



# **The Cook Islands International Visitor Survey Results**

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**January – March 2019**

**Prepared for Cook Islands Tourism Corporation**

**by**

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Auckland University of Technology**

[www.nztri.org](http://www.nztri.org)

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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 January and 31 March 2018. The data presented is collected from an online departure survey (<http://www.mycookislandsvisit.com>). There were 954 individual respondents to the survey - representing a total of 1,779 adults and 226 children in the expenditure analysis (this equates to 7% of all visitors during the period – based on the same period of 2018 visitor arrival data from the Cook Islands Statistics Office).

Over half (53%) of visitors surveyed come from New Zealand, 14% come from Australia. Visitors are well educated (69% of visitors have some form of tertiary education) with a relatively high annual household income (52% earn over NZ\$100,000 per year). Nearly half of the visitors (47%) travel with one companion. Solo travellers are less common (15%).

Over three in five (62%) of those surveyed are first time visitors to the Cook Islands, a further 24% have visited twice or three times before. The main purpose of visit is holiday-making (80%). The average length of stay in the Cook Islands is 8.9 nights. The majority of visitors (91%) stay either one or two weeks. A quarter of visitors surveyed visited Aitutaki (25%).

Visitor spend prior to arrival in the Cook Islands (\$2,197 per person) has increased from the 2017/2018 annual average (\$1,967 per person) but decreased slightly when compared to the same quarter of 2017 (\$2,204). Spend while in the Cook islands (per person per day) is \$162. This spend is significantly higher than the 2017/2018 annual average of \$149, while being very slightly lower than the same quarter for the previous year (\$163 for January to March 2018).

The average local spend per visitor during the entirety of their stay is \$1,442. When pre-paid spend and in-country spend are combined, it is estimated that each visitor brings \$2,321 to the Cook Islands economy (or approximately \$261 per day). This figure is higher than the \$2,051 average for 2017/18 and the same as the January to March 2018 figure of \$2,321.

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

The future intentions of visitors remain similar to those seen in the previous year: 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.

## Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	ii
Executive Summary.....	iii
Introduction .....	1
Visitor Characteristics .....	2
Information Sources and Purchasing Behaviour .....	10
Visitor Expenditure .....	13
Visitor Satisfaction .....	17
Most appealing aspects of the Cook Islands.....	21
Least appealing aspects of the Cook Islands.....	31
Suggestions to improve the visit to the Cook Islands .....	43
Reasons to return to the Cook Islands and recommend to others.....	44
Final observations .....	45

## Figures and Tables

Figure 1: Country of origin (n = 853).....	2
Figure 2: New Zealand visitors (n = 454).....	2
Figure 3: Australia visitors (n = 121) .....	3
Figure 4: Distribution of age and gender (n = 876).....	3
Figure 5: Highest qualification (n = 881).....	4
Figure 6: Annual household income in NZD (n = 685) .....	4
Figure 7: Main purpose of visit (n = 954).....	5
Figure 8: Travelling with whom? (n = 814) .....	5
Figure 9: Number of companions on trip (n = 739) .....	6
Figure 10: Number of visits to the Cook Islands (n = 885).....	6
Figure 11: Number of previous visits to the Cook Islands – country breakdown .....	7
Figure 12: Length of stay in nights (n = 927).....	7
Figure 13: Mode of transport (n = 954) .....	8
Figure 14: Visited Islands (n = 952) .....	8
Figure 15: Average length of stay in the Cook Islands and on each island (n = 2-921) .....	9
Figure 16: How did you find out about Cook Islands as a destination (n = 954).....	10
Figure 17: How did you find out about Cook Islands as a destination – country breakdown.	11
Figure 18: Importance of information source used when planning your trip (n = 858).....	12
Figure 19: How did you purchase your travel to the Cook Islands (n = 952).....	12
Figure 20: Amount of money spent per person prior to arrival (n = 680).....	13
Figure 21: Items included in money spent prior to arrival .....	14
Figure 22: Overall satisfaction with experience of the Cook Islands (n = 887) .....	17
Figure 23: Degree of participation in activities (n range = 12-929).....	18
Figure 24: Degree of satisfaction with activities participated in (mean score out of 5) .....	19
Figure 25: Degree of satisfaction with Cook Islands services (mean score out of 5) .....	20
Table 1: Average visitor expenditure in the Cook Islands (per person per day) .....	15
Table 2: Average expenditure per visitor per day by country of origin.....	15
Table 3: Most appealing aspects of the Cook Islands (n=899) .....	21
Table 4: Least appealing aspects of the Cook Islands (n=823) .....	31

## Introduction

The Cook Islands government, local businesses and communities require a clear picture of the characteristics, expectations and expenditure patterns of visitors to the nation. This information enables effective planning and development of the tourism industry and highlights its crucial role within the broader 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 January to March 2019. Over this three-month period, 6,854 visitors were contacted by email to take part in the survey, and 954 responses were received: a conversion rate of 14%. The conversion rate for this period is same as the 2017/18 annual average (14%) and higher than the 2018 January to March quarter (12%). These responses cover a total of 1,779 adults and 226 children and it is this number that is used for the visitor spend analysis.

The data presented includes detailed information on:

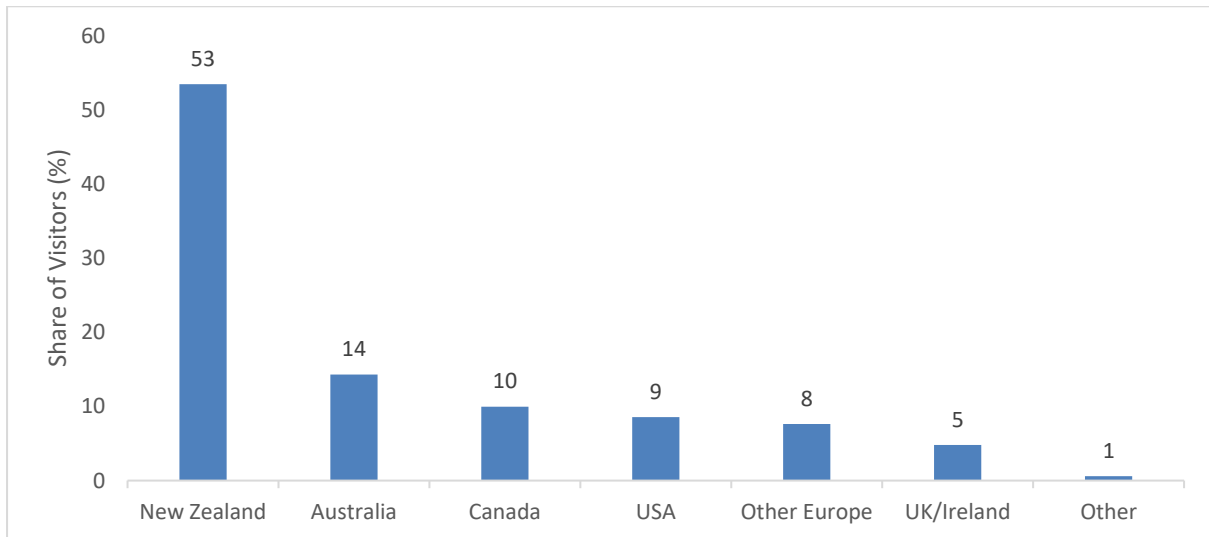
- The characteristics of visitors to the Cook Islands (age, gender, education, country of origin, income, purpose of visit, travelling companions, number of previous visits, length of stay, airline used, islands visited)
- Visitor information obtained about the Cook Islands, the factors influencing in 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 2018 January to March quarterly findings these figures are highlighted in the discussion that follows.

## Visitor Characteristics

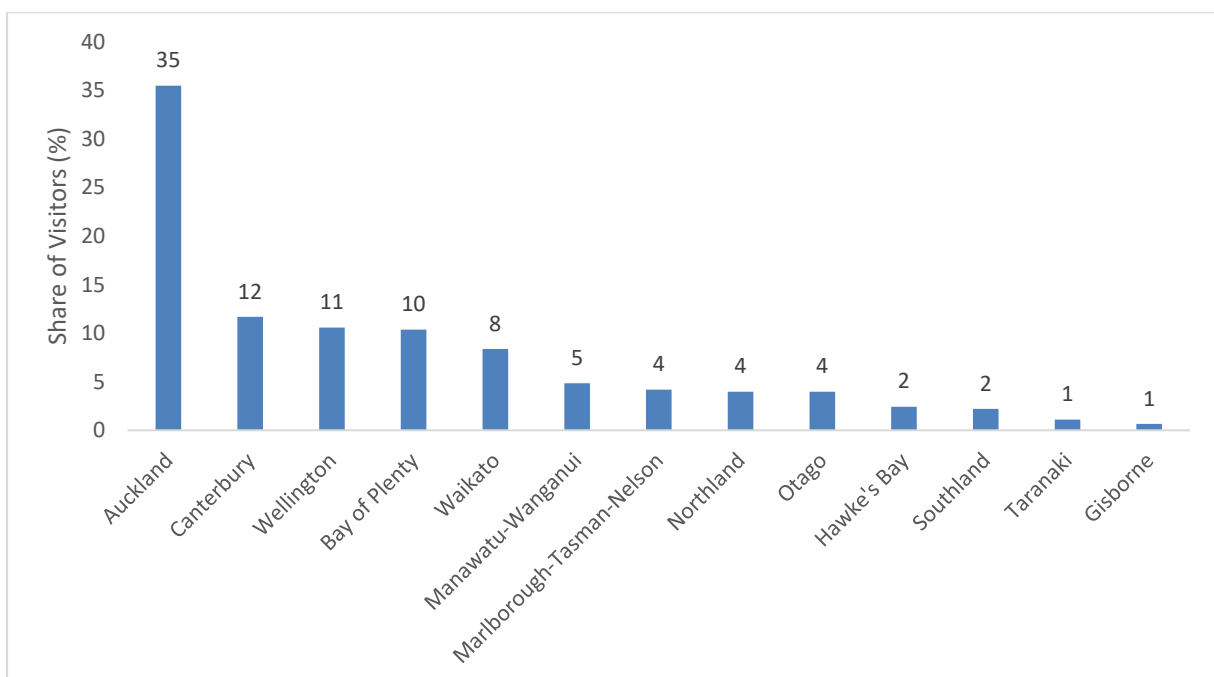
Over half (53%) of the visitors surveyed come from New Zealand (Figure 1). The second largest visitor group is from Australia (14%). USA, Canada, other Europe, Asia, and UK/Ireland represent the other main source markets.

**Figure 1: Country of origin (n = 853)**

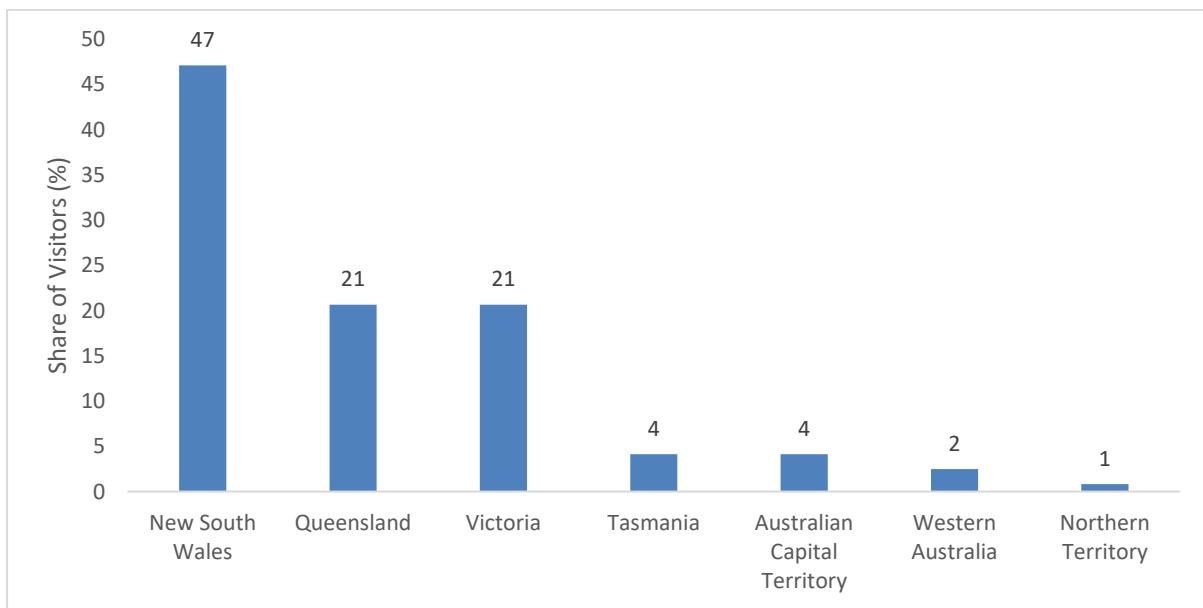


Auckland, Canterbury, Wellington, Bay of Plenty, and Waikato account for 76% of New Zealand visitors. For visitors from Australia, the regions of New South Wales, Queensland, and Victoria generate the highest numbers of arrivals (89%) (Figure 2-3).

**Figure 2: New Zealand visitors (n = 454)**

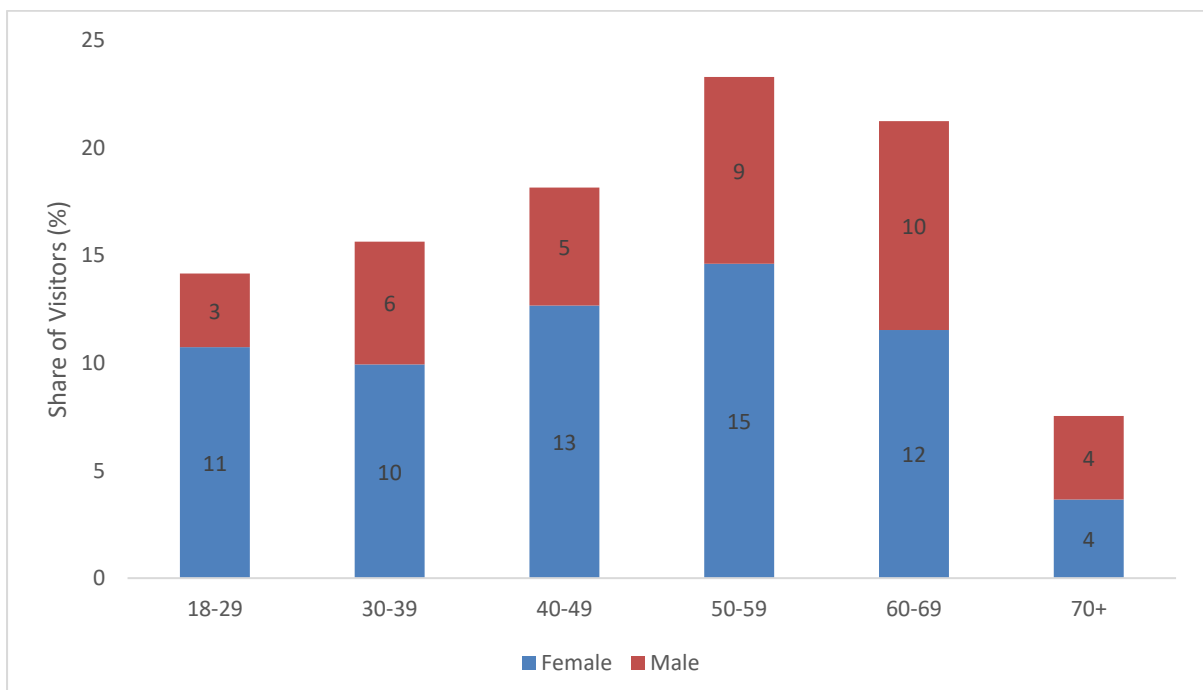


**Figure 3: Australia visitors (n = 121)**



More women (63%) than men (37%) completed the survey (Figure 4). The most significant age categories are the 50 to 59 year (24%) grouping, the 60 to 69 year (22%) grouping, followed by those aged 40 to 49 (18%), 30 to 39 (16%), and 18 to 29 (14%). There are relatively few travellers in the 70 plus age bracket (8%).

