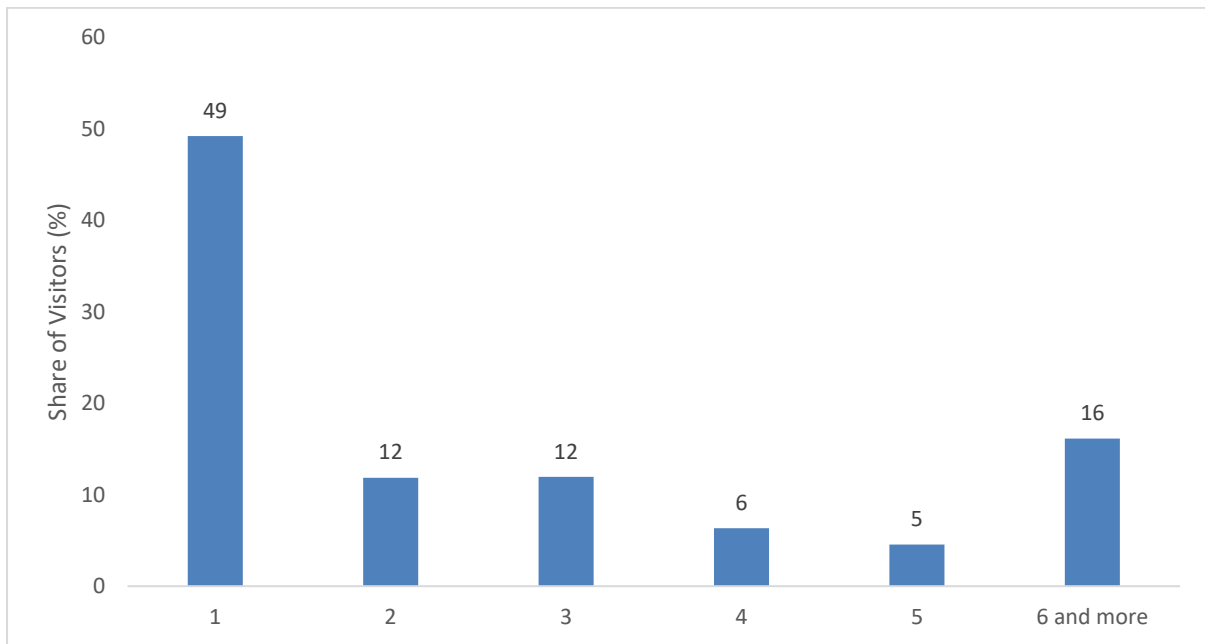
**Figure 8: Travelling with whom? (n = 1240)**



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

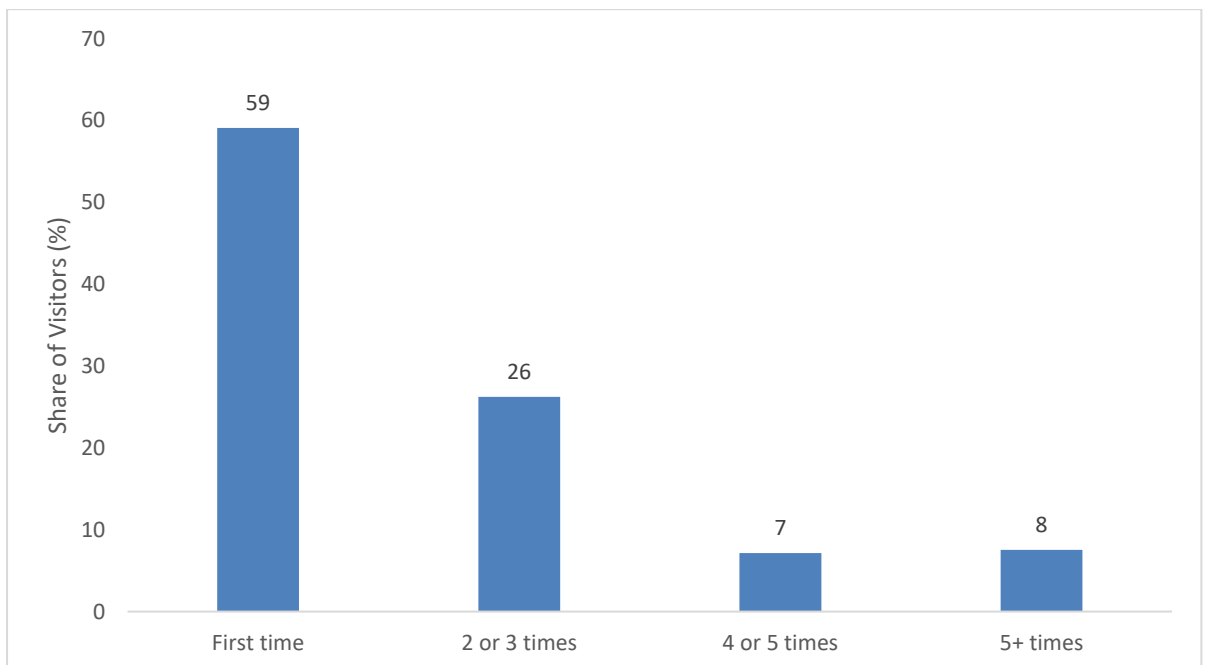
Nearly half of the visitors (49%) travelled with one companion on their visit to the Cook Islands (Figure 9), and nearly a fifth of the visitors (16%) travelled with more than six people.

**Figure 9: Number of companions on trip (n = 1122)**



Nearly three in five of the visitors (59%) are on their first visit to the Cook Islands. A further 26% have been to the Cook Islands twice or three times before. A smaller group (15%) have visited four or more times (Figure 10).

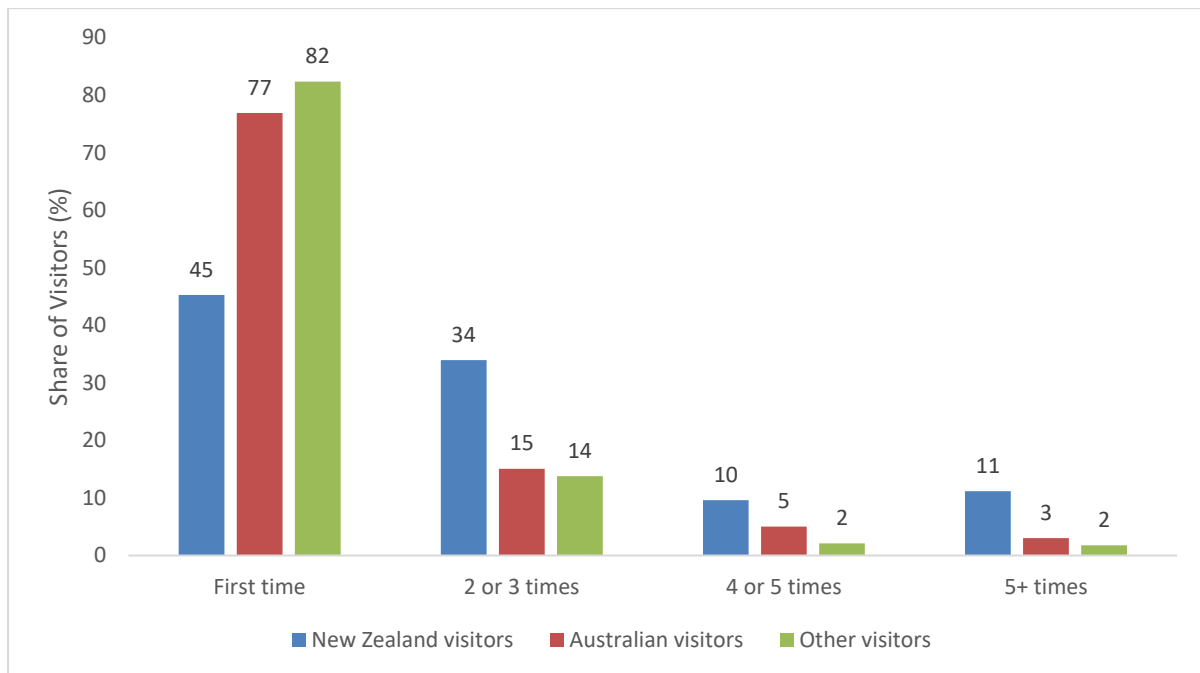
**Figure 10: Number of visits to the Cook Islands (n = 1273)**



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

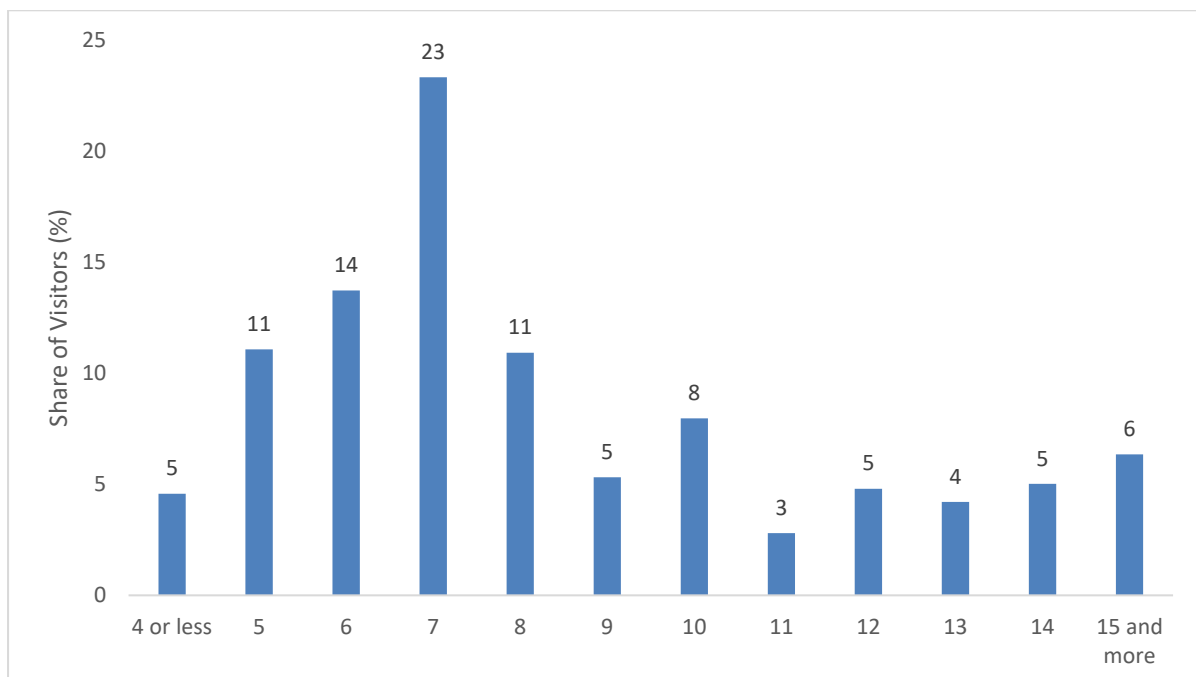
New Zealanders are more likely to be repeat visitors than those from other source markets (Figure 11). Over half of the surveyed visitors from New Zealand (55%) have visited the Cook Islands before compared to only 23% of visitors from Australia and 18% from other countries.

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



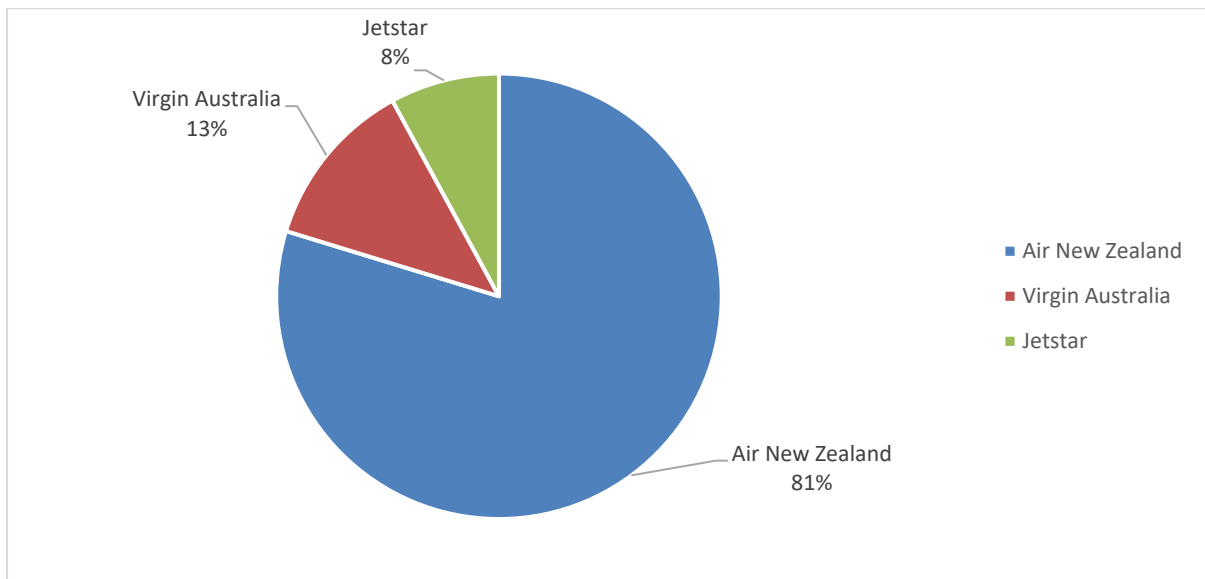
The average length of stay in the Cook Islands is 8.7 nights with 77% of visitors spending 10 or fewer nights in the country (Figure 12).

