



The Cook Islands International Visitor Survey Report

July – September 2022

Prepared for Cook Islands Tourism Corporation

by

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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 visitors to the Cook Islands between 1st July and 30th September 2022. This is the fifth international visitor survey (IVS) report presented since the gradual reopening of borders in 2021/2022 and as such it represents an important barometer of industry performance.

The data that underpins the report is generated by an online departure survey <http://www.mycookislandsvisit.com>. There are 715 individual respondents to the survey - representing a total of 1,469 adults and 109 children in the visitor expenditure analysis (this is estimated to be approximately 4% of all visitors during the period – based on July to September 2022 visitor arrival data from the Cook Islands Statistics Office). In the report we draw comparisons between all visitors in the July to September 2019 survey period, and all visitors in July to August 2021 period.

As a result of the gradual return of longer haul international travel, the majority (90%) of visitors surveyed come from New Zealand. Visitors are well educated (65% have some form of tertiary education) with a relatively high annual household income: 56% earn over NZ\$100,000 per year, 11% over \$200,000. Well over half (58%) of visitors travel with more than one companion, solo travellers are far less common (8%).

For more than four in ten (44%) visitors surveyed this was their first trip to the Cook Islands. The main purpose of visit is holidaymaking (89%). The average length of stay in the Cook Islands is 8.3 nights. Most (84%) visitors stay ten nights or less. Twenty-two percent of visitors surveyed visited Aitutaki.

Visitor spend prior to arrival in the Cook Islands is \$2,073 per person, which is 9% higher than visitors during the July to September period in 2019 (\$1,903 per person), and also 7% higher than visitors during July to August 2021 (\$1,931). Spend while on the Cook Islands (per person per day) is \$200. This spend is 35% higher than visitors' local spend in July to September 2019 (\$148); but slightly lower than visitors in July to August 2021 (\$208).

When pre-paid spend and local spend are combined, it is estimated that each visitor brings \$2,489 to the Cook Islands economy (or approximately \$300 per day). This figure is 25% higher than visitors during the July to September 2019 period (\$1,989), but slightly lower than visitors during the July to August period in 2021 (\$2,498).

Overall visitor satisfaction levels with services and experiences in the Cook Islands remain high (mean value 4.6 out of 5). The most appealing elements are beautiful natural environment, cleanliness and weather; friendly local people; atmosphere; and activities, attractions, entertainment and events. The least appealing elements are issues with public services, facilities and infrastructure (especially the length of the waiting time at the airport), price and quality of the food and beverage, stray animals and mosquitos, accommodation,

and price of goods and services. Rubbish and care for the natural environment also features. In terms of the COVID-19 response in the Cook Islands, visitors are generally satisfied with related processes and requirements.

The desire of visitors to return to Cook Islands in the future remains strong: 94% of those surveyed state that they would come back for another visit, and 98% say they would recommend the Cook Islands to friends or family. These rates are higher than visitors during the same quarter in 2019 (93% and 97% respectively).

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Introduction

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

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

This report focuses on visitors who travelled to the Cook Islands from 1st July to 30st September 2022. Over this three-month period, 3,143 visitors were contacted by email to take part in the survey, and 715 responses were received: a conversion rate of 23%. The conversion rate for this period is the same as the July to August 2021 period (23%); but higher than the same period in 2019 (14%). These 715 responses cover a total of 1,469 adults and 109 children when we examine visitor expenditure. As the fifth IVS report produced since mid-2021 these documents provide an important barometer of industry performance during the pandemic.

This IVS report presents detailed information on:

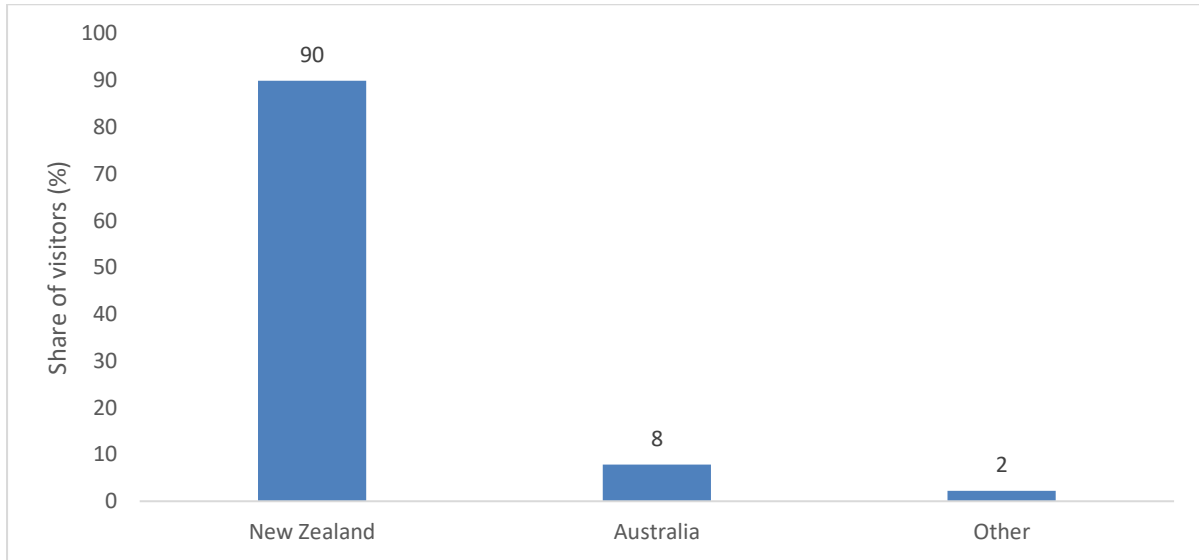
- The characteristics of visitors to the Cook Islands (age, gender, education, country of origin, income, purpose of visit, travelling companions, number of previous visits, length of stay, airline used, and islands visited)
- Information used by visitors to learn about the Cook Islands, factors influencing the travel decision making process, and booking sources
- Visitor expenditure (amount of money spent prior to arrival and while in the Cook Islands, and items of spending)
- Perceptions of COVID-19 impacts on travel and related Cook Islands policies and processes
- Visitor satisfaction: most and least appealing elements of the visit, overall satisfaction, and rating of specific activities.

Key sections of the report highlight important variations between the July-September 2022 figures and the July to August 2021, and the July-September 2019 (pre COVID-19) findings.

Visitor Characteristics

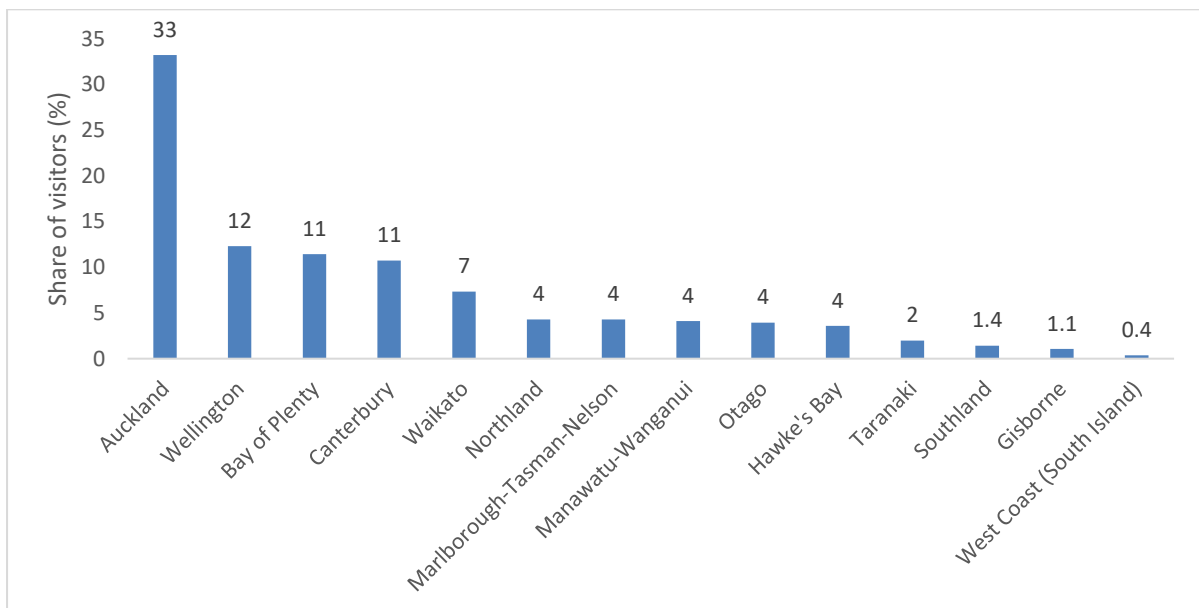
Ninety percent of the visitors surveyed come from New Zealand, followed by 8% of respondents from Australia (Figure 1). The remaining visitors originated primarily from Europe, and USA.

Figure 1: Country of origin (n = 626)



For the New Zealand market, a third of visitors are from Auckland. Wellington, Bay of Plenty, and Canterbury account for a further 34% of New Zealand visitors (Figure 2).

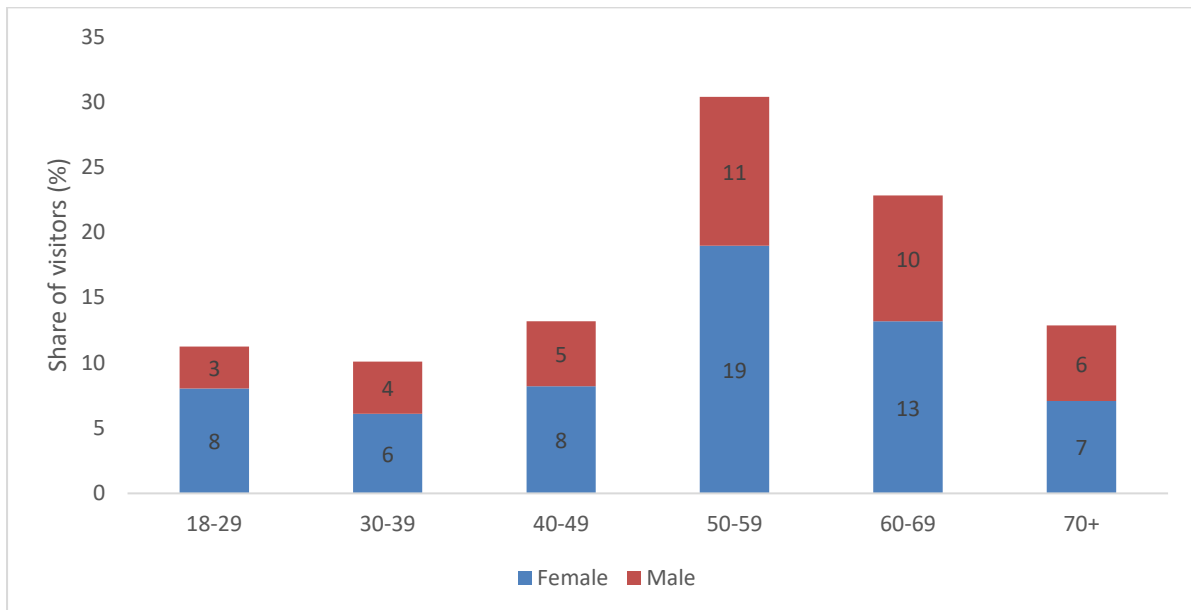
Figure 2: New Zealand visitors (n = 560)



More women (62%) than men (38%) completed the survey reflecting an ongoing tendency for women to complete surveys more readily than men. The most significant age categories are the 50 to 59 (30%) and 60 to 69 age groups (23%), followed by those aged 40 to 49 year (13%),

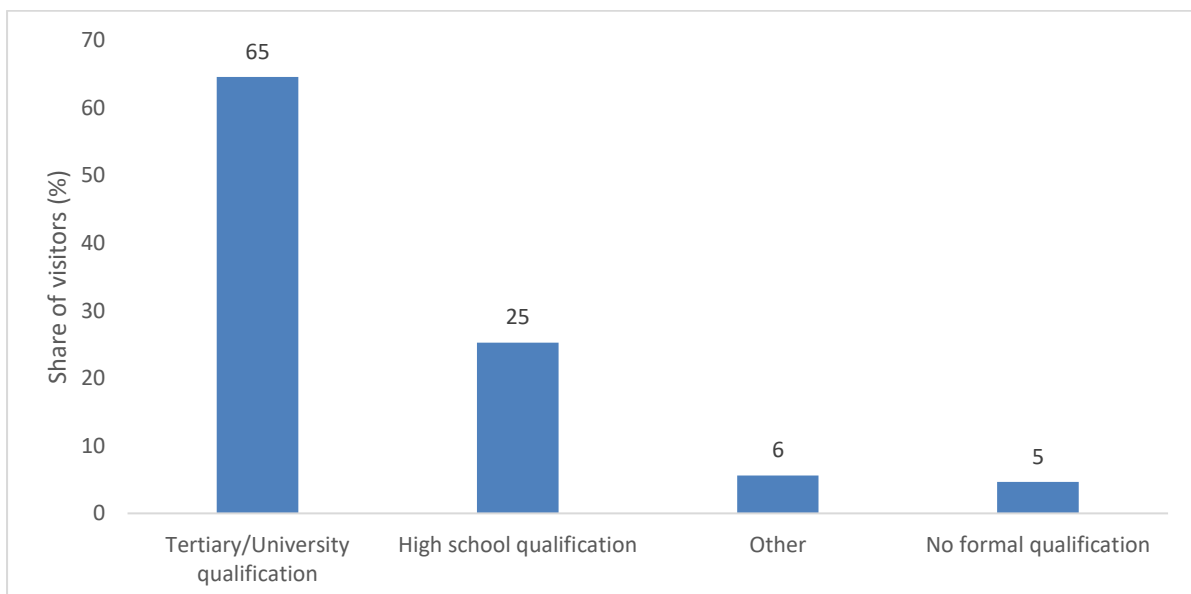
70+ (13%), 18 to 29 year (11%), and 30 to 39 year (9%) (Figure 3). Those under 18 are not surveyed for ethical reasons.

Figure 3: Distribution of age and gender (n = 630)



Visitors are well educated, with nearly two thirds (65%) of those surveyed having tertiary/university qualification, and a further 25% visitors having completed a high school education (Figure 4).

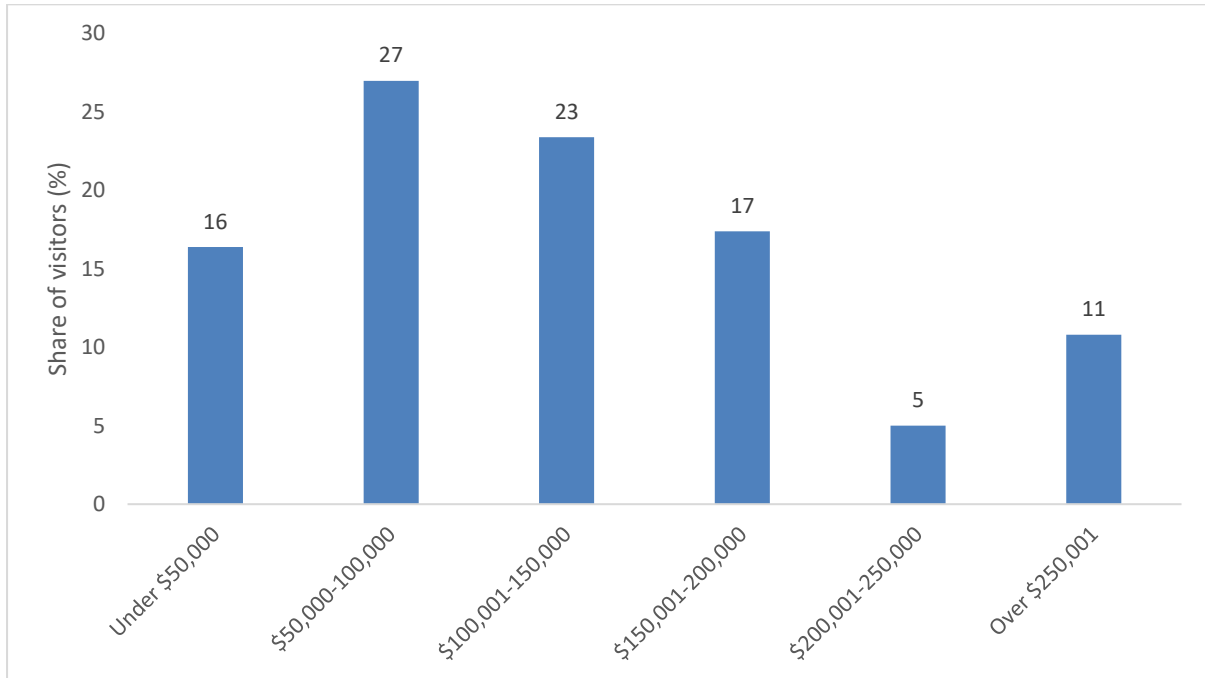
Figure 4: Highest qualification (n = 626)



Over a quarter (27%) of visitors have an annual household income of between NZ\$50,000 and NZ\$100,000. Nearly one in four (23%) respondents surveyed earn between NZ\$100,001 and NZ\$150,000. A third of respondents have a household income of over NZ\$150,000 per year

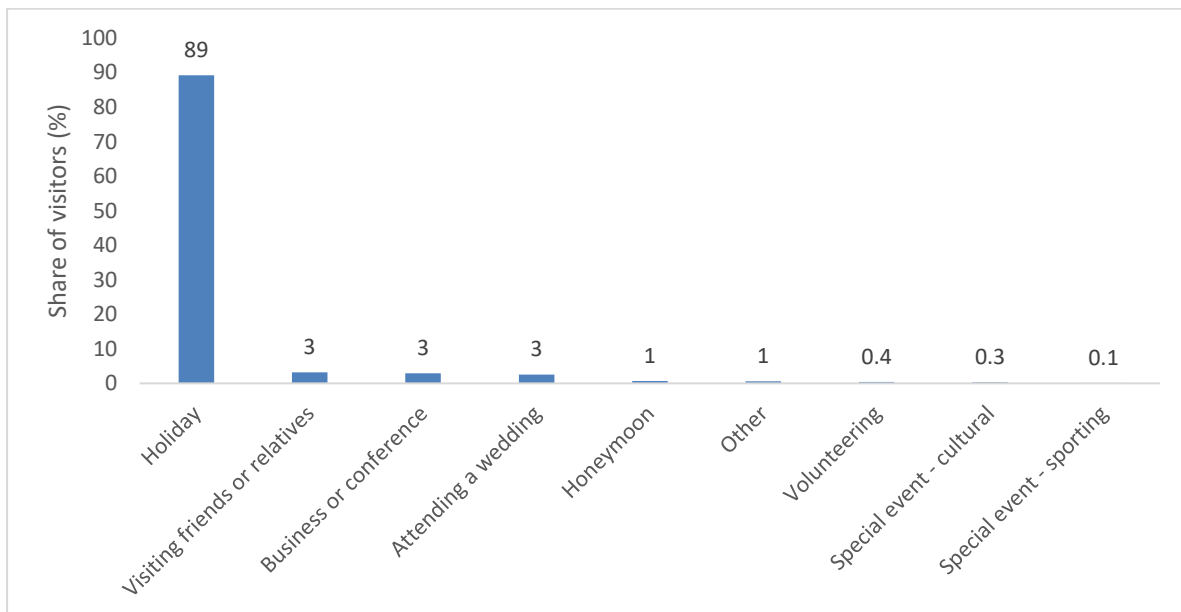
(Figure 5). The average household income in July-September 2022 is NZ\$141,284. By way of contrast, the average household income in July to August 2021 was higher at NZ\$172,942 but the July to September 2019 figure was considerably lower at NZ\$127,651.