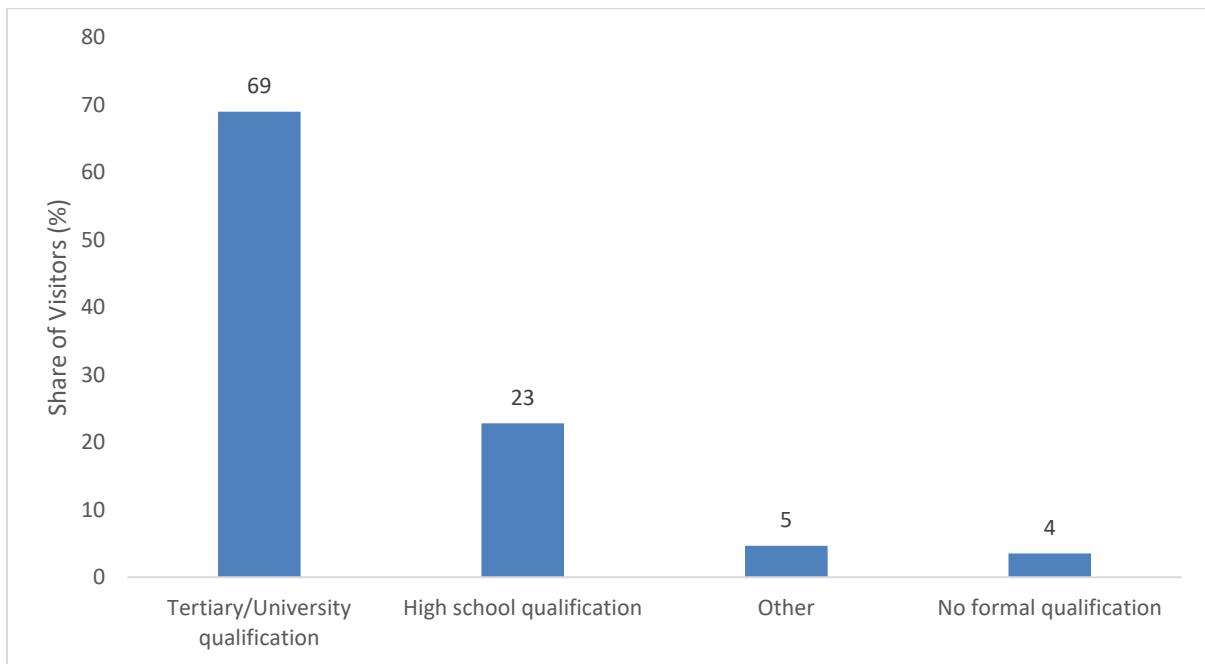
**Figure 4: Distribution of age and gender (n = 876)**



Visitors are well educated with over two-thirds (69%) of those surveyed having some form of tertiary qualification, and a further 23% having completed a high school education (Figure 5).

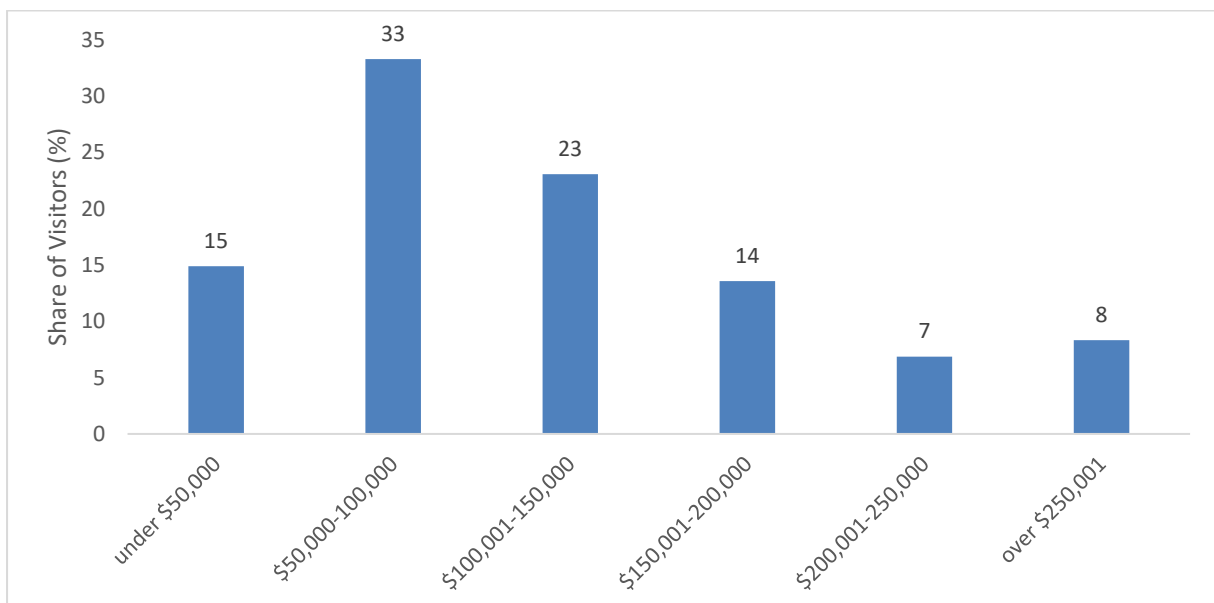


**Figure 5: Highest qualification (n = 881)**



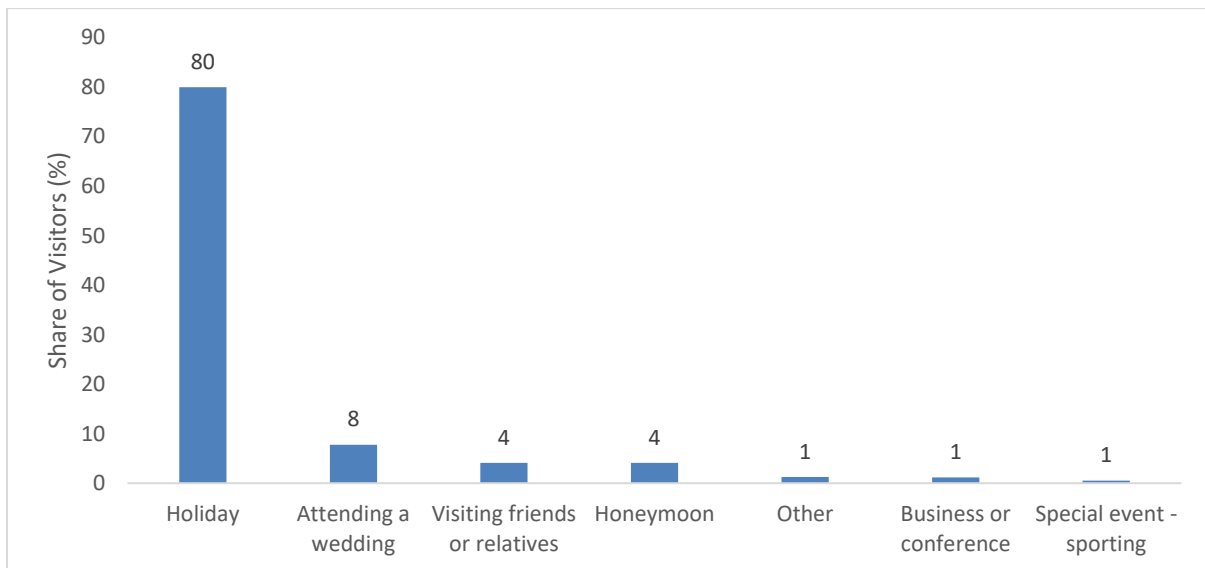
Nearly a third of visitors (33%) have an annual household income of between NZ\$50,001 and NZ\$100,000. A quarter (23%) of those surveyed earn between NZ\$100,001 and NZ\$150,000. A further 29% of respondents have a household income of over NZ\$150,000 per year (Figure 6).

**Figure 6: Annual household income in NZD (n = 685)**



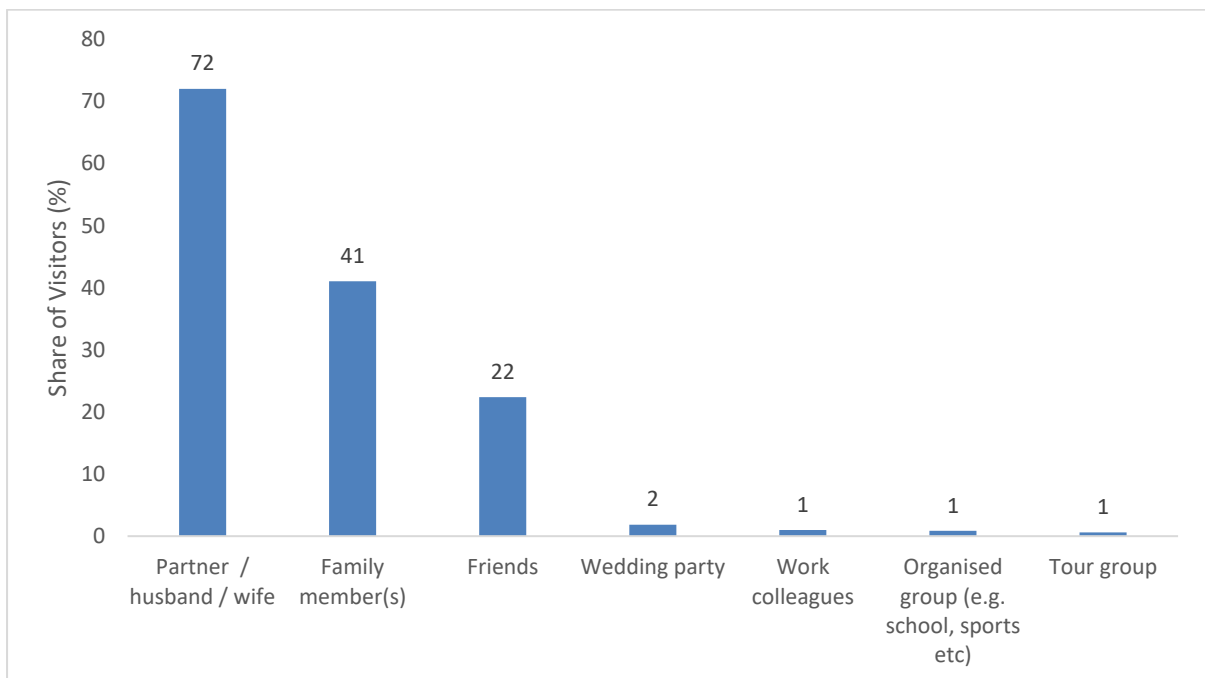
Four in five respondents come to the Cook Islands for a holiday (80%). Other reasons given include attending a wedding (8%), visiting friends or relatives (4%), a honeymoon (4%), other (1%), business and conference (1%), and special sporting event (1%).

**Figure 7: Main purpose of visit (n = 954)**



The majority (85%) of visitors travel with one or more companions. Among this grouping, most (72%) travel to the Cook Islands with a partner or spouse. Visitors also travel with other family members (41%), or with friends (22%). Those travelling as part of a wedding party, with work colleagues, in an organised group or in a tour group, represent smaller shares of the total sample (Figure 8).

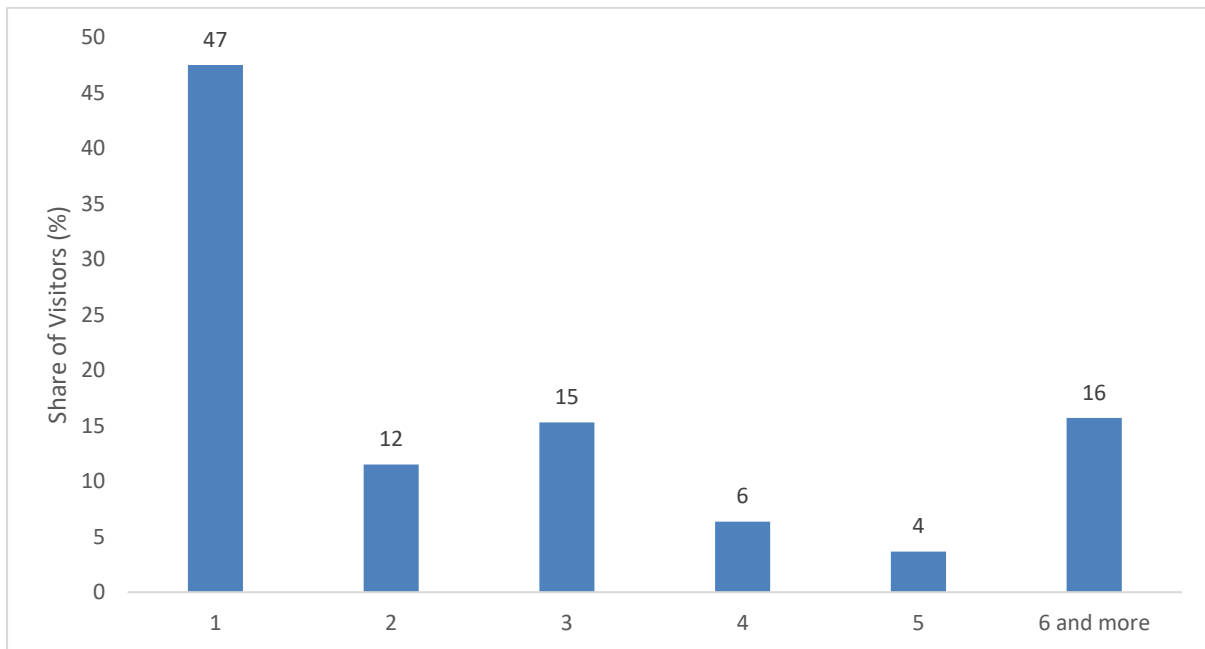
**Figure 8: Travelling with whom? (n = 814)**



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

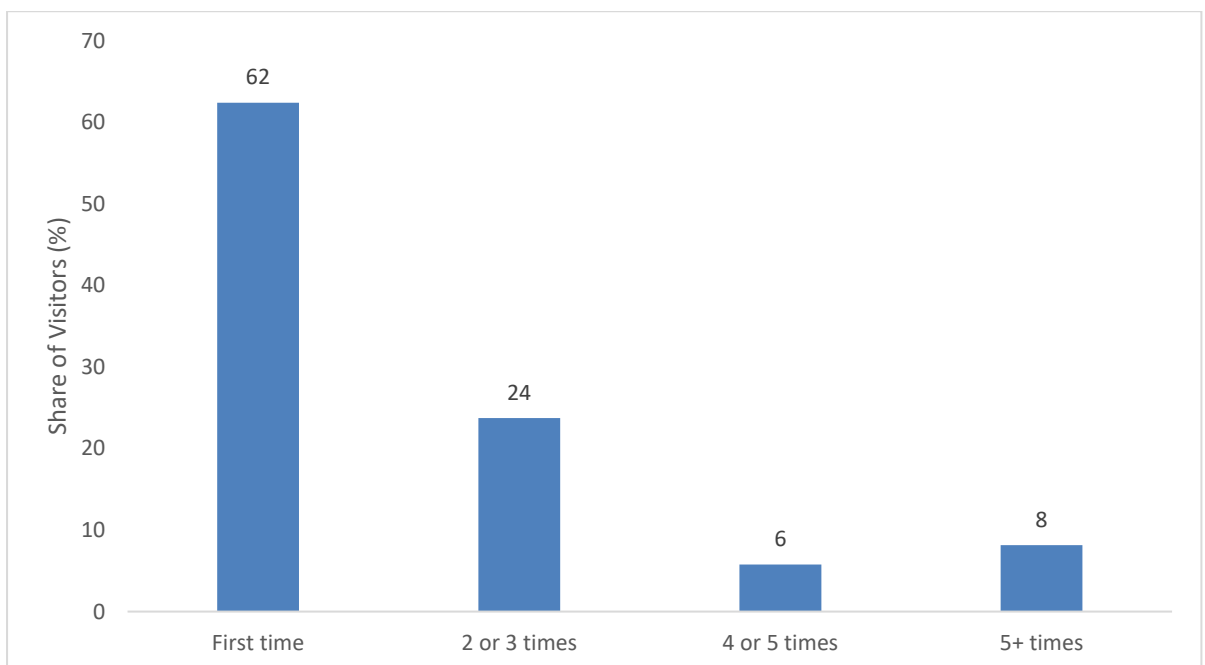
Nearly half of the visitors (47%) travelled with one companion on their visit to the Cook Islands (Figure 9), and nearly a fifth of the visitors (16%) travelled with more than six people.