**Figure 12: Length of stay in nights (n = 1356)**



Over four in five visitors (81%) travel to/from the Cook Islands with Air New Zealand, a further 13% visitors fly with Virgin Australia, followed by eight percent of visitors travelling with Jetstar (Figure 13).

**Figure 13: Mode of transport (n = 1385)**

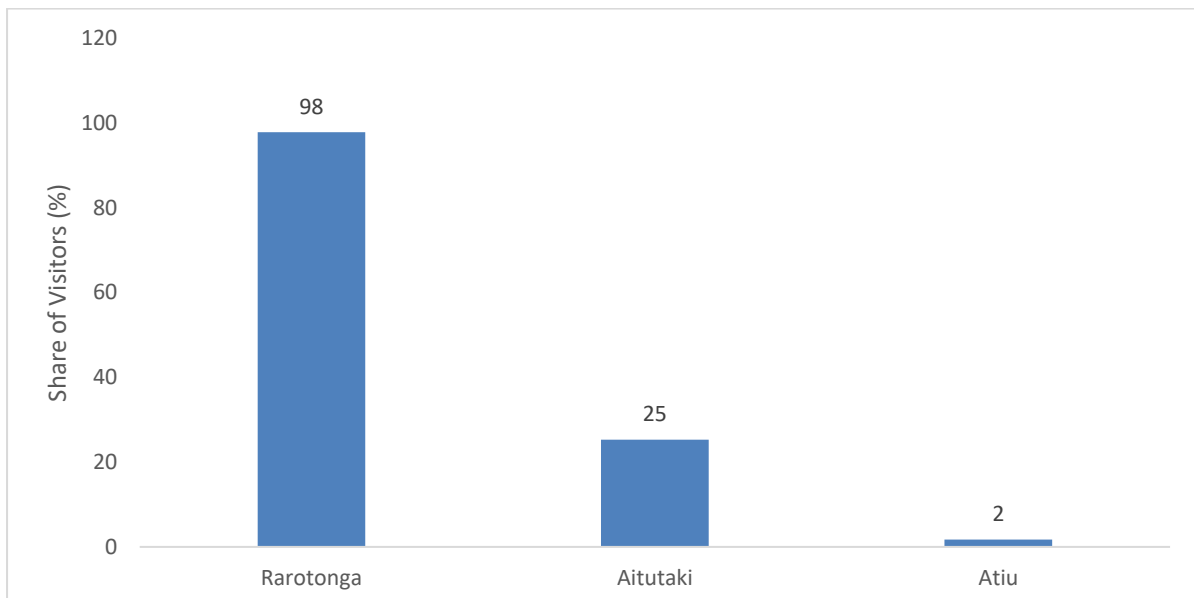


Note: Multiple responses, therefore total does not add up to 100%

For 87% of visitors, the Cook Islands is the sole destination for their trip. For 13% of the visitors surveyed the Cook Islands is part of a larger journey, including some visitors who are on an around-the-world trip. For those travelling to other countries as part of their trip, the top destination mentioned was New Zealand (63%), followed by travel to United State of America (32%), other pacific countries (17%), Asian countries (16%), Australia (14%), and Europe (7%).

The vast majority (98%) of visitors to the Cook Islands spend time on Rarotonga, with Aitutaki being the second most visited island (25%) (Figure 14).

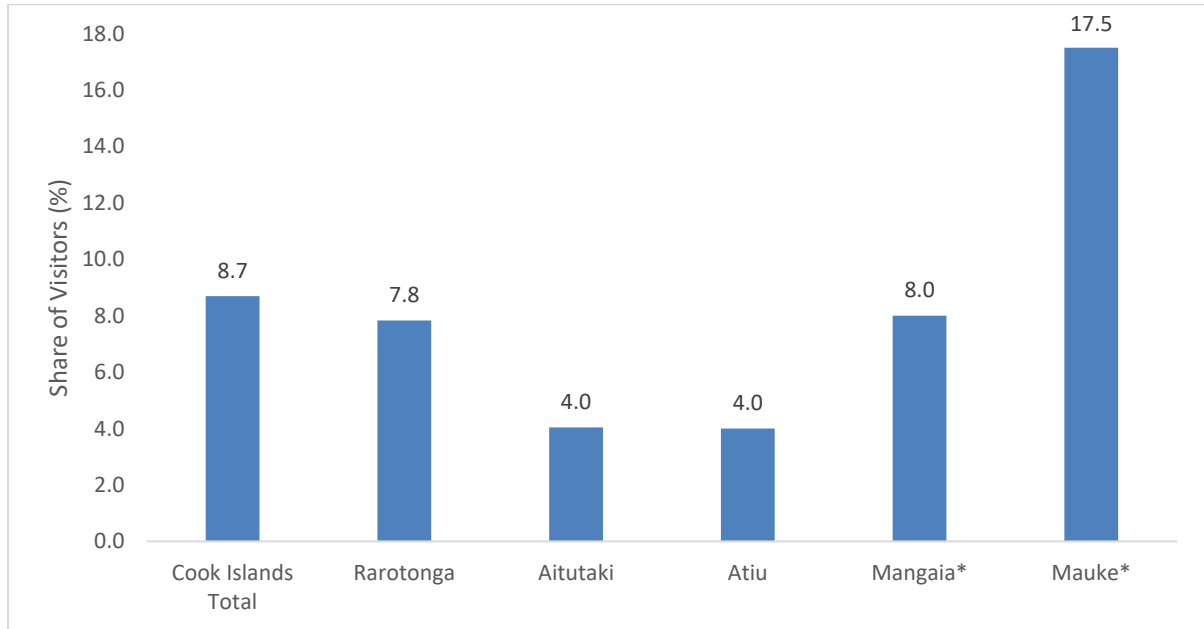
**Figure 14: Visited Islands (n = 1384)**



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

The average length of stay on Rarotonga is 7.8 nights (Figure 15). For the visitors that went to Aitutaki, the average number of nights spent on the island itself is 4.0. It should be noted that sample sizes for Mauke and Mangaia are very small.

**Figure 15: Average length of stay in the Cook Islands and on each island (n = 2-1328)**

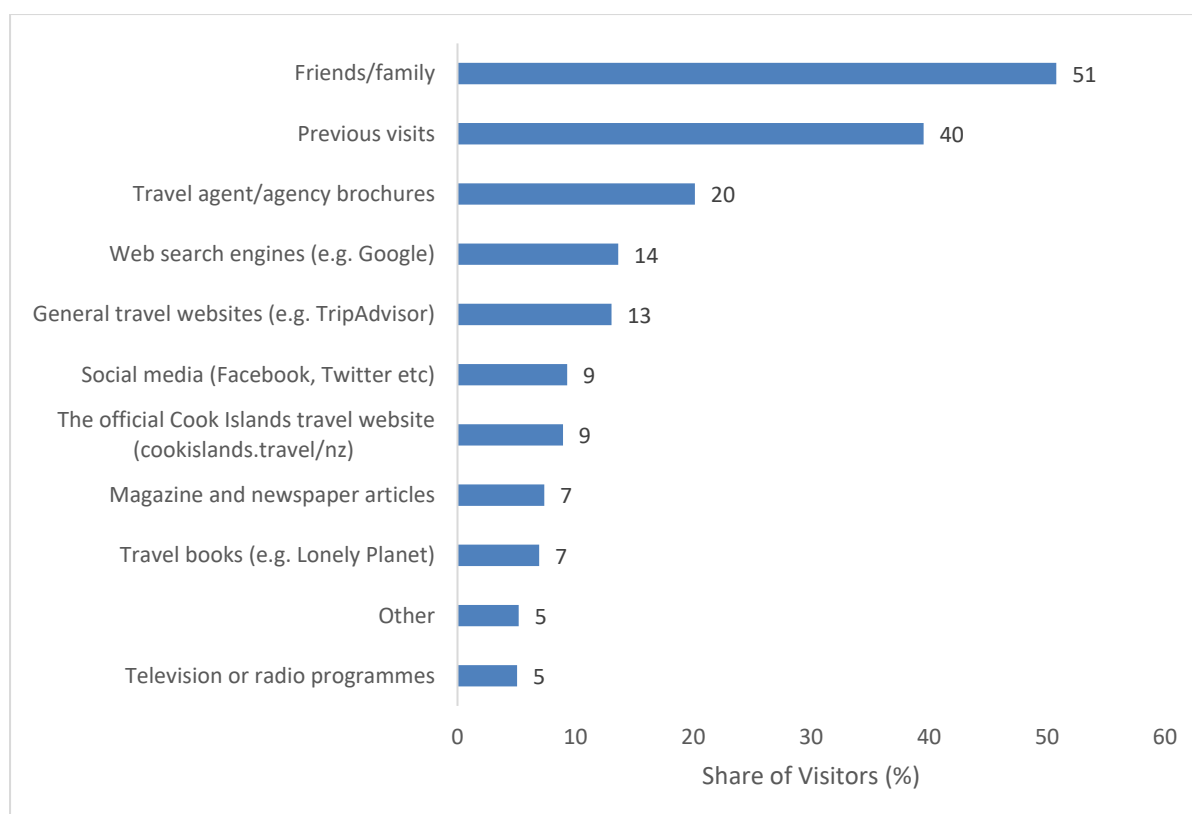


Note: \*n≤5

## Information Sources and Purchasing Behaviour

Participants were asked how they had found out about the Cook Islands as a holiday destination for this trip (Figure 16). Over half of (51%) of respondents ranked word of mouth from friends and family members as the most important influence, followed by previous experience (40%). Travel agents/agency brochures (20%), web search engines (e.g. Google) (14%), general travel websites (e.g. TripAdvisor) (13%), social media (Facebook, Twitter etc) (9%), and the official Cook Islands travel website (9%) played less significant roles.