Figure 5: Annual household income in NZD (n = 500)



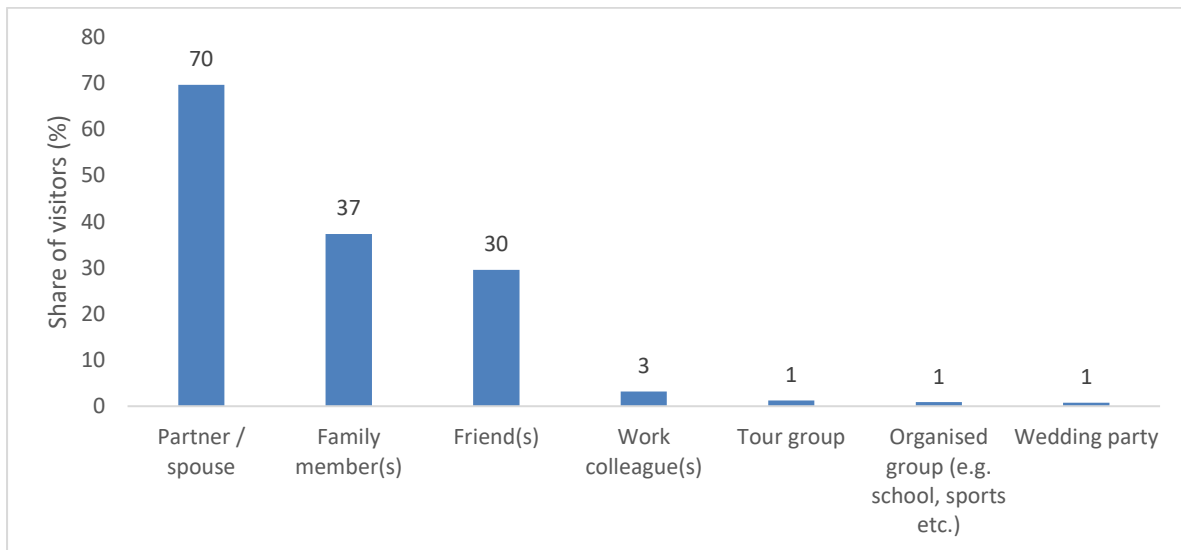
The predominant purpose of visit to the Cook Islands is for a holiday (89%) (Figure 6). Other reasons given include visiting friends or relatives (3%), business and conference activities, and attending a wedding (3% respectively).

Figure 6: Main purpose of visit (n = 715)



The majority (92%) of visitors travel with one or more companions. Among this group, most travel to the Cook Islands with a partner or spouse (70%). Visitors also travel with other family members (37%), with friends (30%), or with colleagues (3%). Those travelling as part of a tour group, a wedding party or in an organised group represent smaller shares of the sample (Figure 7). Wedding party visitation remains considerably lower than pre-pandemic levels (xx% of visitors in 2019).

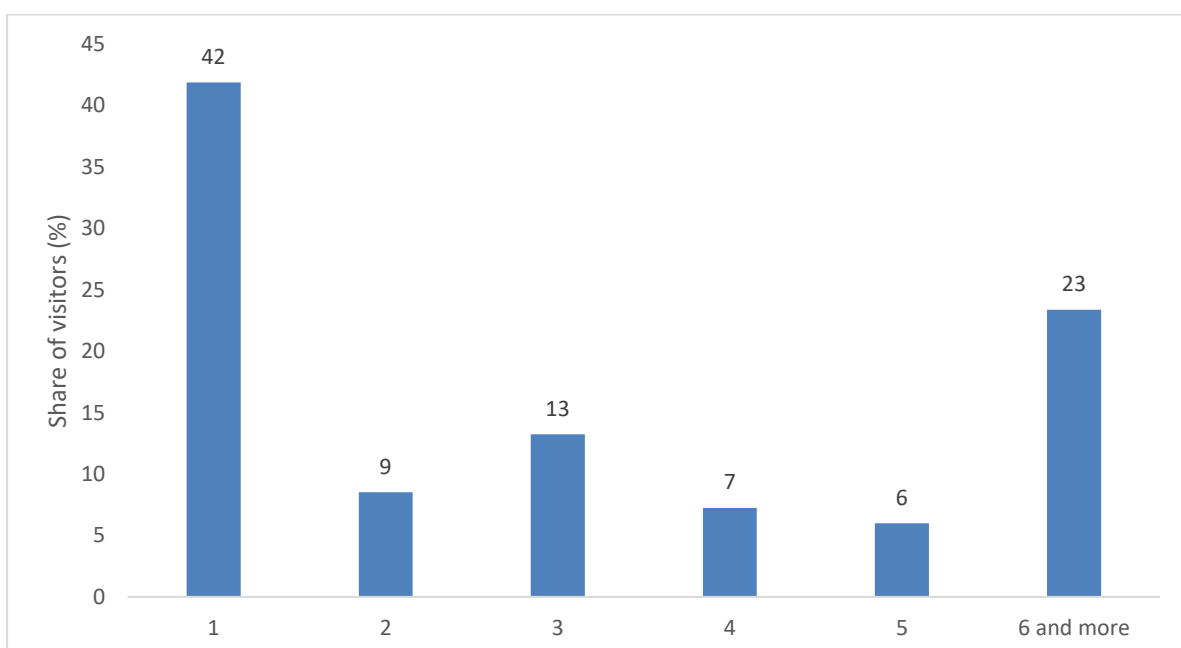
Figure 7: Travelling with whom? (n = 656)



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

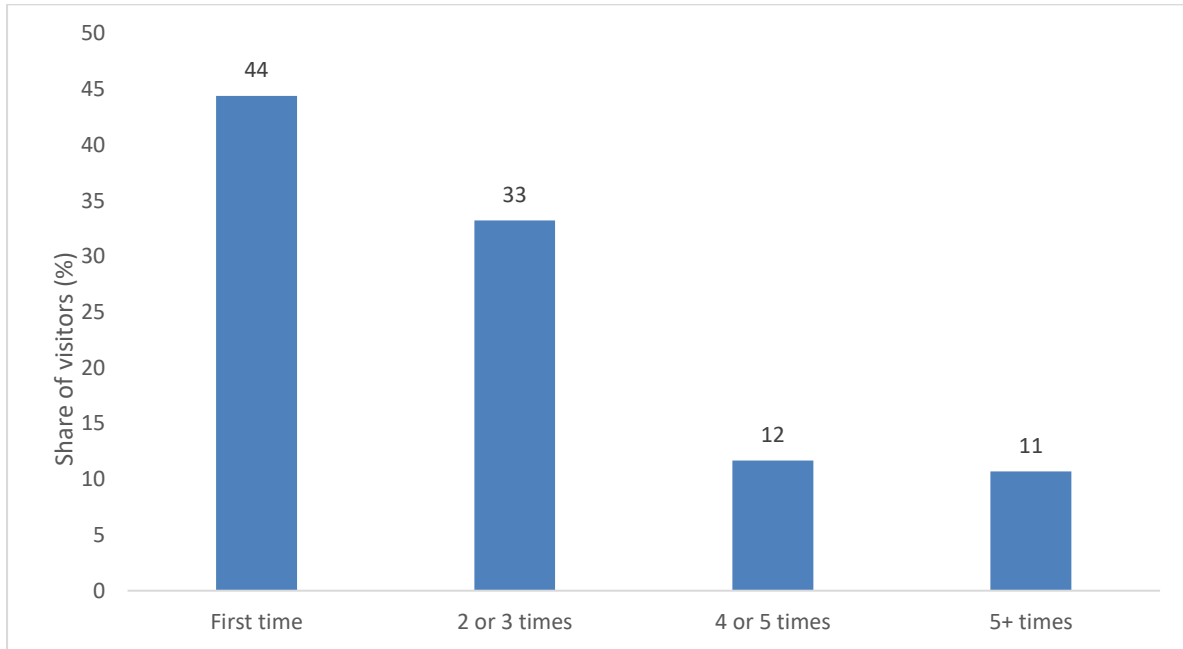
Breaking this down further, if we exclude those travelling alone, over four in ten visitors (42%) travelled with one companion on their visit to the Cook Islands (Figure 8), and nearly a third of visitors (29%) travelled with two to four people.

Figure 8: Number of companions on trip (excluding those travelling alone) (n = 552)



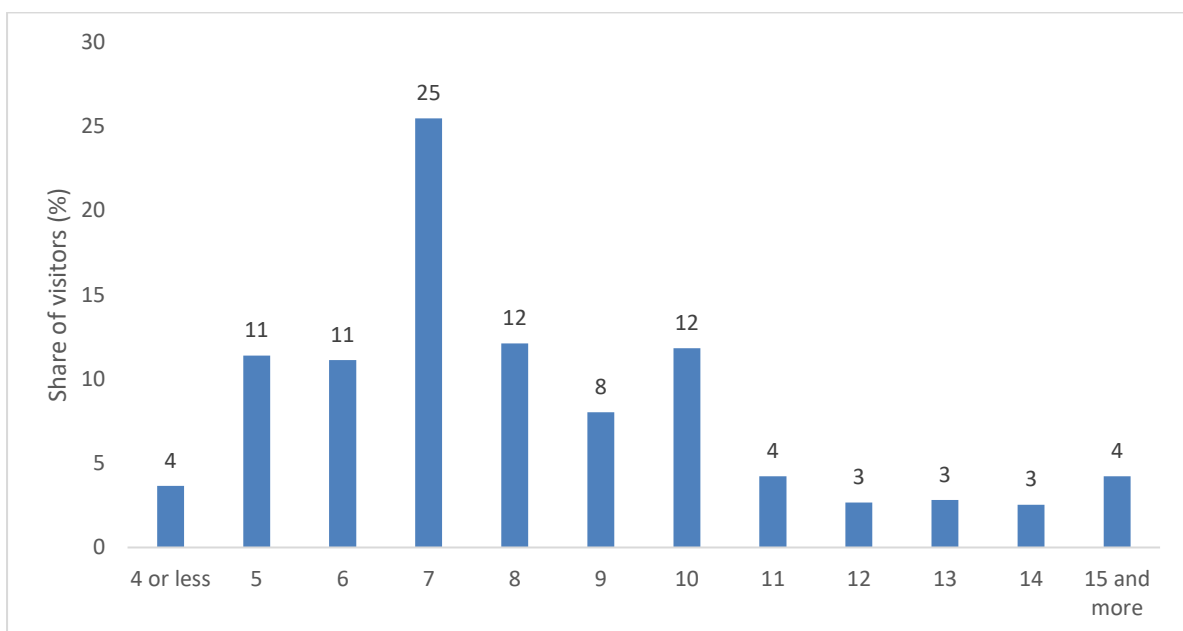
More than four in ten visitors (44%) are on their first visit to the Cook Islands. A further 33% have been to the Cook Islands two or three times before. Nearly a quarter of those surveyed (23%) have visited four or more times (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Number of visits to the Cook Islands (n = 617)



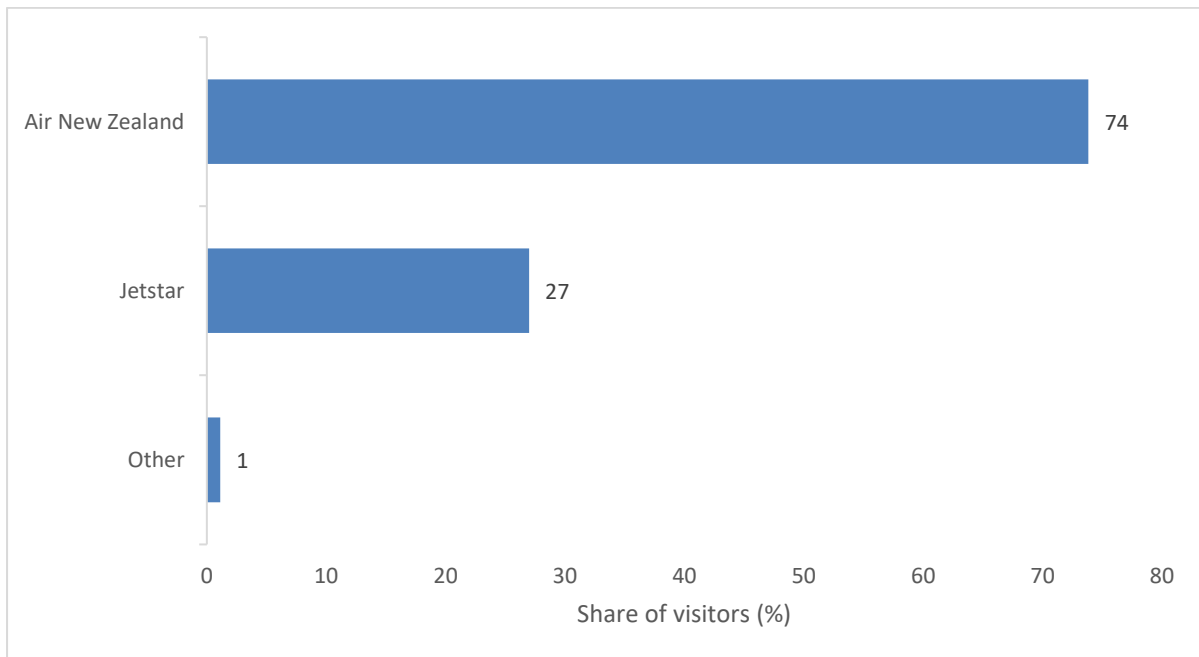
The average length of stay in the Cook Islands is 8.3 nights (median 7.0) with 83% of visitors spending ten or fewer nights in the country (Figure 10).

Figure 10: Length of stay in nights (n = 711)



Nearly three quarters of visitors (74%) travelled to/from the Cook Islands with Air New Zealand. A further 27% of visitors travelled with Jetstar (Figure 11).

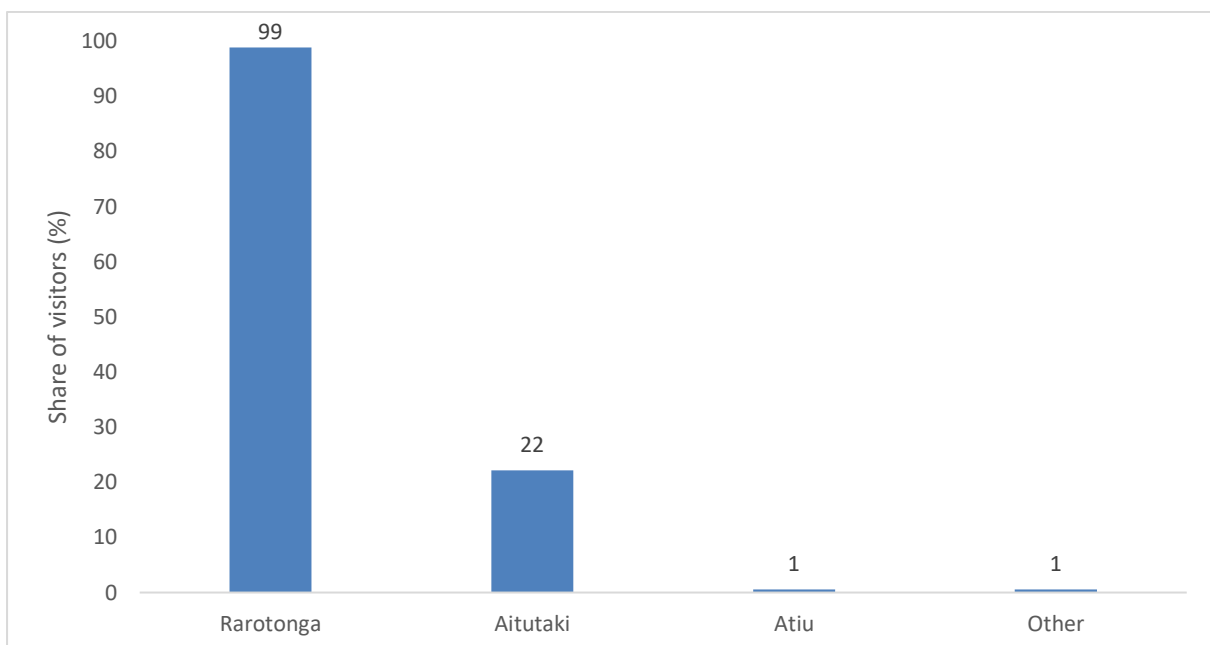
Figure 11: Mode of transport (n = 715)



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

The vast majority (99%) of visitors to the Cook Islands spent time on Rarotonga, with Aitutaki being the second most visited outer island (22%). A small number of visitors spend time on Atiu (1%) and other outer islands, e.g. One Foot Island and Mitiaro (1%) (Figure 12).