**Figure 9: Number of companions on trip (n = 739)**



Over three in five of the visitors (62%) are on their first visit to the Cook Islands. A further 24% have been to the Cook Islands twice or three times before. A smaller group (14%) have visited four or more times (Figure 10).

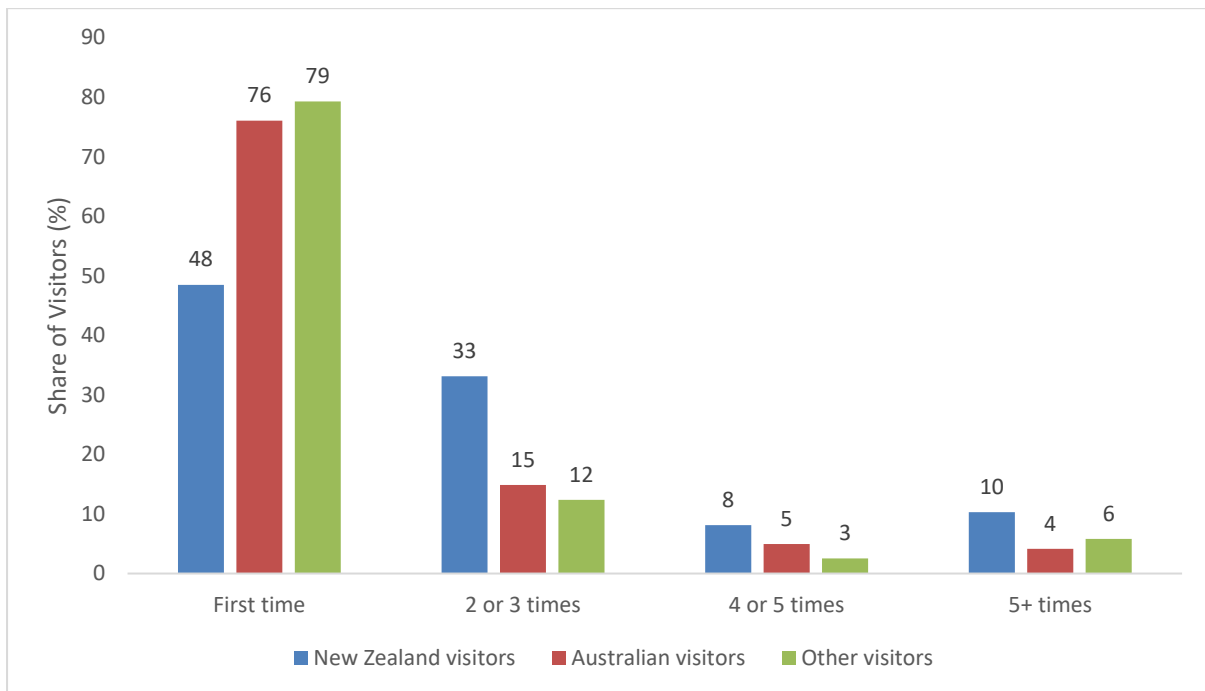
**Figure 10: Number of visits to the Cook Islands (n = 885)**



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

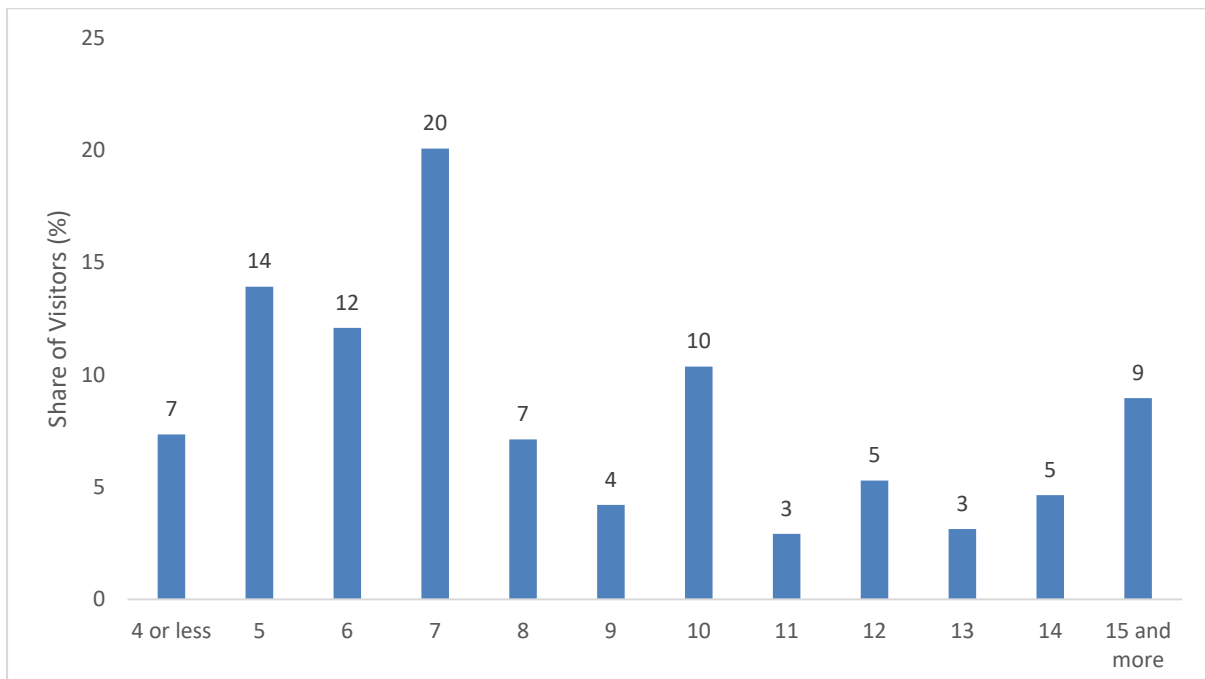
New Zealanders are more likely to be repeat visitors than those from other source markets (Figure 11). Over half of the surveyed visitors from New Zealand (52%) have visited the Cook Islands before compared to only 24% of visitors from Australia and 21% from other countries.

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



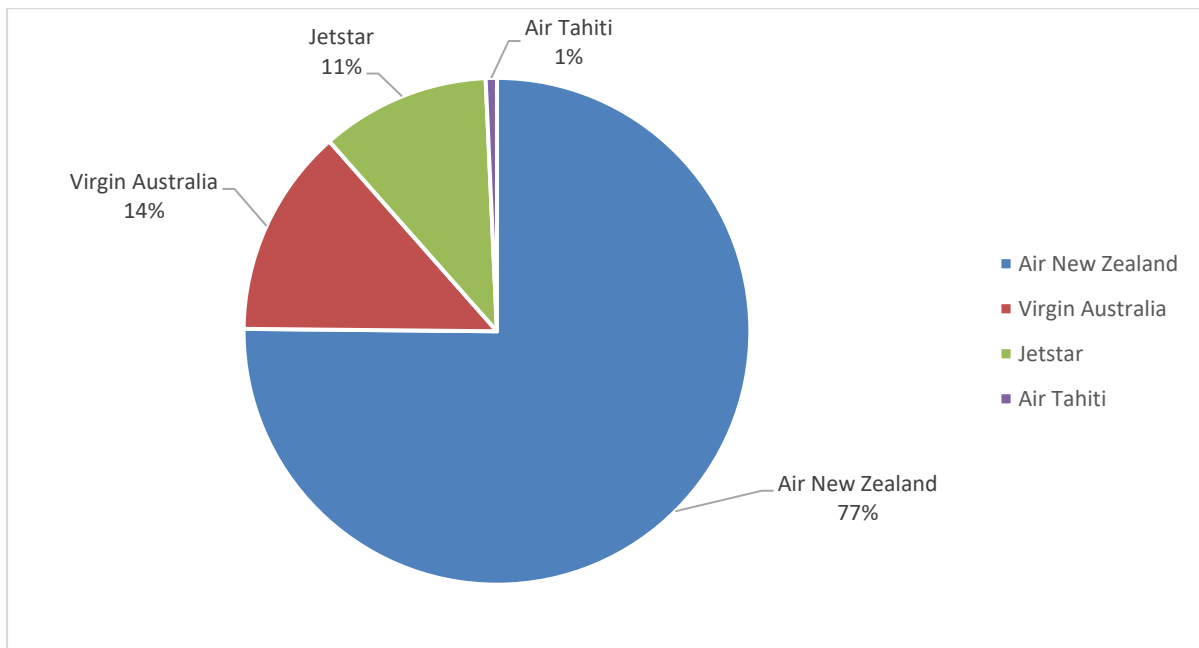
The average length of stay in the Cook Islands is 8.9 nights with 75% of visitors spending 10 or fewer nights in the country (Figure 12).

**Figure 12: Length of stay in nights (n = 927)**



Over three quarters visitors (77%) travel to/from the Cook Islands with Air New Zealand, a further 14% visitors fly with Virgin Australia, followed by 11% of visitors travelling with Jetstar and one percent of visitors travelling with Air Tahiti Nui (Figure 13).

**Figure 13: Mode of transport (n = 954)**

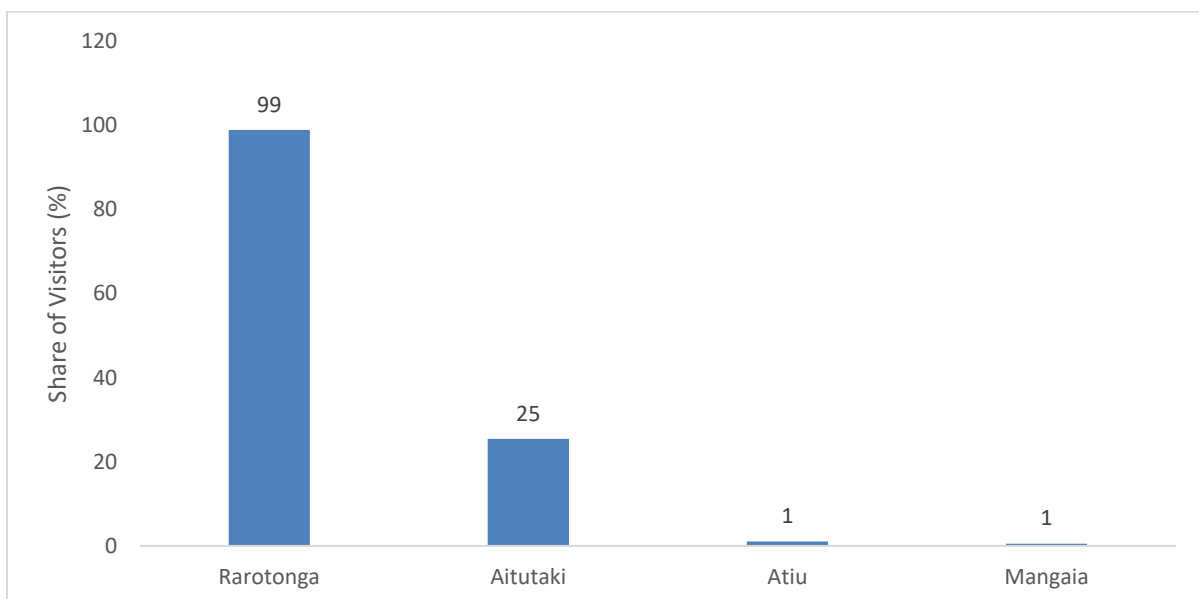


*Note: Multiple responses, therefore total does not add up to 100%*

For 78% of visitors, the Cook Islands is the sole destination for their trip. For 22% 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 (79%), followed by travel to Australia (24%), United States of America (17%), Asian countries (16%), other pacific countries (8%), and Canada (2%).

The vast majority (99%) of visitors to the Cook Islands spend time on Rarotonga, with Aitutaki being the second most visited island (25%) (Figure 14).

