



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

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**April – June 2022**

**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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## **Acknowledgements**

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## Executive Summary

This report focuses on the characteristics, expectations, and expenditure patterns of visitors to the Cook Islands between 1<sup>st</sup> April and 30<sup>th</sup> June 2022. This is the fourth international visitor survey (IVS) report presented during the time of COVID-19 and as such it represents an important barometer of the pandemic-related performance of the industry.

The data that underpins the report is generated by an online departure survey (<http://www.mycookislandsvisit.com>). There are 682 individual respondents to the survey - representing a total of 1,242 adults and 158 children in the in-country expenditure analysis (estimated to be approximately 5% of all visitors during the period – based on April to June 2022 visitor arrival data from the Cook Islands Statistics Office). In the report we draw comparisons with NZ visitors in the April to June 2019 survey period, and all visitors in May to June 2021 period.

As a result of the border restrictions, nearly all (98%) of visitors surveyed come from New Zealand. Visitors are well educated (68% have some form of tertiary education) with a relatively high annual household income (59% earn over NZ\$100,000 per year) and one visitor in five (18%) earning over \$200,000 per year. Well over half (57%) of visitors travel with more than one companion, solo travellers are far less common (8%).

Four out of ten (41%) visitors surveyed are travelling for the first time to the Cook Islands. The main purpose of visit is holidaymaking (89%). The average length of stay in the Cook Islands is 8.7 nights. Most (82%) visitors stay ten nights or less. Twenty-two percent of visitors surveyed visited Aitutaki.

Visitor spend prior to arrival in the Cook Islands is \$2,082 per person, which is 23% higher than New Zealand visitors during the Apr to Jun period in 2019 (\$1,699 per person), but slightly lower than all visitors of May to June 2021 (\$2,164). Spend while on the Cook Islands (per person per day) is \$199. This spend is 30% higher than NZ visitors' local spend in April to June 2019 (\$153); but slightly lower than all visitors in May to June 2021 (\$206).

When pre-paid spend and local spend are combined, it is estimated that each visitor brings \$2,554 to the Cook Islands economy (or approximately \$295 per day). This figure is 35% higher than NZ visitors of April to June 2019 period (\$1,896), but 8% lower than all visitors during the May to June 'travel bubble' in 2021 (\$2,747).

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; activities, attractions, entertainment and events; and atmosphere. The least appealing elements are issues with public services, facilities and infrastructure (especially the length of the waiting time at the airport), stray animals and mosquitos, price of goods and services, price and quality of the

food and beverage, some of the businesses not being open or fully operational, rental cars and scooters. Rubbish and natural environment care also features.

In terms of the COVID-19 response in the Cook Islands, visitors are generally very satisfied with pandemic related processes and requirements. However, the levels of satisfaction are slightly lower than their January to March 2022, July to August and May to June 2021 counterparts. Contact tracing system and Rarotonga International Airport were given the lowest scores by April to June 2022 visitors.

The desire of visitors to return to Cook Islands in the future remains strong: 95% of those surveyed state that they would come back for another visit, and 99% say they would recommend the Cook Islands to friends or family. These rates remain higher compared to 2019 NZ visitors during the same quarter.

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## Introduction

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

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

This report focuses on visitors who travelled to the Cook Islands from 1<sup>st</sup> April to 30<sup>st</sup> June 2022. Over this three-month period, 3,325 visitors were contacted by email to take part in the survey, and 682 responses were received: a conversion rate of 23%. The conversion rate for this period is lower than the May to June 2021 period (29%) when the New Zealand and Cook Islands travel bubble commenced; but higher than the same period in 2019 (16%). These 682 responses cover a total of 1,242 adults and 158 children when we examine visitor expenditure. As the fourth COVID-period IVS report, this document, together with the first three COVID reports (May-June 2021, July-August 2021, and January - March 2022), provide an important barometer of the pandemic performance of the industry.

The data presented includes detailed information on:

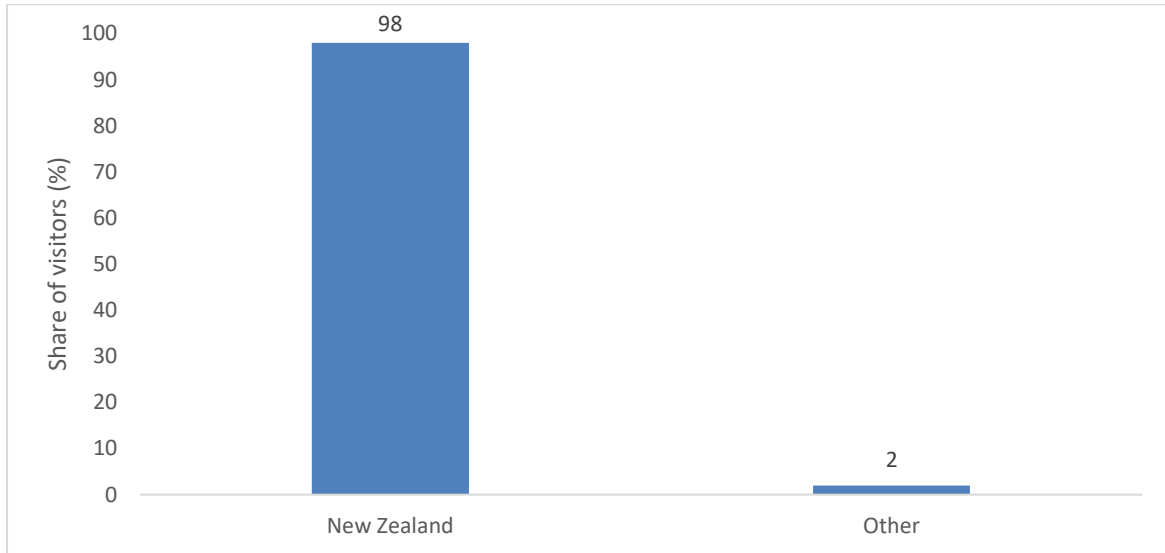
- The characteristics of visitors to the Cook Islands (age, gender, education, country of origin, income, purpose of visit, travelling companions, number of previous visits, length of stay, airline used, and islands visited)
- Visitor information obtained about the Cook Islands, factors influencing the travel decision making process, and booking information
- Visitor expenditure (amount of money spent prior to arrival and while in the Cook Islands, and items of spending)
- Visitor 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 2022 figures, the May to June 2021, and the same period of 2019 findings (NZ visitors).

## Visitor Characteristics

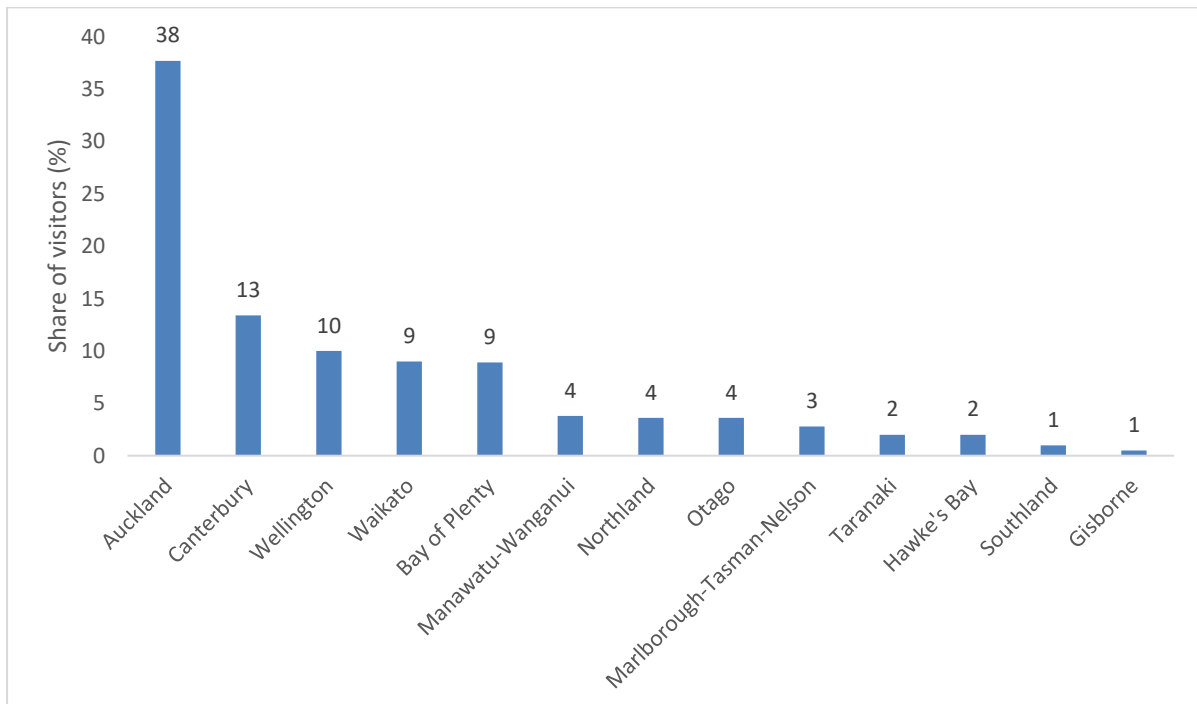
Virtually all (98%) of the visitors surveyed come from New Zealand (Figure 1). The few remaining non-New Zealand visitors originated primarily from Australia, Europe, and USA.

**Figure 1: Country of origin (n = 682)**



Auckland dominates the New Zealand market (38%), together Wellington, Canterbury, and Waikato account for a further 32% of New Zealand visitors (Figure 2).