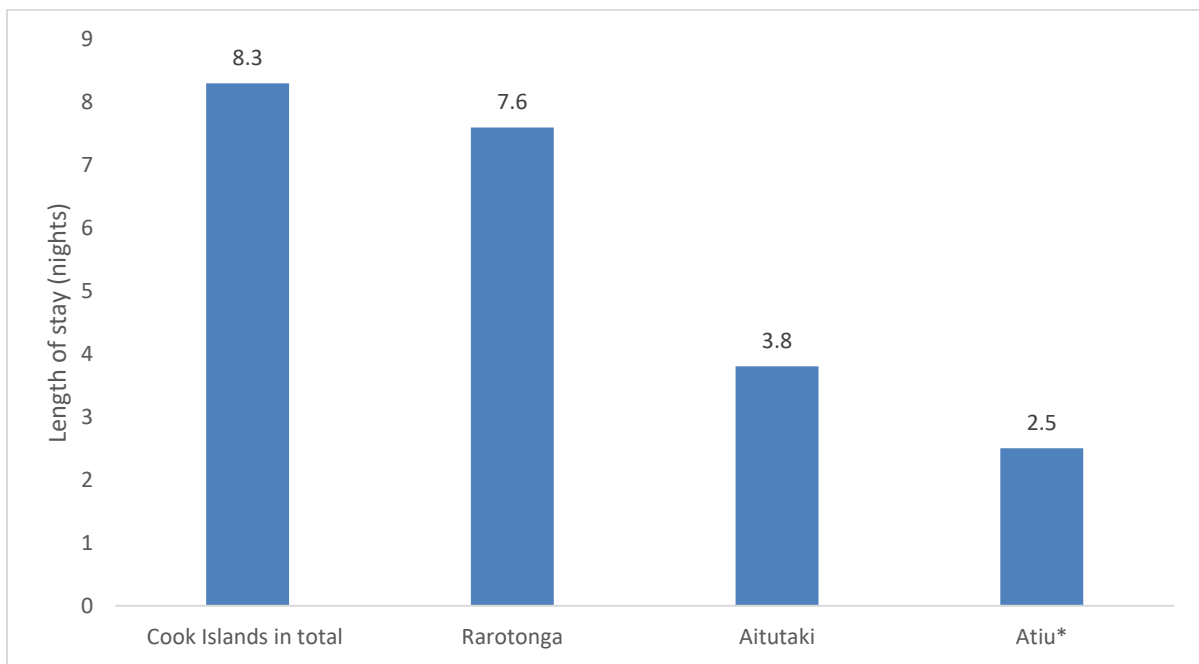
Figure 12: Visited Islands (n = 713)



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 7.6 nights (Figure 13). For the visitors that went to Aitutaki, the average number of nights spent on the Island itself is 3.8.

Figure 13: Average length of stay in the Cook Islands and on each island (n = 4-698)

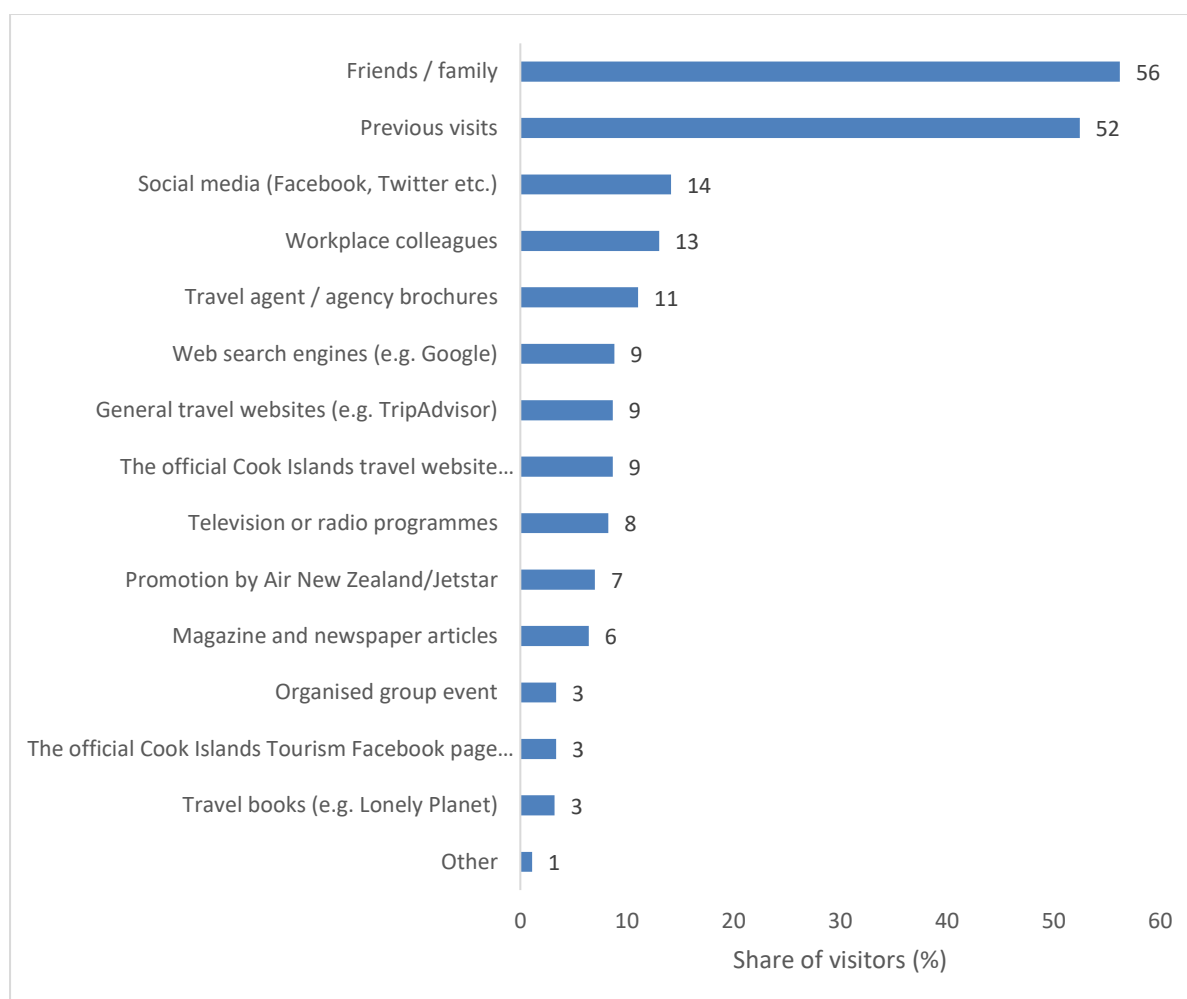


*: n=4

Information Sources and Purchasing Behaviour

Participants were asked how they found out about the Cook Islands as a holiday destination (Figure 14). Over half (56%) of respondents ranked word of mouth from friends and family members as the most important influence, followed by their previous visits (52%), social media (e.g. Facebook, Twitter) (14%), workplace colleagues (13%), travel agent/agency brochures (11%). Other information sources include web search engines (e.g., Google) (9%), general travel websites (e.g. TripAdvisor) (9%), and the official Cook Islands travel website (9%).

Figure 14: How did you find out about Cook Islands as a destination (n = 715)

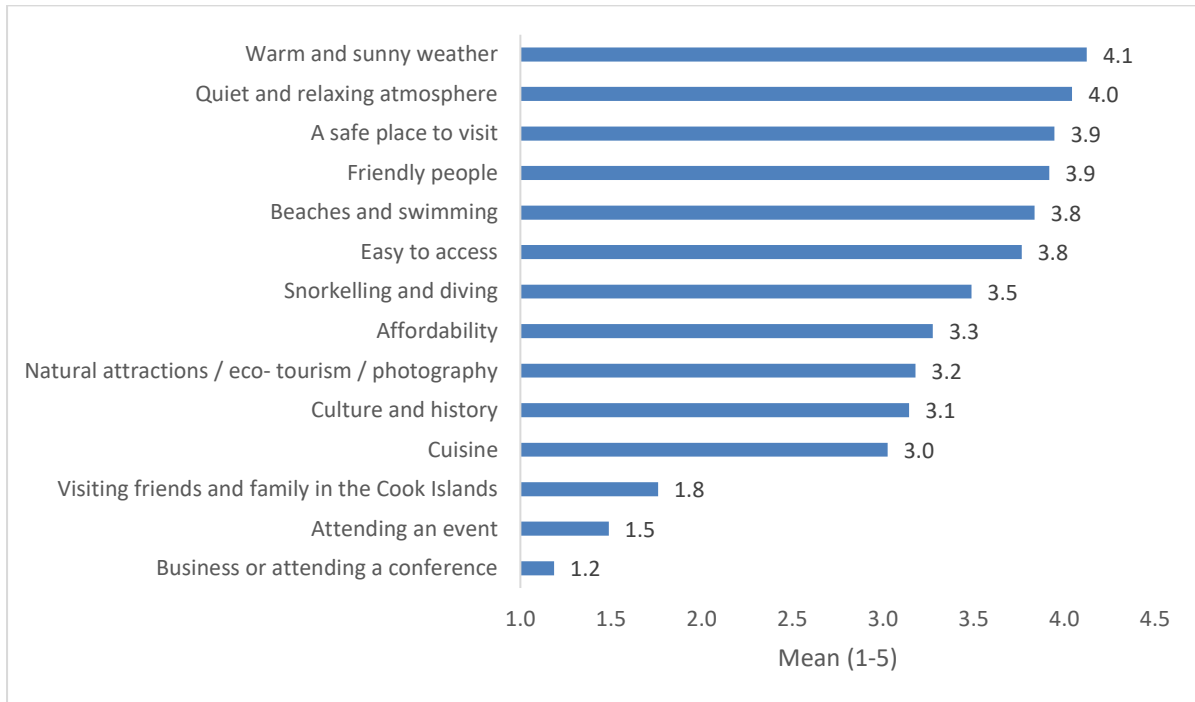


Note: Multiple responses, therefore total does not add up to 100%

Visitors were asked to highlight 'influential factors' that led them to choose the Cook Islands as a travel destination. Warm and sunny weather is ranked as the most influential factor (4.1 out of 5.0), followed by quiet and relaxing atmosphere (4.0), a safe place to visit (3.9), and friendly people (3.9). Other influential factors include the beaches and swimming (3.8), ease of access (3.8), snorkelling and diving (3.5), and affordability (3.3). Visiting friends and

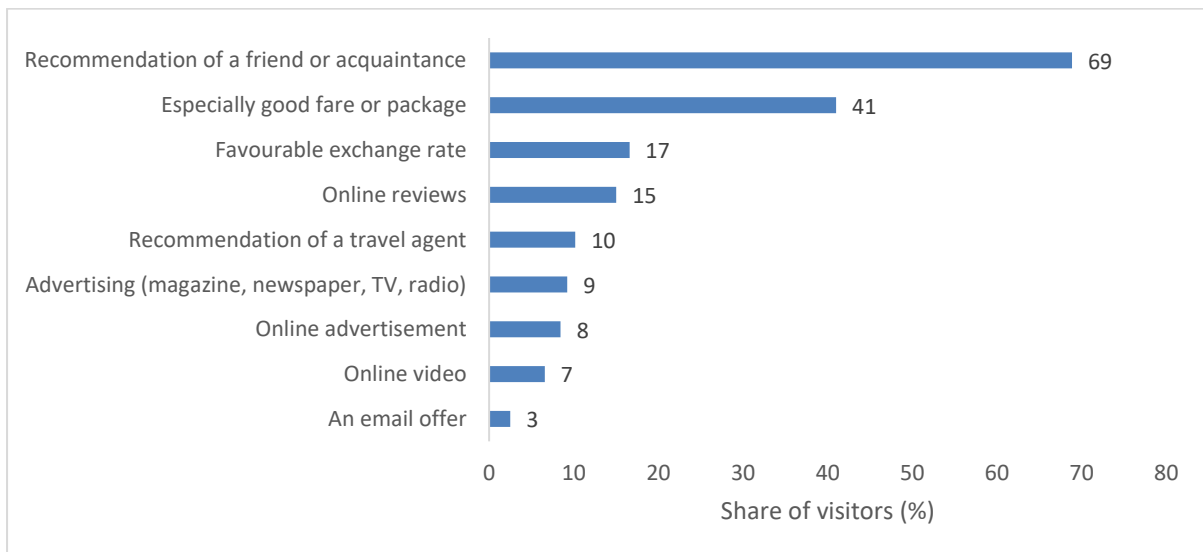
relatives (1.8), attending an event (1.5), and business or conference (1.2) are the least influential factors overall (Figure 15).

Figure 15: Influences on the decision to choose the Cook Islands (n = 645-694)



Over two thirds (69%) of visitors mentioned ‘recommendation of a friend or acquaintance’ as the most important factor influencing their visit (Figure 16). Over two in five respondents (41%) indicate that an ‘especially good fare or package’ is important for them when selecting the Cook Islands, followed by favourable exchange rates (17%), online reviews (15%), and the recommendation of an agent (10%).

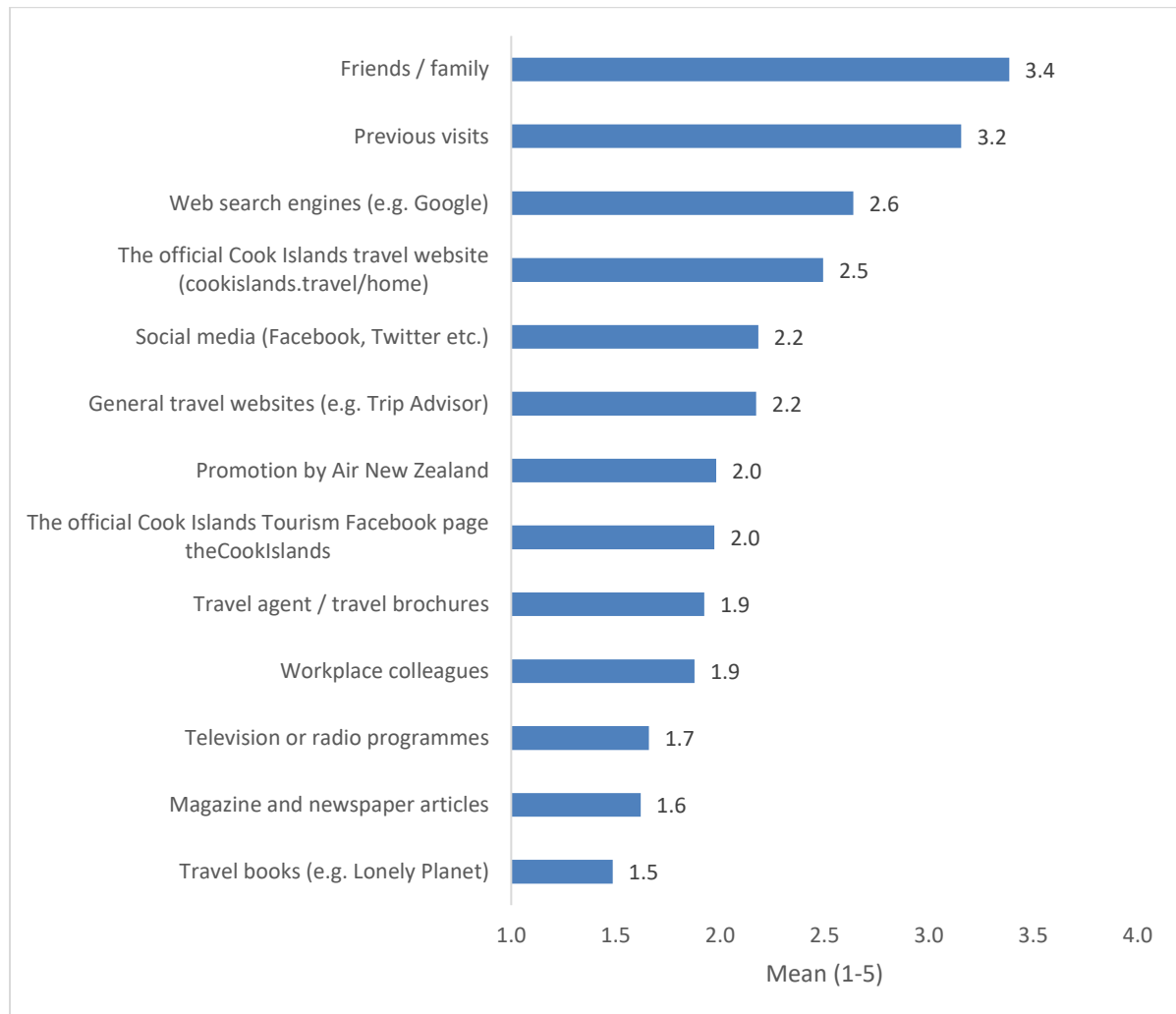
Figure 16: Which factors influenced your selection of the Cook Islands? (n = 639)