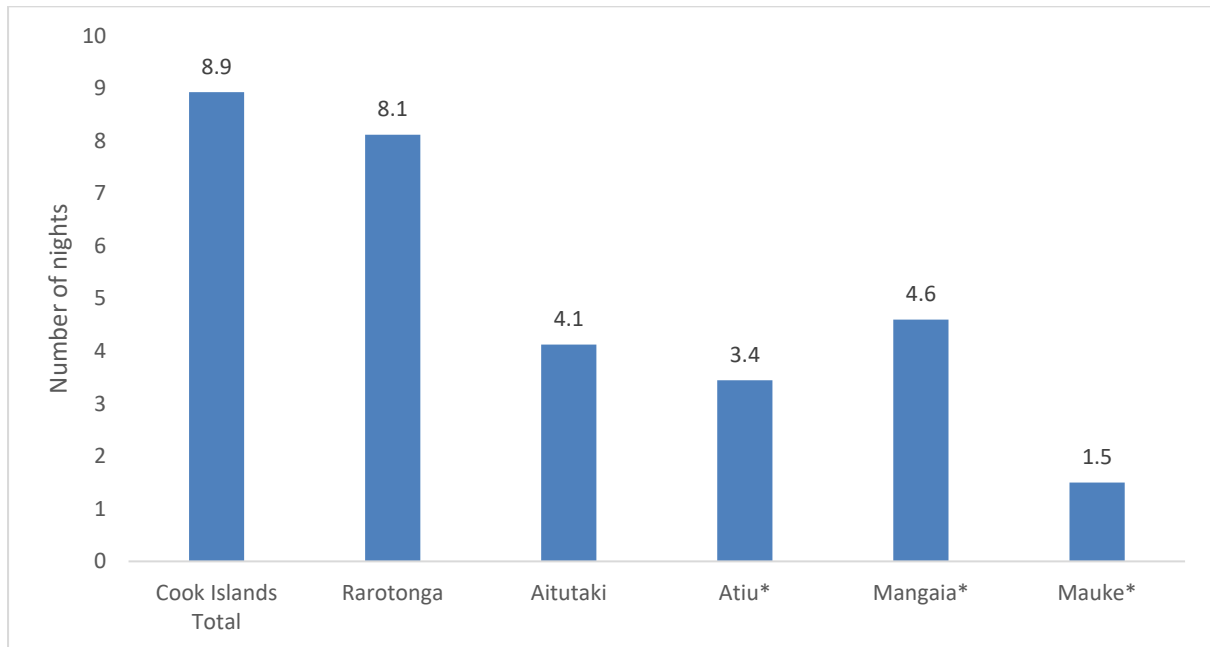
**Figure 14: Visited Islands (n = 952)**



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

The average length of stay on Rarotonga is 8.1 nights (Figure 15). For the visitors that went to Aitutaki, the average number of nights spent on the island itself is 4.1. It should be noted that sample sizes for Atiu, Mauke and Mangaia are relatively small.

**Figure 15: Average length of stay in the Cook Islands and on each island (n = 2-921)**

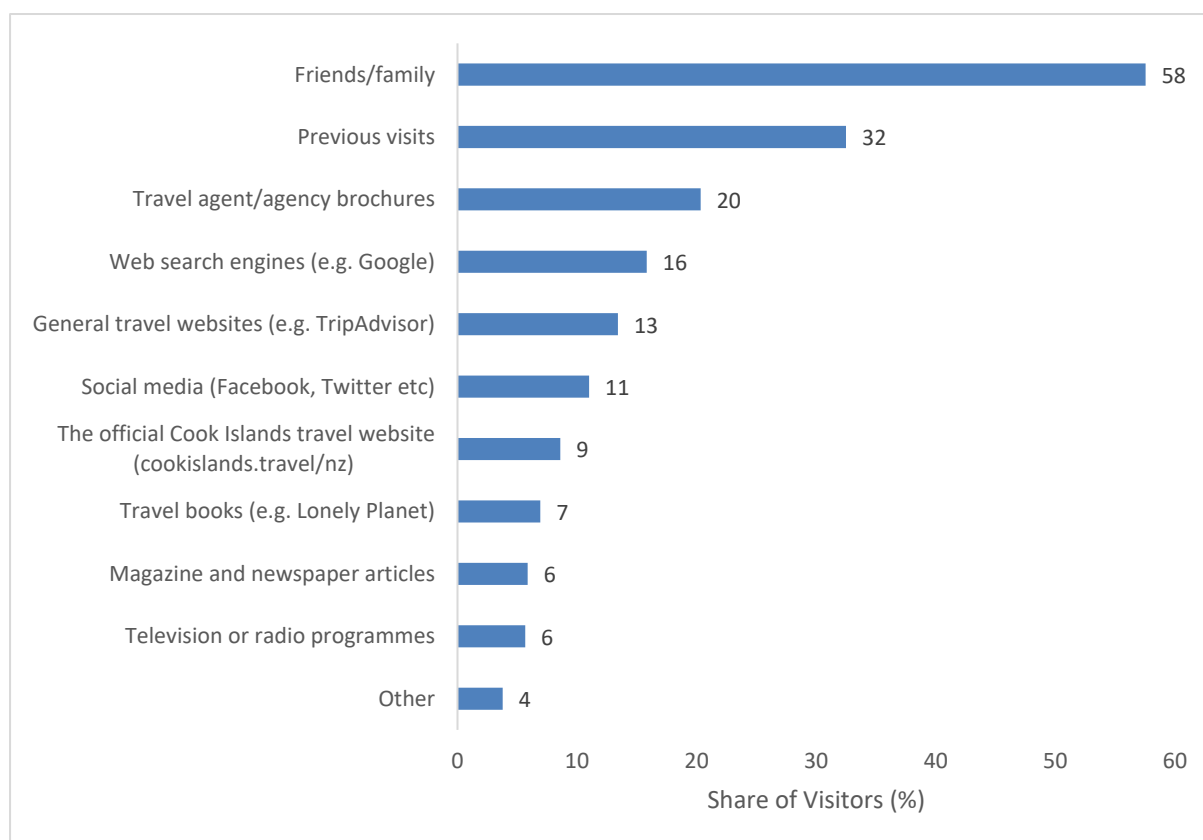


Note: \*n≤9

## Information Sources and Purchasing Behaviour

Participants were asked how they had found out about the Cook Islands as a holiday destination for this trip (Figure 16). Nearly three in five (58%) respondents ranked word of mouth from friends and family members as the most important influence, followed by previous experience (32%). Travel agents/agency brochures (20%), web search engines (e.g. Google) (16%), general travel websites (e.g. TripAdvisor) (13%), social media (Facebook, Twitter etc) (11%), and the official Cook Islands travel website (9%) played less significant roles.

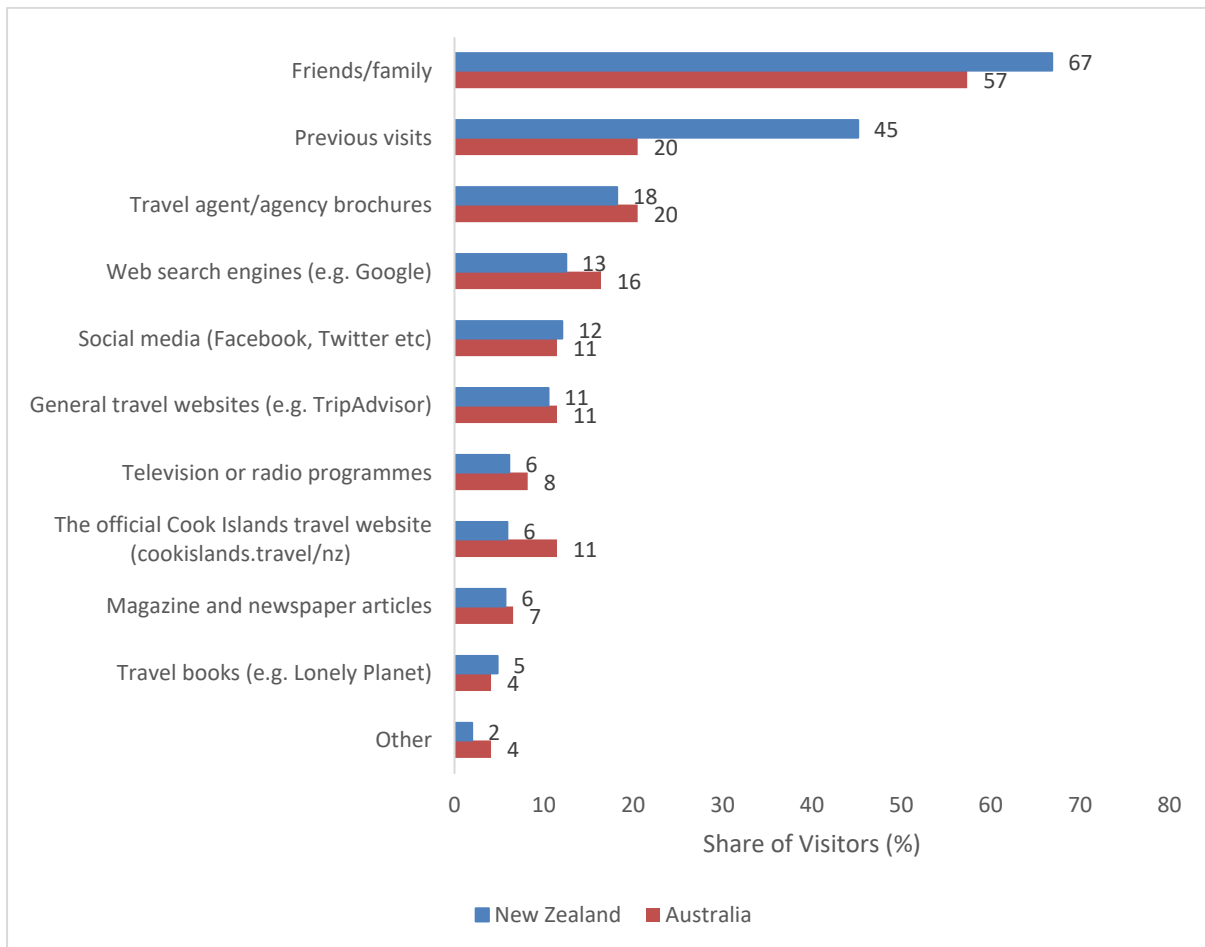
**Figure 16: How did you find out about Cook Islands as a destination (n = 954)**



*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 (67%). 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 ranked their previous visits as the most important information source (Australian visitors 20%). Australian visitors are more likely to rank the official Cook Islands travel website, web search engines (e.g. Google), travel agent/agency brochures, television or radio programmes, magazine and newspaper articles as the most important influence.

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

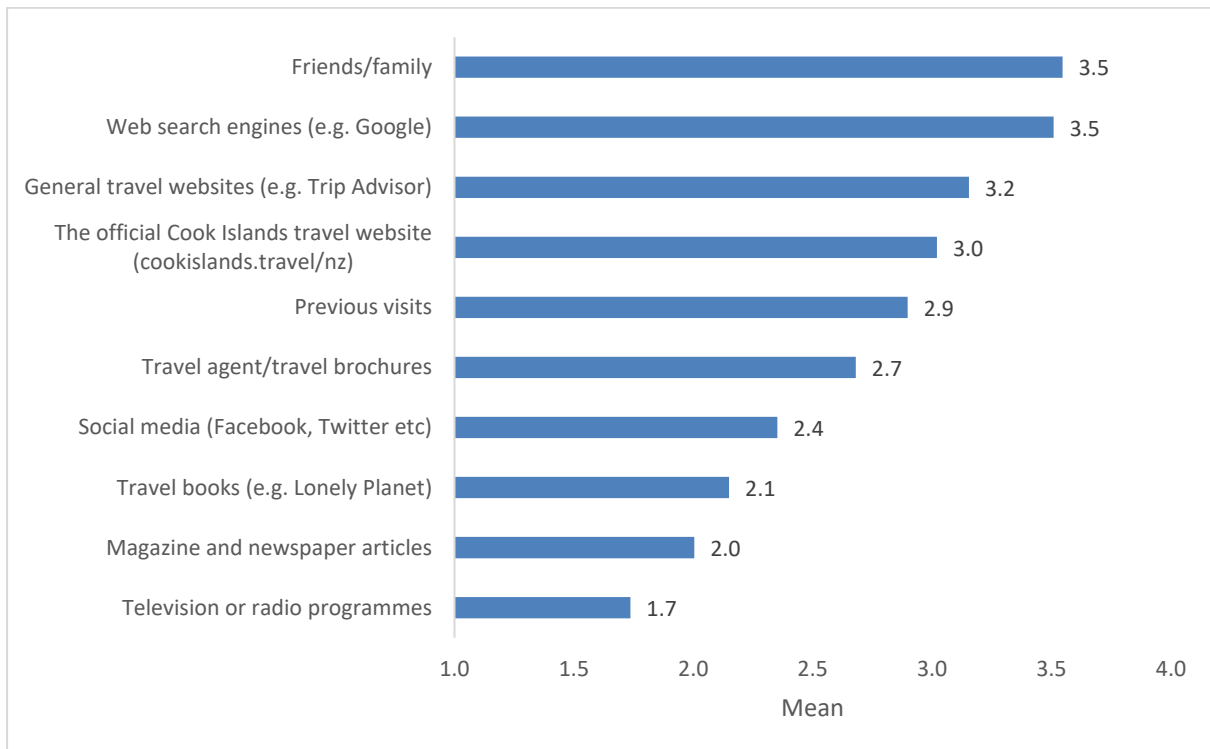


*Note: Multiple responses, therefore total does not add up to 100%*

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 (Figure 18). Other relatively highly rated information sources are general travel websites (e.g. Trip Advisor) (3.0), previous visits (2.9), and travel agent/agency brochures (2.7).

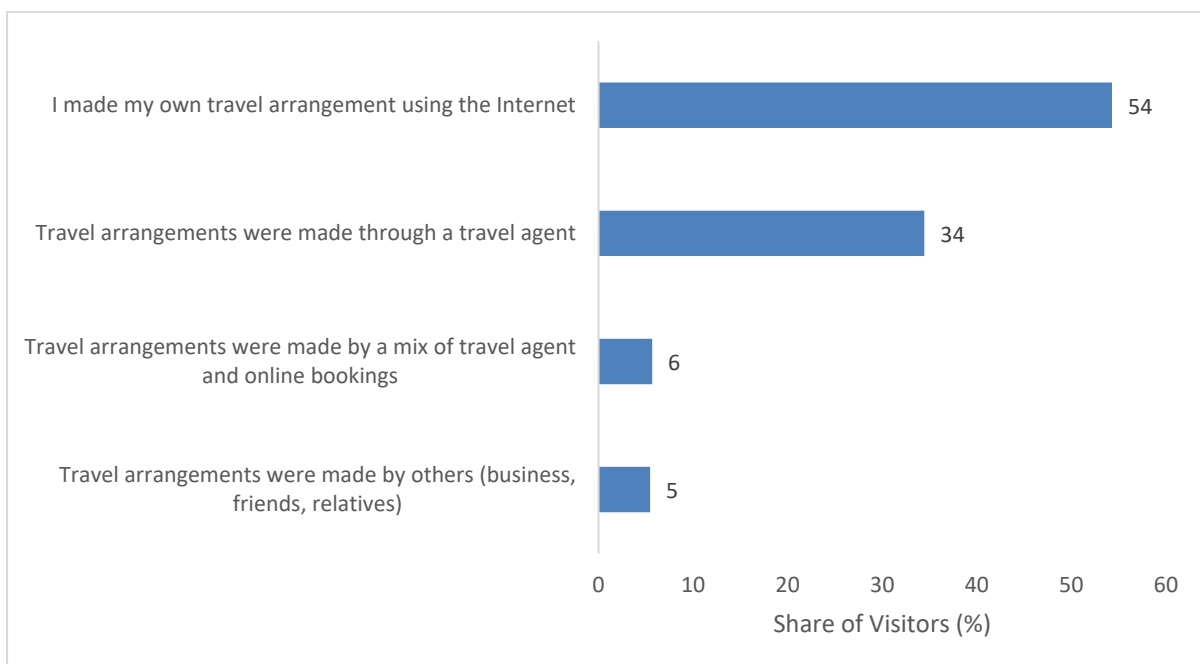


**Figure 18: Importance of information source used when planning your trip (n = 858)**



Over half of visitors surveyed (54%) made their own travel purchase through online websites (Figure 19). A smaller group (34%) of visitors surveyed used the travel agent, followed by 6% of visitors who relied on a mix of travel agent and online bookings. Five percent of visitors had their travel paid organised and paid directly by others (5%).