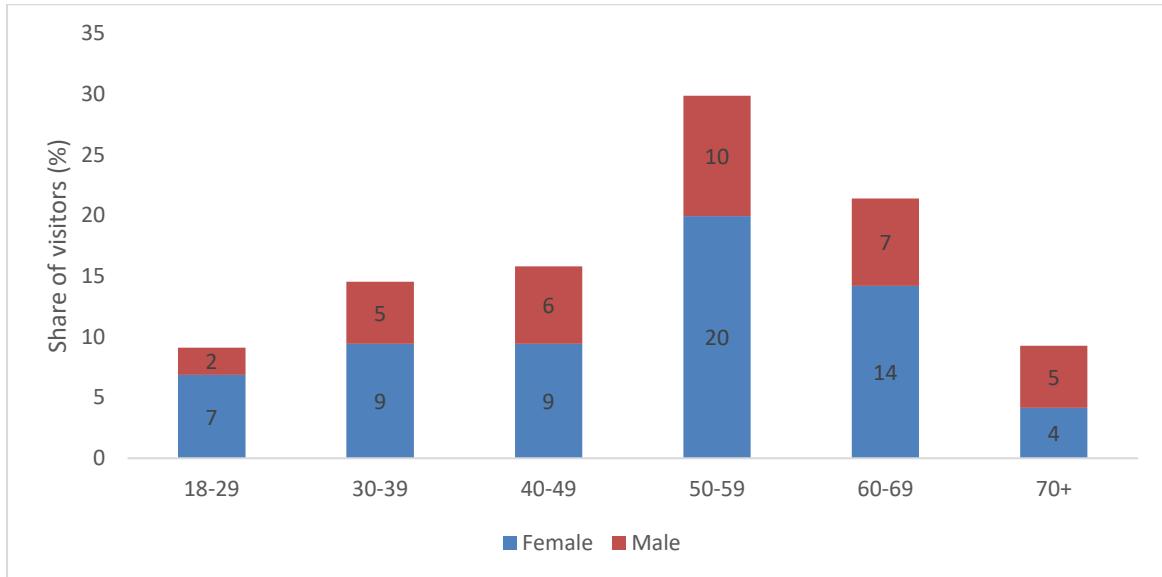
**Figure 2: New Zealand visitors (n = 605)**





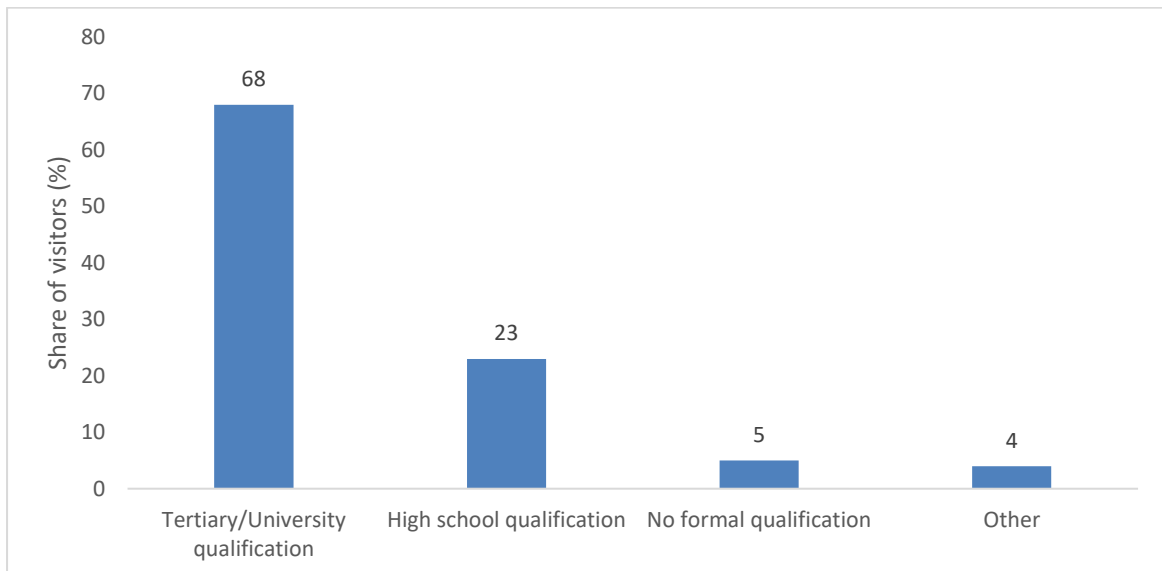
More women (64%) than men (36%) completed the survey (Figure 3). The most significant age categories are the 50 to 59 (30%) and 60 to 69 age groups (21%), followed by those aged 40 to 49 year (15%), 30 to 39 (14%), 18 to 29 and 70+ (9% respectively). Those under 18 are not surveyed for ethical reasons.

**Figure 3: Distribution of age and gender (n = 626)**



Visitors are well educated, with over two thirds (68%) of those surveyed having some form of tertiary qualification, and a further 23% having completed a high school education (Figure 4).

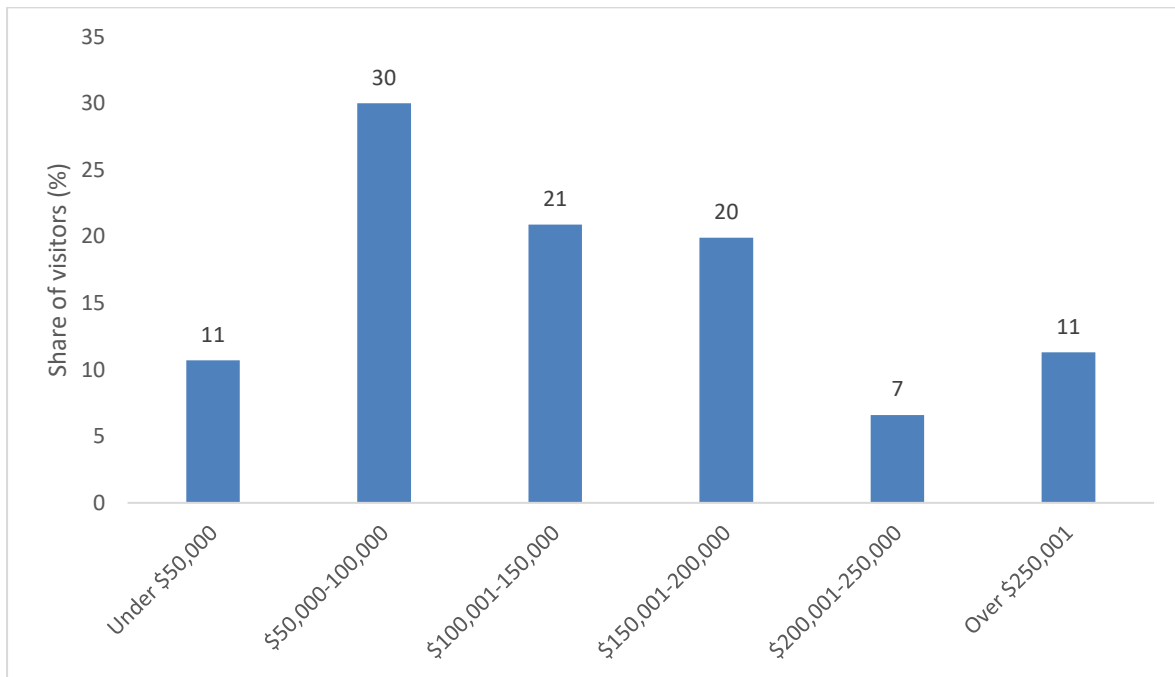
**Figure 4: Highest qualification (n = 627)**



The average household income is NZ\$152,566. By way of contrast, the average household income in May to June 2021 was NZ\$163,614. Nearly a third (30%) of visitors have an annual household income of between NZ\$50,000 and NZ\$100,000. Just over one in five (21%)

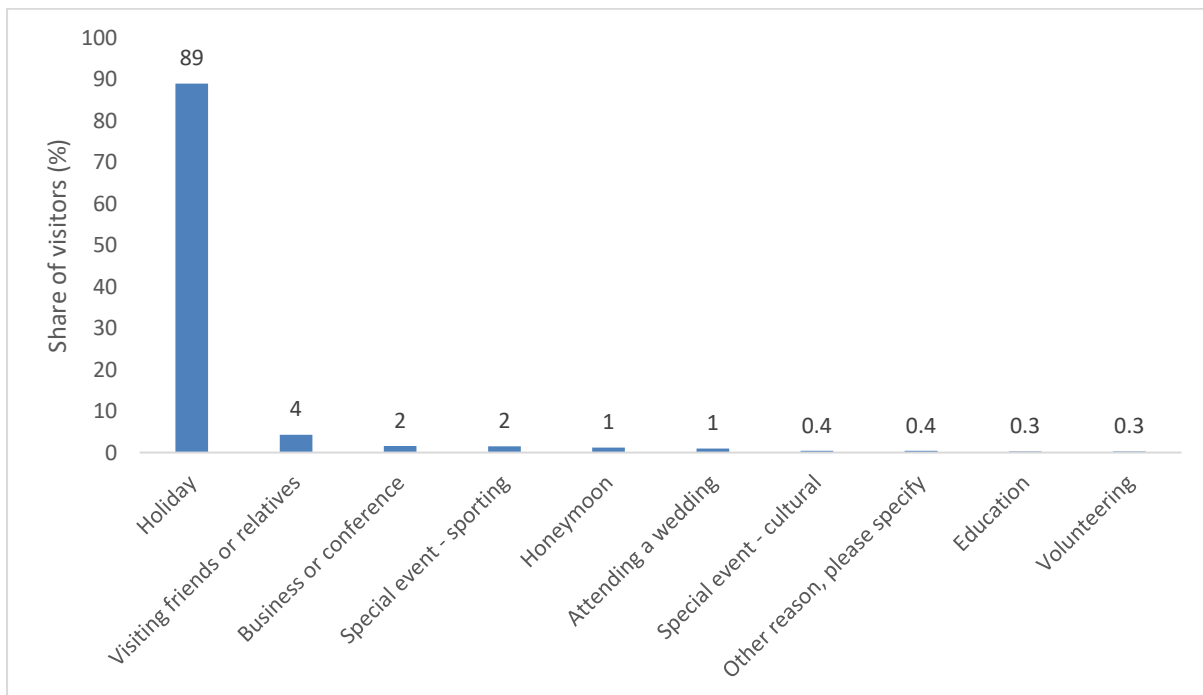
respondents surveyed earn between NZ\$100,001 and NZ\$150,000. A further 38% of respondents have a household income of over NZ\$150,000 per year (Figure 5).