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

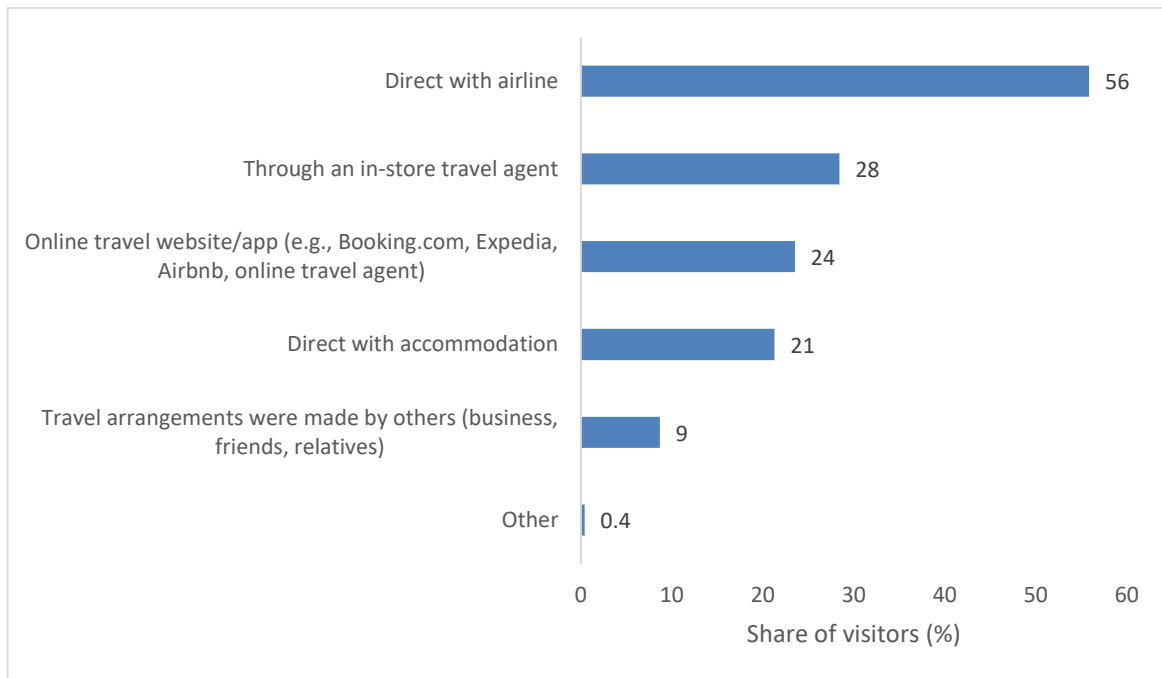
Visitors were asked to rate the importance of the listed information sources used to plan their trip on a scale from 1 to 5. Friends and family members are ranked as the most important sources (3.4), followed by previous visits (3.2), web search engines (e.g., Google) (2.6), and the official Cook Islands travel website (2.5) (Figure 17).

Figure 17: Importance of information source used when planning your trip (n = 634-684)



Over half of travellers surveyed (56%) made their own travel arrangements directly with an airline (Figure 18). A considerable share of visitors surveyed purchased a pre-paid trip either through an in-store travel agent (28%) or through an online travel website/app (24%). Over one in five (21%) visitors purchased a pre-paid trip directly with accommodation providers. A further 9% of those surveyed indicated that travel arrangements were made by others on their behalf (business, relatives).

Figure 18: How did you make your travel arrangements for the Cook Islands (n = 714)



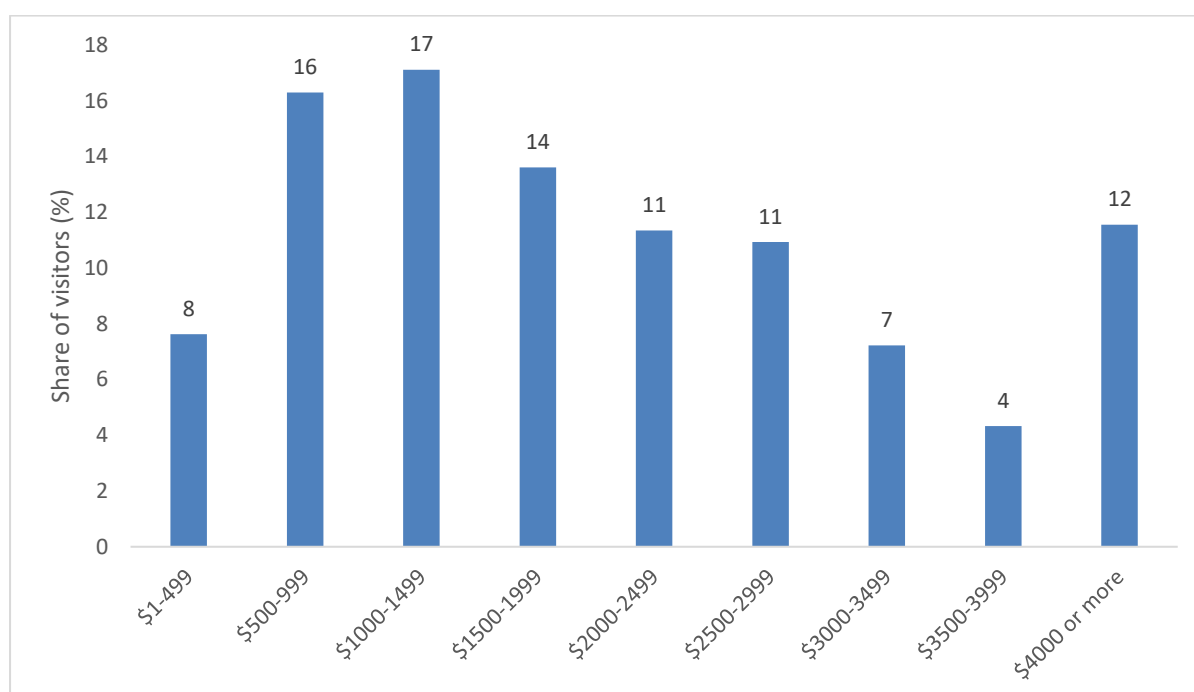
Note: Multiple responses, therefore total does not add up to 100%

Visitor Expenditure

The IVS asks a range of questions about visitor expenditure, both prior to arrival, and while in the Cook Islands. All the figures below are based on respondent estimates of their own spending and any others they spent money on (e.g., spouse, children etc.). The following prepaid expenditure section is based on the number of adults and children that respondents included in their cost estimates: 1,578 people comprising 1,469 adults and 109 children.

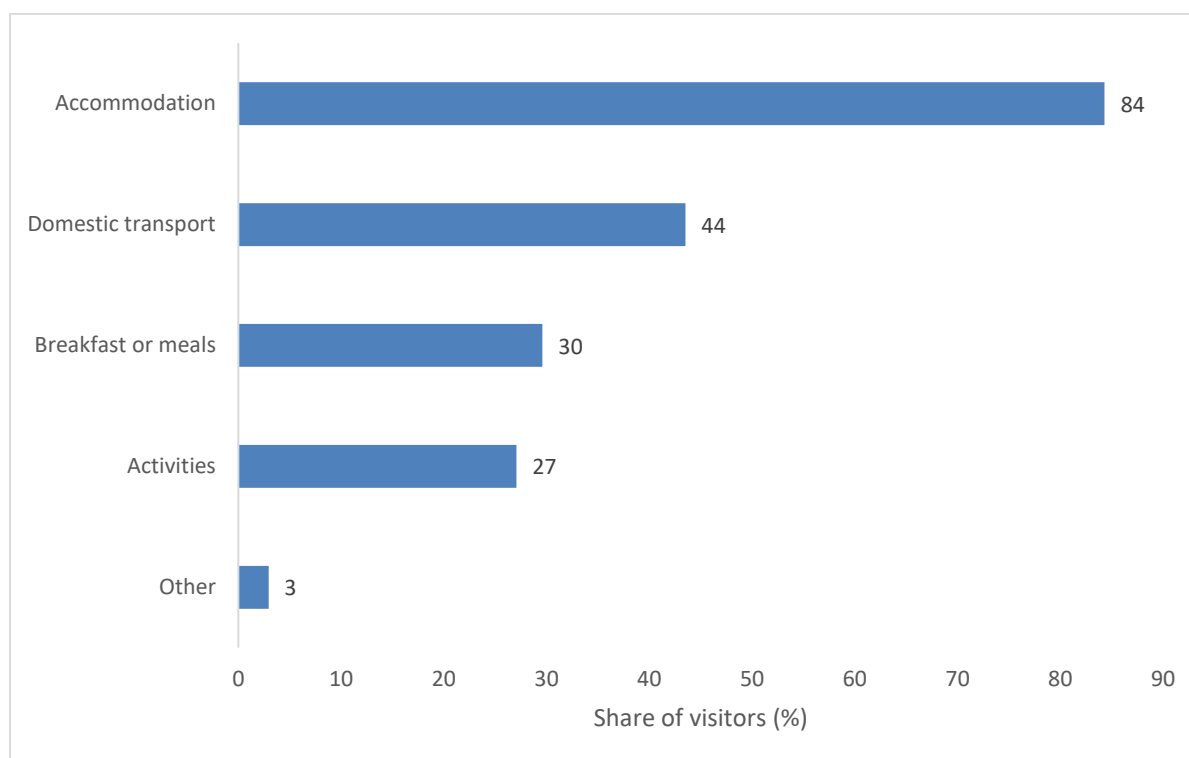
On average, visitors to the Cook Islands spend NZ\$2,073 per person prior to arrival. Over four in ten (42%) visitors spent between NZ\$1,000 and NZ\$2,499 prior to arrival (Figure 19). The prepaid figure per person is 9% higher than visitors' average prepaid spend (NZ\$1,903) in the July to September 2019 period, and 7% higher than July to August 2021 period (NZ\$1,931).

Figure 19: Amount of money spent per person prior to arrival (n = 485)



In addition to international flights, spending prior to arrival includes accommodation (84% of respondents), domestic transport and airport transfers (44%), meals and breakfast (30%), and activities (27%) (Figure 20). The 'other' category (3%) mainly includes items such as travel insurance.

Figure 20: Items included in money spent prior to arrival (n = 510)



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

The following local expenditure section is based on 1,422 people covering 1,331 adults and 91 children. The total spend per visitor per day while in the Cook Islands (excluding any pre-paid expenditure) is NZ\$200 (Table 1). This figure is 35% higher than visitors in the same quarter survey period in 2019 (NZ\$148). Compared with survey period after the border re-opened, this figure is 4% lower than July to August 2021 (NZ\$208), and virtually the same as April to June 2022 (NZ\$199).

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

Expenditure Items	n = 1,422	
	Mean (NZ\$)	(% of spend)
Accommodation	86	43
Restaurant/Café/Bar	44	22
Shopping	15	7
Vehicle rental	13	6
Domestic Flights	10	5
Water-based Activities	10	5
Groceries	9	5
Land-based Activities	5	3
Other	3	2
Petrol	2	1
Internet	2	1
Public Transport	1	0.4
Total spend (NZ\$)	200	100%

Most money spent locally is on accommodation related services (43%) and restaurants, cafés, and bars (22%). Shopping (7%) and vehicle rental (6%) also feature along with domestic flights and water-based activities (5% respectively).

It is difficult to estimate accurately the proportion of the pre-paid spend that flows to the Cook Islands. For the purposes of this research, 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\$100 and for the average total visit is NZ\$829 (8.3 nights).

By multiplying daily in-country spend by the average stay (8.3 nights) we can see that spend per person per visit while in the Cook Islands is on average NZ\$1,660. The total figure (what is spent locally and what flows back to the Cook Islands from pre-paid expenses) is therefore NZ\$300 per visitor per day (\$200 + \$100), or NZ\$2,489 (\$1,660 + \$829) for each visitor. Table 2 shows that July to September 2022 visitors contributed 25% more to the local economy than visitors who came during the July to September 2019 period, and an almost identical amount to those who arrived in the July to August 2021 period.

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

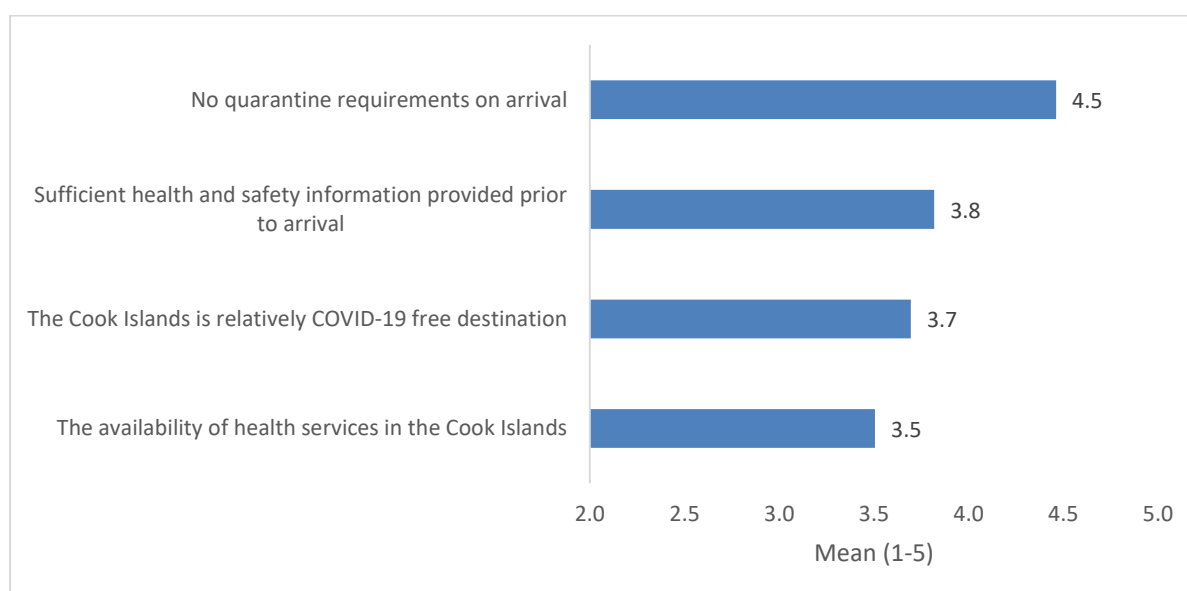
	Jul-Sept 2022 All visitors	Jul-Sept 2021 All visitors	Jul-Sept 2019 All visitors
Average Spend Prior to arrival (NZ\$)			
Per Person Per Trip	\$2,073	\$1,931	\$1,903
Flowing into local economy rate – estimated 40%			
Per Person Per Trip	\$829	\$772	\$761
Per Person per Day	\$100	\$93	\$92
Length of stay (nights)	8.3	8.3	8.3
Average Local Spend			
Per Person Per Trip	\$1,660	\$1,726	\$1,228
Per Person per Day	\$200	\$208	\$148
Total Economic Impact-Per Trip	\$2,489	\$2,498	\$1,989
Total Economic Impact-Per Day	\$300	\$301	\$240

Perception of COVID-19 - Impacts and Responses

The gradual reopening of the Cook Islands to visitors was subject to a set of criteria including airline and airport preparedness, necessary protocols and frameworks. Several questions related to COVID-19 impacts and responses were inserted into the IVS from May 2021 to enable a better understand visitor perceptions of the pandemic’s impact and related destination responses.

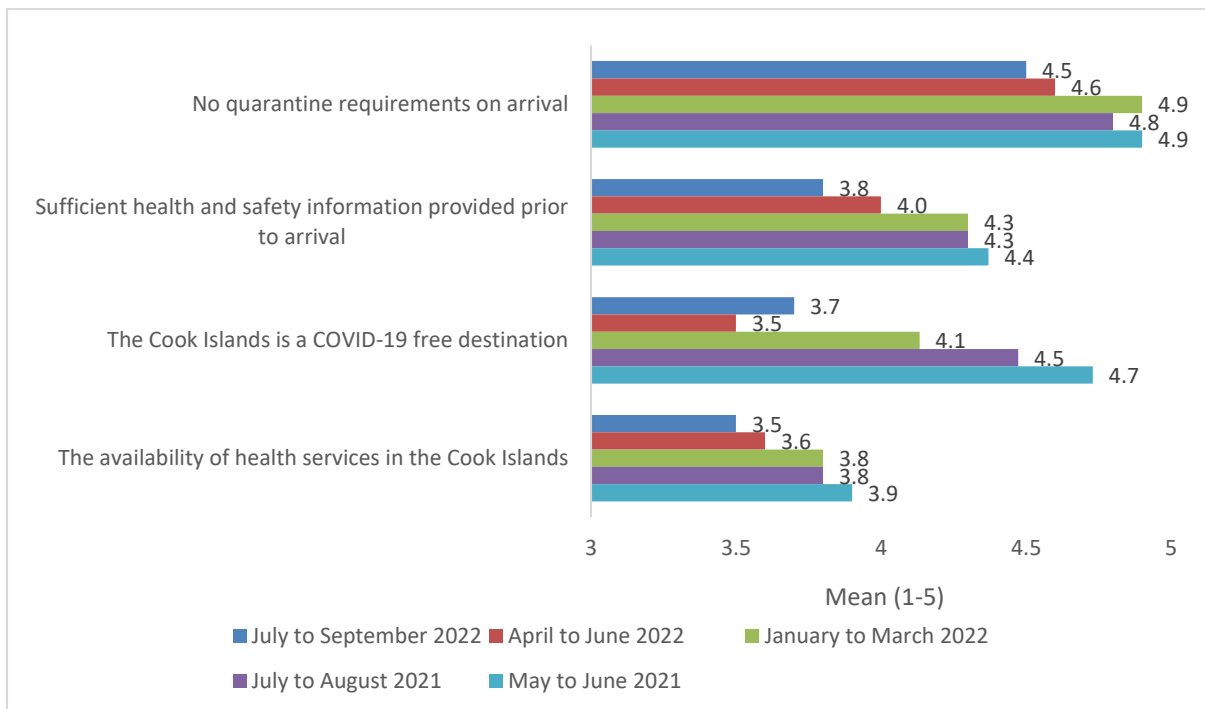
When visitors were asked about the importance of COVID-19 related factors in influencing their decision to travel to the Cook Islands, “no quarantine requirement on arrival” ranked the highest (4.5 out of 5), followed by “sufficient health and safety information provided prior to arrival” (3.8) (Figure 21).