**Figure 19: How did you purchase your travel to the Cook Islands (n = 952)**

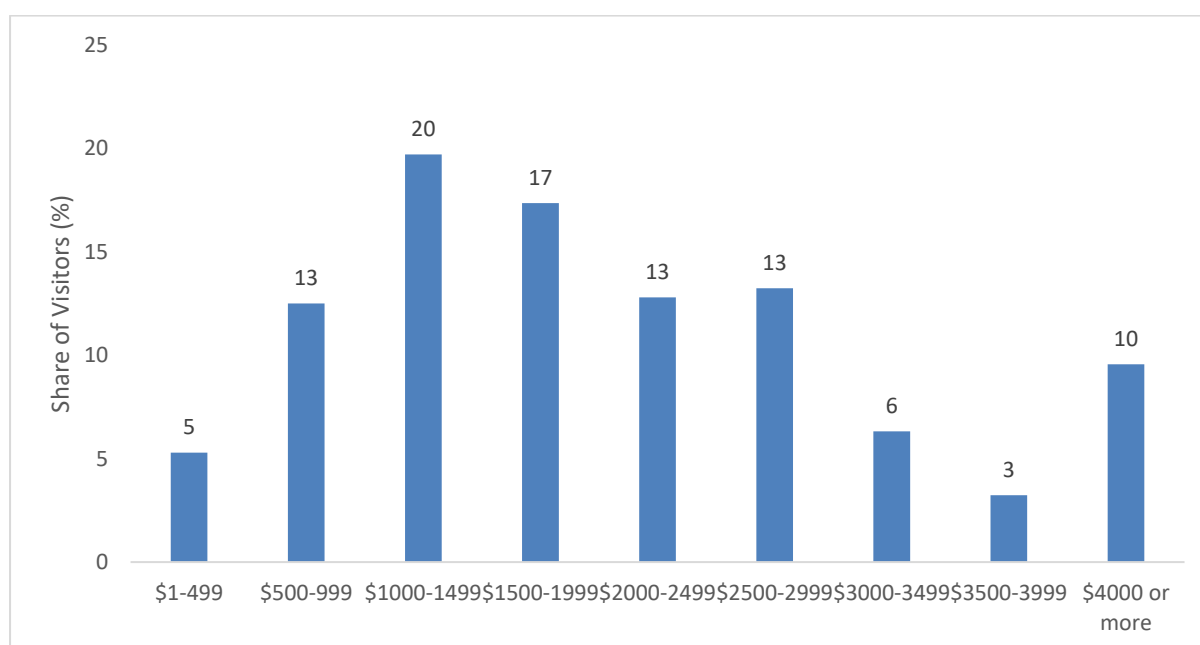


## Visitor Expenditure

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: 1,957 people comprising 1,756 adults and 201 children.

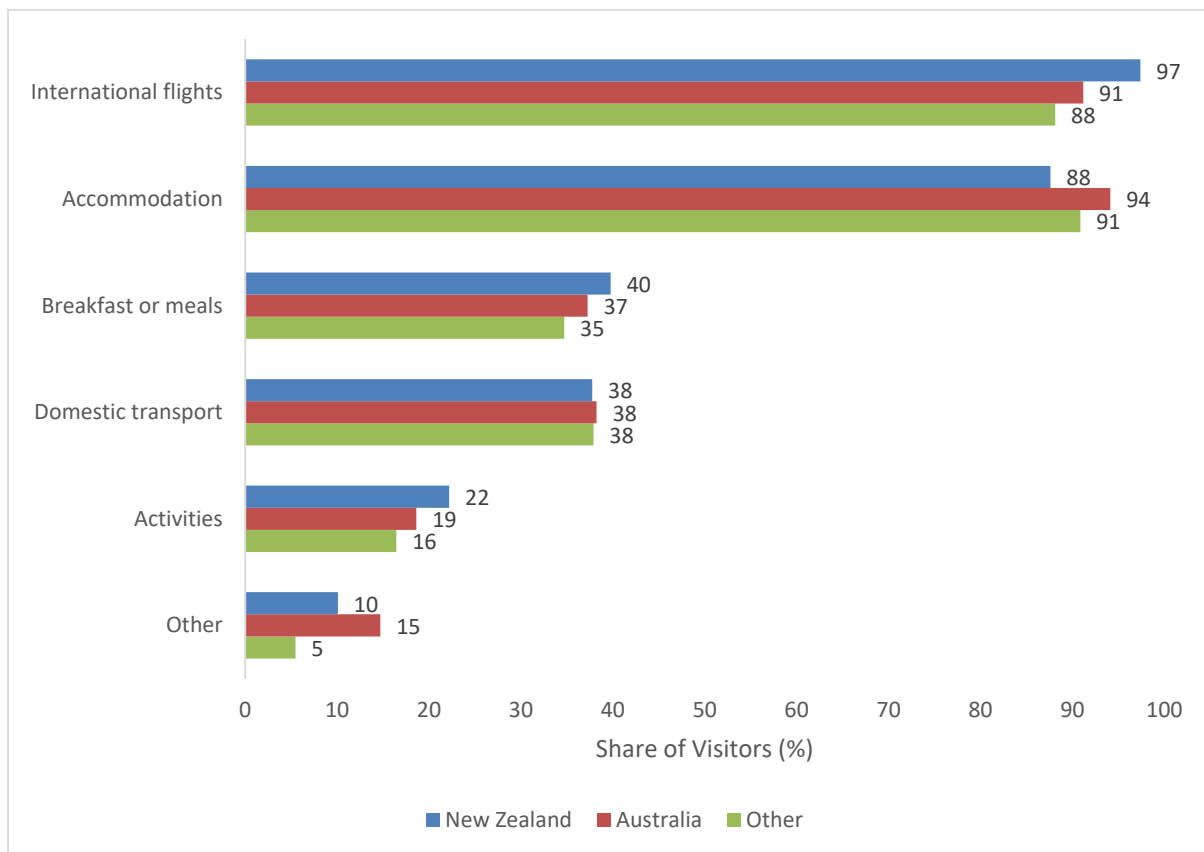
On average, visitors to the Cook Islands spend NZ\$2,197 per person prior to arrival. Half (50%) of the visitors spend between NZ\$1,000 and NZ\$2,499 prior to arrival (Figure 20). The prepaid figure per person is close to the figure from the same quarter in 2018 (NZ\$2,204) and slightly higher than 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 = 680)**



In addition to international flights and domestic transport, spending prior to arrival usually includes accommodation: in 88% of the cases for New Zealand visitors, 94% for Australian visitors, and for 91% of visitors from other countries (Figure 21). Over one third of visitors prepaid for breakfast and meals prior to arrival (40% for New Zealand, 37% of Australian visitors, and for 35% 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, we estimate that 80% flows back to local operators. In total this means that for every pre-paid dollar, 40 cents flows to the Cook Islands. We estimate that the pre-paid spend figure per day flowing back to the local economy is NZ\$99 and for the average total visit is NZ\$879 (8.9 nights).

The total spend per visitor per day while in the Cook Islands (excluding any pre-paid expenditure) is NZ\$162 (Table 1). This figure is higher than the overall spend figure for 2017/18 (NZ\$149) and very close to the same figure from the 3<sup>rd</sup> quarter in 2018 (NZ\$163). The majority of money spent locally is on accommodation (40%), restaurants, cafes and bars (21%), and shopping (8%). These per person expenditure figures are based on 954 survey responses covering a total of 2,005 people (1,779 adults and 226 children).

By multiplying daily spend by the average stay (8.9 nights) we can see that spend per person per visit to the Cook Islands is on average NZ\$1,442. The total figure of what is spent locally and what flows back to the Cook Islands from pre-paid expenses is therefore NZ\$261 per visitor per day (\$162 + \$99), or NZ\$2,321 (\$1,442 + \$879) for each visitor.

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

<b>Expenditure Items</b>	<b>n = 954</b>	
	<i>Mean (NZ\$)</i>	(% of spend)
Accommodation	65	40
Restaurant, cafes and bar	35	21
Shopping	13	8
Domestic flights	11	7
Vehicle rental	10	6
Activities	9	6
Groceries	9	5
Other	2	1
Internet	2	1
Cruising	2	1
Petrol	2	1
Public transportation	1	0
<b>Total Expenditure</b>	<b>162</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 2 provides an overview of the in-country expenditure by the visitor's country of origin. Visitors from the Australia have the highest average spend per person per day at NZ\$176. United States of America/Canada visitors spend on average at NZ\$170 per day, closely followed by European visitors (NZ\$168 per day). The New Zealand visitors during this period spent the least at NZ\$158 per day.

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

<b>Expenditure Items</b>	<b>n = 305</b>	<b>n = 289</b>	<b>n = 1107</b>	<b>n = 192</b>
	<b>USA/ Canada</b>	<b>Australia</b>	<b>New Zealand</b>	<b>Europe</b>
Accommodation	74	75	60	78
Restaurant, cafes and bar	35	35	36	35
Shopping	11	13	14	8
Vehicle rental	8	9	11	10
Activities	11	11	10	4
Domestic flights	13	16	9	16
Groceries	11	8	8	7
Other	1	1	3	2
Petrol	2	2	2	2
Cruising	1	4	2	2
Internet	2	3	2	3
Public transportation	1	1	1	1
<b>Total spend (NZ\$)</b>	<b>170</b>	<b>176</b>	<b>158</b>	<b>168</b>

Average Australian spend per person for this quarter (NZ\$176) is higher compared to the same quarter in 2018 (NZ\$160) and the 2017/18 average of NZ\$168. The average spend of

NZ\$170 for visitors from the United State of America/Canada for this period is slightly lower than the same quarter in 2018 (NZ\$174) and a little higher than the 2017/18 average of NZ\$164. European visitors spent NZ\$168 per person per day and this is higher than the same quarter in the previous year (NZ\$148) and the average for 2017/18 of NZ\$133. New Zealanders' spend of NZ\$158 per person per day is lower than the same quarter in the previous year (NZ\$164) but higher the average of \$148 for 2017/18.

## 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). Over two thirds (70%) of the visitors surveyed were 'very satisfied' with their overall experience of the Cook Islands. Very few visitors (2%) 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 = 887)**

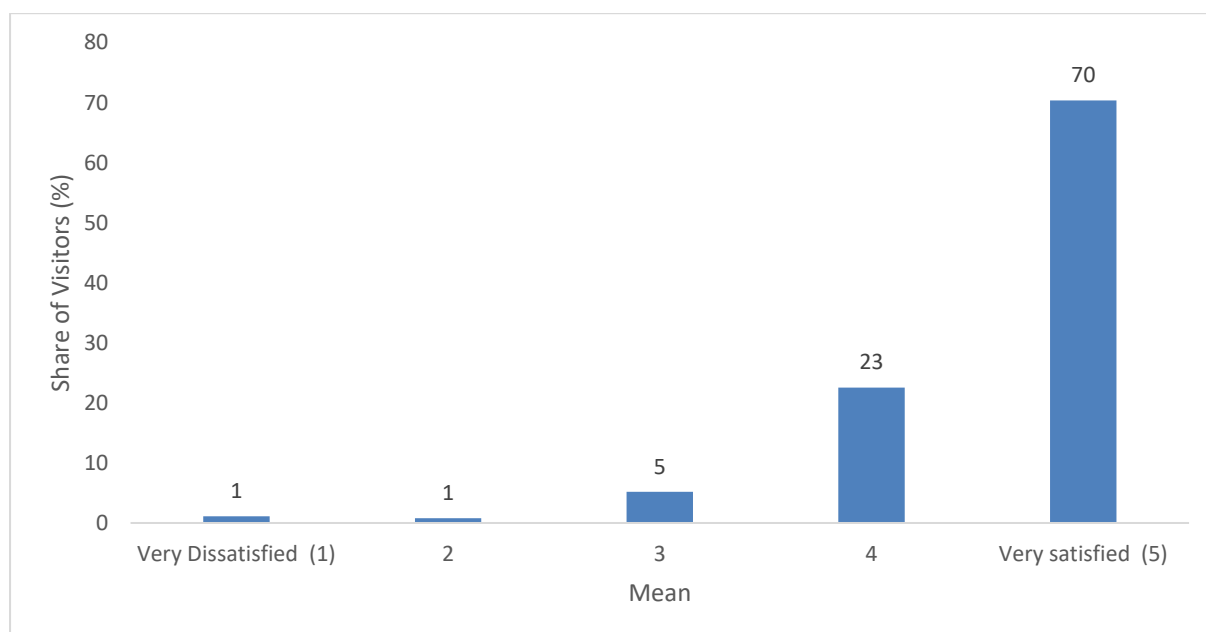
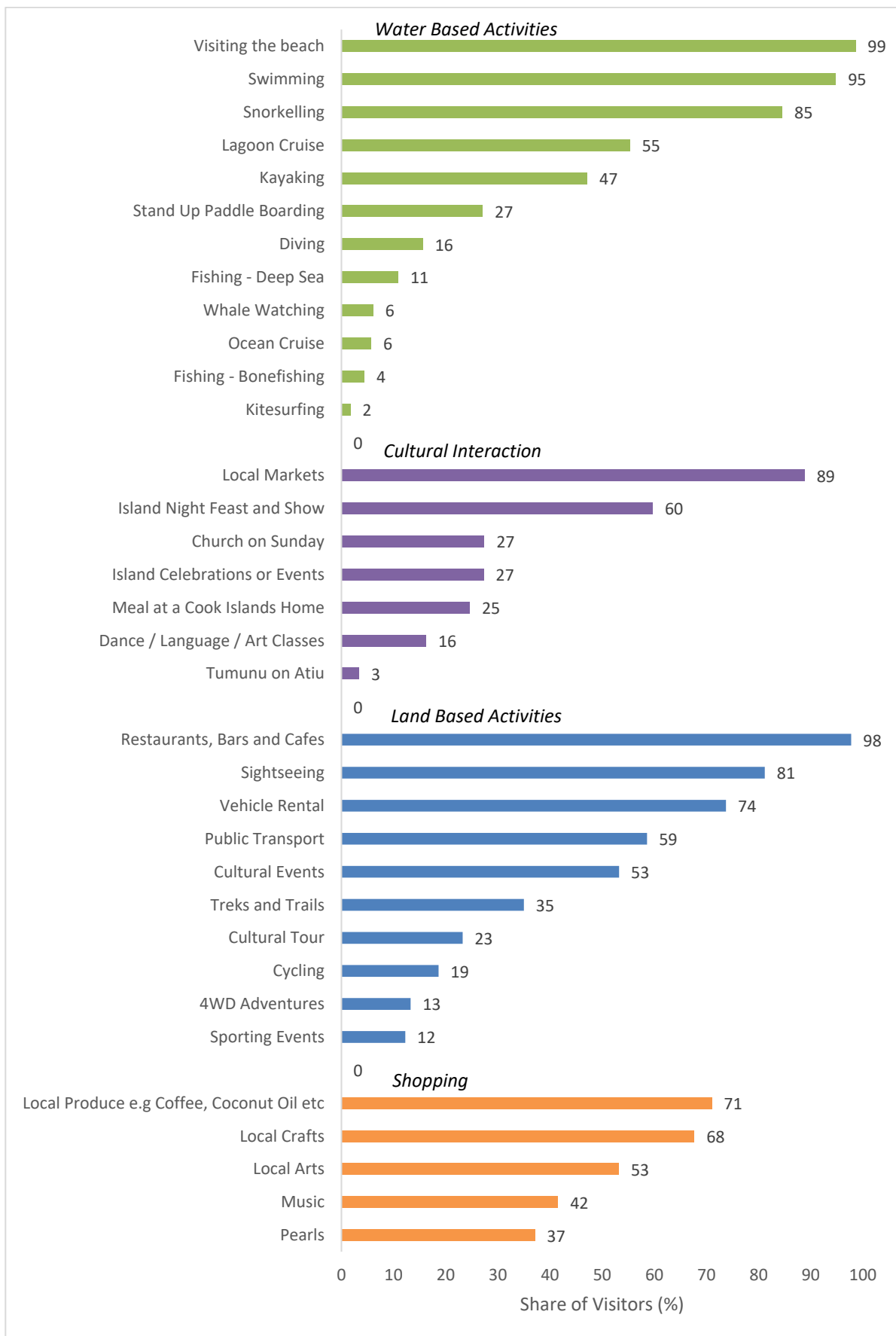