**Figure 5: Annual household income in NZD (n = 512)**



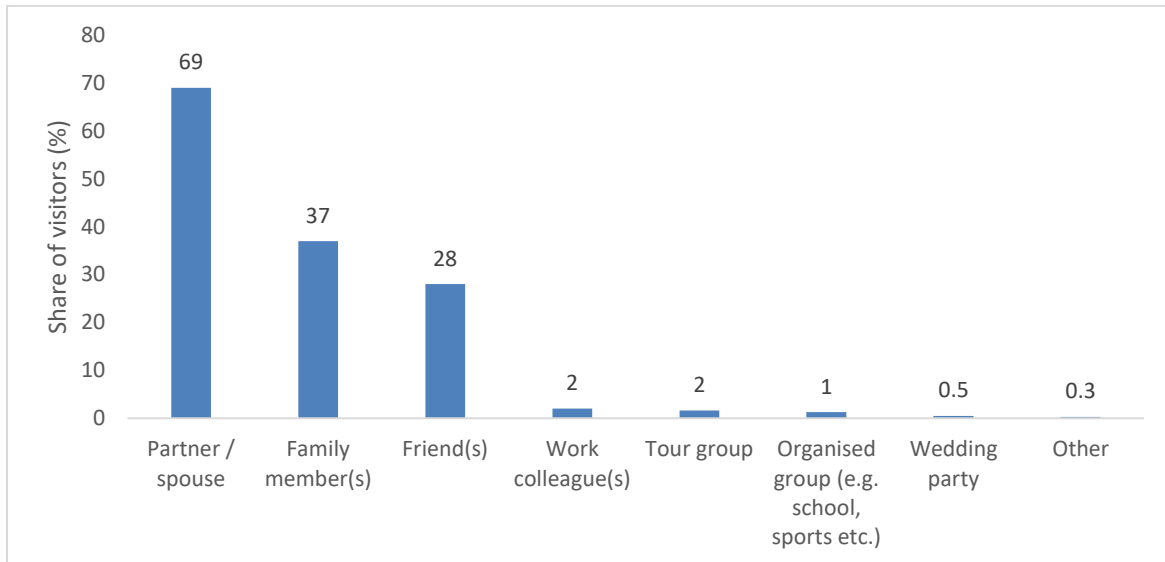
The predominant purpose of visit to the Cook Islands is a holiday (89%) (Figure 6). Other reasons given include visiting friends or relatives (4%), business and conference activities, and attending sporting event (2% respectively).

**Figure 6: Main purpose of visit (n = 682)**



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 (69%). Visitors also travel with other family members (37%), with friends (28%), with colleagues (2%), or in a tour group (2%). Those travelling as part of a wedding party or in an organised group represent smaller shares of the sample (Figure 7).

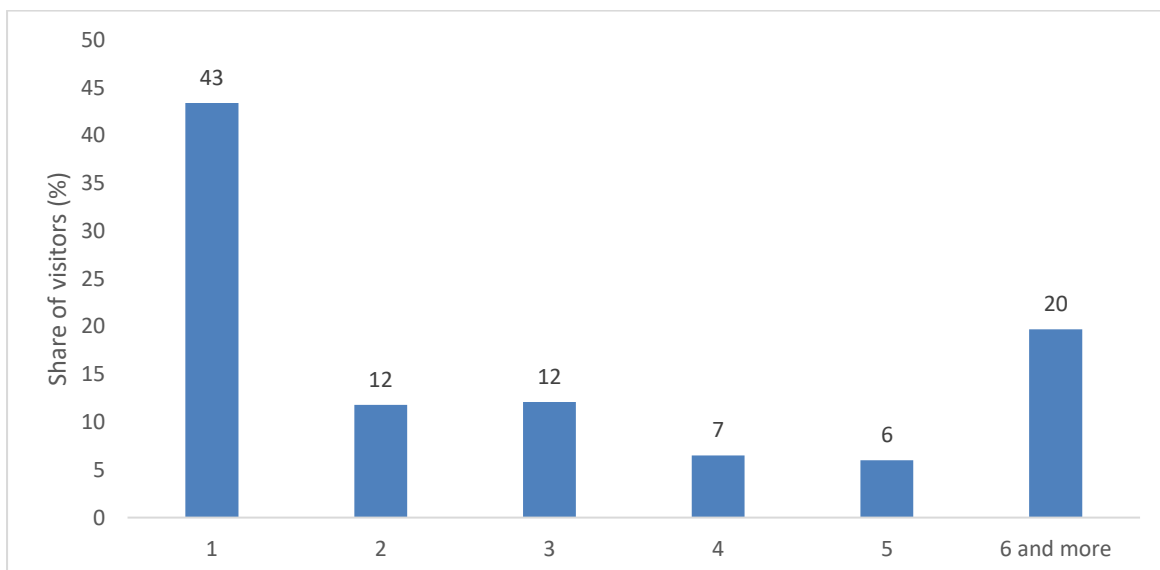
**Figure 7: Travelling with whom? (n = 626)**



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

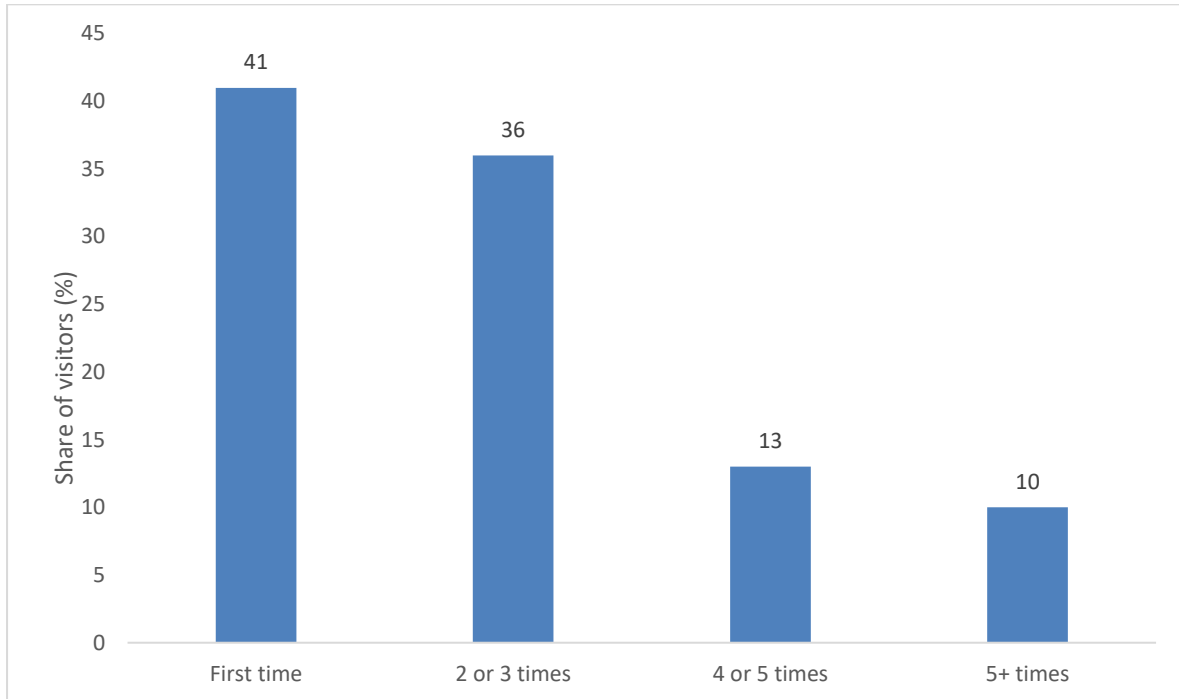
If we exclude those travelling alone, nearly half of visitors (43%) travelled with one companion on their visit to the Cook Islands (Figure 8), and over a third of visitors (31%) travelled with two to four people.