Figure 21: The important factors in your decision to travel to the Cook Islands (n = 561-617)



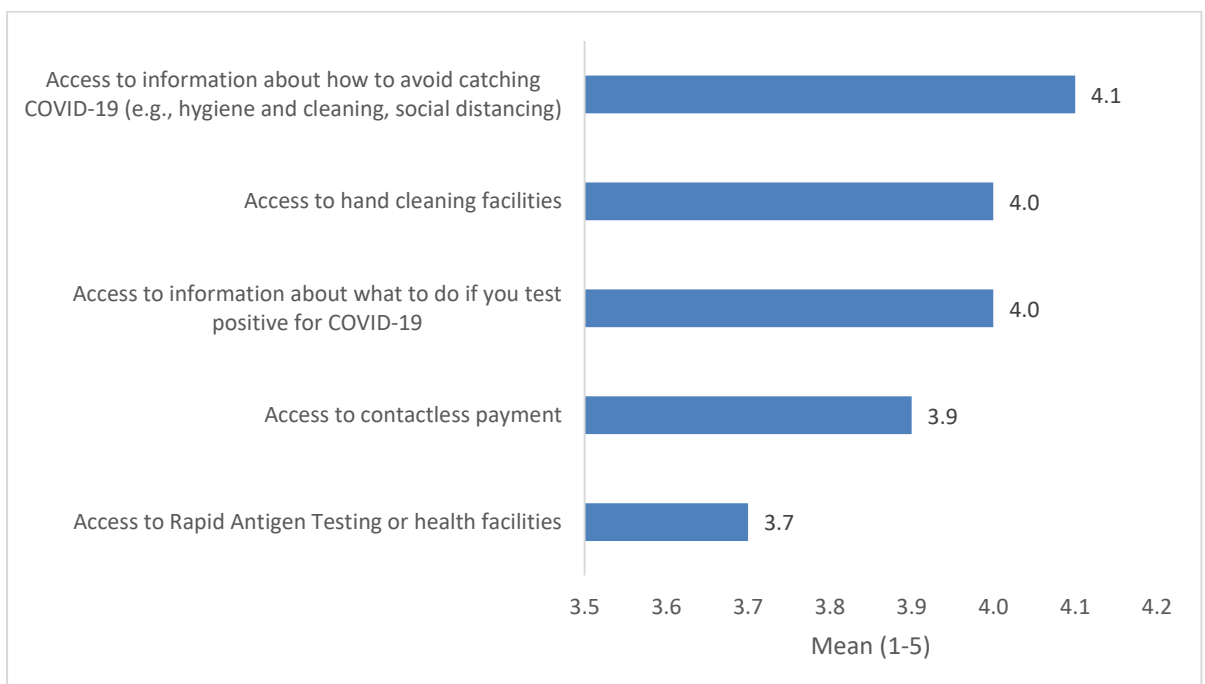
We can see that all factors listed are rated as less important by the July to September 2022 visitors when compared to the four other survey periods since 2021. The only exception is “the Cook Islands is a COVID-19 free destination” (3.7 out of 5) which is slightly higher than of the figure in April to June 2022 (3.5) (Figure 22).

Figure 22: The importance of factors in influencing your decision to travel to the Cook Islands – time series



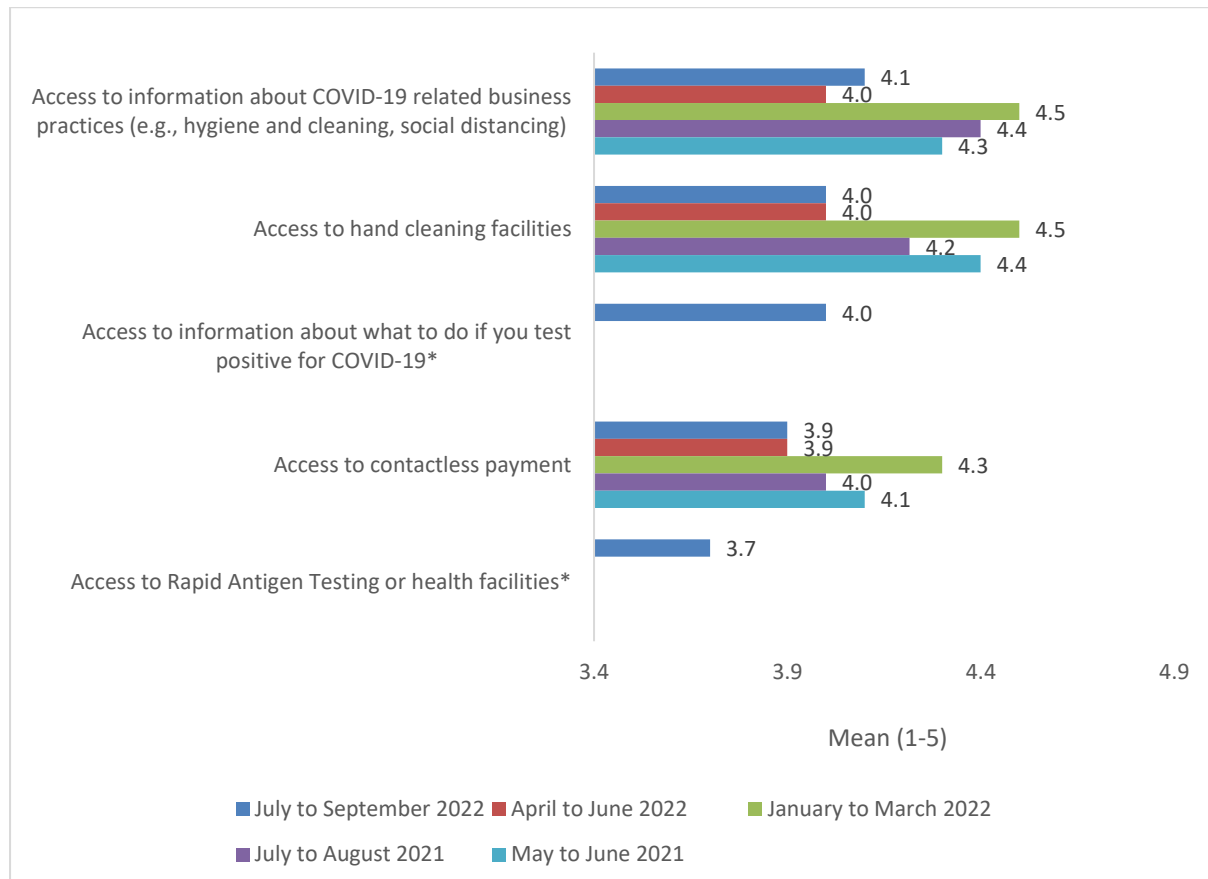
In terms of the COVID-19 responses in the Cook Islands (Figure 23), visitors feel satisfied with access to information about how to avoid catching COVID-19 (4.1 out of 5), access to hand cleaning facilities (4.0), and they also appreciate easy access to information about what to do if you test positive for COVID-19 (4.0). Visitors expressed a relatively lower level of satisfaction with the access to Rapid Antigen Testing or health facilities (3.7).

Figure 23: Degree of satisfaction with COVID-19 responses (n = 401-581)



July to September 2022 visitors show similar levels of satisfaction across most variables when compared to April to June 2022 except “Access to information about COVID-19 related business practices” which ranks a bit higher than the April to June 2022 figures. July to September 2022 visitors feel less satisfied across all variables previous IVS reports since 2021 (Figure 24).

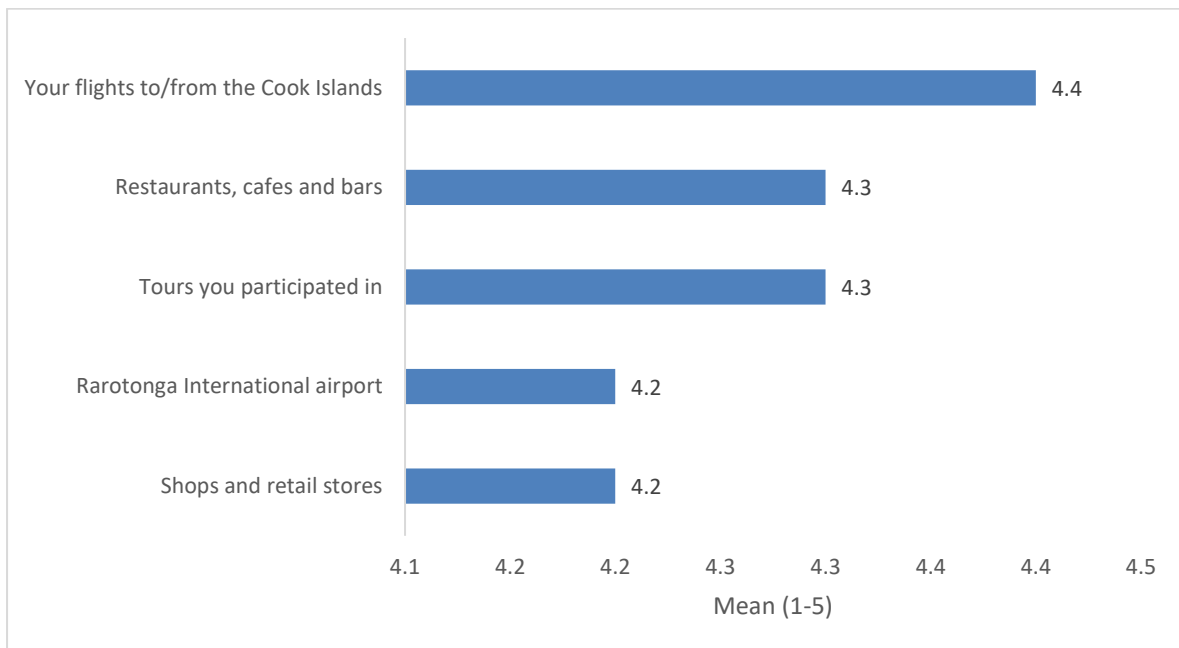
Figure 24: Degree of satisfaction with COVID-19 responses – time series



Note: * New variables from July to September 2022

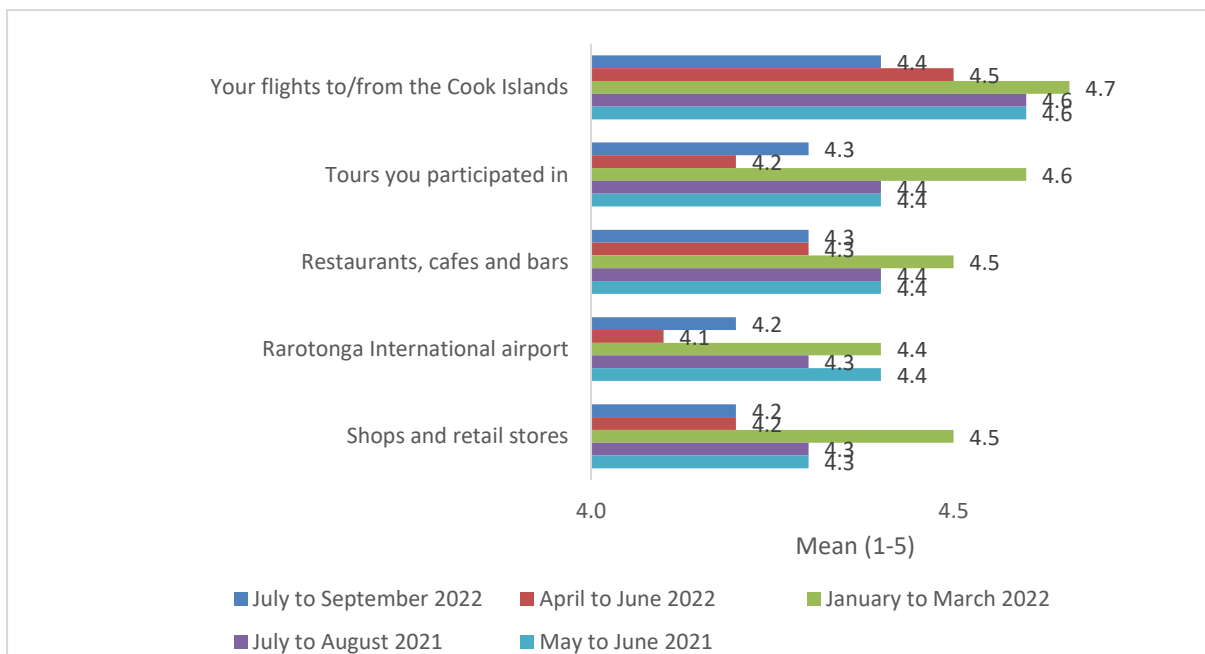
Visitors were asked to rate their level of satisfaction with health and safety measures during their trip to the Cook Islands (Figure 25). Overall, respondents give high satisfaction scores (all above 4 out of 5) across a range of activities and sectors. The health and safety aspects of “Rarotonga International Airport” and “shops and retail stores” received the lowest score (4.2 respectively).

Figure 25: Degree of satisfaction with health and safety measures (n = 434-608)



July to September 2022 visitors feel less satisfied across most variables when compared to their counterparts who visited in 2021 and 2022 (Figure 26). The exception is the health and safety aspects of “tours you participated in” and “Rarotonga International Airport” which are slightly higher than the April to June 2022 findings.

Figure 26: Degree of satisfaction with health and safety measures – time series



A total of 110 respondents provided further comments about their perceptions of COVID-19 related management during their time in the Cook Islands. Over a third (36%) of the

comments include visitors stating that they had no concerns regarding COVID-19, or that they had nothing to say regarding COVID-19. Comments include:

"I was not worried about catching COVID-19."

"I had no concerns."

Over a quarter (26%) of the comments provided were positive in nature, including: no face masks; enjoyed the visit; feel safe; well-managed, no issues; nice staff to help visitors recover from COVID. Positive comments include:

No face masks

"Enjoyed not having to wear masks during our visit."

"Enjoyed the freedom (compared to NZ) of no masks at the time we visited."

Enjoyed the visit

"Lovely place. Wish locals would come home. Loved it because it was quiet."

"Very good."

Feel safe

"Was great and surprising no mandate for masks. Felt totally at ease because at the timing of our visit there seemed to be little covid problems..."

"I felt very safe and had no Covid-19 related issues. It was nice to get away from all of that!"

Well-managed, no issues

"Very well controlled."

"...Raro is well versed with COVID."

Nice staff to help visitors recover from COVID

"...The resort was very good about delivering meals to us. We received some more paracetamol after we had run out of our own supply..."

"I caught covid whilst in Raro. The resort was very helpful in providing us with information and RAT tests."

Nearly one in four (23%) of comments were negative in nature, including: caught COVID-19 in or after Cooks trip; poor protocols, confusion over regulations, arrival or departure experience; flight concerns with sick people around; lack of distancing; limited access to hand wash or sanitizer. Negative comments included:

Got COVID-19 in or after Cooks trip

"I tested positive for Covid 2 days after my return from Rarotonga."

Poor protocols, confusion, concern

"There weren't that many restrictions, but I wasn't upset about it until I actually got sick."

"The lack of mask wearing was the reason I caught covid in Raro. It was my first time having it."

Arrival or departure experience

"Our arrival at the airport was stressful due to all the docs that needed to be presented etc."

"On arrival at the Airport the long queues to Passport Control was very crowded and close there was no room for distancing. We queued for at least 45 minutes."

Flight

Air NZ to Rarotonga, male passenger in seat next to me did not wear a mask. I was very concerned about Covid - so was upset for the whole flight."

Concerns with sick people around

"We believe we contracted covid from a shop assistant in a Muri shop she displayed bad symptoms and we had to walk past her to exit the shop. We got sick 8 days after we arrived in Rarotonga and my husband spent 11 and myself 7 days in isolation ..."

Distance

"We waited for more than an hour at the airport on arrival. Many people all together - an easy spreader of COVID."

No information

"...We were not given any information about whether we needed to move to an isolation hotel, the resort moved us twice to other rooms during our isolation. [...]"

Hand wash or sanitizer

"Hand sanitisers were empty or public toilets were missing hand soap and paper towels"

Sixteen percent of the comments provided are more general perspective such as less restrictions and a relaxed attitude Comments include:

"Surprised by little mask wearing."

“Seemed to be a strong belief that outside arrivals and departure lounges Covid did not exist! I think I saw only 2 mask wearers in the week. Hope Covid stays well away!”

“I felt that most people thought that Covid was over. Next to no social distancing or mask use.”

“Very little awareness about COVID-19 from the locals...pretty relaxed about it.”

“Comparing NZ and Cook Islands, the Islands appeared more relaxed than NZ.”