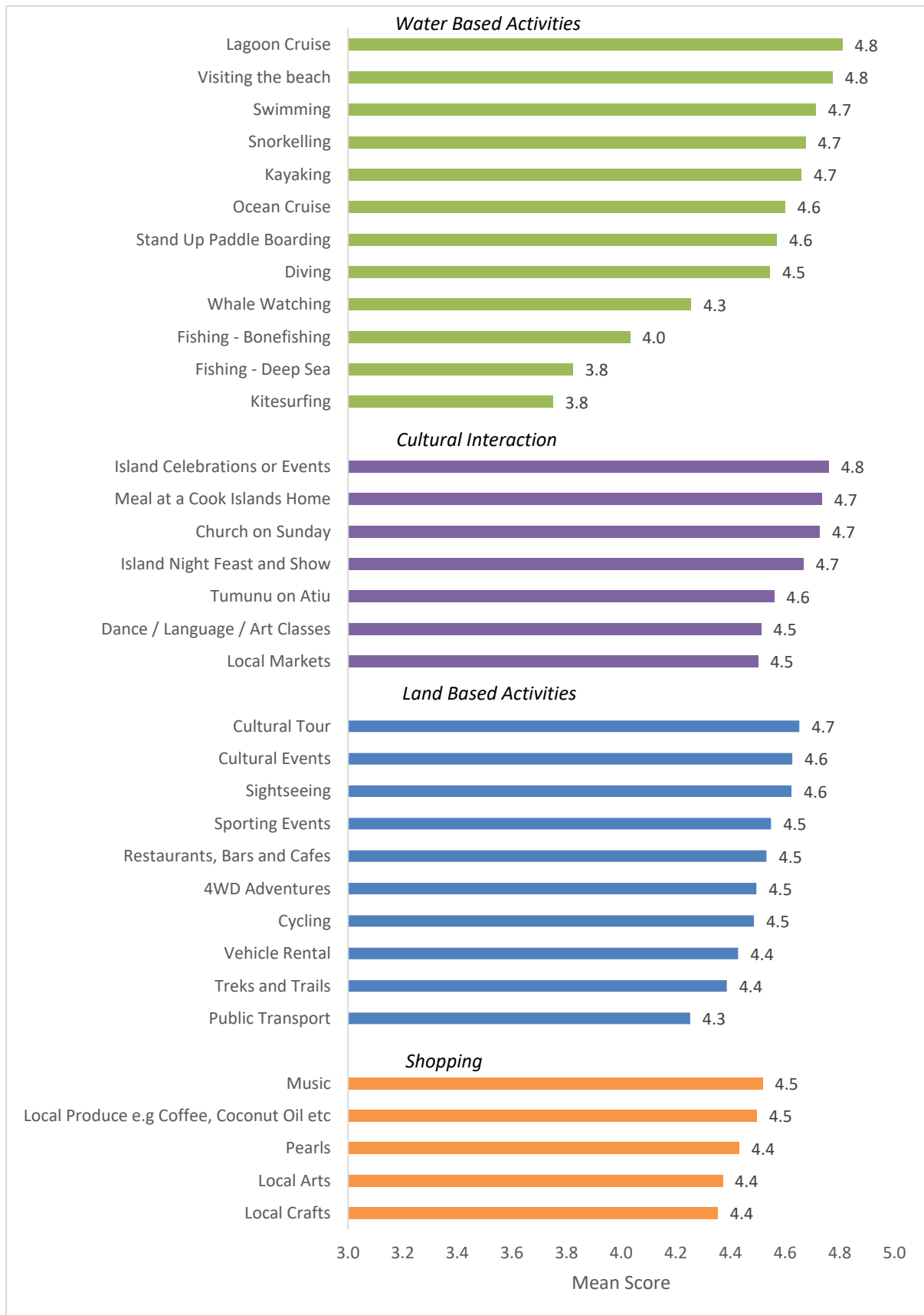
Figure 23 shows the percentage of respondents who undertook specific activities while on their visit to the Cook Islands. Almost all visitors visited a beach (99%) and at least one restaurant or café (98%) during their trip. Most of the respondents either go swimming (95%) or visit a local market (89%), and 60% of visitors experience an Island Night and Feast Show.

Visitor satisfaction is generally high for all activities undertaken (almost all registering more than 4 out of a possible high of 5 except 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 (4.4). It should be noted that some activities e.g., kitesurfing, Tumunu on Atiu, bonefishing, and ocean cruise are characterised by relatively low numbers of participants (n = 12-40).

**Figure 23: Degree of participation in activities (n range = 12-929)**



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

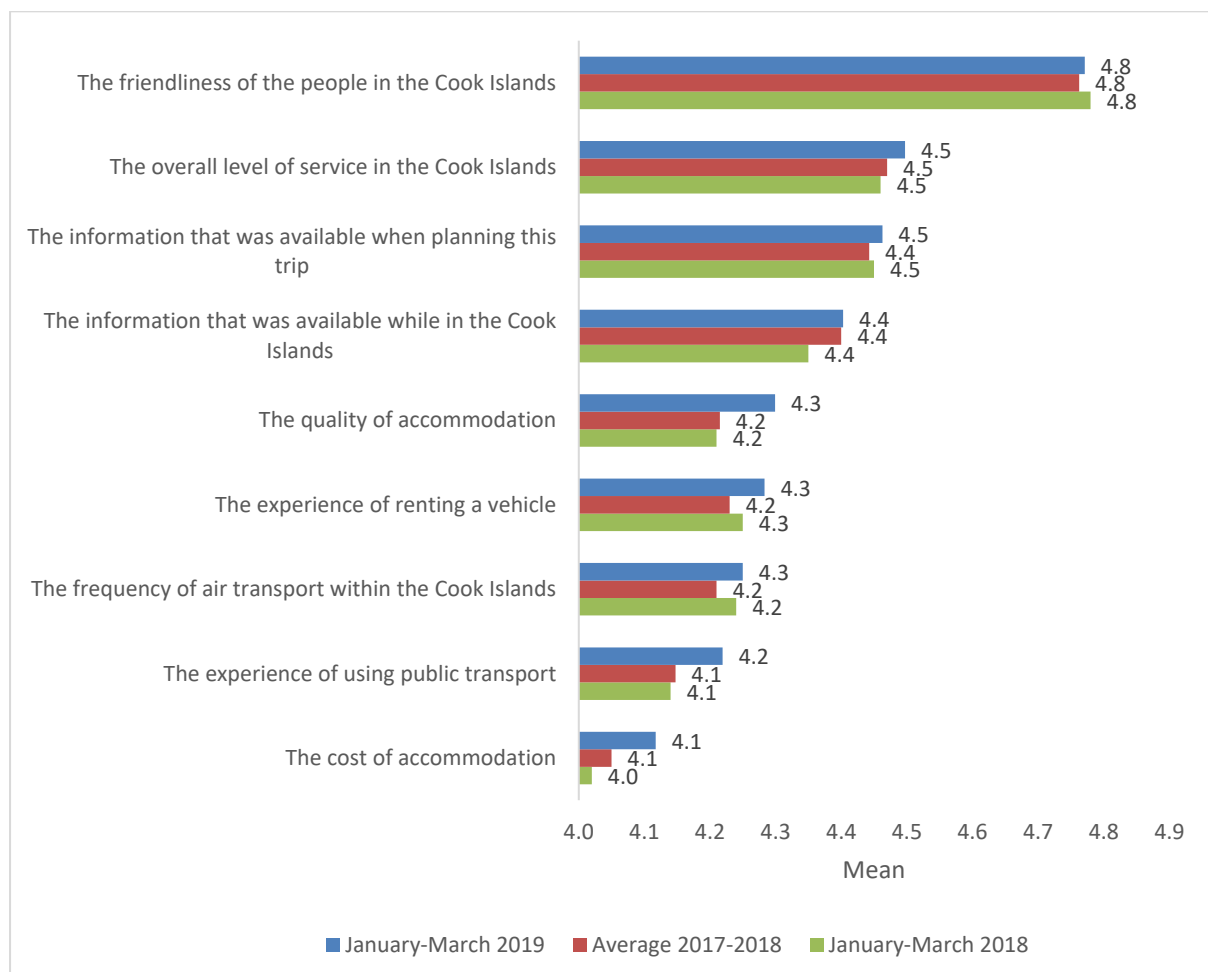




Visitors were asked to rate their level of satisfaction with nine different statements relating to their most recent visit to the Cook Islands. Responses from the period of January to March 2019 are compared to the annual average for 2017/18, and the same quarter for 2018 (Figure 25). Respondents consistently highlight the friendliness of the people in the Cook Islands.

As can be seen from Figure 25, the degree of satisfaction with the friendliness of the people in the Cook Islands, the overall level of service in the Cook Islands, and the information that was available while in the Cook Islands are the same as the annual average for 2017/18 and the same quarter for 2018. Visitor satisfaction with the information that was available when planning this trip and the experience of renting a vehicle are slightly higher than the average 2017/18 and same as the 3<sup>rd</sup> quarter in 2018. Respondent satisfaction with the quality of accommodation, the frequency of air transport within the Cook Islands, as well as the experience of using public transport are higher than both the average for 2017/2018 and the same quarter for 2018. The level of satisfaction with the cost of accommodation remains the same as the average for 2017/2018, while is slightly higher than the same quarter for 2018.

**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 (52%), the friendly and welcoming local people (44%), the tourist attractions and activities on offer (27%), and the peacefulness and relaxing atmosphere of the islands (25%). Smaller numbers of visitors mentioned aspects such as food and beverage (12%), convenience and safety (9%), un-commercial destination (7%), accommodation (6%), culture (4%), the level of service (4%), overall good experience (4%), family friends (2%), price of goods and services (1%) as well as emotional connection (1%).

**Table 3: Most appealing aspects of the Cook Islands (n=899)**

Themes	Share of respondents (%)
<b>Environment, Cleanliness &amp; weather</b>	52%
<b>Local people</b>	44%
<b>Activities, attractions and entertainment, events</b>	27%
<b>Atmosphere</b>	25%
<b>Food and beverage</b>	12%
<b>Convenience and safety</b>	9%
<b>Un-commercial</b>	7%
<b>Accommodation</b>	6%
<b>Culture</b>	4%
<b>Level of service</b>	4%
<b>Overall good experience</b>	4%
<b>Family friends</b>	2%
<b>Price of goods and services</b>	1%
<b>Emotional Connect</b>	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 over half of the respondents (52%) as the most appealing aspects for their trip. Words like ‘beautiful’, ‘clean’, ‘paradise’, ‘crystal’, and ‘warm’ 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 beautiful waters and beaches.”*

*“Beaches, snorkelling in the marine reserve on Rarotonga. Aitutuki - the whole place, quiet, laid back, weather....”*

*"The scenery, i.e. lagoon and beaches."*

*"The unbelievable beauty of the lagoons! ... The Cooks are a highlight of our round-the-world trip and we love to come back some day, even if it's such a long way from home (Holland)."*

*"Lovely clean environment."*

*"Flowers and gardens."*

*"The relaxed environment, and how clean and tidy everything was."*

*"Warm weather and the landscape."*

*"Coral reef and beach."*

*"The beaches were nice and clean as was the rest of the island, water was clear."*

*"The natural beauty, including flora, fauna, sun, sea sand, the fish."*

*"Oddly enjoyed the many stray dogs who joined us on the beach."*

*"Sunshine."*

*"Beautiful clear and warm water to swim in, beautiful warm weather."*

*"The scenery - just the most beautiful place in the world."*

*"Warm weather and warm lagoon water for swimming. Tropical fruits and island paradise views."*

*"Beautiful crystal clear water and sandy white beaches."*

*"The relaxed environment, and how clean and tidy everything was."*

*"Clear waters and air, very little litter, lots of aquatic life, clean fresh water streams (partner commented never seeing fish in stream by Anchors Rest when she was growing up, we saw fish, eels during last visit.)"*

### **Local people**

The second most significant attraction for the visitors is their interaction with local people in the Cook Islands. Forty-four percentage of the respondents (44%) 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', 'kind', 'cheerful', 'relaxed', 'amazing', 'nice', 'positive', 'authentic', 'humble', and 'genuine'. Some of the good examples included:

*"The friendliness of the locals."*

*"... friendly, helpful polite people."*

*"The lovely people and beautiful island. The locals have such pride in their properties, always lovely and tidy."*

*"People (kindness and smiles)."*

*"The genuine loveliness of the people..."*

*"The locals taking the time to interact with us was nice too."*

*"Met some wonderful Cook Island folk who gave us rides, help and directions. I liked how the people we met were so proud of their country."*

*"The people were amazing and welcoming."*

*"The humbleness of the people was absolutely beautiful."*

*"The people of the Cook Islands are beautiful, friendly and helpful. It is great to see the locals look after their properties, very proud."*

*"The women were the most appealing and attractive."*

*"People are friendly I felt very safe. It has a real family feel. No one hassles you to buy their wares."*

*"The locals have such pride in their properties, always lovely and tidy."*

*"I have visited the Cook-Islands on and off over 30 times ... the reason I come back is the people they always make you feel welcome and are friendly. I have made a lot of friends over the years and I try to visit them as many times of the year as possible. Cook island people are your greatest asset I travel to other countries as well, but the cooks have a place in our families' heart and each trip back gets better and better."*

*"The good-natured attitude of the local population."*

*"Helpful cheerful locals :)"*

*"The locals were very friendly, would love to visit again."*

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

Activities, attractions, entertainment, and events were mentioned by over a quarter (27%) of respondents as the third most appealing element of their visit to the destination. The availability of water sports including snorkelling, surfing, swimming, lagoon cruise, diving, fishing, and kayaking was the most frequently mentioned attractions. In addition, land-based activities like hiking, cross island walking, cycling, and markets were also mentioned by respondents. Moreover, wedding, church-mass, singing and dancing events, food markets,

and local shops were also mentioned frequently by visitors. Aitutaki lagoon and Muri lagoon can be said top special attractions for visitors. Comments included:

*"Incredible lagoon and abundance of snorkelling."*

*"Cycling all around the islands and photography opportunities."*

*"The cross island walk was awesome."*

*"I think that my experience swimming with whales was outstanding and will be part of me for the rest of my life. My lagoon cruise in Aitutaki was also a wonderful experience."*