**Figure 8: Number of companions on trip (excluding those travelling alone) (n = 535)**



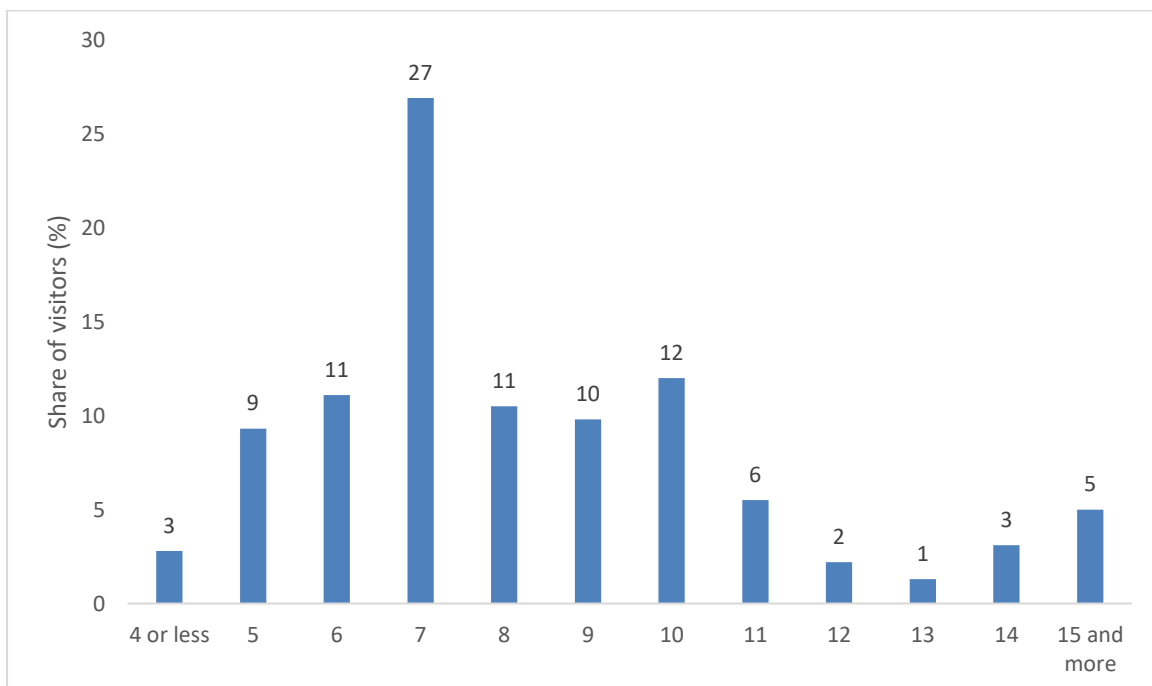
Over four in ten visitors (41%) are on their first visit to the Cook Islands. A further 36% have been to the Cook Islands two or three times before. Nearly a quarter of those surveyed (23%) have visited four or more times (Figure 9).

**Figure 9: Number of visits to the Cook Islands (n = 620)**



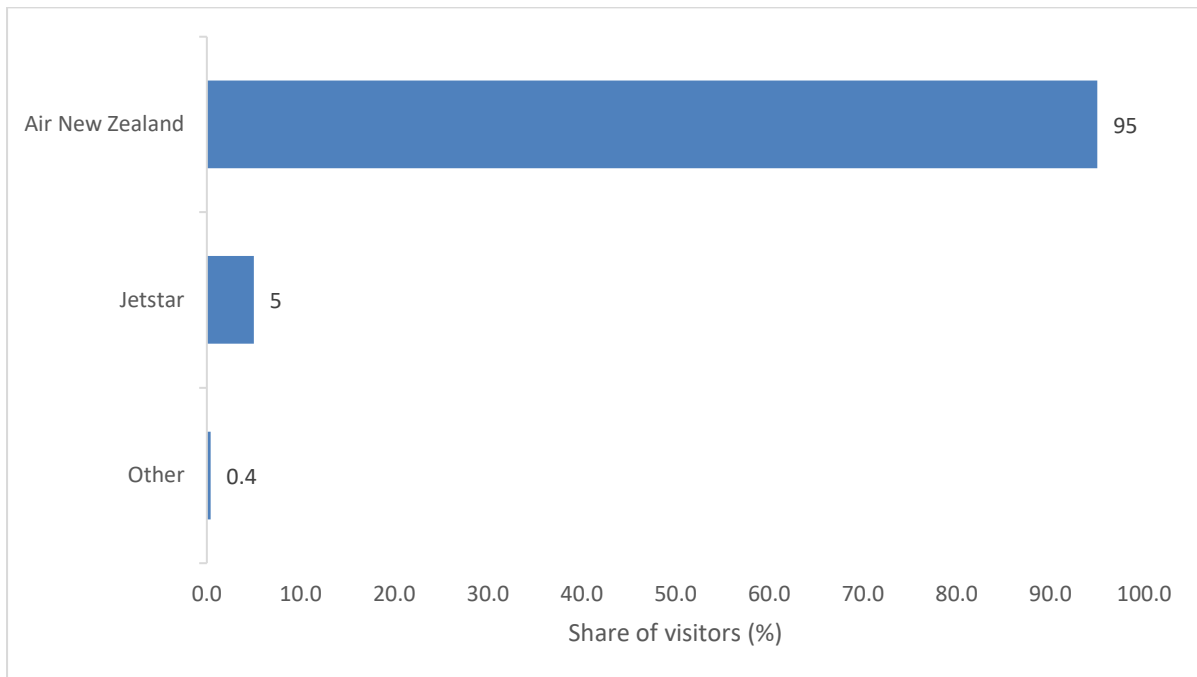
The average length of stay in the Cook Islands is 8.7 nights (median 7.0) with 82% of visitors spending ten or fewer nights in the country (Figure 10).

**Figure 10: Length of stay in nights (n = 676)**



The majority of visitors (95%) travelled to/from the Cook Islands with Air New Zealand. A further 5% of visitors travelled with Jetstar (Figure 11).

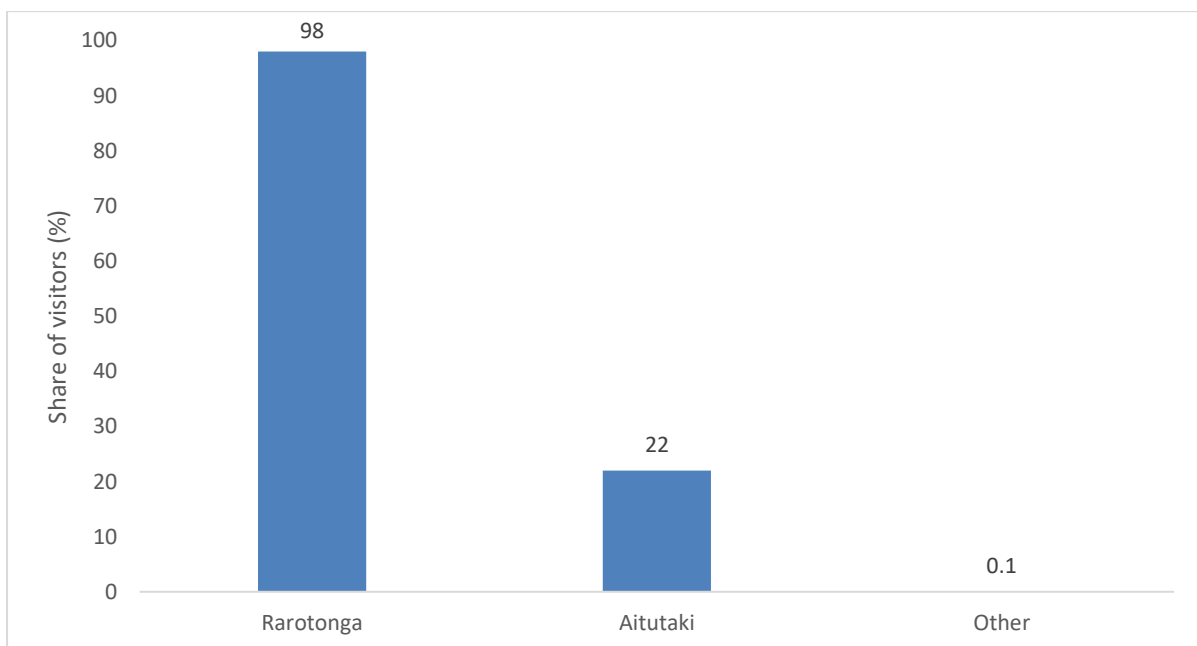
**Figure 11: Mode of transport (n = 682)**



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

The vast majority (98%) of visitors to the Cook Islands spent time on Rarotonga, with Aitutaki being the second most visited outer island (22%). Far fewer visitors spend time on other outer islands (less than 1%) (Figure 12).

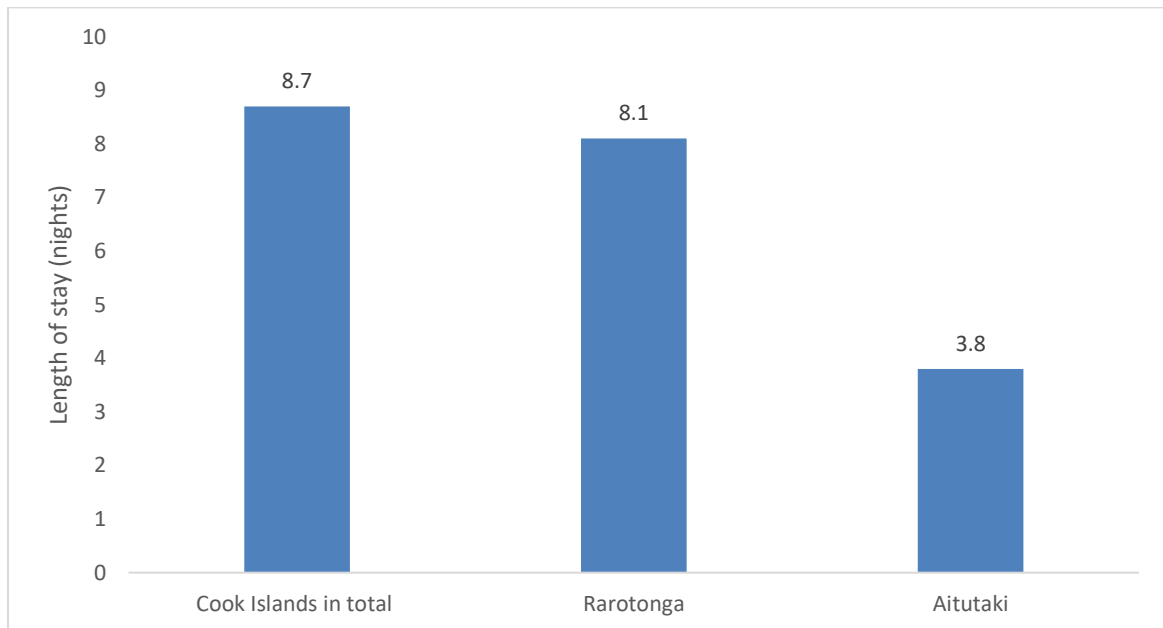
**Figure 12: Visited Islands (n = 680)**