One in ten comments provided suggestions around COVID, including: the use of face masks, the need to provide public information on what to do once visitors got COVID and observations that it was just time to get on with life. Comments include:

“Mask wearing non-existent, could be useful if more cases in Rarotonga...”

“More mask wearing should be encouraged especially in public indoor buildings.”

“Probably help if there was more public display on what to do if getting COVID.”

“Moved on from Covid. It's not important.”

“Not worried, need to move on & live normally.”

Visitor Satisfaction

Visitors were asked to indicate their overall satisfaction with their Cook Islands experience on a scale from 1 'very dissatisfied' to 5 'very satisfied' (Figure 27). Over two thirds (70%) visitors surveyed were 'very satisfied' with their overall experience of the Cook Islands. Very few visitors (2%) were unsatisfied with their visit (i.e., providing a score of 2 out of 5 or lower). The percentage of visitors saying they are 'very satisfied' in July to September 2022 is the same as visitors in July to August 2021 (70%) but higher than visitors who came during the same period in 2019 (65%). The average overall satisfaction score is 4.6 which is slightly lower than July to August 2021 period (4.7), but higher than visitors who came during the same period in 2019 (4.5).

Figure 27: Overall satisfaction with experience of the Cook Islands (n = 636)

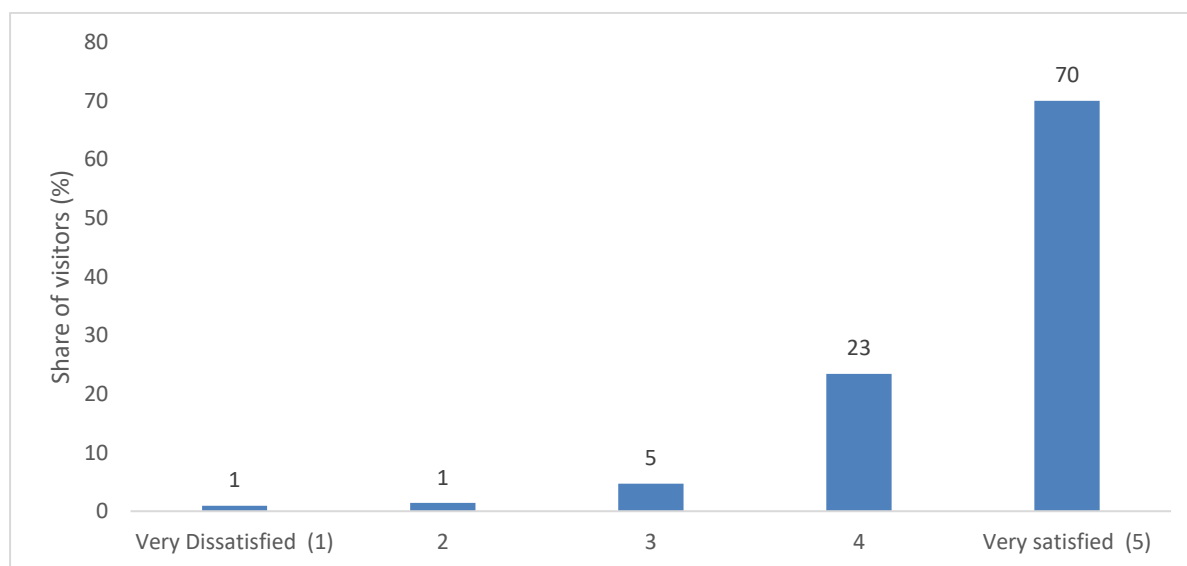


Figure 28 shows the percentage of respondents who undertook specific activities during their visit to the Cook Islands. Almost all visitors went to a beach (98%) and frequented at least one restaurant or café (98%) during their trip. Most of the respondents either go swimming (92%) or visit a local market (88%), and 82% of visitors state that they also tried snorkelling. Rates of participation in shopping are relatively low when compared to other activities.

Visitor satisfaction is generally high with activities undertaken (almost all activities receive a rating greater than 4 out of 5) (Figure 29). Activities involving cultural interaction (4.6), land-based products (4.4), and shopping (4.4) are generally rated higher than water-based experiences (4.3).

Figure 28: Degree of participation in activities (n = 17-678)

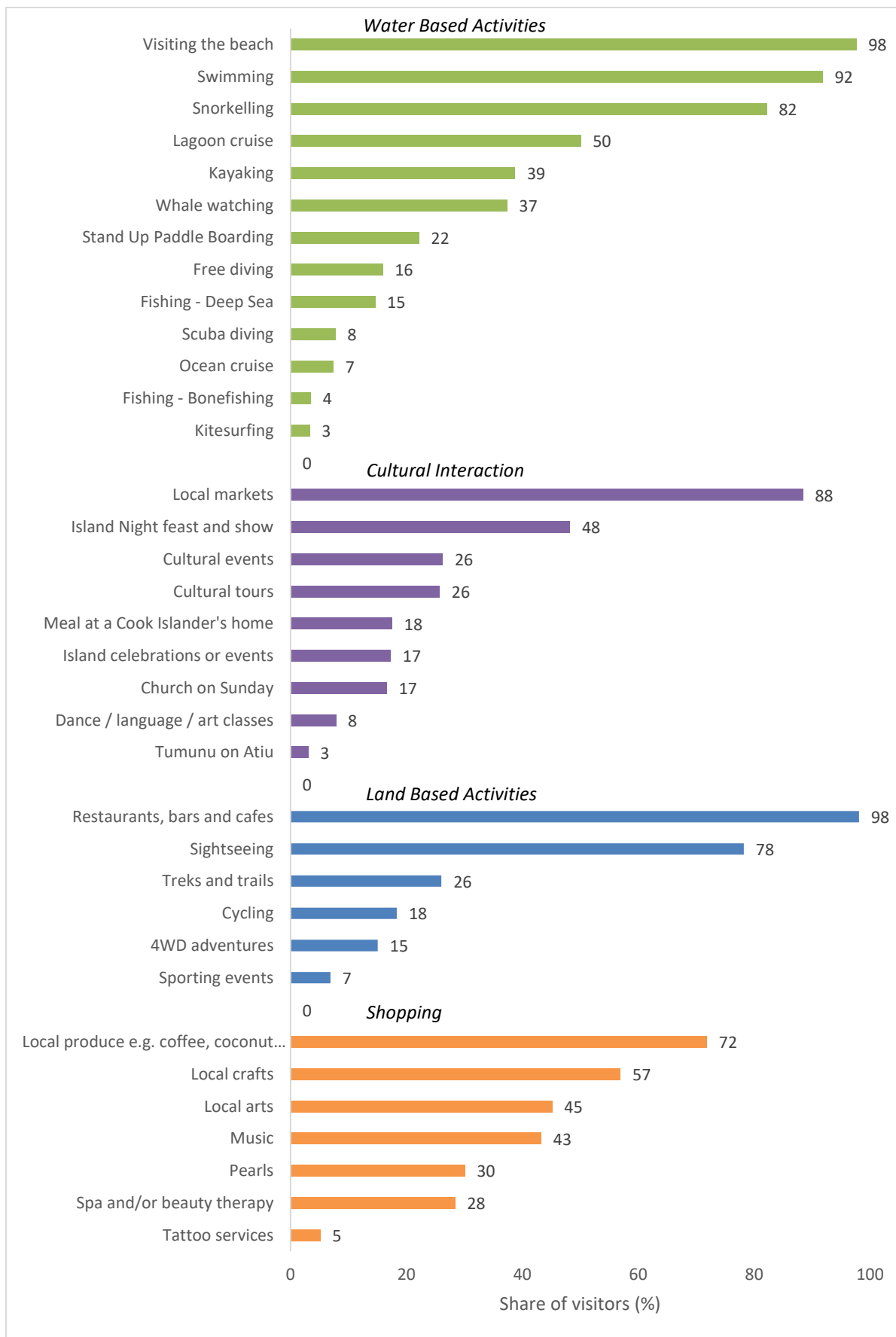
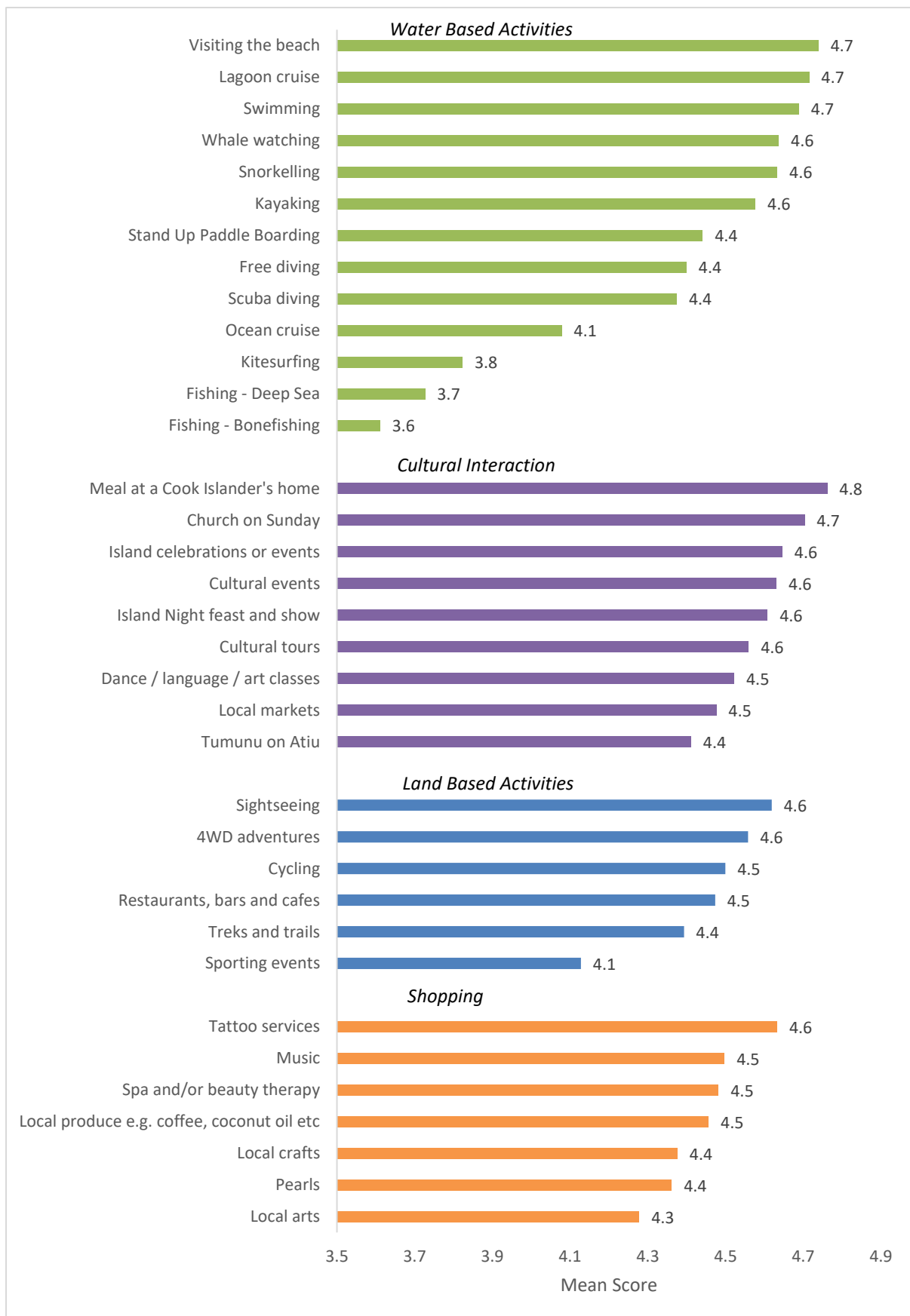
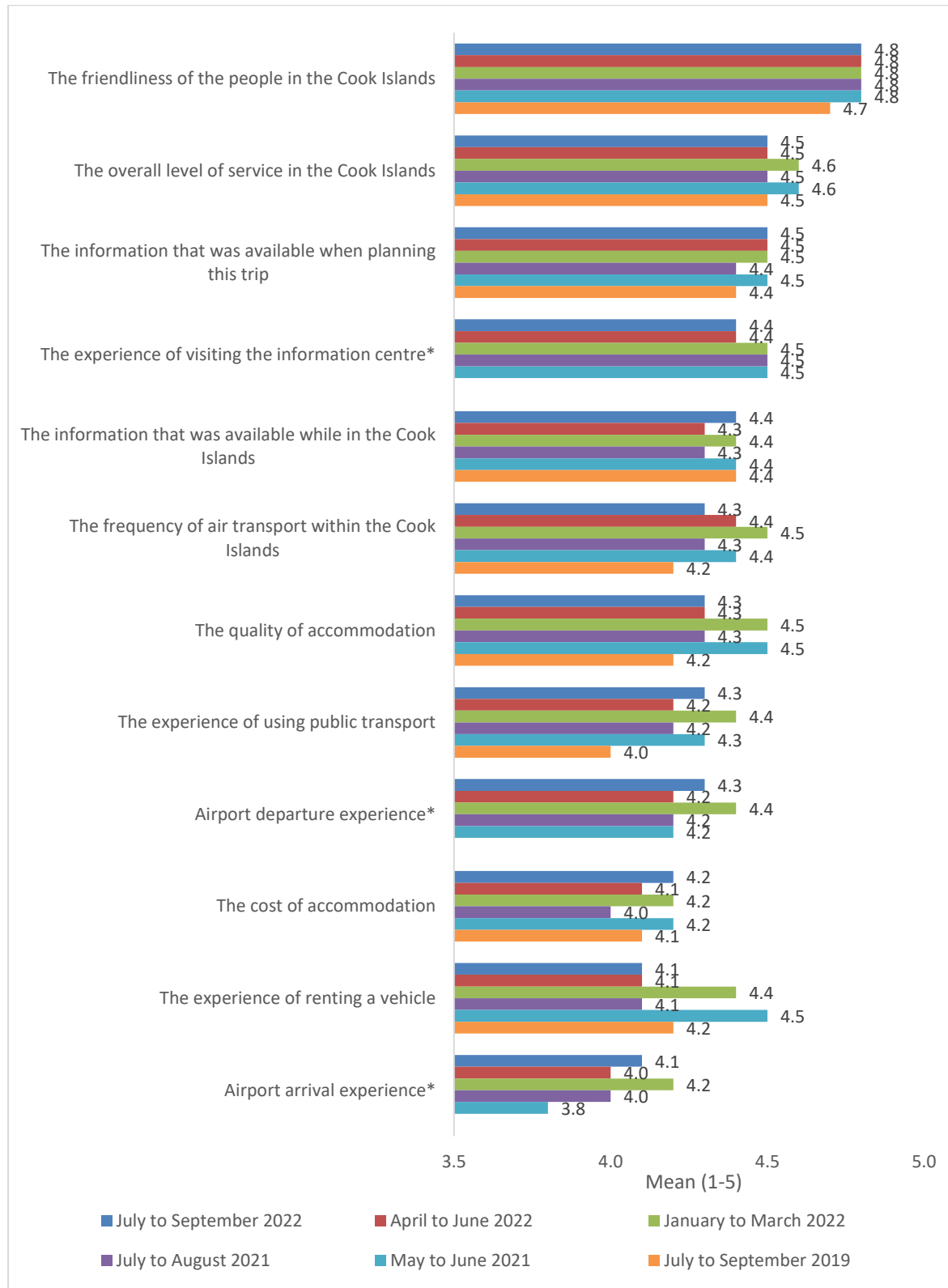


Figure 29: Degree of satisfaction with activities participated in



Visitors were asked to rate their level of satisfaction with nine different statements relating to their most recent visit. Responses from the period July to September 2022 are compared to the visitors of July to August 2021, and visitors in the same quarter of 2019 (Figure 30).

Figure 30: Degree of satisfaction with Cook Islands services – time series



Note: * New variables from 2021

The degree of satisfaction with the majority of items in July to September 2022 is similar satisfaction with most of the items presented when compared with April to June 2022, January to March 2022, May to June 2021, and July to August 2021 visitors (Figure 31). These are also similar or slightly higher than visitors during the same period in July to September 2019. July to September 2022 saw a fall in satisfaction with the frequency of flights to the Cook Islands and also the experience of renting a car.

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 for visitors are the natural environment, cleanliness and weather (49% of respondent comments), the friendly and welcoming local people (38%), the peacefulness and relaxing atmosphere of the country (28%), and the tourist attractions and activities on offer (26%). Smaller numbers of comments mentioned aspects such as food and beverage (15%), accommodation (8%), convenience and safety (6%), and level of service (6%).

Table 3: Most appealing aspects of the Cook Islands (n = 635)

Themes	Share of respondent comments (%)*
Environment, cleanliness & weather	49
Local people	38
Atmosphere	28
Activities, attractions and entertainment, events	26
Food and beverage	15
Accommodation	8
Convenience and safety	6
Level of service	6
Culture	4
Overall good experience	4
Non-commercial	2
Family or friends	2
Friendly animals	1
Price of Goods and Services	1
Emotional connection	1
Family friendly or safe destination	1
COVID resilience and travel availability	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 lagoons, and warm weather in the Cook Islands were mentioned by almost half (49%) of the respondents as the most appealing aspect of their trip. Words like ‘beautiful’, ‘warm’, ‘clean’, ‘pristine’, ‘perfect’, ‘tropical’, and ‘amazing’ are used to describe the attraction of the local environment. Comments included:

“...The scenery was breath-taking especially at sunrise/sunset....”

“The sea, the sky, maunga, hearing the reef... Wonderful.”

"...being able to feel the warmth of the sun and swim in pristine clean blue waters."