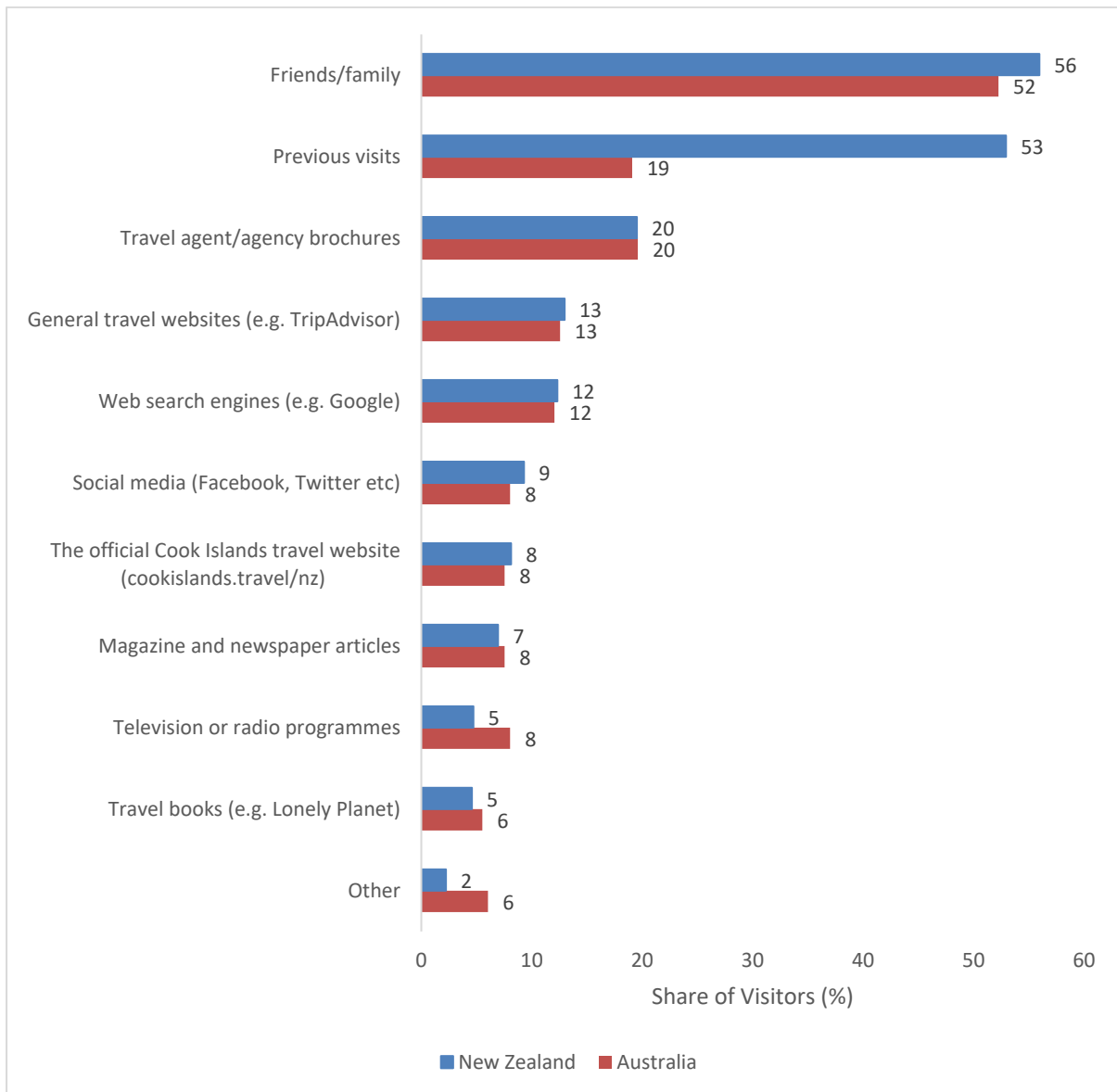
**Figure 16: How did you find out about Cook Islands as a destination (n = 1386)**



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

Visitors from New Zealand are more likely to seek information about the destination via word of mouth from friends and family members (56%). There are more repeat visitors from New Zealand than Australia and this is reflected by the fact that over half of visitors from New Zealand ranked their previous visits as the most important information source (Australian visitors 19%). Australian visitors were more likely to rank television or radio programmes, travel books, magazine and newspaper articles, and other ways as the most important influence.

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

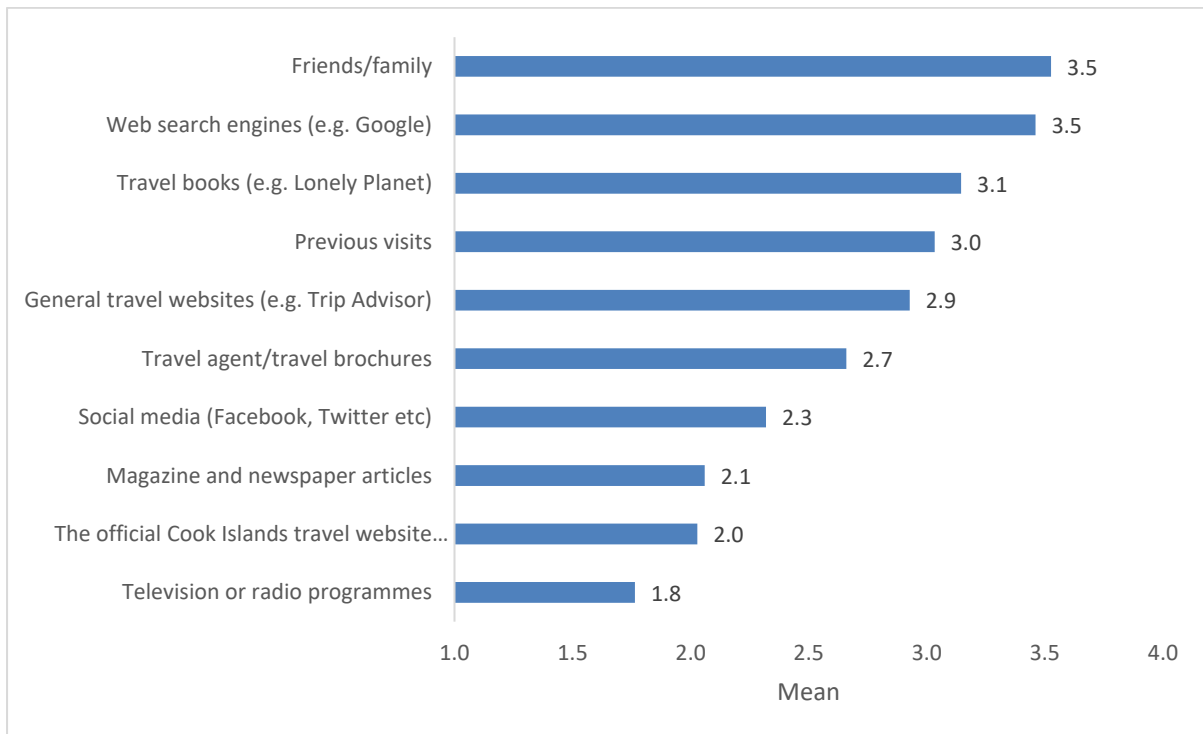


*Note: Multiple responses, therefore total does not add up to 100%*

When visitors were asked to rank the importance of the listed information sources used to plan their trip, friends and family members (3.5) as well as web search engines (e.g. Google) (3.5) are ranked as the most important sources (Figure 18). Other important information sources are travel books (e.g. Lonely Planet) (3.1), previous visits (3.0), and general travel websites (e.g. Trip Advisor) (2.9).

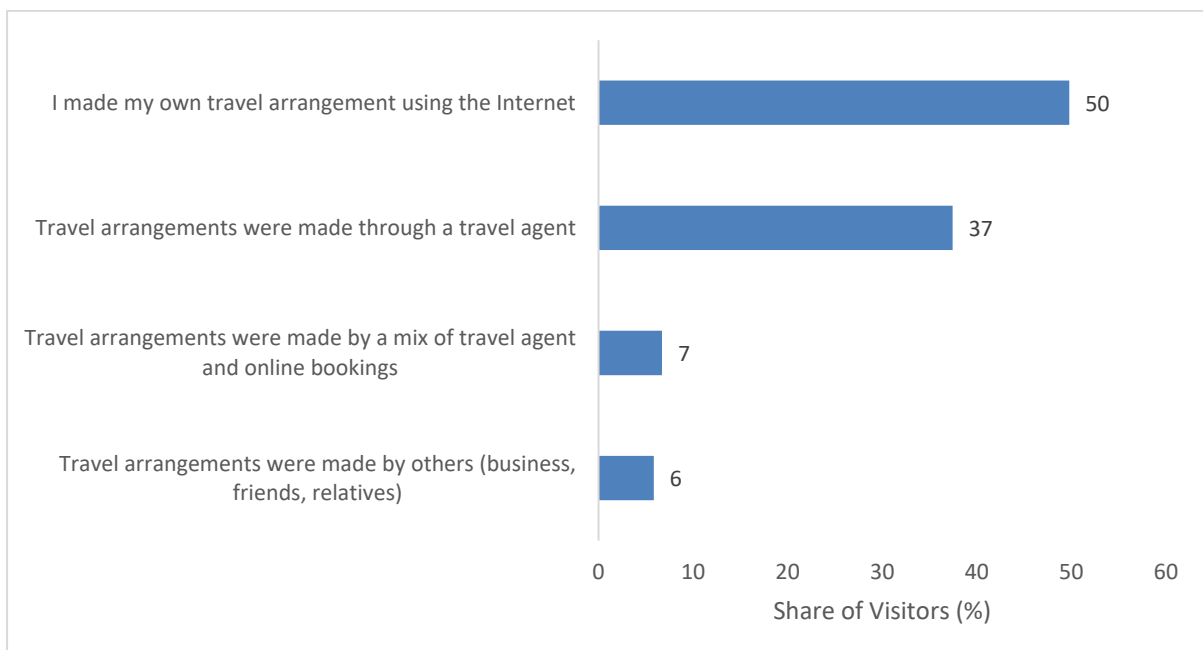


**Figure 18: Importance of information source used when planning your trip (n = 947)**



Half of visitors surveyed (50%) made their own travel arrangements through online websites (Figure 19). A smaller group of visitors surveyed (37%) purchased a pre-paid trip through the travel agent, followed by 7% of visitors whose travel arrangements were made by a mix of travel agent and online bookings, or others such as business, friends, and relatives (6%).

**Figure 19: How did you purchase your travel to the Cook Islands (n = 1386)**

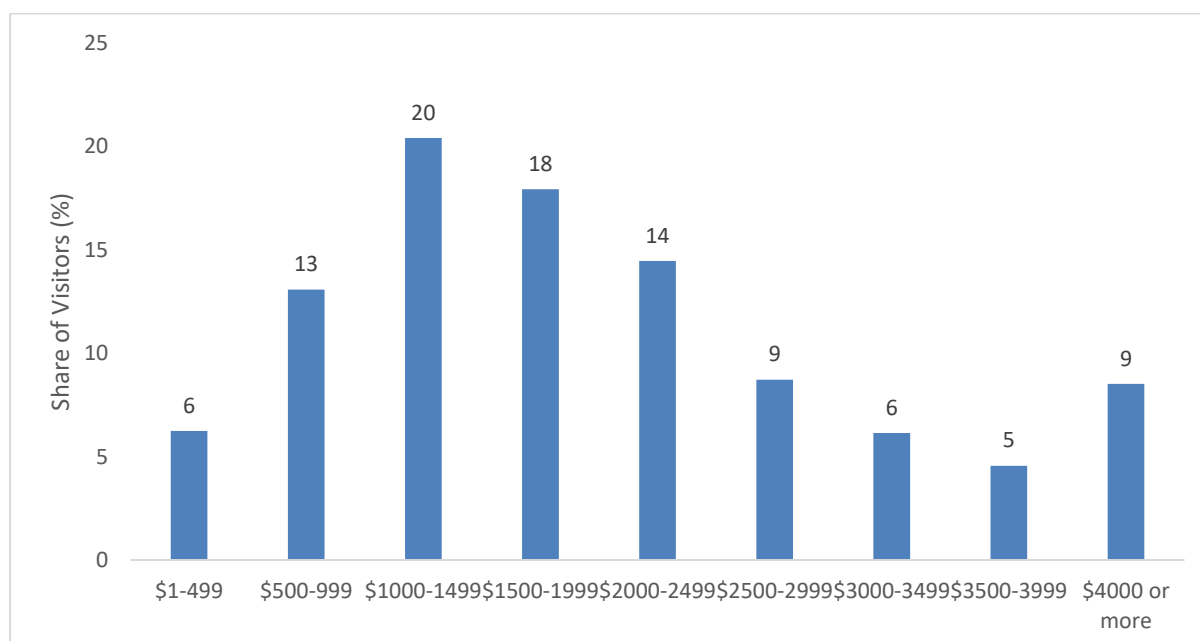


## Visitor Expenditure

The survey asks a range of questions about visitor expenditure, both prior to arrival and while in the Cook Islands. All the figures below are based on respondent estimates of their own spending and any others they spent money on (e.g., spouse, children). The following pre-paid expenditure section is based on the number of adults and children that respondents included in their cost estimates: 3,355 people comprising 3,019 adults and 336 children.