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

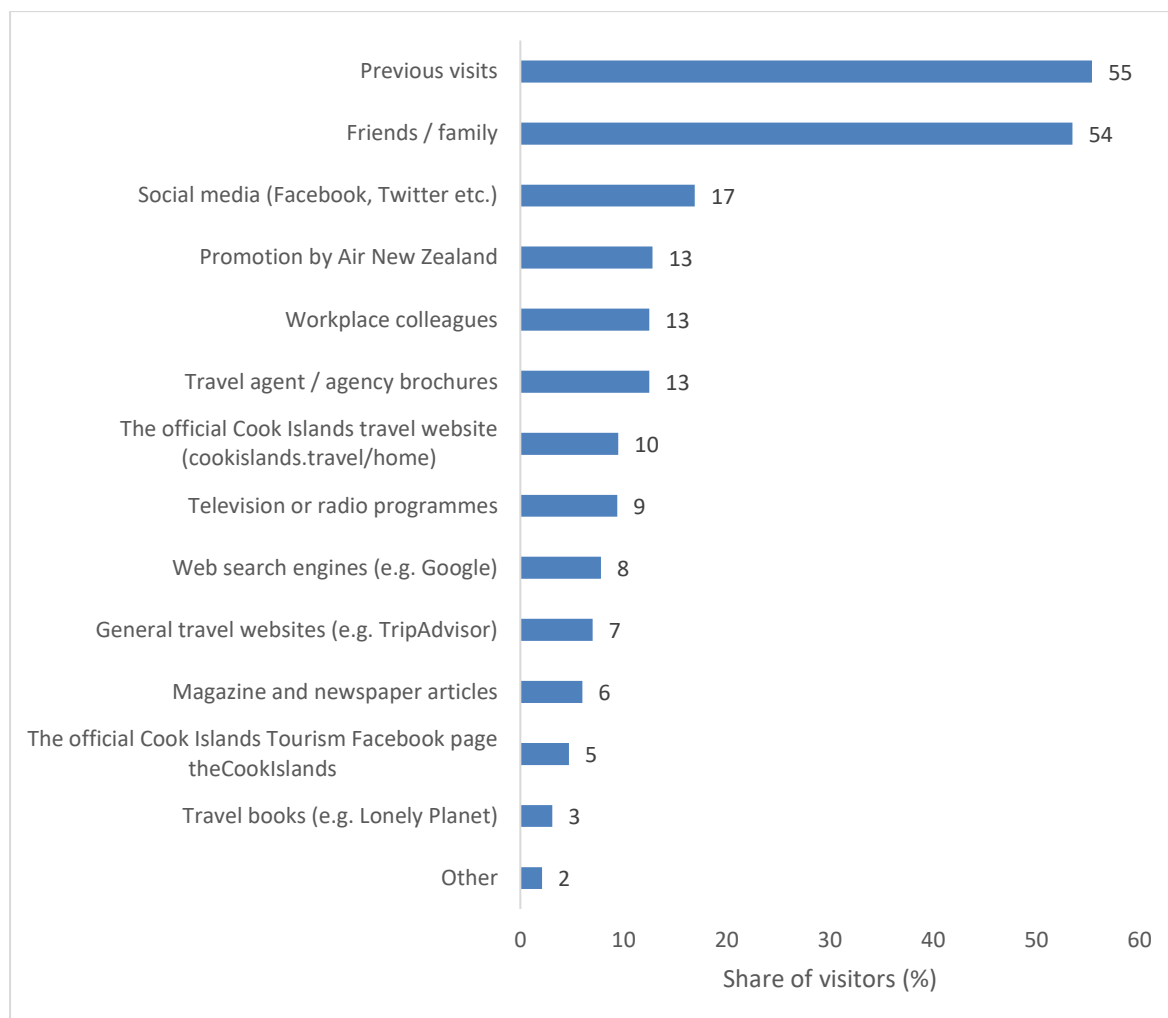
**Figure 13: Average length of stay in the Cook Islands and on each island (n = 146-655)**



## Information Sources and Purchasing Behaviour

Participants were asked how they found out about the Cook Islands as a holiday destination (Figure 14). Over half (55%) of respondents ranked their previous visit as the most important influence, followed by word of mouth from friends and family members (54%), social media (Facebook, Twitter etc) (17%), Air NZ promotion (13%), workplace colleagues (13%), travel agent/agency brochures (13%), and the official Cook Islands travel website (10%).

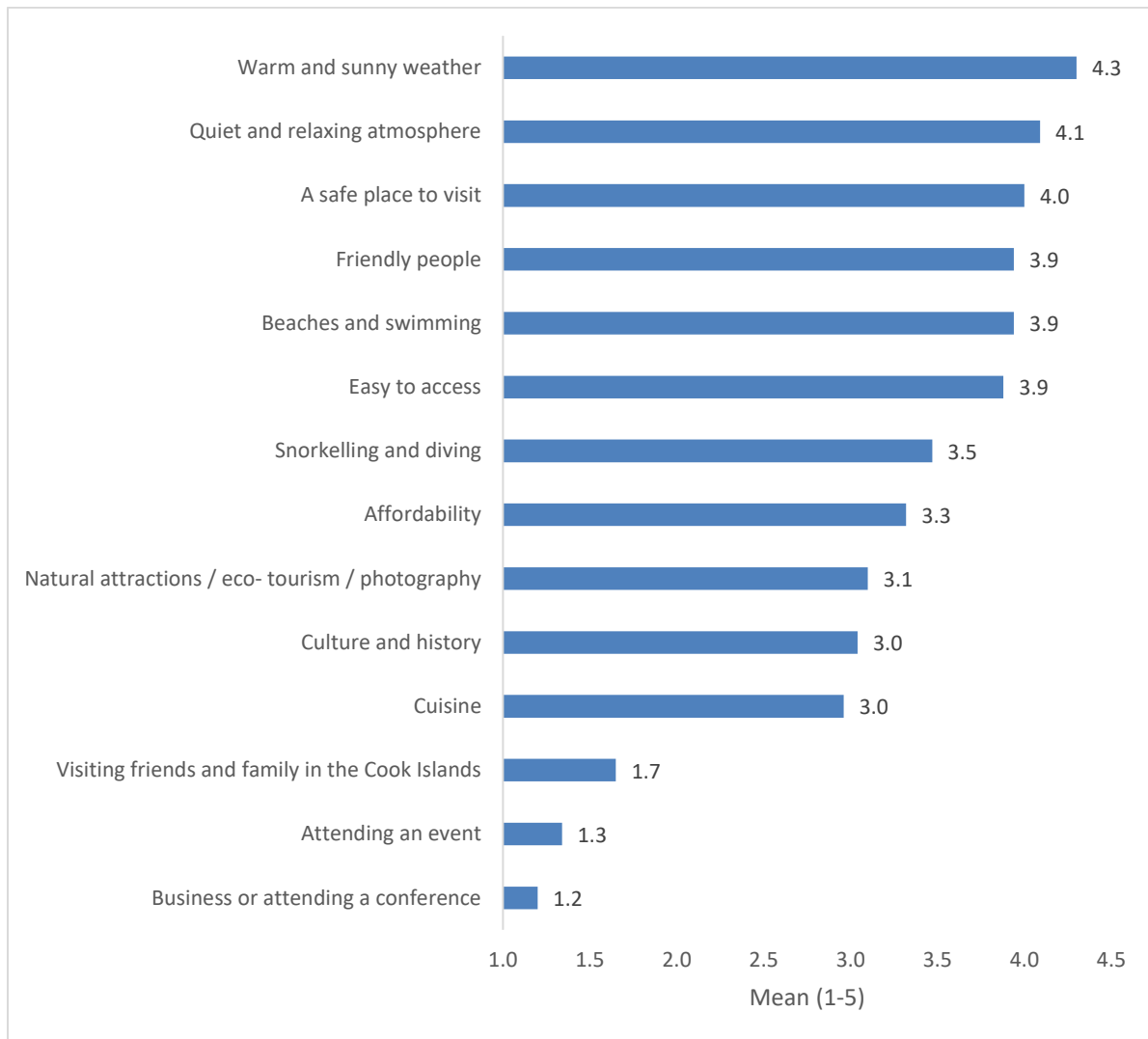
**Figure 14: How did you find out about Cook Islands as a destination (n = 681)**



*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 (4.3 out of 5.0), followed by quiet and relaxing atmosphere (4.1), a safe place to visit (4.0), friendly people (3.9), beaches and swimming (3.9), ease of access (3.9), snorkelling and diving (3.5), and affordability (3.3). Visiting friends and relatives (1.7), attending an event (1.3), and business or conference (1.2) are the least influential factors overall (Figure 15).