*"Enjoyed riding our scooter around."*

*"Stunning Aitutaki lagoons, Informality on Rarotonga, Wonderful food on Rarotonga"*

*"The Te Vara Nui cultural night."*

*"Snorkelling at the Aroa Marine Reserve."*

*"Great location for a beach wedding."*

*"The culture and traditional dancing."*

*"Walking around and shopping in town, markets night and day."*

*"Food market was awesome."*

*"Sights, snorkelling, friendly people, local food stalls at night market."*

*"Muri Beach night markets."*

*"Aitutaki was beautiful especially sailing on the lagoon Rototahi."*

*"The tour with George around the circle of the island was really great. He gave us lots of information and I learned how to crack open a coconut, which was really fun! I also loved snorkelling among the coral in the mostly calm waters."*

### **Atmosphere**

The Cook Islands is described as a very peaceful, quiet, relaxing, and laid-back destination by respondents and this atmosphere is an appealing factor for a quarter of those surveyed (25%). 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:

*"Instant relaxation of island lifestyle."*

*"Lots of relaxation, small and tranquil."*

*"The peace and serenity."*

*"Laid back, perfect place to relax and rejuvenate."*

*"Like New Zealand in the 70s. So relaxing and no pressure."*

*"The lower key atmosphere compared to other pacific islands."*

*"Relaxed Feeling (Island Time) and a whole lot of time to do nothing."*

*"Relaxation, away from mobile phones, tranquillity, no traffic lights, rain, sun, flame trees, dogs (my son loves dogs) hospitality."*

*"The feeling of isolation."*

*"Time disappears, so relaxing, no stresses."*

*"Relaxing atmosphere, beach, weather, culture and range of activities on offer that are so vast! You can do so much or little on the holiday!!"*

*"Quiet and relaxed."*

*"Laid back, perfect place to relax and rejuvenate."*

*"Peace and quiet, being able to totally relax."*

*"The ability to be able to relax on the beach. Walk most places we wanted to go."*

### **Food and beverage**

Food and beverages was also identified as an appealing aspect by twelve percent of respondents. 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 was happily surprised by the quality of the food at the Muri Night markets. The restaurant food on both islands was very good quality."*

*"Fresh fish and the high standard of the meals."*

*"We found the hamburgers of Villis, the absolute best we've ever tasted anywhere."*

*"The wonderful flavours of fruits and food."*

*"Good takeaway restaurants."*

*"Cocktails and meals at the Manuia beach Boutique and Crown beach resort. (Within*

walking distance). Availability of Fresh fish, fresh fruit at stalls.”

“The abundance of fruit.”

“Delicious local fish.”

“Good local food and produce.”

“Many options of restaurant where you can dine at night (molti ristoranti dove alla sera si può cenare).”

“It was easy to find vegetarian food. The coffee was great.”

“... watching the sunset while drinking cocktails, sampling local food.”

“Having dinner at Waterline and watching the sun go down. Good food in most of the places we went.”

“The availability of scrumptious food, affordable meals, availability of free water from water stations.”

“The numerous restaurants and cafes and accommodation options were great.”

“The level of service & the food at every establishment we had the pleasure or visiting was second to none, and the people were beautiful both inside & out, it truly was the most amazing holiday I have had in a very long time, I have never felt so relaxed.”

### **Convenience & Safety**

The convenience and safety of the Cook Islands as a holiday destination were mentioned by 9% of respondents. They referred to currency, proximity, ease of travel around the islands, safety with low crime rate, safe speed-limits, and hassle-free services. Some tourists emphasised safety particularly feeling safe at night. Comments included:

“The ease of the destination in terms of accessibility to retail shops restaurants and natural attractions.”

“Simple holiday to arrange. NZ Dependency, NZ passport and currency. Air NZ. Direct booking with the Resort as returning visitor.”

“Every visit (this was my 16th!) I always enjoy the relaxed ambience, not having to change money, the food, the beauty of the scenery and friendliness of the people.”

“Coming from New Zealand it is a nice easy holiday to book and plan. Don't have to worry about visas, changing currency etc.”

“You land straight on a tropical island, no extra travel to other islands needed.”

“The ability to do as much or as little as we chose.”

*"The ease of getting around on foot or bus."*

*"Safe beaches."*

*"Not a long haul flight. Warm. Familiar enough. Overall friendly honest people."*

*"Same currency. English language"*

*"Coming from New Zealand it is a nice easy holiday to book and plan. Don't have to worry about visas, changing currency etc."*

### **Not too commercialised**

Seven percent (7%) of the survey participants mentioned that the lack of commercial development on the Cook Islands is one of the most appealing factors for them. They were inclined to the rustic, less commercially developed and secluded ambience of the Cook Islands. Many believed that the rural or un-Americanised experience was the salient characteristic of the destination. Comments included:

*"No American corporate food companies."*

*"It is unsophisticated and undeveloped."*

*"The quiet and low level of development on Aitutaki."*

*"The lack of crowds and the control of development. The protected lagoon was beautiful."*

*"That it was still a natural and not too many modern changes and heaps of tourists, easy to get around."*

*"It is still rural and unpopulated which we were looking for."*

*"The most attractive aspect of the Cook Islands is that it is free of big corporate companies, e.g. McDonalds, KFC, big hotel chains. The people still hold on to their culture and family values and it is important to them."*

*"Under development and lack of commercialism"*

*"Cook Islands is very unspoiled, no high rise buildings or chain hotels and restaurants. Loved the church services...."*

*"So laid back, not all commercialized like other islands!!!! Never change that please:)."*

### **Accommodation**



Six percent (6%) of respondents expressed that the accommodation they stayed in was an appealing aspect of their visit to the Cook Islands, referring to the niche location, environment, luxury, and in-house restaurant and cafes, and the friendly and supportive staff. Comments included:

*"The accommodation was phenomenal."*

*"The accommodation, service, food and beach resources were excellent. The Fijian staff provided outstanding service and were super friendly and helpful."*

*"We stayed at the Kenosha Villas and Ire's apartment villas in Muri and it was absolutely the high light of our trip. Beautiful accommodation just added value to being in paradise. The Koki Lagoon Cruise was awesome the staff were absolutely friendly and supportive."*

*"Relaxed, unspoiled feeling of the island, yet amenities, accommodations and services that made my trip enjoyable."*

*"Our resort was wonderful."*

### **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 art, sacraments, religion and other cultural aspects shape lives of the local indigenous community of the islands. The unique local people and their culture is something that appeals:

*"Civic pride."*

*"The culture and its freedom place to enjoy and relax."*

*"Spirituality."*

*"How the traditional funeral is in the Cook Islands."*

*"Loved the church services."*

*"The people of Cook Island are friendly and nice warm and welcoming. You have a great culture."*

*"Although being tourism driven in many aspects. I love the fact that it still upholds its own traditions and customs making the island unique."*

*"The culture and traditional dancing."*

*"Culture never change and are one of the proudest."*

### **Level of service**

Four percent (4%) 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 appreciated the 'friendly', 'courteous' and 'helpful' local staff. The quality of service at the accommodations, restaurants, and resort also won recognition from some visitors. Comments included:

*"Warm welcome at the airport was lovely."*

*"the venue including the superb staff made for an amazing holiday."*

*"Airline service worked out well. The people and service staff were very friendly."*

*"The friendliness of all of the people, especially on Aitu!!!! We really enjoyed our dinners with Roger and Kura!! Loved the personal treatment of our guides."*

*"Incredible staff at the Resort, from front desk to housekeeping to greens keepers."*

*"The level of service & the food at every establishment we had the pleasure or visiting was second to none, and the people were beautiful both inside & out, it truly was the most amazing holiday i have had in a very long time, I had never felt so relaxed."*

### **Overall good experience**

Four percent (4%) of visitors surveyed focused on their overall experience when discussing appealing factors. Comments such as 'everything', 'wholeness' and 'it was all so amazing' demonstrated their focus on their overall experiences. Comments included:

*"Everything was just absolutely amazing! Would love to go back."*

*"Everything, it was the best experience/holiday I have ever had."*

*"The whole experience."*

*"We found everything about our trip to be 100% enjoyable, we came to celebrate my birthday & also to catch up with friends from the Cook Island we had not seen for many years."*

*"The people, the weather, the beautiful lagoon, the food, just loved the place in general."*

*"My wife and I have been to the Cook Islands on a number of occasions, we wanted to share our experience with our friends, so I organised the whole trip. They were not disappointed. We all had an excellent holiday. Now we are organising taking our whanau to the Cook Islands."*

### **Family and friends**

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

*"I met my daughter at Rarotonga for a few days relaxation. Fantastic. Want to go back!"*

*"We had a holiday based around the wedding, and being with friends and family from around the world rather than too many tourist activities."*

*"We have been to the Cook Islands 14 times in the last 10 years and have family and friends living there (even though neither of us are Cook Islanders). We love it and it is like a home away from home."*

### **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:

*"The clockwise and anticlockwise bus was cheap and easy to use."*

*"Being able to take the kids to the Nautilus for \$35 to swim in a nice pool."*

*"Affordable pricing for meals and drinks."*

*"Costs were very reasonable."*

*"Good value."*

### **Emotional Connection**

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

*"The slow pace we were there 25years ago this time it was our 50th wedding anniversary."*

*"We had a lovely honeymoon."*

*"The friendly people, the wonderful music of the church service in Arorangi, the beauty of the island. This is my 20th visit and I consider Rarotonga as my second home! Also, Jake is a national treasure greeting and saying come again as we leave."*

*"Finally seeing where my family came from."*

## 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, facilities and infrastructures, price of goods and services, rubbish and natural environment care, stray animals and mosquitos, poor weather, accommodation through to disappointment with the safety, too touristy, and lack of information.

**Table 4: Least appealing aspects of the Cook Islands (n=823)**

Themes	Share of respondents (%)*
Public services, facilities and infrastructure	17%
Price of good and service	12%
Rubbish and natural environment care	10%
Stray animals and mosquitos	9%
Poor weather	8%
Accommodation	7%
Attractions and activities	6%
Food and beverage	6%
Customer service	4%
Local people	3%
Flight related issues	3%
Rental cars or scooters	3%
Safety	2%
Too touristy	2%
Lack of information	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***

Seventeen percent of respondents considered the destination’s public services and facilities to be the least appealing aspects of their Cook Islands experience. Most comments focused on road conditions, limited public transport, poor internet connection, ATM availability, and toilets facilities. Comments included:

*“The roads were very bumpy with a lot of pot holes.”*

*“Roading was pretty bad. Some major potholes especially around the Southern part of the island.”*

*“The inaccuracy of the bus timetable.”*

*“The terrible public transportation. It was unsafe and unreliable.”*

*“Lack of footpaths.”*

*"The main road around Rarotonga could do with some major maintenance work."*

*"Condition of the main road. Somewhat difficult internet connections/access."*

*"1. Exorbitantly high ATM fees. 2. No international phone and data packages available with my local phone company, so forced to buy a local SIM card."*

*"Internet service was limited and somewhat expensive."*

*"Lack of public toilets especially at beach."*

*"Local toilets kept clean."*

*"Not enough light on the streets at night and no place to go so it was quite dangerous."*

*"Bad road conditions for scooters."*

*"I wish the bus was more available."*

*"Difficulty (and expense) of having consistent internet access. I was prepared for this based on travel advice I found on when researching the trip, and so I planned ahead to not need much internet use (e.g. I printed off a guide for the cross island trek prior to arriving in Rarotonga, booked activities online before arriving in Rarotonga)."*

*"Abandoned properties."*

*"Lack of maintenance of buildings, roads and rubbish e.g. old cars, lying around. The country appeared much poorer than I expected."*

*"The disco bus is REALLY annoying."*

*"Pot holes made driving a bit dangerous at times whilst on a scooter."*

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

Twelve percent of the respondents stated that the least appealing part of their visit was the price of goods and services with comments regarding the cost of food, accommodation, internet, transportation. Key words that dominated the responses included 'costly', 'expensive', and 'overpriced'. Comments included:

*"Lack of cheap places to eat after say 4pm. Horrendously expensive air travel to other islands which made it impossible for me to go to any. Very sad I didn't get to see Aitutaki in particular."*

*"So expensive to fly to Aitutaki."*

*"We would have liked to visit another island of the Cook Islands but found the added cost prohibitive."*

*"We had cooking facilities at the motel but found food expensive, vegetables not particularly fresh and not readily available."*

*"Accommodation was expensive."*

*"WiFi cost."*

*"The grocery stores are expensive. My phone bill was also insane from the data and cost of calls/texts etc."*

*"Internet access limited and expensive. Alcohol very expensive. Not a cheap trip at all."*

*"The taxi driver grossly overcharged us for both trips to the airport, very disappointing to be taken advantage of by him."*

*"High cost of car rental and accommodation, taxi's charging per person for a fare, cost of a lagoon fishing licence."*

*"Bank ATM fees were extremely high."*

*"Fish expensive. Food expensive generally."*

*"The cost of food and goods in say the pharmacy, or the CITC were exceptionally high we found, we thought by going with an Airbnb and cooking our own meals would be less expensive, however, that isn't the case."*

*"Expensive basic needs, such as food in the grocery shops or toiletries."*

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

Rubbish and natural environment care were mentioned by ten percent of respondents as the least appealing elements of their visit to the Cook Islands. Comments mostly focused on the degradation of coral reefs, the amount of rubbish and its burning, poor condition of the lagoons and beaches, especially Muri Lagoon, plastic waste, and threatened marine life. Comments included:

*"We're very concerned about the severe decline of the health of the coral at Fruits over the last decade. Snorkelling is one of the main attractions of Rarotonga, so this is definitely a major concern for us."*

*"A lot of dead coral."*

*"Rubbish!! All over the beautiful island of Aitutaki beaches and the coral die back on the tautu side!"*

*"It does seem that the waters in the lagoon seem to be losing their crystal clear quality,*

*which is a bit disappointing.”*

*“The clear indication that the quality of the environment has been eroding: Beaches, shallow water, loads of coral, murkiness of the water, silt.”*

*“Lagoon becoming polluted and yet building carries on without controls.”*

*“Trash burning.”*

*“The litter. There was plastic and glass littering car parks and the road side on both Rarotonga and Atiu. This was causing a lot of negative comment amongst the tourists I was talking with.”*

*“Damage to the sea shore and impact of large hotels on the environment.”*

*“State of some of the areas e.g. burnt houses, rubbish.”*

*“Graffiti, rubbish, broken glass at Black Rocks.”*

*“Pop cans, water and juice bottles, and beer bottles, not being returned for a refund (as per 5 cents per bottle) which could possibly reduce such items being thrown away by the users. More knowledge given to people, locals and travellers, not to walk on the coral.”*

*“Too much rubbish everywhere. It is very sad to see that people do not care for the beaches with the amount of rubbish we saw. Travelling on the back roads also was messy with rubbish.”*

### **Stray animals and mosquitos**

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

*“The stray dogs wandering along the beaches.”*

*“I wasn't used to so many animals wandering around although they were well respected. I'm used to rescuing so this saddened me although saying that I know it's the Island way.”*

*“The dogs that pestered us on the beach and at our hotel.”*

*“Stray Dogs - When walking on the beaches or visiting the beach the amount of stray/malnourished dogs that were roaming around was unsettling. Especially those near children.”*