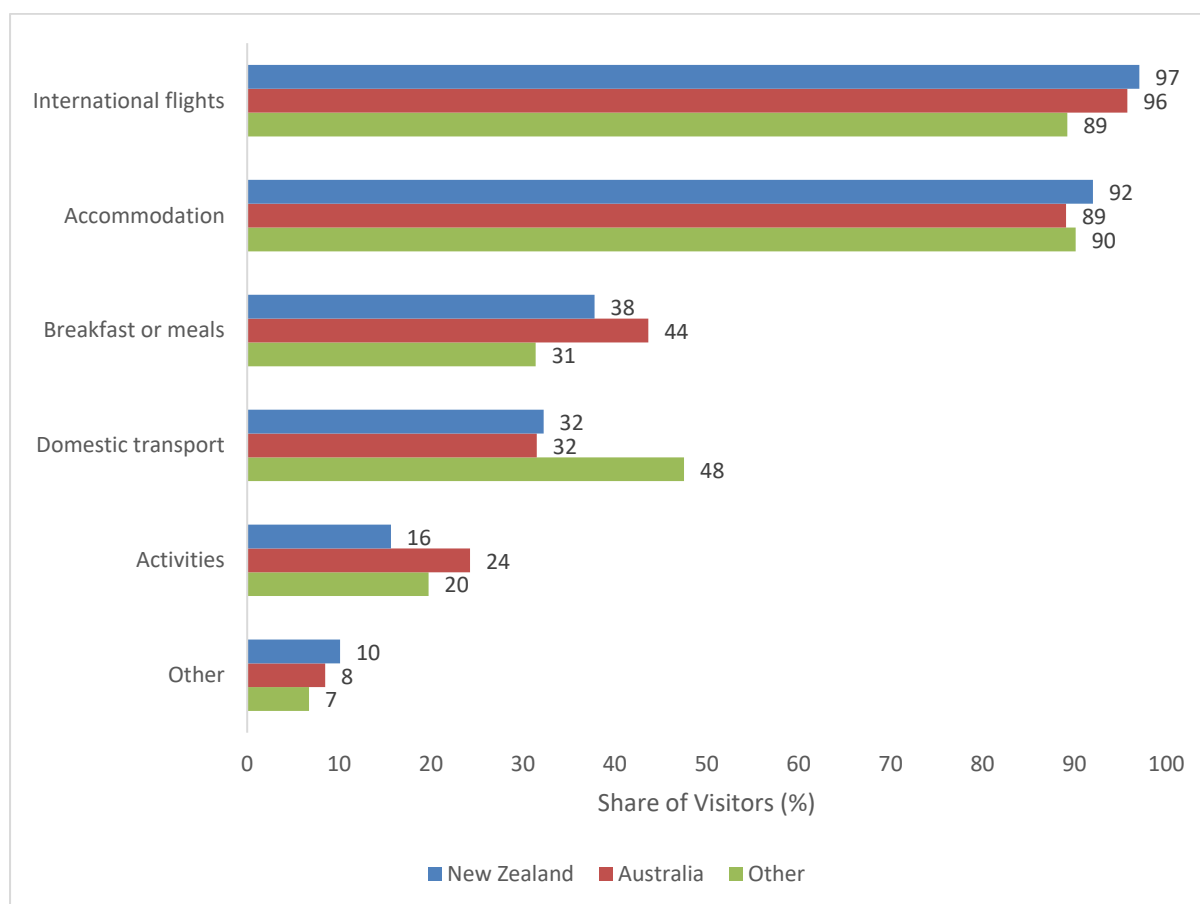
On average, visitors to the Cook Islands spend NZ\$2,015 per person prior to arrival. Over half (52%) of the visitors spend between NZ\$1,000 and NZ\$2,499 prior to arrival (Figure 20). The prepaid figure of per person is slightly higher than the data from the same quarter for 2017 (NZ\$1,831) and close to the previous full year (average prepaid spend of NZ\$1,967 for 2017/18).

**Figure 20: Amount of money spent per person prior to arrival (n = 1011)**



In addition to international flights and domestic transport, spending prior to arrival usually includes accommodation: in 92% of the cases for New Zealand visitors, 89% for Australian visitors, and for 90% of visitors from other countries (Figure 21). Over one third of visitors prepaid for breakfast and meals prior to arrival (38% for New Zealand, 44% of Australian visitors, and for 31% of visitors from other countries). Activities are much less likely to be included in pre-paid expenses.

**Figure 21: Items included in money spent prior to arrival**



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

It is difficult to estimate accurately the proportion of the pre-paid spend that flows to the Cook Islands. For the purposes of this study, and based on previous research in the region, we conservatively estimate that 50% of the pre-paid spend is allocated to airfares. Of the remaining 50% of the pre-paid spend, 80% of this flows back to local operators. In total this means that for every pre-paid dollar, 40 cents flows to the Cook Islands. We estimate that the pre-paid spend figure per day flowing back to local operators, excluding flights, is NZ\$93 and for the average total visit is NZ\$806 (8.7 nights).

The total spend per visitor per day while in the Cook Islands (excluding any pre-paid expenditure) is NZ\$165 (Table 1). This figure is higher than the overall spend figure for 2017/18 (NZ\$149) and the same 2<sup>nd</sup> IVS survey quarter in 2017 (NZ\$142). The majority of money spent locally is on accommodation (41%), restaurants, cafes and bars (21%), and shopping (8%). These per person expenditure figures are based on 1,386 survey responses covering a total of 2,746 people (2,482 adults and 264 children).

By multiplying daily spend by the average stay (8.7 nights) we can see that spend per person per visit to the Cook Islands is on average NZ\$1,435. The total figure of what is spent locally and what flows back to the Cook Islands from pre-paid expenses is therefore NZ\$258 per visitor per day (\$165 + \$93), or NZ\$2,241 (\$1,435 + \$806) for each visitor.

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

<b>Expenditure Items</b>	<b>n = 1386</b>	
	<i>Mean (NZ\$)</i>	(% of spend)
Accommodation	67	41
Restaurant, cafes and bar	35	21
Shopping	13	8
Vehicle rental	10	6
Domestic flights	10	6
Activities	10	6
Groceries	8	5
Other	3	2
Petrol	2	1
Internet	2	1
Cruising	2	1
Public transportation	1	0
<b>Total Expenditure</b>	<b>165</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 2 provides an overview of the in-country expenditure by the visitor's country of origin. Visitors from the United State of America/Canada have the highest average spend per person per day at NZ\$182. New Zealand visitors spend on average at NZ\$170 per day, closely followed by Australia visitors (NZ\$155 per day). The European visitors during this period spent the least at NZ\$128 per day.

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

<b>Expenditure Items</b>	<b>n = 315</b>	<b>n = 438</b>	<b>n = 1792</b>	<b>n = 135</b>
	<b>USA/ Canada</b>	<b>Australia</b>	<b>New Zealand</b>	<b>Europe</b>
Accommodation	78	54	73	38
Restaurant, cafes and bar	30	37	37	36
Shopping	13	17	13	10
Vehicle rental	9	9	11	7
Activities	14	11	10	8
Groceries	9	7	8	7
Domestic flights	18	12	7	11
Other	4	1	4	2
Petrol	2	2	2	1
Internet	2	2	2	3
Cruising	2	2	2	5
Public transportation	1	1	1	1
<b>Total spend (NZ\$)</b>	<b>182</b>	<b>155</b>	<b>170</b>	<b>128</b>

The average spend of NZ\$182 for visitors from the United State of America/Canada for this period is clearly higher than the same quarter in 2017 (NZ\$138) and slightly higher than the

2017/18 average of NZ\$164. New Zealanders' spend of NZ\$170 per person per day is also higher than the same quarter in the previous year (NZ\$139) and the average of \$148 for 2017/18. Average Australian spend per person for this quarter (NZ\$155) is a slightly lower compared to the 2017/18 average of NZ\$168 and the same quarter in 2017 (NZ\$168). European visitor spend at NZ\$128 per person per day is slightly higher than the same quarter in the previous year (NZ\$121) but a little lower than the average for 2017/18 of NZ\$133.

## Visitor Satisfaction

Visitors were asked to indicate their overall satisfaction with their experience of the Cook Islands on a scale from 1 'very dissatisfied' to 5 'very satisfied' (Figure 22). Nearly two thirds (66%) of the visitors surveyed were 'very satisfied' with their overall experience of the Cook Islands. Very few visitors (3%) were unsatisfied (a score of 2 or lower out of 5) with their visit.

**Figure 22: Overall satisfaction with experience of the Cook Islands (n = 1273)**

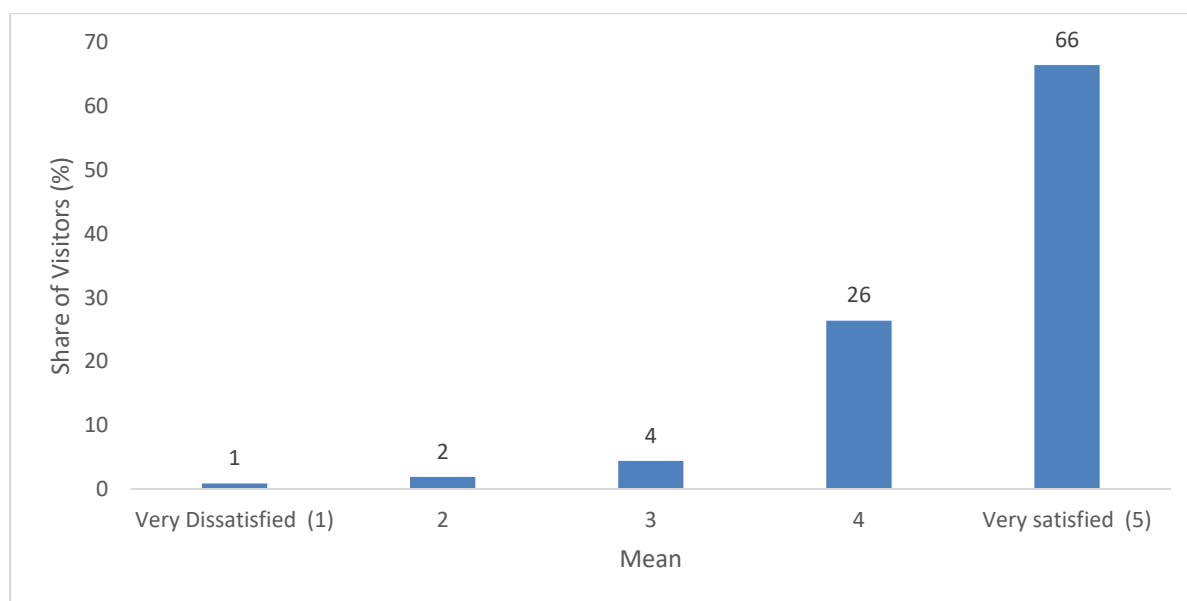


Figure 23 shows the percentage of respondents who undertook specific activities while on their visit to the Cook Islands. Almost all visitors visited a beach (97%) and visit at least one restaurant or café (98%) during their trip. Most of the respondents either go swimming (93%) or visit a local market (90%), and 57% of visitors experience an Island Night and Feast Show.

Visitor satisfaction is generally high for all activities undertaken (almost all registering more than 4 out of a possible high of 5 except bonefishing, kitesurfing, and deep sea fishing) (Figure 23). Activities involving cultural interaction (average satisfaction of 4.6) rank the highest, followed by land-based products (4.5), shopping (4.4), and water-based experiences (4.3). It should be noted that some activities e.g., bonefishing, kitesurfing, and Tumunu on Atiu, are characterised by relatively low numbers of participants (n = 32-54).