"The roads seem very clean and tidy, not much rubbish around etc."

"...The lagoon is stunning and weather perfect."

"How important marine life is, and other natural treasures are well looked after."

"The beautiful ocean and beaches - cleanliness of the whole island."

"...I applaud your hard work in environmental projects e.g., water stations, recyclable beer flagons etc."

"THE BEACH!!! Especially on the days when it was sunny. I loved how there were a few seats to lie down on as well. I had an A+ time on the beach... I love how crystal clear the lagoon is, I felt so incredibly happy at the beach."

"The reef was well looked after and had a beautiful array of fish."

Local people

Over a third (38%) of comments expressed that the warmth and welcoming nature of local people was the most appealing aspect of their travel experience. Key words that dominated the responses include 'friendly', 'helpful', 'kind', 'welcoming', 'lovely', and 'beautiful'. Comments included:

"The friendliness of everyone, the willingness to help, nothing was a bother."

"Such wonderful, caring and helpful people..."

"The friendly and beautiful people. They are your biggest asset..."

"...We spoke with many friendly locals and spent a lot of our time on the island with them..."

"The people make the trip worthwhile."

"Friendly people. Bright sunny personalities."

"I love ❤️ the Cook Island people and their kind and generous approach to visitors. We enjoyed meeting people in the market, on the bus. Everywhere!"

"The people. It's always and will always be the people. ❤️ I love how friendly everyone is..."

Atmosphere

The Cook Islands is described as a very relaxing, peaceful, quiet, and laid-back destination with 28% of respondents finding this lifestyle as the most appealing factor. Most common

words to describe the atmosphere in Cook Islands are 'relaxing', 'peaceful', 'quiet', 'slow', 'peace', 'Island time', and 'laid back'. Comments included:

"Island time, relaxing and no stress."

"Relaxed lifestyle."

"I loved the quiet atmosphere and the relaxing, slow pace of the island in general."

"The laid-back friendly atmosphere."

"It's a place where you can do nothing and relax without feeling guilty."

"The quietness of the island and how relaxed you become quickly. No rush to do anything absolutely loved the island..."

"The natural beauty and peacefulness. Please don't lose this through overdevelopment."

"We loved the quiriness of the island; it was such an interesting place on so many levels..."

Activities, attractions, entertainment & events

Activities, attractions, entertainment, and events featured in more than one quarter (26%) of respondent comments as the most appealing aspect of their visit. The accessibility of water-based activities including snorkelling, swimming, lagoon cruise, fishing/bone fishing, whale watching, and swimming with turtles are mentioned frequently. Also, land-based activities like sightseeing/tours and biking/walking/scooter tours are mentioned by many respondents. Comments included:

"The Punanga Nui market has improved big time more vendors and a lot cleaner and more organised"

"...Tumutoa tours was great too. We also enjoyed scooting around the backroads"

"Hands down, the day trip to Aitutaki - great flight crew and great ground crew."

"The Swimming, snorkelling (Captain Tama's, Ariki Adventures) Swimming with the whales with Wet and wild."

"Sun, snorkelling, beautiful-coloured water, watching whales when drinking cocktails at Club Raro. Riding a scooter with the warm breeze gently blowing around us. Walking/relaxing on different beaches..."

"Fascinating tours on Atiu."

“Snorkelling Cook Islands was the most amazing experience. Learned so much from the team that run this activity and came away with a bigger appreciation of the sea and the island.”

“Sitting on the beach watching the family diving with the turtles and provided with fruit and coconut drink by the Go-local hostess.”

“The fishing charter and opportunities to engage with nature - whales outside the reef, turtles and fish when snorkelling, finding a coconut crab (left it alone!).”

“The experience of seeing and swimming with humpback whales. I appreciated that there were no crowds of boats around and there were so many whales.”

“Swimming with turtles. Visit to museum at Muri and chatting with a local guide in the museum.”

“...Highlight was hiring a bike and exploring the island. Muri lagoon is incredibly stunning...”

Food and beverage

Food and beverages were identified as an appealing aspect of the trip in 15% of respondent comments. Comments focused on the quality and variety of food and beverage, and fresh produce available in the Cook Islands. Visitors described the local food as ‘amazing’, ‘delicious’, ‘yummy’, ‘tropical’, ‘quality’, and ‘fresh’. Many visitors mentioned their wonderful dining experiences in local restaurants. Comments included:

“Food and cocktails superb.”

“...Loved the coffee at Beluga cafe...”

“...fresh fish and the tropical fruit.”

“...Great pizza in town and fish wraps at Vibe!”

“Fresh fruit and vegetables growing locally...”

“...being invited out for meals to experience island food, umu, minaise, chopsuey etc.”

“...The locals Cooks lager was delicious! The service at restaurants was really friendly and the food delicious...”

Accommodation

Eight percent of respondent comments featured the accommodation they stayed in referring to the level of service, facilities, location, dining, and the friendly and supportive staff. Comments included:

"...The culture show & dinner was great value and entertaining"

"...the most friendly services by our accommodation"

"World class beautiful beachfront five-star accommodation."

"Amazing location at an Airbnb house in Arorangi District."

Convenience and safety

Six percent of respondent comments featured the safety and convenience of travelling to/around the Cook Islands. These usually referred to the currency, ease of travel around the islands, and accessibility from New Zealand. Comments included:

"Short flight from NZ."

"It is a very easy place to visit in that the currency and language are the same as home."

"Ease of access to the whole island."

"...safe to walk around at night."

"...ease of getting around the island on the bus..."

Level of service

Six percent of visitor comments emphasised the service and local hospitality they experienced as the most appealing aspect of their visit. The quality of service at the accommodation, restaurants, and on the tours won recognition from some visitors. Comments included:

"Given the shortage of staff, amazing to how hard the people who are working is making things work!"

"Friendliness and helpfulness of hotel staff and shopkeepers."

"Aitutaki was very beautiful and the service at our resort there was superior to anything else we had experienced."

"We caught COVID and were very impressed by the support received at the resort."

"We went for a short break to somewhere...we had stayed before who were really friendly and accommodating -we had not booked for the date difference -mistake-but we were large party and found a space in same place."

"The lovely waitress. Made me so welcome this second trip to Rarotonga. Every morning she knew my coffee order and would ask how I am and chat with me. I just love it."

Culture

Four percent of respondents commented on the Cook Island's unique culture as one of the most appealing aspects of their visit. Art, traditions, religion, and other cultural aspects shape the lives of the local indigenous community of the islands. Comments included:

"...Better understanding of the 'Raro' culture."

"Loved our cross-island tour walk, our guide was extremely knowledgeable and friendly, it really grounded us and gave us a deeper respect and awareness for where we were, the culture and the history."

"...we loved Te Ara Museum, our first time there."

"...the cultural markets were excellent."

"...Tumutoa evening which was fantastic!"

"Visiting Highland Paradise as I didn't do that the last time I came to Rarotonga."

Overall good experience

Visitors (4%) also commented on the 'overall experience' when discussing appealing factors of the Cook Islands. Comments such as 'everything' demonstrated the holistic nature of the positive experience the visitors had:

"It leaves Bali for dead."

"Everything. Loved it all 10/10 all round."

"For years I have wanted to visit the Cook Islands because of the many times I have seen world class beauty and crystal-clear waters. You met my expectations."

"...best island we have found to recharge the batteries from our extremely busy work lives. fourth visit and many more to come."

"We have been there before and will go again. Could happily live there for NZ winter if we were allowed."

Non-commercial

Two percent of the survey participants commented that the Cook Islands is appealing because it is not over-commercialised or 'too touristy'. Some visitors noted that the Cook Islands' environment and cleanliness had improved because of smaller number of tourists. Comments included:

"...There were no speeding drivers, no traffic congestion, no queues..."

"...It feels unspoilt."

"Beauty of the island - unspoiled by big business. Love the natural state of it, no fast-food chain restaurants - please keep it that way..."

"...we like the fact it wasn't overcrowded."

Family or friends

Two percent of the respondents considered being able to visit their family and friends in the Cook Islands as one of the most appealing aspects of their visit. Comments included:

"Getting together with large group of friends"

"Visiting old friends from 40 years ago."

"I went for my son's wedding"

Friendly animals

A few comments (1%) is on the friendliness and well-controlled animals, especially the local dogs. Further comments included:

"...My children loved the wandering dogs and would stop to pat as many as they could."

"...Loved the dogs and chickens everywhere."

"Loved the way dogs are looked after."

Price of goods and services

A small number (1%) of the respondents commented on the price of goods and services in the Cook Islands as being one of the most appealing aspects of their visit. Such comments are:

"...enjoying a few cold ones with reasonable dining prices."

"...good price for food and drink."

"...cheap to hire scooter."

Emotional Connection

Some visitors (1%) who repeatedly come back to visit the Cook Islands expressed their emotional attachment to the destination, such as a 'feeling of home'. Comments included:

"The people were so friendly and welcoming that it felt like home :) I'm a Pacific Islander and I visited from Hawai'i so it was really lovely to visit somewhere with familiar and homey vibes."

“I go on business, have done for 35 years, take wife or wife and children or wife and grandchildren, I feel at home and have had good bonding with my customers, I just love going to the Cook's.”

Family friendly or safe destination

A small number of the respondents (1%) appreciate the family-friendly feature/service offered by accommodations and tour operators. Comments included:

“All the swimming activities for the kids...”

“Able to accommodate a large family group...”

COVID resilience and travel availability

Another one percent of respondents expressed appreciation for being able to travel to the Cook Islands after the pandemic, and the efforts local people made in re-opening the border. Comments included:

“It was open to NZers during the covid pandemic, whilst there was no other travel to any other pacific islands.”

“It was open after COVID...”

Least appealing aspects of the Cook Islands

Visitors were asked: “What did you find least attractive or appealing about the Cook Islands on your most recent visit?”. Table 4 summarizes key themes respondents felt were least appealing. Major themes to emerge included issues with public services and facilities and infrastructure (20%), food and beverage (12%), poor weather (10%), stray animals and mosquitos (10%), accommodation, and price of goods and services (8% respectively).

Table 4: Least appealing aspects of the Cook Islands (n = 595)

Themes	Share of respondent comments (%)*
Public services and facilities and infrastructure	20
Food and beverage	12
Poor weather	10
Stray animals and mosquitos	10
Accommodation	8
Price of goods and services	8
Rubbish and the lack of care for the natural environment	7
Attractions and activities	5
Rental cars or scooters	4
Not open or not ready to operate	4
Customer service	3
Law and Legislation	3
Booking issues	3
COVID-19	3
Flight related issues	3
Lack of information	3
Labour shortage	2
Other tourists	1
Safety	1
Local people	1
Too touristy	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

Twenty percent of respondent comments mentioned the destination’s public services, facilities, and infrastructure as being the least appealing aspects of their Cook Islands experience. The majority of comments focused on the arrival and departure process at the airport (e.g., the waiting time and poor organisation). Other comments focused on the conditions of the roads, the bus services, and internet access. Comments included:

"The airport queues while checking in and going through customs were physically painful and I almost passed out."

"Arrival at airport was unnecessarily long and drawn out. Too few customer agents made this a painful first experience with the Cook Islands."

"Arriving. The airport customs and entry are terribly slow. Perhaps some of the slowest I have experienced in the world."

"...Also, the 2 hours standing in the queue in the heat with masks on at arrivals - they should provide seats and ventilation/air conditioning and call people up by a number system such as airline seat number."

"The difficulty of getting around the island. Bus was infrequent and at night only ran in one direction which made it difficult to go out at night."

"I know visitor numbers are down, but the frequency of the round island bus was not enough with just one bus running. It might be that with at least one more bus, more people would use the service and get around and spend their money."

"One of the public buses that circumnavigated the island was in a poor state of maintenance."

"I really wish NZ phones could roam in Cook Islands without having to buy travellers sim card. this is SO annoying."

"... Not being able to access Wi-Fi, was difficult as I was supposed to be working, when I did, it ran out really quickly."

Food and beverage

Twelve percent of respondent comments noted that food and beverage offerings in the Cook Islands were a least appealing aspect of their visit. Comments primarily focused on the *limited food choice* (particularly for dietary preferences like vegan/vegetarian), the lack of local produce (e.g., fresh fruit, fish), the price of food, and the fact that much food that was available was *unhealthy*. Comments included:

"Felt like a lot of the local market was dedicated to very western food for tourist consumption rather than being actually representative of Cook Island cuisine."

"Expected more traditional food options (lots of burgers, chips and pizza at restaurants)."

"Lack of understanding of Coeliac disease."

"Food - lack of decent fruit and vegetables..."

"Couldn't get over how expensive food and drinks were and there was not a lot of lovely fresh tropical fruit available at the resort."

"There seemed to be a number of fast-food options, and a few higher end restaurants. It would be nice to have some more middle options, that are affordable and healthy."

"There's not much traditional food on menus around the island."

"Healthy food options seemed not to be available or easily accessible."

"The lack of vegan options in cafes, restaurants, etc. We were hungry all the time :("

"Unable to get fresh fish."

Poor Weather

Poor weather was mentioned in ten percent of respondent comments. Even though many mentioned that this was out of their control, it still impacted on their holiday. Comments included:

"Too much rain...haha but that can't be helped. Was escaping too much rain in NZ :)"

"Lack of nightly entertainment at resort Weather not warm enough and resort too exposed."

"The weather! 9 days of rain, wind, and storms. A lot of money spent/annual leave taken for no sun."

"The weather was not the best during our trip which meant that we couldn't enjoy a lot of activities in and around the water."

"Unfortunately, the weather didn't play it's part. Managed to swim and snorkel the first couple of days then awful wind and rain which curtailed our activities. We were unable to do our Lagoon Cruise or swim in the lagoon. However, the pool kept our children occupied and we had a lovely relaxing holiday."

Stray animals and mosquitoes

Ten percent of respondent comments stated that the least appealing part of their visit was the presence of stray animals and mosquitoes. *Dogs* dominated the conversation, but *chickens*, *mosquitoes*, and *sea slugs* were also mentioned. Comments included:

"Some of the wandering dogs weren't very friendly."

"Dogs on road at night hard to see."

"The amount of stray dogs in Rarotonga that looked hungry and sad. Pets were in cages when driving by in the sun which is torture to see and for them to be in such conditions. Education required to the residents on how to look after their pets."

"Animal welfare was the least attractive part of my visit. As an animal lover I would have liked to have been able to find out more about the island dogs and cats. I was distressed to hear that the police pick up the dogs and shoot them..."

"A little uncomfortable at the numbers of dogs that roam the villages and beaches."

"...Attacked 3 times by dogs at night (we were cyclists)."

"Barking dogs and roosters in the night...but not too seriously. It wouldn't stop us coming again."

"The chickens at 04:00."

"...Mosquito's were annoying."

"The Sea slugs in muri?"

"Sea slugs in shallow waters in Aitutaki."

Accommodation

A further eight percent of respondent comments included complaints about the standard of accommodation. Respondents emphasised that the *costs* of the resorts were too high, that some of the accommodation was run down and in need of maintenance. Visitors also commented that food at some accommodation was often unavailable/not what visitors were expecting, and that *service* and *communication* at some of the resorts were not up to standard. Comments included:

"High cost of average accommodation."

"I was quoted \$795 per night at the resort which was outrageous."

"The age of accommodation without renovations."

"The resort was very run down, even accounting for the storm damage. It appeared that the owner didn't care."

"... this accommodation was clean but very RUN DOWN."

"Aitutaki was too expensive to travel to and to stay at."

"Our room was so damp it made us sick."

"After enquiring with the resort twice and being assured there were no issues after the high tides in July/Aug, the resort was not up to expectations. Honestly, we have rented holiday homes in the past and would do that again over staying in a resort."

"The hotel nearly ruined the holiday. Didn't give the rooms booked. TERRIBLE communication. Bad service. Would never go there again. Altered the experience of the island..."

"Disappointed with how dated the accommodation was, expected better quality. The breakfast was not pleasing at all..."

Price of goods and services

Another eight percent of comments mentioned the price of goods and services as a least appealing part of the Cook Islands visit. Respondents mostly referred to the prices of *food*, but comments also mentioned the price of accommodation, taxis, and hiring scooters/bicycles. Comments included:

"High cost of average accommodation."

"The high cost of food..."

"The price of food and beverages at local supermarkets..."

"The sugar tax and price of food from shops."

"Cost of groceries whilst there was higher than I expected but not a reason I wouldn't return."

"Things can be pricey but it's understandable with import prices."

"How expensive taxis are. Makes NO SENSE to charge each person the same price, if there is 1 person in the Taxi or 5 people. Still really annoyed about how unfair that was."

"Cost to hire a bicycle and poor condition of the road not good for bicycle riding..."

Rubbish and the lack of care for the natural environment

Rubbish and the lack of care for the natural environment were mentioned in seven percent of respondent comments. Comments mostly focused on the degradation of coral reefs, litter on the beaches but also in the streets, broken glass, and the presence of abandoned sites. A few comments also mentioned the absence of rubbish bins which made it hard to control litter. Comments included:

"...The status of the reefs was heart breaking. I could not believe how dead everything was. Whilst you can't control climate change issues, you can control septic runoff into the lagoon from resorts and houses. Clean it up or you will lose a vast amount of your tourist market. We will likely not come back as the snorkelling was very sad to do."

"Glass /rubbish washed up on the beach. I collected glass & rubbish off the beach whilst walking, nearly every day."

"Quite a lot of litter about, sadly..."

"The amount of litter everywhere. The lack of coral and no fish life @ the lagoon side."

"The broken glass on the beach :(so much every day we collected. it was dangerous for the kids running in the sand."