*"Dogs in Rarotonga. I did not enjoy strolling on the beach fearing they may attack. I had some jumping at me which was frightful."*

*"The dogs also need to be more under control."*

*"Roosters keeping me awake every night in Rarotonga."*

*"The roosters making noise at all hours of the night, not just at sunrise."*

*"The crowing roosters at 3am."*

*"I had a lot of mosquito bites."*

### **Poor weather**

Eight percent of visitors mentioned poor weather while in the Cook Islands. More specifically, visitors complained about the rain, wind, humidity and heat, but several also acknowledged that the weather was seasonal and nobody's fault. Comments included:

*"Unfortunately struck very inclement weather, swimming not great, too rough for boats to go out, quite cold and very windy, no fresh fish. Just an act of God, though. No reflection on place."*

*"Weather... it rained for 3 days straight."*

*"Unfortunately, we had a few days of very heavy rain, but it was still warm and didn't ruin our holiday. Hard to predict the weather!"*

*"Unfortunately, we were very unlucky with the weather due to a storm, including lightning and thunder, for most of the time we were there."*

*"So much rain! I know can't help that."*

*"We went during rainy season - would probably avoid in the future."*

*"The heat!"*

*"Humidity probably had the largest negative impact on our enjoyment."*

*"As it rained for 3 days it curtailed our activities."*

### **Accommodation**

Seven percent of visitors surveyed mentioned their accommodation while in the Cook Islands. Visitors rated the cost of accommodation as expensive for the value received, and some also pointed out that some accommodation need an upgrade of facilities and service. Comments included:

*"The hotel was in need of refurbishment."*



*"The resort was really run down and no activities or food throughout the daytime."*

*"The standard of the resort: room and the breakfast."*

*"I would never stay at the resort unless they did some serious fixes to their rooms that was our families biggest let down."*

*"Island night evening wasn't good, very windy venue, wouldn't give my pregnant partner a blanket, partner got food poisoning, staff were extremely slow to organise a taxi for us, we had to ask 3 times over 1 hour while partner was sick outside of the Hotel. Was the Islander Hotel."*

*"Reception staff at the resort were very rude to our while party. Will definitely stay at a different accommodation provider."*

*"Some of the accommodations looked like they hadn't been updated in a long time."*

*"The 5-star accommodation wasn't 5-star. It was 3 1/2 star."*

*"Waiting to book into accommodation at 2pm when the flight arrives at 7am."*

*"The hostel was dreadful- I got charged twice the nightly rate as others staying in exactly same dorms. There was rather crap all through the rooms and general hygiene practices were so poor. The chap looking after the place barged into my room while I was sleeping once and the following day all of my possessions had been moved into another room without forewarning."*

*"Our flight was in the evening and we had to vacate our room in the morning. It was a long day not being able to get out of the heat for a rest. We feel the accommodation could have been more accommodating since no one used our room up until the time we left the hotel at 8.30 pm. We are in our late 60s and like to rest in the afternoon. Apart from that the hotel was very good. Such a pity they let us down at the end."*

### **Attractions and activities**

Seven percent of respondents mentioned attractions and activities as the least appealing aspect of their Cook Islands visit. Their concerns regarded the limited attractions and activities available, in particular the lack of cultural experiences and poor snorkelling, swimming and fishing. Some comments focused on the poor selection of shops and the fact that markets and stores close very early. Comments included:

*"Needed a few adrenaline type activities."*

*"Lack of cultural experiences and opportunities to witness culture of villages/people compared to other similar island destinations. Many of the employees at the resort were from overseas anyway. Very friendly and accommodating, excellent service but expected local people."*

*"The deep-sea fishing trip was a bit of a disaster as nobody was catching anything either on our boat or others as we all discussed our trips later. We all wondered whether it was the wrong time of the year for deep sea fishing and if so, then the charter boat people should be more up front about that?"*

*"Sad that snorkelling was not great, - perhaps due to dying coral reefs."*

*"Lack of snorkelling and marine life."*

*"Diving that was murky, rough, and eventually cancelled."*

*"Everything was closed on Sunday."*

*"The main market doesn't open every day."*

*"Stores closed too early."*

*"Just a slight lack of something to do in the evening as television is limited."*

*"Booking our tour bundle we were not told how weather dependent the activities would be and we missed going to Sunday church because of the ad hoc nature of the tours being arranged-disappointed to miss church and be sitting around waiting to see if we were to taken out or not."*

*"Cancellation of events."*

### **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:

*"My husband has severe food allergies and I don't know if we could come back because there were several places that assured him there would be no X or Y in the food and then dishes were served up to him and with ingredients that could and did make him severely ill. It wasn't a language barrier - I think there's a lack of understanding of food allergies and it meant some servers didn't think it was important or didn't care. At some places, servers lied and said an ingredient wasn't in the food when we could all see it visibly in the dish! It was a hard component of an otherwise perfect holiday."*

*"Partner got food poisoning."*

*"Finding fresh produce and meats."*

*"The price of food, the lack of selection of fresh produce."*

*"Accessibility to grocery shop without going on the bus to town."*

*"Lack of quality options, especially food."*

*“Because we planned to do the majority of our dining at our bungalow, we expected to mostly be grilling fresh fish. We tried almost daily to find fish however could not find any available and went everywhere that locals recommended. We ended up cooking frozen salmon”*

*“Lack of vegetarian food options.”*

*“Food prices were high as we cooked for ourselves most nights, but it wasn't onerous. You just have to realize that most of the food has to be imported so of course it is pricey.”*

*“Cost of groceries - seemed less expensive to eat out. Water - filling up jugs every night from the filtered tap at the gas station.”*

*“Lack of restaurant choices.”*

*“Food choices are limiting.”*

*“Restaurant menus in Rarotonga - lack of variation, the ones we visited very similar menus.”*

### **Customer service**

Four percent of respondents mentioned customer service as a least appealing aspect of their holiday in the Cook Islands. Their comments often focused on customer service at the airport, followed by complaints about the service at restaurants, accommodation and transport. Most visitors used words such as ‘slow service’, ‘long waits’, ‘rude’, ‘poor attitude’ to describe the services. Comments included:

*“Slackness of service.”*

*“The time it took to get through customs, only because it was quite warm, a small space, and everyone queuing.”*

*“It took over an hour to get out of the airport.”*

*“Service poor as although lots of smiling actually don't really understand about customer service with a preference for being laid back. Restaurants and bars are sparse in some areas of the island with little else to attract tourists.”*

*“The customer service is terrible in the town at a few cafes we visited...not very professional. The elderly at the markets service was beautiful and humbling always smiling and greeting everyone the younger generations need to follow suit.”*

*“Poor transit to hotel. Left sitting sun 40 minutes. Transit back to airport never arrived.”*

*“Also, we had airport transport booked for our flight home and they were 45 minutes late. We barely made our flight.”*

*“The airline service. Some rude airline staff.”*

### **Local people**

A small group (3%) of respondents noted that the least appealing part of their visit was their interaction with local people in the Cook Islands. Recurrent themes related to unfriendly attitudes and rudeness. Comments included:

*“People were very unhelpful, we were sent around in circles many times! I didn’t find workers very friendly or helpful and felt like all they wanted to do was take your money. This part disappointed me and my family the most.”*

*“People in town are often unfriendly.”*

*“I was treated much better by the locals when they knew I was helping at the hospital rather than just being a tourist.”*

*“Not very friendly people in the Supermarket or some of the shops.”*

*“The laziness of locals. They are not working if they don't feel like... most of the craft I saw are not made from here.”*

### **Flight related issues**

Three 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, delays or cancellations, and airport facilities. Comments included:

*“Flight times meant we had to spend a night in Rarotonga when I would have rather just gone straight to and from Aitutaki.”*

*“The time we had to depart from the airport after our flight was postponed from the day before (had to be picked up at the hotel at 1am).”*

*“The air New Zealand flight from LA does not allow a visit to the Saturday market.”*

*“Air NZ flight comes in at 7AM on a Sunday and the stores are closed to buy water and food.”*

*“Late flight to Los Angeles around midnight.”*

*“Virgin Australia lost our bags for 4 days. Not very responsive to sorting things out.”*

*“Airport - flight delayed so was there for 6hrs. Nothing to do.”*

*“That our flight to the US was cancelled out of Rarotonga - and no reason why!”*

### **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 about the process of renting vehicles, unreliable service. Comments included:

*"Rental car quality is outrageous, the cars are dirty and hardly road-safe."*

*"The scooter we had did not have very good suspension, so we felt every bump on the roads."*

*"Our car rental was a wreck, but it got us from A to B."*

*"Better info on car rentals."*

*"Difficulty in renting a scooter."*

*"The car rental agent at Avis didn't accept our valid Canadian drivers' licences and wouldn't rent us a vehicle unless we applied for a special license from police station. We decided to use bus to avoid this hassle. We found out after we left that there was no requirement to do this."*

## **Safety**

A very small percentage of visitors surveyed (2%) mentioned safety in the Cook Islands as a least appealing factor. In particular, this group referred to thefts, poor safety while on the road and problems about illnesses. Comments included:

*"The baggage handler who got into an unlocked compartment of my suitcase, between Aitutuki and Rarotonga, took my toothbrush. My mistake for leaving it open. How many others have been affected? A shame really that one or more persons can negate a lot of the positives in the Cook Islands "*

*"The level of petty crime is a major concern."*

*"Roading should take care of the pot holes on the road as these are very dangerous for scooter riders in the Cooks as they don't know the roads as well as the locals and are not aware of the dangers."*

*"The irresponsible driving of local people on motorbikes. It is when they drive on the wrong side of the road to merge into traffic."*

*"Walking on main road - don't feel safe from cars"*

*"My child witnessing another child being repeatedly hit in what I expected to be a safe environment (a 'kids club')."*

### **Too touristy**

One percent of respondents mentioned the Cook Islands as being 'too touristy', commercialised, and busy in the traffic and overdeveloped. Visitors also mentioned some negative behaviour on the part of other visitors. Comments included:

*"Too many tourists now - especially from countries other than New Zealand - who moaned and grizzled about things that they expect (e.g. ham and other cold meats for breakfast, to be able to get a meal & coffee when they arrive at their accommodation in the early hours e.g. 2am, and not enjoying the relaxed vibe of Rarotonga, and moaning if they didn't get perfect sunny days every day, like the travel brochures!)."*

*"Too much traffic."*

*"That there were a lot of tourists in some place such as Muri Beach which made us want to get out of town quickly."*

*"Cruise ship people taking over the hotel facilities were staying at."*

*"Too many people looking for cheap holidays."*

*"The overdevelopment on Rarotonga."*

*"How busy it has become. Tourism seems to have changed Rarotonga for the worst. Traffic is horrible. Native people of Rarotonga are not as happy as they have been in previous visits."*

### **Lack of information**

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

*"The absence of signs on walking trails, and information generally on walking trails and tracks."*

*"Difficult to find the end of the cross island track and Wigmore waterfall in south side due to construction and ambiguous signage."*

*"Sometimes it was had to book in for dinner and very busy, learnt to book early. More information warning about booking to going for dinner needs to be advertised more."*

*"And things closing. You need to let people know that stuff is closed on Saturdays too."*

*"We heard about the cultural festival happening by word of mouth, but it was hard to figure out the location at first, then figure out the when things started, or if indeed there was a festival moment happening. We'd not booked through an agent, so fishing the information seemed tricky."*

### ***Law and Legislation***

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

*“Changes in motor scooter laws on helmets.”*

*“Finding that due to recent changes to the CI driver licensing system, I could not renew my expiring full CI driver licence (car and motorcycle) for a further 5 or 10 year period. This major inconvenience prompts me to reconsider any future trips.”*

## 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 41% of visitors made a comment. Of those that made suggestions many focused on public services and infrastructure (18%). Others emphasized: the need for more entertainment, activities, transport (15%); making it easier to stay longer and visit more places (12%); accommodation improvements (11%); improvements to the environment/ animal care (8%); weather (7%); the availability, quality, and price of food and drinks (7%); the need for better information (7%); better value for money (6%); flights (6%); attitudes of locals and service levels (3%); others (2%); and law and legislation (1%). Comments on these themes included:

*"Enhance Internet and international communications."*

*"The odd street light in built up areas like Muri."*

*"Pot hole repairs."*

*"Need some more activities like turtle dives etc kids between 10 and 14 could do."*

*"Some adventure tours cancelled with no warning."*

*"Better organised opportunities to meet local families in their homes."*

*"Better/clearer/more accurate bus timetable."*

*"A smaller but more frequent bus going both ways would be ideal."*

*"Accommodation being more service focused than money making. Attempting to charge for items not provided."*

*"The burning of rubbish needs to be controlled."*

*"Get the stray dog issue under control."*

*"Better knowledge that food allergies are real and serious."*

*"Greater availability of fresh vegetables."*

*"More fresh seafood/restaurant choices - everything shipped in."*

*"No one can control the weather - but better information on seasons and expected rain would be helpful please if possible? Also, we knew nothing about trips to other islands, and info is not obvious or easy to find/stumble across if you do not know what to look for beforehand."*

*"Flights that arrive and leave during day or early evening, rather than in middle of night."*



## 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 that for the 2017/18 annual average and slightly higher than the identical quarter in 2018 (92%). Of the seven percent of visitors who indicated they would not want to return to the Cook Islands, the majority stated that did not to do so because of a desire to visit another destination. A few visitors said that they 'had been there and seen it all'. Some visitors commented that a holiday to the Cook Islands is relatively expensive (especially accommodation and food) and not good value for money. Other factors given for not wishing to return included a lack of activities, long distance to travel, and poor service. Comments included:

*"We are nearly 70 and there are other places we still want to visit. Fiji still our favourite Pacific destination."*

*"I want to see as many countries in this world that I can see. I loved it though!"*

*"Maybe, it is a beautiful place and we had a good time. But on the whole, we did not find it good value compared to other destinations so would probably not return."*

*"I don't think the weather is nice enough. The island is very small and it's very far away."*

*"Lovely time, but just too slow a pace and would like to have more activities."*

*"Nothing to do when it's raining and can't go to beach."*

*"Simply put, roosters etc at my windows is NOT my idea of a quiet restful holiday. Management did nothing about it."*

Half (50%) of the visitors saying they would return stated that they would definitely include the outer islands in their next visit. A further 46% 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 (90%) mentioned they would like to include 'Aitutaki'. 'Atiu' was the second most mentioned island at 38%; another 26% of visitors stated that they would like to visit Mangaia, 21% 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 a return visit to the country.

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, crowding, and concerns over a lack of environmental care.

## **Final observations**

This report shows that the Cook Islands tourism industry generally performed well during the survey period of January to March 2019. 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 remains the same as the same quarter in 2018 and it will be interesting to see if this trend is sustained for the rest of the year.

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. The level of satisfaction with public transport, the quality and cost of accommodation, as well as the information that is available has increased slightly.

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 rubbish and natural environment care in the Cook Islands.

It is vital now to build on this generally 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. The report shows that cost effective on-line research can generate information that is of value to both the tourism industry and government policy makers. As the survey continues we are able to explore in more detail the characteristics of different market segments and the overall impacts and performance associated with the industry - with several data-mining projects in train for 2019.