**Figure 23: Degree of participation in activities (n range = 32-1344)**

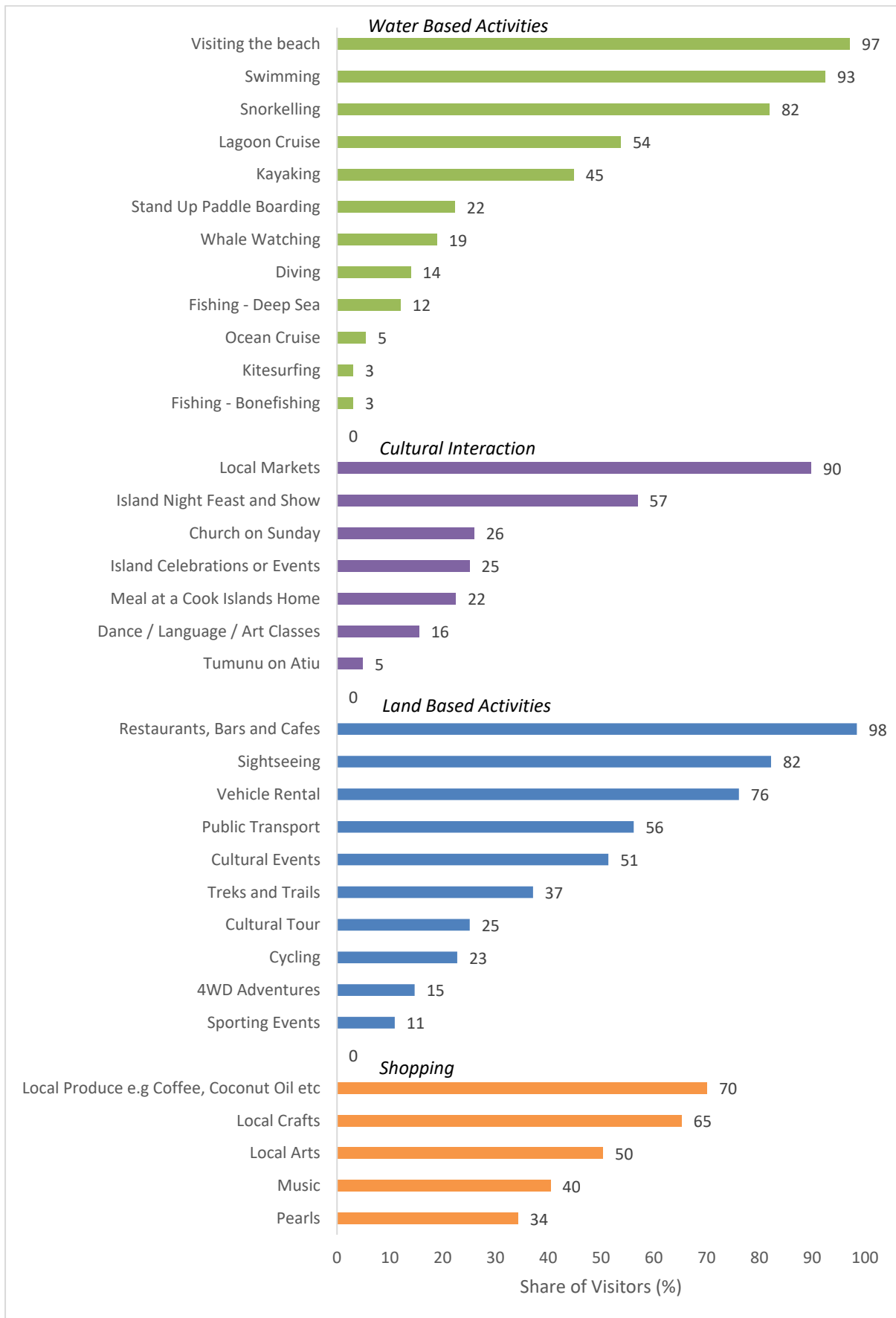
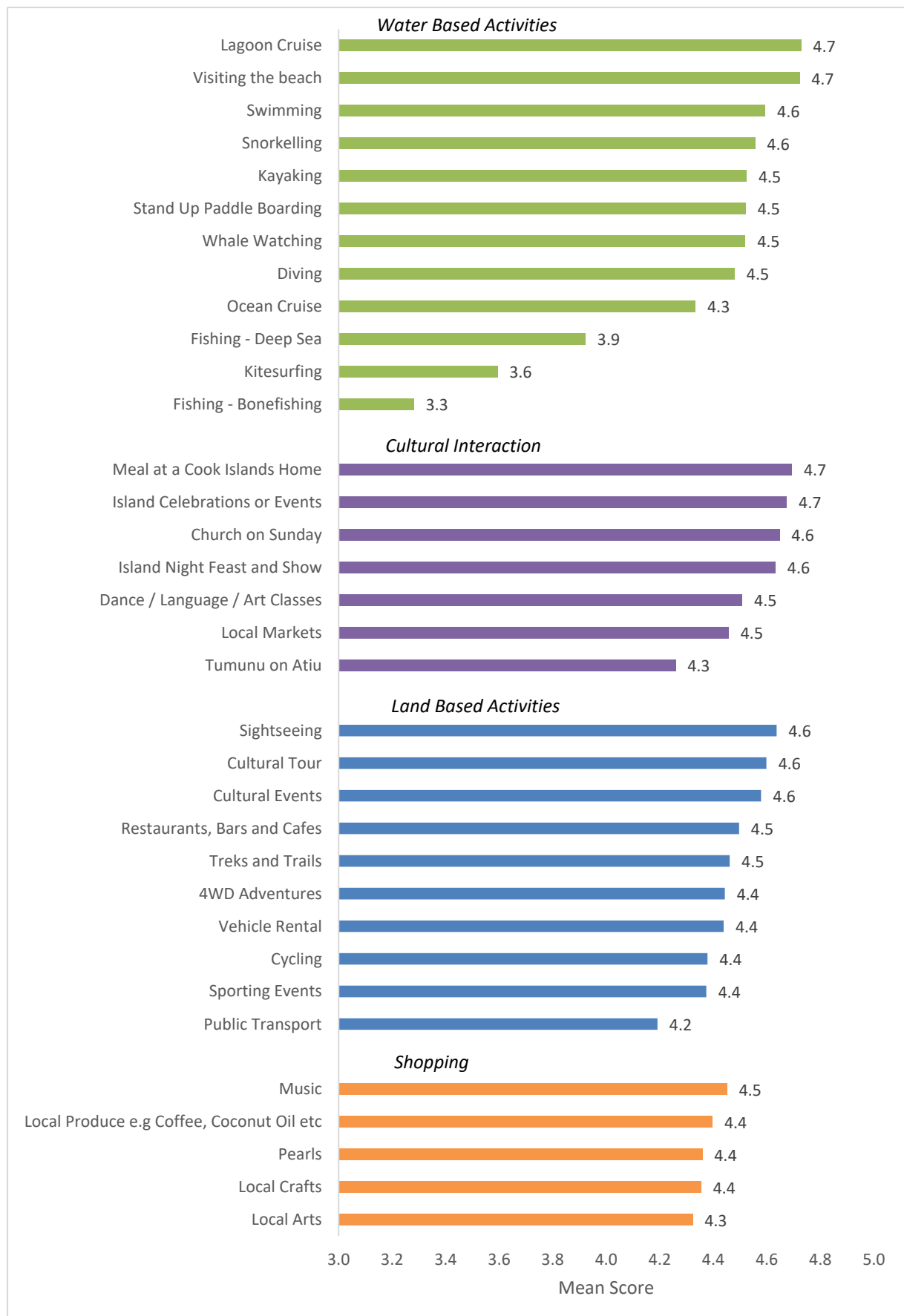


Figure 24: Degree of satisfaction with activities participated in (mean score out of 5)

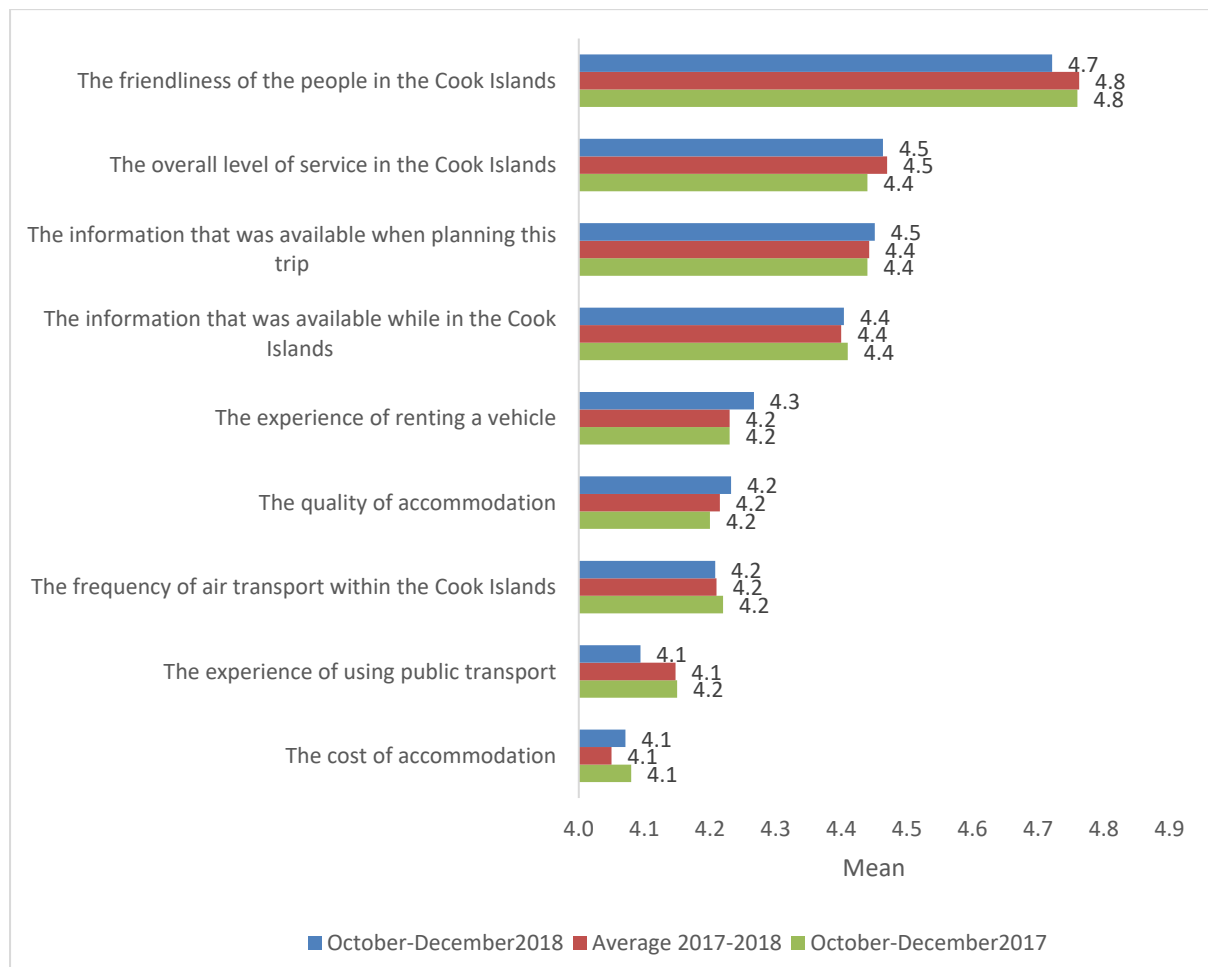




Visitors were asked to rate their level of satisfaction with nine different statements relating to their most recent visit to the Cook Islands. Responses from the period of October to December 2018 are compared to the annual average for 2017/18, and the same quarter for 2017 (Figure 25). Respondents consistently highlight the friendliness of the people in the Cook Islands.

As can be seen from Figure 25, the degree of satisfaction with the information that was available while in the Cook Islands, the quality of accommodation, frequency of air transport within the Cook Islands, and the cost of accommodation are the same as the annual average for 2017/18 and the same quarter for 2017. Visitor satisfaction with the friendliness of the people in the Cook Islands is slightly lower than the average 2017/18 and the same quarter in 2017. The degree of satisfaction with the overall level of service in the Cook Islands is same as the average for 2017/2018 and slightly higher than the same quarter for 2017. Respondent satisfaction with the information that was available when planning this trip as well as the experience of renting a vehicle are higher than both the average for 2017/2018 and the same quarter for 2017. The level of satisfaction with the experience of using public transport remains the same as the average for 2017/2018, while is slightly lower than the same quarter for 2017.

**Figure 25: Degree of satisfaction with Cook Islands services (mean score out of 5)**



## Most appealing aspects of the Cook Islands

Visitors were asked “What did you find most attractive or appealing about the Cook Islands on your most recent visit?” (Table 3). The most appealing elements of the Cook Islands experience were the beautiful and clean natural environment (49%), the friendly and welcoming local people (40%), the peacefulness and relaxing atmosphere of the islands (30%), and the tourist attractions and activities on offer (24%). Smaller numbers of visitors mentioned aspects such as food and beverage (12%), convenience and safety (6%), overall good experience (5%), accommodation (4%), un-commercial destination (4%), culture (4%), the level of service (3%), friendly dogs (2%), price of goods and services (1%) as well as family friends and emotional connection (1%).