"Mess on the beaches of Rarotonga- broken glass, cans, plastic in abundance. Locals don't seem to care."

"Broken glass, lots of it, on the beach on the sea end of Aitutaki private island resort. Just where there is good snorkelling."

"Not enough rubbish bins around for litter."

"The amount of products in plastic containers e.g. drinks and plastic containers. I understand that there is no recycling process for many things but the constant burning of rubbish with all the smoke and aroma would put new visitors off. I understand why it gets done but in some areas, it happens a lot."

Attractions and activities

Five percent of visitor comments included criticism/disappointment related to attractions and activities in the Cook Islands. Many comments mentioned activity cancellations caused by poor weather conditions. Other comments were centred around *markets, lack of nightly entertainment, fishing, and lagoons*, with a smaller amount focused on specific activities that were booked by visitors. Comments included:

"Really limited free diving opportunities due to the shallow waters in the lagoon, so we will probably rotate round Samoa and Niue again before we come back to Raro."

"The deep-sea fishing - no fish caught - worst 5 hours. No signs that the fish market is closed unless the boat comes in..."

"Lack of nightly entertainment at resort..."

"The National Museum needs a serious update; it looks more like a community museum than a national one. A private museum gallery near Muri beach is closer to what it should be, but it should better as a National Museum."

"The eco-tourism can be improved. In my opinion the Cook Islands shouldn't allow tourists to swim with the Turtles. I witnessed the turtles being harassed by my guide and hundreds of tourists out in the passage on one day. Surely this is bad for this eco system."

"Spa treatments way too expensive. Other pacific islands spa treatments way more affordable and got them daily. Heard many others say they were not worth the extra cost they were asking."

"Muri night markets food was a bit disappointing. Huge feeds but not overly tasty."

Rental cars and scooters

Four percent of respondent comments mentioned the experience of trying to rent a car or scooter as the least appealing aspect of their Cook Islands visit. Complaints mainly focused on the unavailability of rental cars and scooters. Comments included:

"Least attractive would be the advertising of rental bikes and then being told differently from what is advertised including prices so no bikes were hired during the visit including family members who were there for 6 days."

"No cars available but we understand it was very busy and buses not running on time that is all I can think of. Very enjoyable holiday."

"Tried to hire cycles none were available from any hire place."

Not open or not ready to operate

Four percent of comments mentioned that the businesses were "not open or not ready to operate" as one of the least appealing aspects of the Cook Islands visit. Many respondents did mention that they understood that this was often the result of staff shortages due to Covid. Comments included:

"Lack of opportunities to spend money - many shops closed."

"Sadly, lots of places still closed, hopefully with borders opening everything can open again."

"Quite a few places were closed, or significantly reduced opening hours, but I guess this is COVID hangover."

"Those shops close early on Saturday. Being a very tourist island, it would be nice to keep the shops open to the afternoon to give visitors time to shop if they leave Rarotonga early on a Monday. Shopping at the markets and stores on the Saturday before 12pm is a rush."

"When on 5-day holiday, we could not return to cafes/ restaurants due to them being closed, could not return to shops as were closed."

Customer service

Three percent of respondent comments mentioned the poor standard of customer service they experienced as their least appealing aspect of their holiday. Comments often focused on customer service in restaurants, accommodation, car or scooter rentals, airport, and transport (e.g., bus, taxi). Comments included:

"Service in bars and restaurants."

"The service at some of the restaurants was quite slow and inattentive. Not a major problem though!"

"The only thing was our stay at the resort, it was disappointing as it was the only place where the staff were dismissive and unfriendly."

"The atmosphere has changed since COVID, locals not as happy, takeaway bars etc not as friendly, not the same, I have been two times before Covid and it was great, this was my third trip, and it was nothing like the first two. Some shops have closed and others not as welcoming as they used to be."

"Airport staff and their lack of ushering / guiding people through customs. The customs/baggage check was particularly rude and didn't help us at all, which was a disappointing end to trip."

"A restaurant who did not have a good range of advertised food and beverage, disappointing, then overcharged by not deleting non supplied goods. Bad experience!!"

"The unprofessional service of the airline hostess. She presented with poor presentation, she had blank facial expression, speech sounded rapid with no emotions of engagement or smile to the customers flying to Aitutaki. I suspected that she was not happy in her job. This is a concern. As someone born in the Cook Islands this is quite embarrassing. Service delivery should be priority. It is very concerning to see the lack and unprofessional attitude and manner of airline staff."

"Our taxi driver who collected us on our last night to go to the airport yelling and swearing the whole 10 minutes to the airport. I hope he was fired!"

Law and Legislation

Law and legislation were mentioned by three percent of visitor comments regarding least appealing aspects of their visit. Comments often focused on the challenges involved in obtaining a scooter license i:

"Police station and trying to get a license/rent vehicle, the process was vague and difficult and cost a lot of time. It was like climbing over a hill just to find another one"

waiting for you. We eventually just ditched the whole process and just used public transport/hitch hiked."

"The disparity between police officers conducting the test. This issue really needs to be addressed as in our party of 3 there were 2 different officers testing, and they were very different in their approach; resulting in 1 of our party failing and not offered a 2nd chance whilst the other officer was very friendly, supportive, safety first but gave a lot of people a 2nd chance. It was very frustrating and seemed quite unfair."

"Applying for a motorcycle license, the time involved..."

"The new paperwork for leaving Cook Island back to New Zealand which was completely unnecessary."

"Uncertainty about covid restrictions."

Booking issues

A further 3% of comments were around booking issues for dining and tours, with concerns focused on the need to book for meals and lack of availability. Comments included:

"Having to book restaurants well in advance."

"Lack of easily being able to book tours at accommodations, tour providers not calling back for days, lack of being able to get a whale watching tour, lack of collection and drop offs at hotels for tours, lack of opening hours of cafes restaurants."

COVID-19

Three percent of comments mentioned issues related to COVID-19. These comments were mainly concerning visitors getting COVID while on holiday and places being short staffed or closed because of COVID. Comments included:

"Unfortunately, we caught Covid from a local shop assistant (she should have been isolating) and spending many days in isolation without too much assistance."

"The understaffed and overworked staff, an unfortunate side effect of Covid and an understandable situation for the island to be in, hopefully it all works itself out soon."

"Using a map from 2019 & trying to find cafe & restaurants that were open. Found quite a few that weren't able to open, due to staff shortages from Covid."

Flight related issues

Three percent of respondent comments mentioned flight related issues as the least appealing part of the visit. Comments mentioned Jetstar and scheduling issues plus the lack of direct access from Australia. Comments included:

"Travel to/from - access only via Auckland."

"Flying with Jetstar and our departure experience."

"Not having access to direct flights for Australia made the journey longer to get there."

"No direct connection from Australia."

Lack of information

A further three percent of respondent comments noted that the least appealing part of the visit was the lack of visitor information available e.g., opening hours for dining and shopping, local attractions and entertainment. Comments included:

"I would not say less attractive but needs some improvement on Info about what is happening on the island. For example, a newsletter informing us about where to go for lunch and dinner, given the options and what is attractive in each place. Where to go for live music. The market days and time..."

"We know about it but the early closure of some places and being closed on Sundays. It's great wish NZ still had it but maybe a bit more info for those not aware."

"Lack of up-to-date brochures with information - especially since we have internet access."

"Only map we were able to obtain covered accommodation and restaurants."

Labour shortage

Two percent of respondent comments highlighted the impacts of staff shortages. Comments included:

"Staff shortages made things harder for services, sorry to see things stretched."

"The long wait for meals, and the obvious fact of insufficient staff, at our accommodation, who evidently get paid a very low wage."

"There were some things that we couldn't do but understand that there is a shortage of staff, and that Cook Islands took a big hit with the covid pandemic closing borders and stopping tourism."

"Air New Zealand and Jetstar didn't seem to have enough staff and check in took much longer than needed."

Other tourists

A small amount (one percent) of respondent comments mentioned their encounter with some rude and unruly tourists as the least appealing aspect of the Cook Islands visit. Comments included:

"Rude tourists & how they treat local staff."

"...whinging tourists."

"Tourists complaining."

"...there is a new type of tourist coming to the Island. They are loud and drunk and are better off going to Bali."

Safety

Safety was a theme mentioned in one percent of the respondent comments. Comments included:

"... we got our money stolen from a locked room."

"No fence around pool at private accommodation, we had young children."

"Hotel and getting robbed."

Local people

A small number (one percent) of comments mentioned local people as the least appealing aspect of the Cook Islands visit. Comments included:

"Some of the drunken locals that appeared inebriated at local bars."

"Some local young men not happy about having tourists back on the island."

Too Touristy

One percent of comments mentioned tourism development or the increasing number of tourists as a negative aspect of their visit. Comments included:

"A sign of the times I suppose but it is a little noisier than it used to be....and much more traffic."

"Too many white New Zealanders dominating the Island. I came to see a Māori Island with Māori people, culture, food but was disappointed."

"Much busier than previous visits."

Suggestions for improvements

When asked if there was anything that could have improved their visit to the Cook Islands 44% of visitors took the time to make a comment. Suggestions focus on public services and infrastructure, many which highlighted arrival and departure experience (24%), the availability and quality of food and drinks (15%), accommodation (12%), weather (11%), entertainment, activities and transport (11%), the need for better information (8%), wanting to stay longer, visit more places (8%), flights (8%), local people, standards of service (8%), car scooter or rental (7%), other (6%), environment, safety and animals (5%), value for money (5%), booking prior to arrival (2%), business needing to be open or fully operational (2%), COVID practices (2%), needing more staff (2%), law and legislation (1%). Comments on these themes include:

"Arrival process at the airport - need to streamline this as it took many of our group close to 2 hours to get thru."

"Quicker arrival processing at airport."

"Better access to internet/Wi-Fi service."

"General road conditions including road to waterfall area."

"Better quality food in the restaurants, better food at some of the markets during the week."

"I'm vegetarian and my friends' vegan and we love to eat but we found it difficult to find good meals that suited our diets that would have made a big difference to our overall experience."

"More island food and seafood."

"The Hotel rates are one of the highest in the world. We will definitely visit again, only just not as often as we would like to (because of the accommodation costs)."

"Better value accommodation which I think is available."

"Sufficient staff at our accommodation so our room could at least get serviced every second day."

"More cultural tourist attractions."

"We would have participated in more activities if we had known about them. Activities not marketed well we had to go chasing what was on. E.g., sailing, shops, pearls."

"Public transport a bit more regular."

"Easier access to transport around the island."

“Signage at some shops was very inaccurate as regards trading hours. EG one outside sign said open daily and when you get there it was only opened 4 days per week.”

“More printed information could have been made available. Other info. was out of date. The staff member at hotel gave better and accurate info compared to the member at the Information centre.”

“Direct flight from Australia.”

“We felt that Rarotonga does not appreciate the tourism that they have did not feel that welcome by the locals.”

“Customer service seems to have vanished, wasn't as friendly as past trips.”

“Don't lose the flavour of the culture of the island, it's what will make the Cook Islands stand out in comparison to the other islands.”

“Less beach pollution.”

“Provide more rubbish bins.”

“Knowing I needed to book tours and cultural activities before arriving”

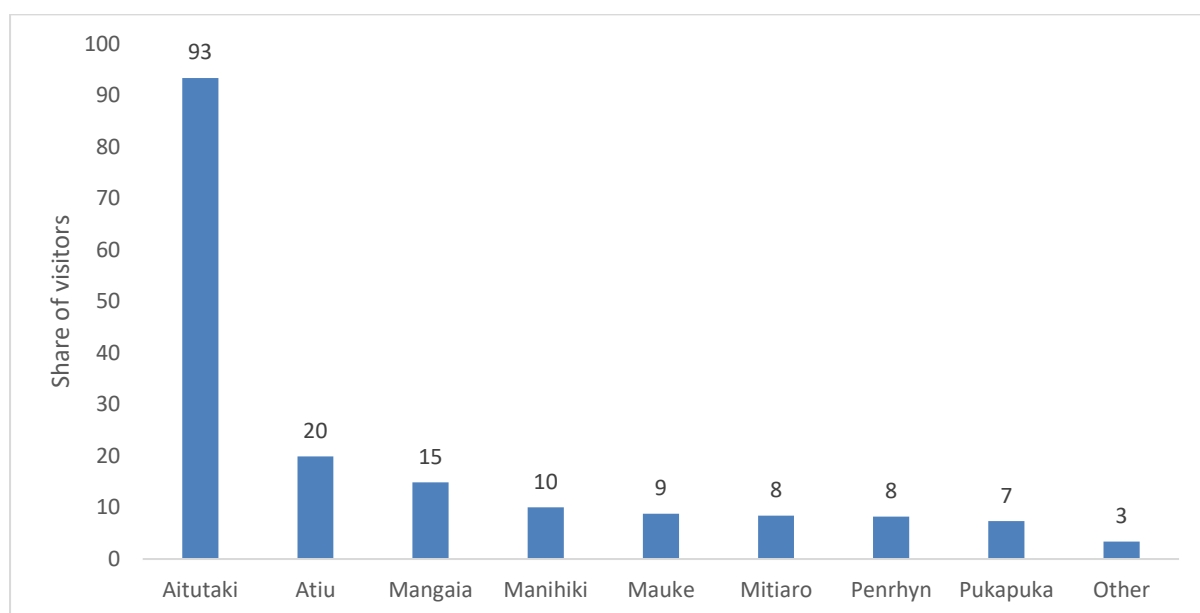
“More staff at the airport.”

Reasons to return to the Cook Islands and recommend to others

Nearly all visitors (94%) indicated that they would consider re-visiting the Cook Islands in the future. This figure is consistent with July to August 2021 period (94%), but slightly higher than visitors exhibited in the same quarter of 2019 (93%).

Over half (52%) of the visitors who said they would return stated that they would definitely include the outer islands on their next visit. A further 44% of visitors indicated they would “maybe” visit outer islands next time. Of those who said they may visit outer islands the next time, most (93%) mentioned they would like to include Aitutaki. Atiu was the second most mentioned island at 20% (Figure 31).

Figure 31: Islands that visitors said they would include on their next visit (n = 558)



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

Of the six percent of visitors who indicated they would not want to return to the Cook Islands, the majority stated it was because of the perceived poor value for money, disappointment with the negative attitude from the local people, concerns with the local environment, and the desire to explore more destinations in the future. Comments included:

“Been there twice now and want to explore other islands.”

“For a cheap and cheerful trip with friends, but not for a lavish 'relaxation at a fancy place' type of holiday.”

“Didn't feel completely satisfied. Although holiday was to just relax and unwind, felt it was far more expensive than going to Fiji or Noosa.”

“Not for a while. Not quite value for money at the moment.”

“Unfriendliness, it’s as if Cook Islanders think the world owes them a living.”

“I felt unwelcome and like locals did not want us there.”

“We feel that Rorotonga is falling behind in its overall maintenance... It feels old and dirty. Which is such a shame as this was our fifth visit. The arrival at the airport was just a joke. The local get their own lanes which they take 10/15 minutes to go through we took one hour 50 minutes.”

“Not to Rarotonga – ‘too plastic’.”

“Lagoon health was heart-breaking.”

“The weather was awful and we found there was little to do if you can’t get out on the water.”

Nearly all visitors surveyed (98%) said that they would recommend the destination to their family and friends which is consistent with previous survey periods. Only 2% of visitors would not recommend the Cook Islands to others. Comments included:

“Samoa way cheaper, loads of culture and amazing restaurants. Also at resorts in Samoa if you are in the beach the waiters come down to the beach for drink and food orders but not in Cook Island.”

“Maybe expensive to travel from Australia.”

“Not Rarotonga.”

“Would tell people to compare to other places also, feel Cook Is is a one-off place for us.”

“Would say yes but cautious of price.”

“I would but not the accommodation we had just not value for money.”

Final Observations

This report shows that the Cook Islands tourism industry performed extremely well during the survey period of July to September 2022. Overall visitor satisfaction levels and the desire to recommend the destination to others have remained consistently high. Clearly the destination is making a generally positive impression on visitors. Visitor spend remains higher than same quarter in 2019 but is a bit lower than previous survey periods after the border reopened for international visitors from May 2021. This reflects the fact that some travellers are now switching to longer haul destinations or other travel options as the rest of the world is opening up again.

Despite the overall positive performance, this report highlights that there is room to enhance the visitor experience, and to increase the economic yield and broader community benefits associated with tourism. Business closure and staffing levels, for example, will require considerable attention if satisfaction and spend are to remain strong. It is also important for local government and businesses to provide timely and accurate information to the public and to provide 'on-site' updates and information for visitors.

In the wake of industry rebuilding, the areas that will require greatest future attention will be the management of environmental quality, ensuring community readiness and buy-in to the industry, and ensuring that food and accommodation services really represent good value for money. It is critical that service levels meet visitor expectations, and it is clear that there are opportunities for improvement in this area.

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought significant challenges to both tourists and the local tourism industry. Visitors were generally impressed with COVID-19 protocols and procedures. Nevertheless, the research highlights some issues, for example, there are many complaints about the long waiting times during the arrival process at the airport which has been a constant issue since the border re-opened in May 2021. Meanwhile, some visitors are very cautious about health guidelines, so businesses should continue to adopt best practice COVID-19 hygiene habits to guarantee the safety to their customers.

It is vital to continue to build on this overall positive industry performance and to convert it into even greater economic benefits for local people. It is critical to now find ways to build on and develop the visitor experience in a manner that enhances local economic linkages. This report reinforces the fact that cost effective on-line research can generate information that is of value to both the tourism industry and government policy makers. As the survey continues we will be able to explore in more detail on the characteristics of different market segments as they return to the Cook Islands and the overall impacts and performance of the industry.