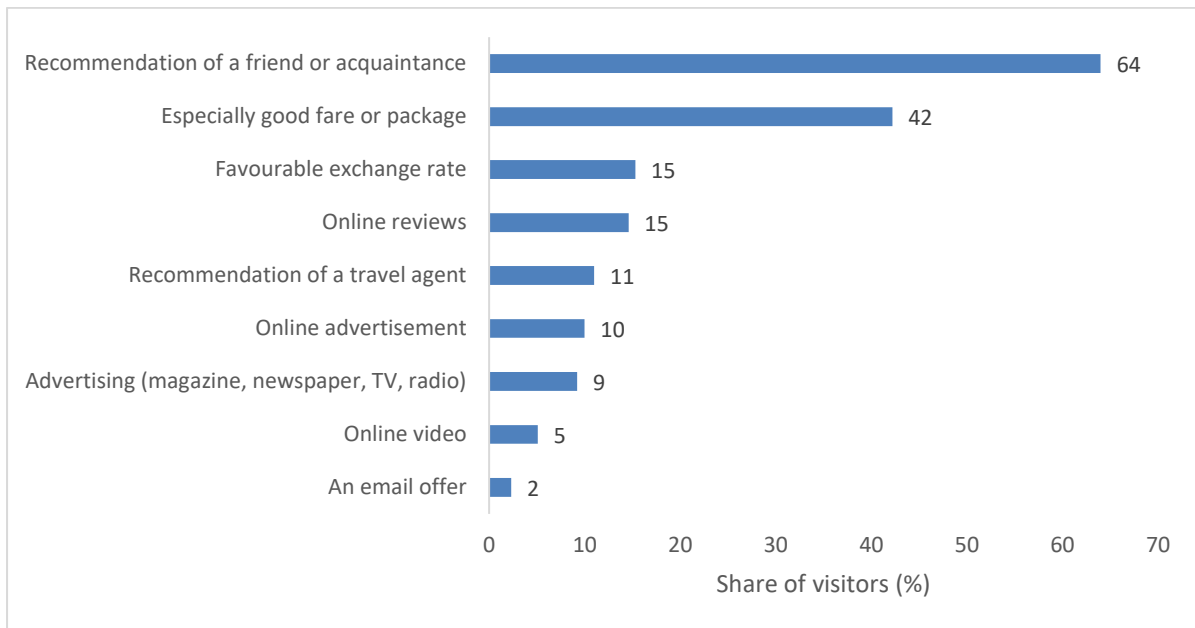
**Figure 15: Influences on the decision to choose the Cook Islands (n = 617-670)**



Nearly two thirds (64%) of visitors mentioned ‘recommendation of a friend or acquaintance’ as the most important factor influencing their visit (Figure 16). Over 40% of those surveyed (42%) indicate that an ‘especially good fare or package’ is important for them in selecting the Cook Islands, followed by favourable exchange rates (15%), online reviews (15%), the recommendation of an agent (11%), online advertisements (10%), traditional advertising (magazine, newspaper, TV, radio) (9%), online videos (5%), and email offers (2%).



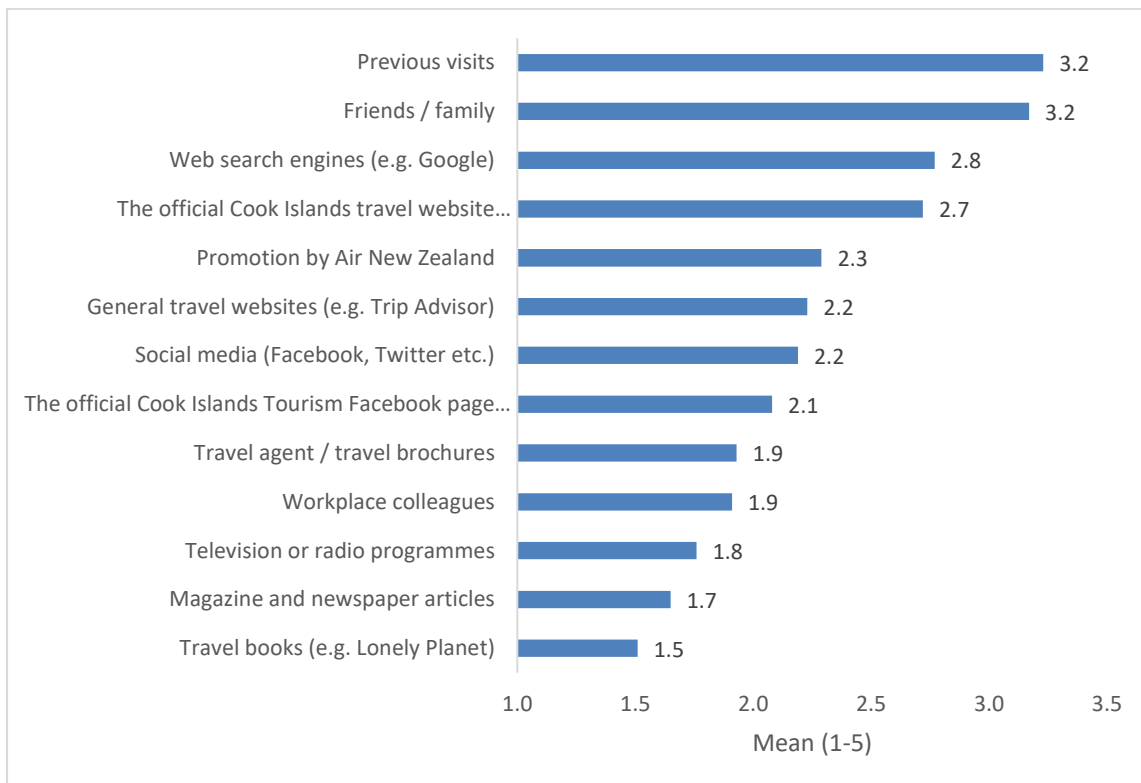
**Figure 16: Which factors influenced your selection of the Cook Islands? (n = 609)**



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

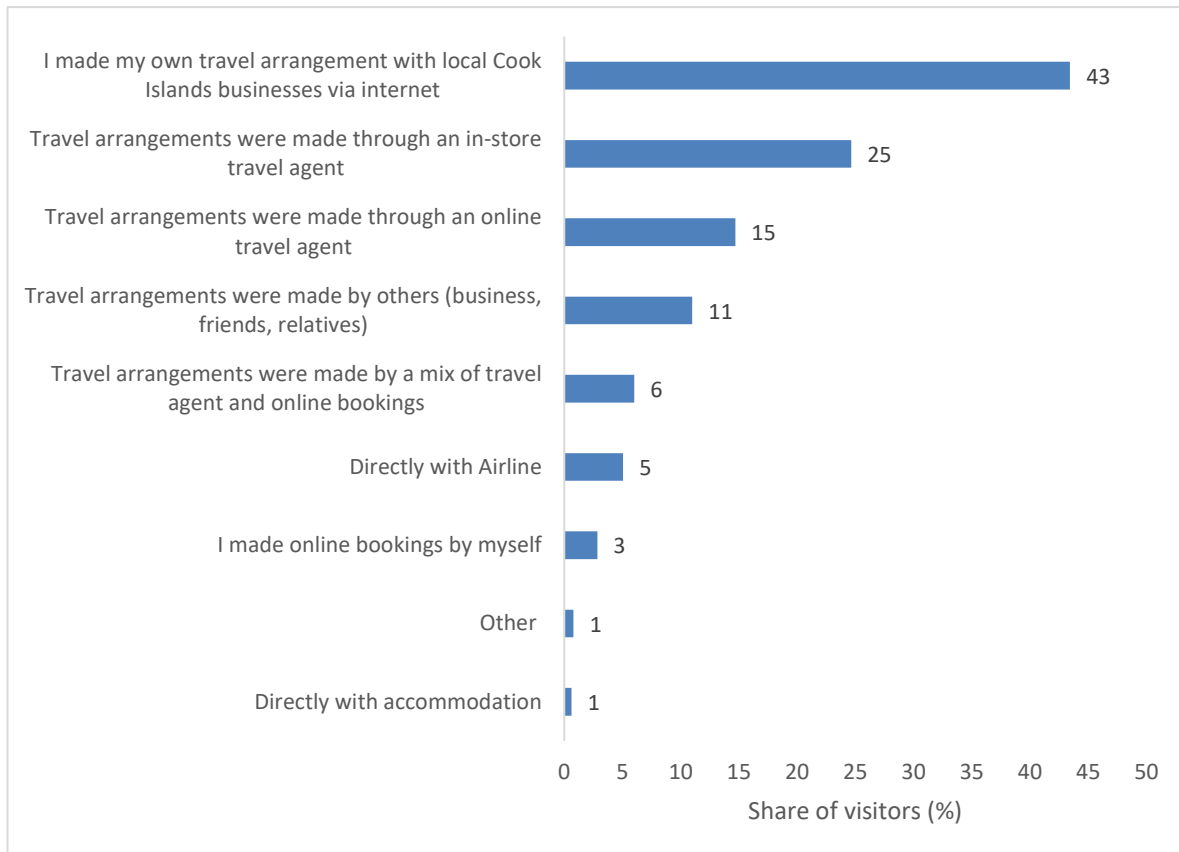
Visitors were asked to rate the importance of the listed information sources used to plan their trip on a scale from 1 to 5. Previous visits and friends and family members are ranked as the most important sources (3.2), followed by web search engines (e.g. Google) (2.8), and the official Cook Islands travel website (2.7) (Figure 17).

**Figure 17: Importance of information source used when planning your trip (n = 615-643)**



Forty-three percent of travellers surveyed made their own travel arrangements with local Cook Islands businesses through online channels (Figure 18). A number of visitors surveyed purchased a pre-paid trip either through an in-store travel agent (25%) or through an online travel agent (15%). For 11% of visitors travel arrangements were made by others (business, friends, relatives). A further 6% of those surveyed relied on a mix of travel agent and online bookings. Five percentage of visitors purchased a pre-paid trip directly with an airline, especially the online bookings through Air NZ website.