**Table 3: Most appealing aspects of the Cook Islands (n=1280)**

Themes	Share of respondents (%)
Environment, cleanliness and weather	49%
Local people	40%
Atmosphere	30%
Activities, attractions and entertainment, events	24%
Food and beverage	12%
Convenience and safety	6%
Overall good experience	5%
Accommodation	4%
Un-commercial	4%
Culture	4%
Level of service	3%
Price of good and services	1%
Family friends	1%
Emotional connection	1%

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

### ***Environment, cleanliness & weather***

The beautiful scenery, natural environment, the beaches, and gardens in the Cook Islands were mentioned by nearly half of the respondents (49%) as the most appealing aspects for their trip. Words like ‘beautiful’, ‘clean’, ‘paradise’, ‘beach’, and ‘weather’ to describe the attraction of the local environment. Most comments here focused on the beauty and the cleanliness of the beaches and lagoons, the weather, the scenery, and the landscapes of the islands in general. Comments included:

*“The beauty of the natural landscape.”*

*“The people, the beautiful scenery, the lagoons!!!”*

*“The beautiful lagoons.”*

*“Weather and beaches.”*

*“Weather with lovely temperatures, snorkelling/swimming in lagoons which had very clear, warm water and found the local people relaxed and friendly.”*

*“The nature including island forests, beaches, water, the friendly people, the focus on preserving nature and resources.”*

*“We loved the amazing environment in the Cook Islands. When choosing a destination, we really consider a place where the impact of massive tourism is not that big. We really appreciate islands like these to care for their natural resources and their traditional lifestyle.”*

*“Beautiful warm and clear water for swimming, amazing scenery.”*

*“Beach and ocean.”*

*“Looking inward to the mountains and jungle.”*

*“The Aitutaki lagoon, the Rarotonga mountains.”*

*“The beaches and snorkelling.”*

*“The cleanliness of most of the island.”*

*“The pure nature.”*

*“Climate and lifestyle.”*

*“Friendly people, nice restaurants, great bus service and dogs-lots of lovely dogs!”*

*“Literally everybody was happy and friendly on the Cook Islands - even the dogs which had to be the coolest and most approachable animals anywhere.”*

*“Snorkelling. I had also been told that there were a lot of stray dogs that are not well looked after but I found that you have done a lot of work in this area and I am happy to say they were all friendly and I love being able to pat random dogs **in good health.**”*

### **Local people**

The second most significant attraction for the visitors is their interaction with local people in the Cook Islands. Forty percentage of the respondents (40%) expressed that the warmth and welcoming nature of local people was an important factor of having a positive travel experience. Key words that dominated the responses included ‘friendly’, ‘helpful’, ‘welcoming’, ‘lovely’, ‘happy’, ‘relaxed’, ‘smile’, ‘nice’, ‘positive’, and ‘awesome’. Some of the good examples included:

*“Warmth of the people and the weather.”*

*"Everyone was so nice!! Felt like family. :)"*

*"The lagoons and beauty. Also, most of the people were very friendly."*

*"Everyone on the island was friendly beyond belief, and I mean everyone!"*

*"The friendliness and openness of the people."*

*"Smiles - from locals."*

*"Awesome people."*

*"Literally everybody was happy and friendly on the Cook Islands - even the dogs which had to be the coolest and most approachable animals anywhere."*

*"The positivity of the locals was incredible whether it was in a store or on the street."*

*"Scenery and the People are so welcoming."*

*"The island, lagoon, but most of all the people."*

*"Lovely local people!!!"*

*"Natural beauty and very friendly locals."*

### **Atmosphere**

Cook Islands is described as a very peaceful, quiet, relaxing, and laid-back destination by respondents and this atmosphere is an appealing factor for thirty percent of those surveyed (30%). People love the slower pace of local life and used the words of 'relaxing', 'calm', 'chilled', 'tranquillity', and 'laid back' to describe the overall atmosphere of the Cook Islands. The notion of 'island time' and the 'laid back vibe' were also mentioned. Comments included:

*"Time to relax."*

*"Family and friends and the relaxing atmosphere."*

*"The snorkelling and chance to chill out."*

*"Laid back and restful. Easy to get around. Friendly people."*

*"Very peaceful, warm open locals."*

*"Having been before, knowing it was going to be a relaxing holiday, island time, friendly locals, weather, seafood was amazing. Everything!"*

*"The laid-back pace of life, the simplicity of Island life, and escaping to a tropical paradise"*

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

*“Peace and serenity.”*

*“The relaxing vibe.”*

*“The relaxed atmosphere and casual vibe.”*

*“The island atmosphere.”*

*“Relaxing place to chill out with family.”*

### **Activities, attractions, entertainment & events**

Activities, attractions, entertainment, and events were mentioned by nearly a quarter (24%) of respondents as the fourth most appealing element of their visit to the destination. The availability of water sports including swimming, snorkelling, diving, fishing, and kayaking was the most frequently mentioned attractions. In addition, land-based activities like hiking, walking, cycling, and markets were also mentioned by respondents. Aitutaki lagoon can be said a special attraction for visitors. Comments included:

*“The lagoon was very beautiful and great for snorkelling. Very clean island with minimal rubbish.”*

*“Friendly people, kite surfing. snorkelling, warm weather, Tevaranui island night, the fishing club.”*

*“Plenty of activities around the island, enjoyed watching whales from the fishing club, shops cafes, restaurants friendly staff and helpful.”*

*“The friendliness of the Cook Island people wherever we went very helpful and couldn't do enough for us very respectful. The markets were very interesting and great to visit and shop. Lagoon cruise and BB, it was amazing loved the snorkling.”*

*“The people were some of the most hospitable, lovely people I've encountered. I liked that at every public event where food was served, grace was said before the meal. Hibiscus grow wild on Atiu! I loved the dogs; I didn't encounter one that I didn't want to bring home with me. I'd like to stay on Aitutaki long enough to eat my way through the menus at Koru Cafe and the Boat Shed Bar & Grill. Bird Man George's Eco Tour was very good. The driving tour of Rarotonga we booked with Cook Island Tours was one of the high point of our trip.”*

*“Scuba diving and motorcycle riding.”*

*“The weather was nice, temperatures warm, we timed it well. It's an easy place to visit, same money as NZ etc. Aitukati is quiet and beautiful and the eco lagoon cruise was a highlight... seeing frigate birds nesting up close etc. Riding scooters to church... wonderful.”*

*“The unspoilt nature of the island and how welcoming the locals were. Muri Beach is the most beautiful place we have ever been too.”*

*"The nature! Aitutaki is a slice of heaven without a doubt."*

*"We loved the glass bottom boat cruise, the night time dinner and cultural night and generally going around eating at different restaurants and exploring the island."*

*"The beach looked like Paradise, the Night Market with the native food was very tasty and it was nice to ride around the Island with the bike."*

*"The local markets and the night market in Muri."*

*"The friendliness of the locals. The colourful shows and markets."*

### **Food and beverage**

Food and beverages was also identified as an attractive aspect for visitors. Twelve percent of respondents (12%) mentioned this. Their comments focused on the food variety, quality, and range of fresh food available in the Cook Islands. 'Amazing', 'excellent', 'high standard/quality', 'well priced', 'delicious', 'authentic' and 'fresh' were some frequent terms to describe the attraction of food for tourists. Many visitors mentioned the local sea food and fruits. Comments included:

*"I love that I am on holiday 5 minutes after landing by plane. No long transfers etc, not having to change money. The restaurants are some of the best meals we have ever had."*

*"Friendly people lovely scenery and delicious food."*

*"The friendliness of the people and the local food."*

*"Range of cafes and restaurants."*

*"The number & diversity of the restaurants; friendly helpful locals; the absence of high rise development."*

*"The simple, relaxed life style. The strong family focus, bonding. Local food and fruit."*

*"Very relaxed, people were friendly and some really good eateries."*

*"Waking up to a tropical breakfast on the beach every morning."*

*"Warm climate and very friendly people. Meals were good and great value for money."*

*"The natural beauty. The delicious and incredible home food everywhere and the Miri markets."*

## **Convenience & Safety**

The convenience and safety of the Cook Islands as a holiday destination were mentioned by 6% of respondents. They referred to the accessibility and easy to get around the islands. Language, the availability of public transport including scooter, as well as the circulation of the New Zealand dollar were the identified factors. Some tourists emphasised safety particularly feeling safe at night. Comments included:

*"Easy to get around, accessibility."*

*"It is a very safe place to travel to, laid back and relaxing, friendly people, lovely weather."*

*"I love that I am on holiday 5 minutes after landing by plane. No long transfers etc, not having to change money. The restaurants are some of the best meals we have ever had."*

*"Use of NZ dollar, size of island. We rented a car and spent most of his time exploring the back roads."*

*"Very relaxing. Simplicity of life without pretension and lack of development. Attractive landscaping. Friendly people. Good value."*

*"Very relaxing and felt very safe."*

*"We liked the relaxed atmosphere, able to get around Rarotonga easily using public transport."*

*"It was a very relaxing, warm and friendly people. Being able to use New Zealand currency was a bonus."*

*"Clean, friendly, safe, value for money, not overcrowded."*

*"The people were so friendly and welcoming. I felt safe, we have a toddler and felt he was safe and comfortable"*

*"How close is from NZ. Also, it is one of the countries without Zika virus so for pregnant couples it is the perfect destination."*

*"The proximity of things (within walking distance)."*

*"Ease of getting around and variety of activities."*

*"The friendliness of everyone on the island, you always feel safe on the island. And the locals cannot do enough for you. Love that island has no fast food outlets, keep it that way."*

*"That I could just relax and have a holiday and feel safe."*

*“Relaxing holiday in a safe lovely place which is not over commercialised and easy to get around.”*

### **Overall good experience**

Five percent (5%) of visitors surveyed focused on their overall experience when discussing appealing factors. Comments such as ‘everything’ and ‘it was all so amazing’ demonstrated their focus on their overall experiences. Comments included:

*“The people and the beaches, it is my favourite of all the Pacific Islands.”*

*“Everything! The food, the people, the culture. One of the best trips ever!”*

*“The whole experience.”*

*“Everyone and everything.”*

*“We have travelled all over the world and it is the most perfect, authentic beach experience we have ever had. Beaches are almost too perfect to believe in Aitutaki.”*

*“This is probably the best place I've ever visited. The locals are so friendly and there is so much to do on the island! Also, I love that it is not super developed, feels like Hawaii before the big hotels and stores came in. LOVE IT!”*

### **Accommodation**

Four percent (4%) of respondents expressed that the accommodation they stayed in was an appealing aspect of their visit to the Cook Islands, referring to the related facilities, the location, the environment, and the friendly and supportive staff. Comments included:

*“The island is very clean and tidy. The obvious effort our resort made to ensure our experience was a great one with survey cards and employee of the month nominations. The staff were very helpful and friendly.”*

*“Being able to stay in the resort and all the activities were great especially with small children.”*

*“The friendly staff at Muri Beach Club Hotel. We have been 4 times now and they know us and treat us as family. Other places treat us friendly.”*

*“Aitutaki, the Vaiorea Beach House with the view of the lagoon. Aitutaki in generally with the big benefit of having no big hotels etc. Pure nature, keep it as it is.”*

*“Our accommodation location right on the lagoon! Stunning place to relax. The atmosphere on Rarotonga is relaxed and friendly, such an easy place to be and unwind. Beautiful views”*



*“Local people were friendly and genuinely welcoming. Magic Reef was outstanding. Whale-watched from our bungalow. Relaxed happy vibe everywhere.”*

*“Very clean beaches, beautiful accommodation (Airbnb apartments), friendly hosts.”*

*“Wide range of accommodation suitable for every need.”*

### **Not too commercialised**

Three percent (4%) of the survey participants mentioned that the lack of commercial development on the Cook Islands is one of the most appealing factors for them. Some visitors believed that the ‘rawness’ of the islands brings tourists ‘calmness’ and ‘escape’ from the stresses and high pace of everyday life. Comments included:

*“How uncommercial it is and the friendliness of the people. How safe I felt. We were going to go to Maui again so glad we didn't. The Cooks is now our happy place.”*

*“You haven't gone the way of Hawaii or Bali... you have kept the culture feeling of the Cook Islands very much alive.”*

*“I loved the fact that Aitutaki is not so famous. It is very natural and uncontaminated from too much tourism.”*

*“Beautiful, quiet beaches that weren't overcrowded.”*

*“The island - it is so nice that it's a true island get away - we loved how it's not too commercialised and wouldn't want it to be - keep it as it is!”*

*“Relatively quiet, not overcrowded, not over-commercialised.”*

*“This was my third visit and it won't be my last. I love the lack of tourist development. No high-rise, just awesome!”*

*“The scenic beauty, the friendly locals. Also, Atiu was an unexpected highlight - I liked that fact that it's not touristy at all, and although small, at times it seemed like I had it all to myself. I wish I had more time to be able to visit the northern group.”*

*“We found it a lovely quiet destination and loved that it has not been spoilt by high rise hotels or high intensity tourism. We also loved the ease of interacting with so many lovely and friendly locals. And the swimming and snorkelling was just amazing.”*

*“Pure nature and not crowded.”*

## **Culture**

The island's unique local culture was mentioned by four percent (4%) of the respondents as an appealing aspect of their Cook Islands visit. The unique local people and their culture is something that appeals:

*"Beautiful beaches - loved looking at where people lived. Very interested to the tombs of family members in people's front and back gardens. People very friendly and helpful. Great atmosphere."*

*"The culture and atmosphere."*

*"Culture of Residents and Coastal Nature of Rarotonga Island."*

*"Love the relaxed culture."*

*"The pace, learning about the culture, the personal tours that we were given, the university lecture, and the music, food and dance."*

*"The amazing hospitality of locals, and at crown beach the snorkelling was my highlight. Simply amazing experience. I also loved finding out more and experiencing the traditions and culture from locals."*

*"So relaxing and culture was awesome."*

## **Level of service**

Three percent (3%) of visitors commented on the service they experienced while travelling in the Cook Islands. Respondents had positive comments about the local hospitality they experienced. Respondents were amazed by the 'friendly' and 'helpful' local staff. The quality of service at the accommodations, restaurants, and resort won high recognition from the visitors. Comments included:

*"The people and the facilities on the Island, heaps to do and see and all easy to access."*

*"Service had improved, people great."*

*"Excellent food and service. Very good prices."*

*"The friendly staff attitude and atmosphere."*

*"Just spending time on the island and enjoying snorkelling with the kids. The people are great, especially those running the more successful restaurants - they've certainly figured out that a bit of kindness really pays off, but also, it's not fake like you find in some places."*

*"We have been to Rarotonga 3 times and we got recognised at the airport by staff at Muri beach club hotel. They are amazing."*

*“The staff at our resort (Manuia) made us feel welcome, and like family.”*

*“The beaches and lovely hotel staff big smiles and helpful.”*

### **Price of goods and services**

One percent of respondents expressed the value for money and good price of goods and services within the Cook Islands. Comments included:

*“Friendly, laid back islands. Easy to travel around. Reasonably priced. Not pretentious!”*

*“Excellent food and service. Very good prices.”*

*“Pleasant and relaxing location. Tropical scenery was good. Tour of the island was good and good value.”*

### **Family and friends**

One percent of the respondents commented on links being developed with family and friends in the Cook Islands. Comments included:

*“We rented a van and had a great time with family and friends. We were celebrating both my wife and I's 50th birthday.”*

*“Catching up with friends.”*

### **Emotional Connection**

A few respondents (1%) gave a feedback regarding the emotional connection they feel with the destination. Comments included:

*“The peace and serenity of Aitutaki, as well as the local foods and beautiful to hear the Maori language spoken everywhere. Especially when coming from Rarotonga where a lot of English is spoken.”*

*“People are so friendly and welcoming, make you part of their family.”*

*“We have travelled to the coasts on an average at least twice a year for 30 years, there is always a sense of coming home.”*

## 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 summaries key themes respondents felt were least appealing. Comments ranged from issues with public services and facilities, stray animals and mosquitos, rubbish and natural environment care, poor weather, price of good and service through to disappointment with the law and legislation issues.

**Table 4: Least appealing aspects of the Cook Islands (n=1161)**

Themes	Share of respondents %*
Public services and facilities and infrastructure	15%
Stray animals and mosquitos	10%
Rubbish and natural environment care	8%
Poor weather	8%
Price of good and service	7%
Accommodation	7%
Food and beverage	6%
Customer service	5%
Flight related issues	4%
Attractions and activities	4%
Too touristy or commercial	4%
Safety	3%
Rental cars or scooters	3%
Local people	2%
Lack of information	1%
Law and legislation	1%

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

### ***Public services, facilities, and infrastructure***

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

*“The roads are not so good, and pale lightning after sundown.”*

*“The Airport was a bit of a low standard compared to the rest of Rarotonga.”*

*“Bus service was often very late, was understanding it would at times be late but would be a long wait outside if it hadn’t arrived.”*

*“Driving on roads at night, no white line, pot holes, poor lighting. Cars with only one headlight working, not sure whether motor cycle or car approaching.”*

*“The main road really, put \$20 on every tourist coming in to pay for upgrade I would be more than happy to pay. Just a white line would help at night as well.”*

*“The signage wasn't great - the track signage at the top of the track was completely graphitised and did not make it clear on which way to go. We also met people going from the south to the north and they said the track markings were really hard to see as the tag markings were placed for people going the N-S direction.*

*Also, the lagoon can be really dangerous, but we never saw any guidelines on safety (don't go out to the reef etc), and also people feeding the fish (really!), there were no signs to advise not to do this. I don't believe this is good practice.”*

*“On top of that, the state of the roads means that it is very dangerous and difficult to walk or cycle during or any time after rain.”*

*“Lack convenient and inexpensive transportation. I would have loved a cheaper, more frequent bus service that allowed us to move about the island easily.”*

*“The bus service was often late, or we found didn't arrive. The roads definitely need some attention as do the buses as they are a great running clockwise and anti-clockwise.”*

*“Found it hard catching the bus as it is hourly and doesn't stop as many places as a tourist would like. After 3 days of the bus, we hired a car so we could stop at more places etc.”*

*“Limited availability of bicycles to hire. We ended up getting a rental car because the public transport was more expensive for five of us than hiring a car, but would have preferred not to drive.”*

*“The internet was unreliable which made it difficult to pay for purchases from time to time.”*

*“Very poor WiFi connectivity.”*

*“Cost of Internet. We all take photos, most have Facebook or Instagram but the cost of sharing our experiences daily is prohibitive.”*

### **Stray animals and mosquitos**

Stray animals, noisy roosters, chickens, mosquitoes / insects and sea cucumbers were mentioned by 10% of respondents. In particular, they complained that the dogs roaming on the streets, mosquitoes and the roosters made their trip unpleasant at times. Respondents used a variety of words to describe dogs including ‘annoying’, ‘noisy’ and ‘aggressive’. Comments included:

*“The dog's, not nasty but annoying.”*

*“The roosters waking me up when I just wanted a sleep in.”*

*“Animal care. Saw skinny horse, cattle tied up without access to water, dogs roaming and don't appear to be cared for properly.”*

*“The free ranging chickens and roosters who crow all hours of the day and night.”*

*“Noisy dogs and dogs walking along the beach without their owners.”*

*“The cats and chickens being allowed to regularly jump up on your dining tables, when they should have been penned up or kept out while diners were eating.”*

*“The roaming dogs on the streets and beach, can be very dangerous for bikes and scooters. To many roosters crowing at 5 o'clock in the morning, most people like to sleep in while on holiday, not hear roosters crow all morning.”*

*“THE DOGS!!! Need to do something about the dogs. It was quite frightening trying to walk down the street at night, there were a lot of dogs and they barked and circled in a really aggressive way, it put me off big time. In fact, people who have asked me about my trip probably only remember that I said it was clean and beautiful, but had too many dogs.”*

### **Rubbish and natural environment care**

Rubbish and natural environment care were mentioned by 8% of respondents as the least appealing elements of their visit to the Cook Islands. Comments focused on the poor condition of the lagoons and beaches, plastic waste, degraded coral reefs, burning of rubbish and threatened marine life. Comments included:

*“The beaches on the main Island had lots of broken glass... employ locals to keep the beaches clean and take pride ... unfortunately these things are the downside of successful tourism.”*

*“It was kind of sad to see polluted areas, trash and debris.”*

*“Conservation - e.g. better protection for native species e.g. no predator proof fenced area for birds. Too much pressure on the land by the number of people.”*

*“Muddy bottom in the lagoon.”*

*“We were sad to see crab races as entertainment. Those poor little things. Better to do something to educate kids - and adults - about protecting these little guys and their habitats.”*

*"Smoke from fires burning rubbish."*

*"Plastic waste."*

*"Too many cars now. Lagoon not as clean as it used to be. I think you should be limiting the amount of cars and the quantity of tourists at any given time. I would rather go on a waiting list for a year or two and come back to the pristine environment I'd just a few years ago, than come as often to a spoilt dirty place (like Bali has become)."*

*"Unfortunately, the reefs are dead over large areas."*

*"The burning of leaves by the natives. They should collect the leaves and compost. Also, waste of so many coconuts. Organize a collectors and process to the islands favour."*

*"The lagoon seems to have less living coral and fish than seen on earlier visits."*

### **Poor weather**

Eight percent of visitors commented on poor weather while in the Cook Islands. In particular, complaints were made about the wind and rain, although some respondents acknowledged the weather was seasonal and cannot be changed and that it also forced them to relax. Comments included:

*"The wind! But nothing much can be done about that."*

*"Sadly, the weather was not good for many of the days, i.e. too windy, which curtailed many activities for many people."*

*"Our first 3 days were virtually non-stop rain which was well beyond anyone's control, but we did wonder if we had visited at the right time given it was supposed to be the dry season. However, we realise that you have a tropical climate and the lovely green landscapes do not occur without rain."*

*"Rain, rain, and more rain. Not being able to get into room till 2pm after arriving at 9am and having to get out of room by 10.30am then sitting in reception till the airport shuttle finally turned up at 3.30pm for the trip to airport for more waiting."*

*"There wasn't anything unless we can blame the rain. Unfortunately, the last few days were wet."*

*"It rained for two days solidly but no one can change that, and it forced us to relax! A negative that was actually a positive!"*

### **Price of goods and service**

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

*"The prices of grocery store products, but it's an island. I did like how most restaurants and takeaways had really reasonably priced options for the quantity."*

*"The cost of some tours and the lack of fresh local produce being served at restaurants."*

*"Cost of hiring equipment kayaks snorkel."*

*"Nothing comes to mind, though the cost of food at supermarkets are expensive."*

*"The prices. Also, I was very surprised by the relatively scarce offer of local fruits/vegetables/produce - it seems that everyone grows for their consumption only and visitors to the islands are stuck with the imported produce available in supermarkets."*

*"High cost of accommodation."*

*"Internet/WiFi availability and cost. Also it wasn't as easy to book cars in the Cook Islands compared to other counties- i.e. it was via email rather than a well-managed website. Also our accommodation contact page didn't work!"*

*"Service was a little slow at times, however it's probably just me not being used to island time. I found it a little expensive, however this is understandable given it's remote location."*

*"Snorkelling was a little murky and the overall prices of food and drink are pretty pricey. Service at our villas was lacking."*

*"Taxi, this is a rip off and should not be allowed. Public transport to provide a cost-effective solution for transport for late night flights, arrival and departure. We walked to the airport the day we left the island as we did not further want to support a corrupt business such as the taxis."*

*"The only thing that surprised us was the price of food at the grocery stores. It is quite expensive."*

*"The food choice in supermarkets. - high sugar (Although I could see there was a sugar tax on the fizzy drinks). Some items were incredibly expensive - I could see many people choosing a meal of fish and chips/takeaways, over a healthier alternative due to the cost."*



*“Our friends’ accommodation was double booked in Aitutaki. Rude rental car operator. Accommodation & food is a bit more expensive than I would have expected.”*

*“Can’t think of anything. Absolutely loved. Maybe the price of food in comparison to home. But that understandable as everything is brought in.”*

*“Cost of food... supermarket shopping but understandable!”*

### **Accommodation**

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

*“We were very disappointed in our accommodation (not chosen by us but paid for by us). We felt it was misrepresented on its website which suggested it had direct beach access. Although spacious, it was also poorly set up and badly maintained and nowhere near the beach. Several things were broken (e.g. BBQ), missing - lighting, chair squabs, kitchen equipment, old mended linen.... to name but a few things.”*

*“No availability of rooms when checking in from an early flight.”*

*“It was not in good clean conditions.”*

*“No door on the bathroom only a curtain.”*

*“Having to wait over 5 hours for our room when we arrived with tired children was disappointing.”*

*“It seems trivial to grumble but one of the bedrooms in our villas that were not using had not been cleaned for quite some time, it had a built up our and dead insects and dust on the floor. The door had been shut but we opened it to get a through breeze. it took 4 days for the odour to reduce and I cleaned the floor. It did not spoil our trip or the enjoyment of the villa which is in a lovely spot with great views.”*

*“Accommodation wasn't up to what we have experienced in here before.”*

*“Maintenance of the resort. We didn't have hot water for 3 days.”*

*“TV reception not great at the hotel - needs improvement.”*

### **Food and beverage**

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

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

*"Illness. A lot of people got a bug. I am not sure what level of hygiene goes into food prep. I had no option but to eat from local establishments every day and I rarely fall ill. I caught a bug for a couple of days, no fun."*

*"Cafes/ restaurants not catering for large groups of people. Food/drinks out of stock."*

*"The lack of fresh vegetables in many restaurants."*

*"A lot of deep-fried foods."*

*"Lack of local food availability, I understand it's become such a popular place to visit but would be nice to eat local food regularly."*

*"Lack of good dining opportunities outside the resort. All booked in advance."*

*"Hard to find local made souvenirs that weren't made in China. Hard at times to find fresh local caught fish."*

*"My family all got food poisoning on the last night apart from me. I don't think they will want to go back to the Island as it was such a terrible experience for them unfortunately, hopefully time will make them forget as I really want to go back!!"*