**Figure 18: How did you make your travel arrangements for the Cook Islands (n = 633)**

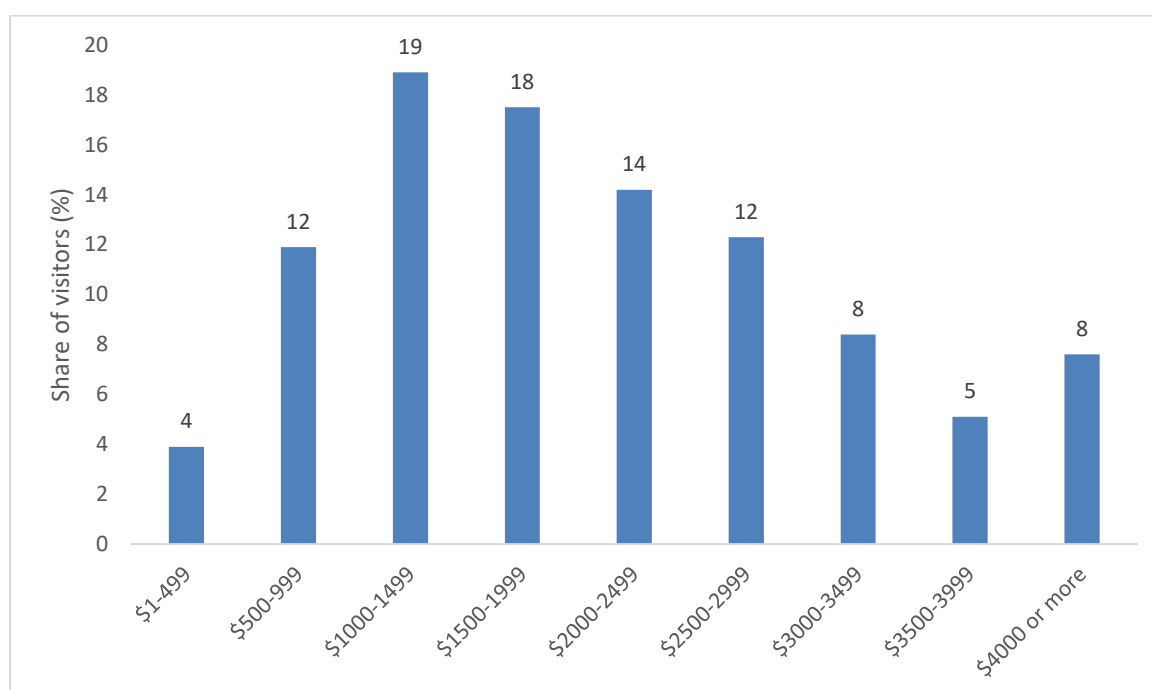


## Visitor Expenditure

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: 1,292 people comprising 1,151 adults and 141 children.

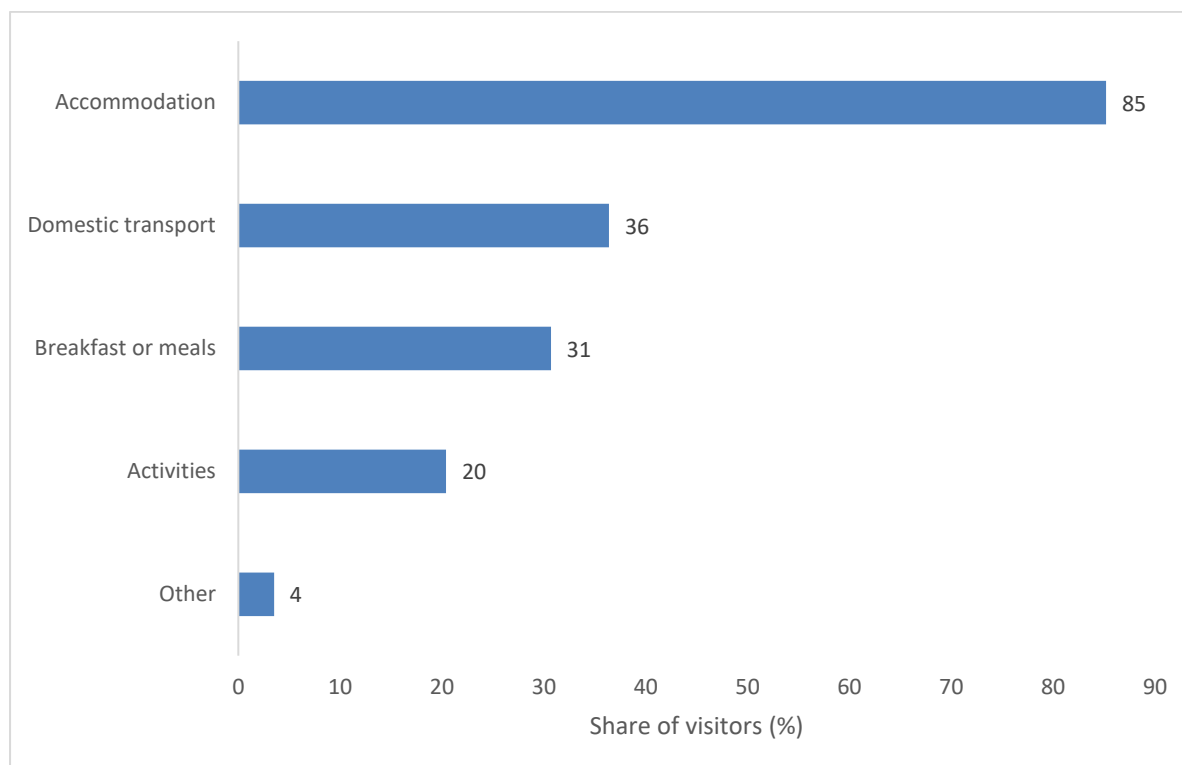
On average, visitors to the Cook Islands spend NZ\$2,082 per person prior to arrival. Over half (51%) of the visitors spend between NZ\$1,000 and NZ\$2,499 prior to arrival (Figure 19). The prepaid figure per person is 23% higher than NZ visitors' average prepaid spend (NZ\$1,699) in the April to June 2019, but 4% lower than May to June 2021 period (NZ\$2,164).

**Figure 19: Amount of money spent per person prior to arrival (n = 486)**



In addition to international flights, spending prior to arrival includes: accommodation (85%), domestic transport and airport transfers (36%), and meals and breakfast (31%) (Figure 20). Activities are far less likely to be included in pre-paid expenses (20%). The other category (4%) is mainly includes separate insurance costs and the COVID-19 test fee prior to arrival at the Cook Islands.

**Figure 20: Items included in money spent prior to arrival (n = 514)**



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

The following local expenditure section is based on 1,400 people covering 1,242 adults and 158 children. The total spend per visitor per day while in the Cook Islands (excluding any pre-paid expenditure) is NZ\$199 (Table 1). This figure is 31% higher than NZ visitors in the same quarter survey period in 2019 (NZ\$152). Compared with survey period after the border re-open, this figure is 4% lower than May to June 2021 (NZ\$206), and 9% lower than January to March 2022 (NZ\$217).

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

Expenditure Items	n = 1,400	
	Mean (NZ\$)	(% of spend)
Accommodation	85	43
Restaurant/Café/Bar	46	23
Vehicle rental	13	7
Shopping	12	6
Domestic Flights	11	5
Water-based Activities	10	5
Groceries	9	5
Land-based Activities	5	3
Other	3	1
Petrol	2	1
Internet	2	1
Public Transport	0.9	0.4
<b>Total spend (NZ\$)</b>	<b>199</b>	<b>100%</b>

Most money spent locally is on accommodation related services (43%) and restaurants, cafés, and bars (23%). Vehicle rental (7%) and shopping (6%) are the next most significant categories along with domestic flights (5%). Water and land-based activities have daily spend figures of NZ\$10 and \$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 study, we conservatively estimate that 50% of the pre-paid spend is allocated to airfares. Of the remaining 50% of the pre-paid spend, 80% flows back to local operators. In total this means that for every pre-paid dollar, 40 cents flows back to the Cook Islands. We estimate that the pre-paid spend figure per day flowing back to the local economy is NZ\$96 and for the average total visit is NZ\$833 (8.7 nights).

By multiplying daily in-country spend by the average stay (8.7 nights) we can see that spend per person per visit while in the Cook Islands is on average NZ\$1,721. The total figure (what is spent locally and what flows back to the Cook Islands from pre-paid expenses) is therefore NZ\$295 per visitor per day (\$199 + \$96), or NZ\$2,554 (\$1,721 + \$833) for each visitor. Table 2 shows that April-June 2022 visitors contributed 22% more to the local economy than NZ visitors who came during the April to May 2019 period and slightly less 2% than those who arrived in the May-June 2021 bubble period.

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

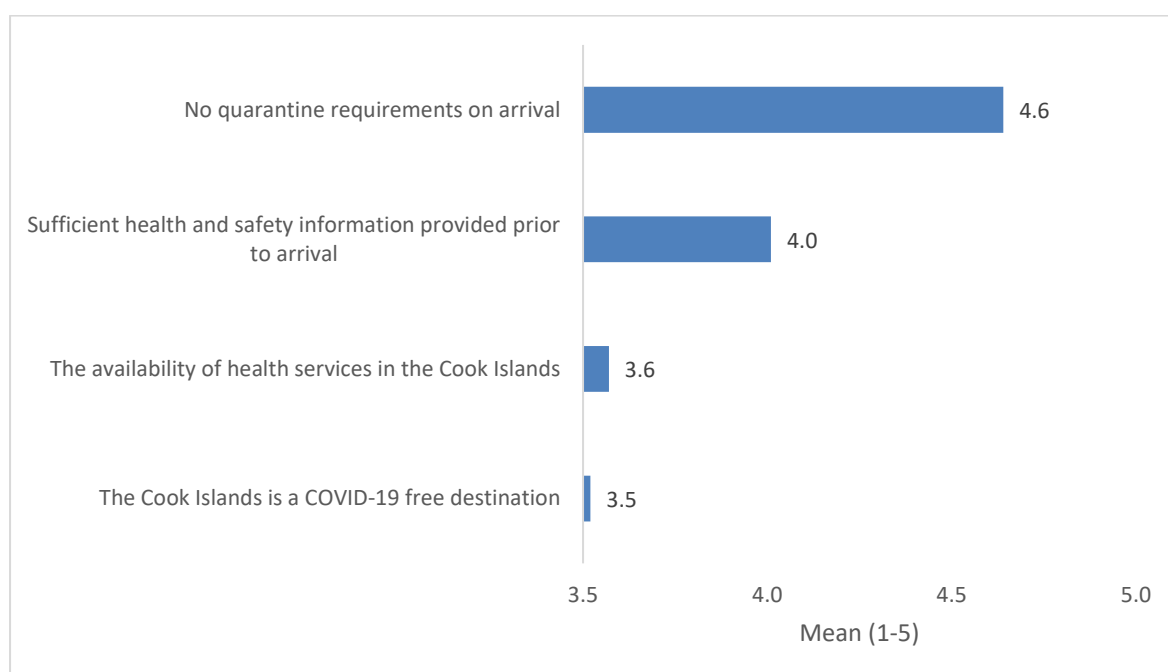
	Apr-Jun 2022 All visitors	May-Jun 2021 All visitors	Apr-Jun 2019 NZ visitors
<b>Average Spend Prior to arrival (NZ\$)</b>			
Per Person Per Trip	\$2,082	\$2,164	\$1,700
<b>Flowing into local economy rate – estimated 40%</b>			
Per Person Per Trip	\$833	\$866	\$680
Per Person per Day	\$96	\$95	\$89
Length of stay (nights)	8.7	9.1	7.6
<b>Average Local Spend</b>			
Per Person Per Trip	\$1,721	\$1,881	\$1,167
Per Person per Day	\$199	\$206	\$153
Total Economic Impact-Per Trip	\$2,554	\$2,747	\$1,896
Total Economic Impact-Per Day	\$295	\$301	\$242