*"I thought the food choices in restaurants were a tad bland."*

*"Totally understandable due to distance and season but not a lot of variety of fruit and vegetables."*

*"I was frustrated that the fish we ate was not fresh. It seems bizarre that the government would sell all the fishing rights to the point that the fish we ate was clearly defrosted. This was very disappointing."*

*"The cost of food and difficulty to find cheaper local places to eat."*

### **Customer service**

One in twenty (5%) of respondents mentioned customer service as a least appealing aspect of their trip to the Cook Islands. Their comments often focused on customer service at the accommodation, transport, airport and restaurants. Most visitors used words such as 'slow service', 'long waits', 'rude', 'poor attitude' to describe the services. Comments included:

*"It was all the same as the last time we were there even the jokes made by the hosts of activities."*

*“Some staff at the hotel and cafes could have been more polite.”*

*“The people in service and retail. Generally, treat tourists like walking wallets.”*

*“Inattentive and rude staff at this resort (went for Sunday BBQ).”*

*“The service at this resort was terrible with some really rude staff who made us feel very unwelcome.”*

*“Public roads and attitude of some clerks/proprietors of some local markets.”*

*“Service at our villas was lacking.”*

*“Nonchalance of some wait staff. Some foreign service providers did not know details regarding Cook Islands history, language or culture.”*

*“Long wait for bags on arrival (the older gentleman singing became very monotonous with the long wait). Slow service.”*

### **Flight related issues**

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

*“Only 1 flight a week direct to Australia.”*

*“Flight to and from via Auckland resulting in long transit times for Brisbane passengers.”*

*“The aircraft departure delay, with 3 young children, but this was outside of the Cook Islands control.”*

*“The only thing I can think of is the flying time of the Jetstar airline.”*

*“The connecting flight from Wellington to Auckland were too tight. When we questioned this with Air New Zealand who had moved the flight a little earlier. We had a huge rush to get the flight, fearing it would close before we got there and then had to wait 3/4 hour till more passengers arrived. When talking about this to other guests who travelled on different days, they all had a similar story. This is an Air NZ problem.”*

*“Queuing at Rarotanga Airport. Three Plane landed at once, Very slow through customs!!! Took two hours.”*

*“The line up at the airport when arriving. The wait was ridiculous, and the process needs to be sped up.”*

### **Attractions and activities**

Four percent of respondents mentioned attractions and activities as the least appealing aspect of their Cook Islands visit. The focus was on the limited attractions available and/or activities such as swimming/snorkelling that were affected by environment issues, weather, lack of information and poor levels of service. There were also a number of comments focused on what appeared to be ad-hoc charges to access natural attractions such as waterfalls. Comments included:

*"You now have to pay to visit the waterfall that used to be free."*

*"I guess it was about some smaller attractions not being open when there are signs on street saying open.... Not a big deal..."*

*"Lack of night time activities and internet accessibility."*

*"It's not that easy to Go Swimming."*

*"Not much options for swimming as most beaches had rocks in them and not completely sandy."*

*"No wind for our kitesurfing trip. Limited options for getting to and from Honeymoon island."*

*"Other than the few and typical tourist activities, there wasn't anything that peaked our interest."*

*"Few hiking trails, self-guided adventures."*

*"The fact that the Cultural centre - Highland Paradise was closed on the weekend."*

### **Too touristy**

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

*"We stopped over in Rarotonga - it was busy."*

*"How Rarotonga is becoming more of a large city with a large city attitude!"*

*"Too many 'touristy' spots."*

*"Other tourists whining when they realised what Island Time means. As in Sunday is a day of religion, rest & family. I do not like visitors to any place not bothering to have any idea of local customs then complaining when they can't get what they want."*

*"I was in Rarotonga 30 years ago when you could go the lagoon and see the beach and how beautiful it is. It is now so built up that you can longer see it. It is such a shame, but I guess this comes with progress and tourism. I enjoyed my trip 30 years ago much more."*

*"The 'money god' appears to be having too big an influence. That is, making money is becoming more important than preserving the natural beauty of the Cook Islands."*

*"Visited 3 years ago and have seen the island become much more commercial in such a short time."*

*"Maybe that Rarotonga has become busier and more crowded since our last visit."*

*"We were very glad we did not participate in a lagoon tour as they looked all too touristy and we were able to do the same thing on our kayaks from our accommodations."*

## **Safety**

Three percentage of visitors surveyed mentioned safety in the Cook Islands as a least appealing factor. In particular, this group referred to theft, the lack of forewarning about the dogs, and poor safety on the road. Comments included:

*"House fires and theft from tourist."*

*"Driving on roads at night, no white line, pot holes, poor lighting. Cars with only one headlight working, not sure whether motor cycle or car approaching."*

*"Dogs and safety on boat trip, really poor, no briefing or lifejackets."*

*"The road law not making it is compulsory to wear helmets on cycles or scooters as experienced a nasty scooter accident late at night with a local elderly lady having crashed on her scooter and was in middle of road badly hurt!!!"*

*"The lack of forewarning about the dogs, it's a different philosophy and experience than we are used to in westernised culture, we were unsure whether to interact or feed. Lack of public notices about not swimming in Muri Lagoon for a few days after a lot of rain (both young kids had bad gastro as a result of the water in there)."*

*"The fact that we had NZ\$400 stolen from inside our villa. Yes, it was definitely stolen!!!"*

*"We had an attempted break in at our accommodation at 2 am. My husband chased the offenders down the road and the police were called. The level of crime is becoming disturbing in the Cook Islands, I was constantly aware of not leaving any*

*valuables where they could be grabbed. This also made us concerned for our daughter who was travelling with us. I find it unfortunate when people ask me about the Cooks, that I have to tell them to lock everything and be careful whilst they are on holiday."*

*"No crash helmets being worn by locals."*

### **Rental cars or scooters**

Three percent of respondents mentioned rental cars and scooters as least appealing aspects of their Cook Islands visit. Respondents referred to the quality and the availability of rental vehicles, the lack of information for renting vehicles, unreliable service, or the process of getting a scooter licence. Comments included:

*"Some things felt too laid back. For example, if we booked a car for the next day, we couldn't get it until 11am... seemed odd to us."*

*"Still waiting for our excess deposit to be returned on our motor scooter hire."*

*"More regulations around scooter hire. Police station not open weekends for licensing."*

*"Quality and uncleanliness of rental car."*

*"Poor service from car rental company."*

*"Nothing. But finding a car to rent is often quite a problem as they are not always available."*

*"The way some service people were unhelpful and unfriendly, and the expense of renting a car for a very run-down vehicle."*

*"Lack of information and help relating to scooter riding and hire."*

### **Local people**

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

*"Some of the locals who work in stores etc were not that friendly, but I also understand why so no biggie."*

*"The hotel and the way, everyone tries to get money out of you."*

*"I didn't find the locals as happy and friendly as I had on previous visits. Some people actually seemed quite rude."*

*"The people of Rarotonga are not as friendly as brochure says."*

*"We did not find the locals to be friendly... they were friendly until you paid for whatever was needed and then they were rude."*

*"I found the younger generation in general at markets or retail are so unfriendly and unhelpful compared to the first few visits to the Island. Everyone used to be so helpful & friendly, not the case anymore, very sad."*

*"A few locals said they didn't like Australians and that we are racist. This at least for me is totally untrue. My son is mixed race and my husband is Maori."*

### **Lack of information**

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

*"The museums could have been better curated and signed -- one of the National Museum sites, I had to ask directions to several times because the sign was illegible."*

*"It was difficult to find lodging if you didn't know a local or have insider information."*

*"Information regarding tours/activities on Atiu was outdated."*

*"Hospitality at hotel and house rental can be very slow in responding to inquiries or issues."*

*"Hard to see public toilets around island, not well signposted. Also, paper maps not accurate, some places have closed. Also walking tracks are not well signposted, street names virtually non-existent, you have to count streets."*

### **Law and Legislation**

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

*"Smoke from seemingly uncontrolled private burning."*

*"The youth, (tourist) drinking culture being encouraged on Rarotonga."*

*"Confused with pearl trade- who's real who's not. No protection against fake pearls."*

## Suggestions to improve the visit to the Cook Islands

When asked if there was anything that could have improved their visit to the Cook Islands 40% of visitors made a comment. Of those that that made suggestions many focused on public services and infrastructure (25%). Others emphasized: the need for more entertainment, activities, transport (12%); accommodation (12%) improvements; making it easier to stay longer and visit more places (11%); the availability, quality, and price of food and drinks (9%); weather (8%), improvements to the environment/ animal care (7%); flights (6%); attitudes of locals and service levels (6%); value for money (6%); and the need for better information (4%). Comments on these themes included:

*"The roads felt like they'd had no work since my previous visit."*

*"I think they need to have some professional figure to better manage ships and harbours for safety reason and to avoid pollution. Port Authority must be better organized. I'm a Marine Chemist, I live in Italy and I know exactly what I'm talking about."*

*"Better roading especially main road."*

*"Improving visitors check in as many arrive on very early morning flights. Cheaper internet."*

*"Being told by travel agent that there was a public holiday on Monday, so most things closed 12.00 Saturday."*

*"Perhaps the accommodation being a little less pricey, and we thought if the busses ran every 15 mins rather than 1/2 hour, then there wouldn't be the need for so many rental cars."*

*"A much more lively cultural scene, especially arts and crafts."*

*"Better fresh produce, less imported goods."*

*"Better and hotter weather (but we realise this is beyond your control!!)"*

*"No dogs running around the islands and the food was edible but not delicious."*

*"Flight arrival and departure times. Early hours of the morning which meant having to book a room for half a night."*

*"Better treatment by Island rentals."*

*"Activities too expensive for what they do."*

*"A guide that showed what was on every day."*



## Reasons to return to the Cook Islands and recommend to others

The majority of visitors (92%) indicated that they would consider re-visiting the Cook Islands in the future. This figure is slightly lower than that of the 2017/18 annual average (93%) and the identical quarter in 2017 (94%). Of the eight percent of visitors who indicated they would not want to return to the Cook Islands, the majority stated that did not wish to return because of a desire to visit another destination. Some visitors commented that a holiday to the Cook Islands is relatively expensive (especially accommodation and food) and not good value for money. A few visitors said that they 'had been there and seen it all'. Other factors given for not wishing to return included the degraded lagoon condition, a lack of activities, and poor service. Comments included:

*"Not for any bad reason, it's just that the world is such a huge place and I would probably rather go somewhere I've never been instead."*

*"For the reasons outlined, we felt there was a general lack of care and it was noticeable from our first visit the comparison. We would like to go back but things would need to be improved"*

*"Enjoyed our stay but a 'bucket list' kind of trip; we have other island destinations, e.g. Hawaii, the Carib., that are closer."*

*"Supermarket costs."*

Under half (45%) of the visitors saying they would return stated that they would definitely include the outer islands in their next visit. A further 50% of visitors indicated they will 'maybe' visit outer islands next time. Of those who said they would or maybe visit outer islands next time, most (89%) mentioned they would like to include 'Aitutaki'. 'Atiu' was the second most mentioned island at 36%; another 23% of visitors stated that they would like to visit Mangaia, 19% of the respondents would like to visit Mauke. A small number of visitors mentioned Manihiki, Palmerston, Penrhyn, Pukapuka. A few mentioned the high cost of visiting outer islands as a barrier to visiting.

Nearly all visitors surveyed (97%) said that they would recommend the destination to their family and friends which is consistent with previous survey periods. Only 3% of visitors would not recommend the Cook Islands to others and this is largely based on the high prices, low level of infrastructure and poor accommodation quality, be crowded, and a lack of environmental care.

## Final observations

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

Despite the overall positive performance this report again highlights that there is room to enhance the visitor experience and to increase the economic yield and broader community benefits associated with tourism. As with previous reports, this quarter's research highlights issues around the stray animals and mosquitos in the Cook Islands. There are also some concerns about environmental degradation, poor weather, and price of good and service.

Overall visitor satisfaction and willingness to return are high and the majority of respondents expressed an interest in visiting one of the outer islands next time. It is vital now to build on this positive performance and to convert it into even greater economic benefits for local people. It is critical to find ways to build on and develop the visitor experience in a manner that enhances local economic linkages. By improving public services, facilities and infrastructure, developing new product offerings, linking the good relationships between the locals and the tourists, and more importantly, enhancing the quality and 'value added' of existing activities and experiences, the tourism industry can increase visitor satisfaction, and increase the generation of positive economic outcomes for the local population.