## Perception of COVID-19 Impacts and Responses

The border opening between the Cook Islands and New Zealand is 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 in order to better understand visitor perceptions of the pandemic’s impact and related responses in the Cook Islands.

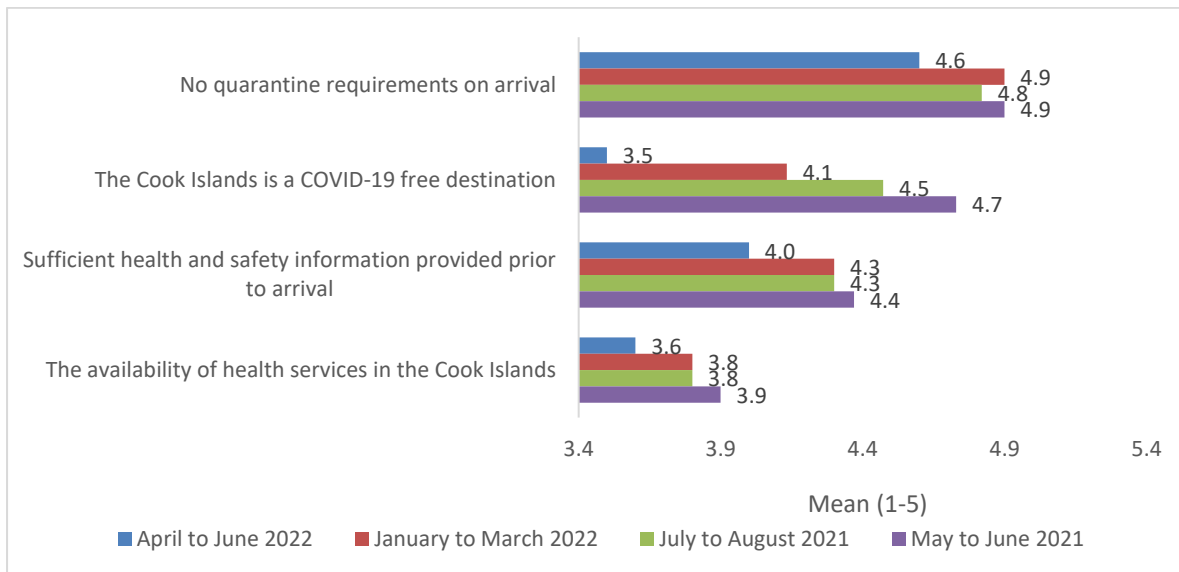
When asked about the importance of COVID-19 related factors in influencing the decision to travel to the Cook Islands, “no quarantine requirement on arrival” was ranked as the most significant factor, followed by “sufficient health and safety information provided prior to arrival” (Figure 21).

**Figure 21: The important factors in your decision to travel to the Cook Islands (n = 561-615)**



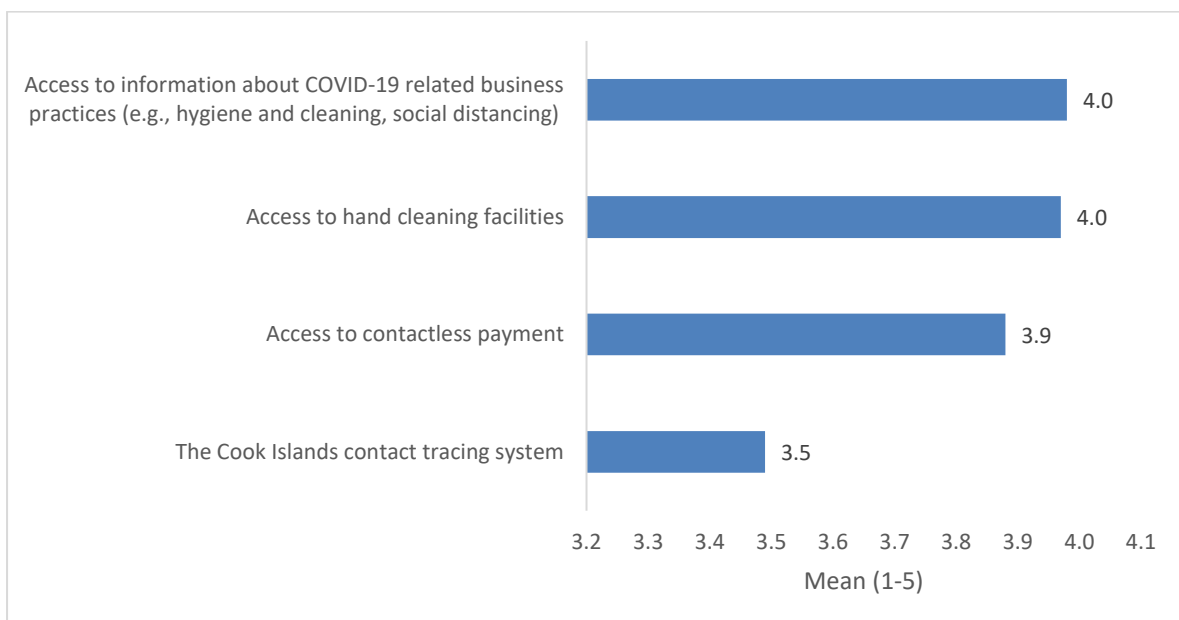
We can see that all factors listed are rated less important by the April to June 2022 visitors when compared to their January to March 2022, July to August and May to June 2021 counterparts (Figure 22). Particularly, “the Cook Islands is a COVID-19 free destination” has fallen considerably in importance.

**Figure 22: The important factors in your decision to travel to the Cook Islands – time series**



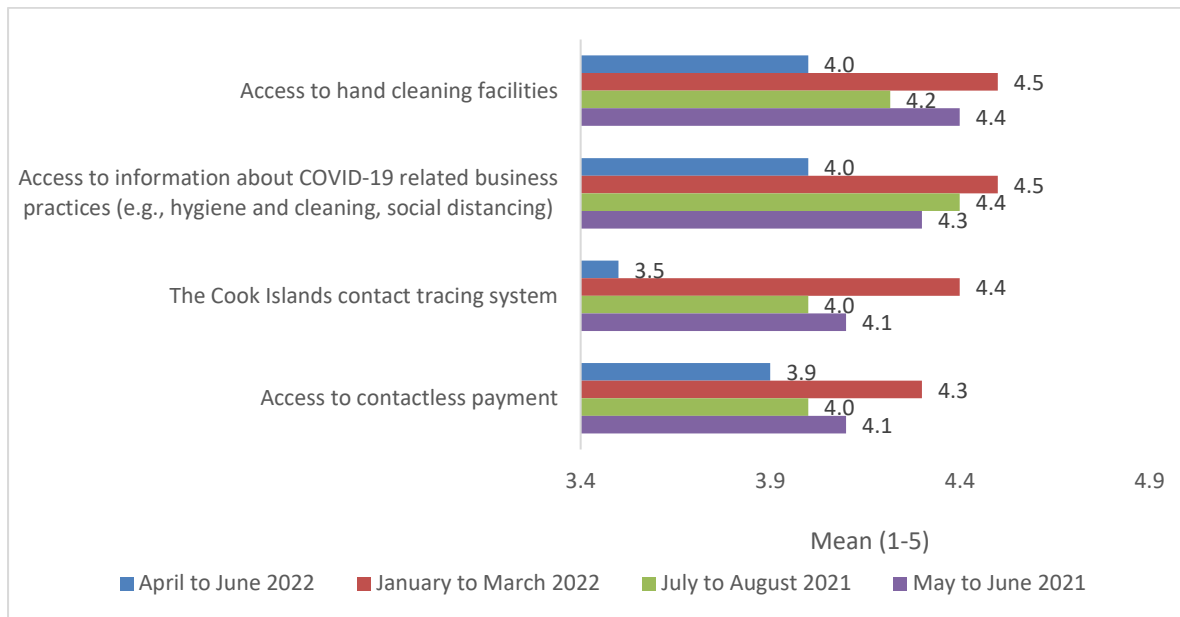
In terms of the COVID-19 responses in the Cook Islands (Figure 23), visitors feel satisfied with access to hand and cleaning facilities (4.0 out of 5), and appreciate easy access to information about COVID-19 related business practices (4.0). Visitors expressed a relatively lower level of satisfaction with access to contactless payment options (3.9) and with the contact tracing system (3.5).

**Figure 23: Degree of satisfaction with COVID-19 responses (n = 352-591)**



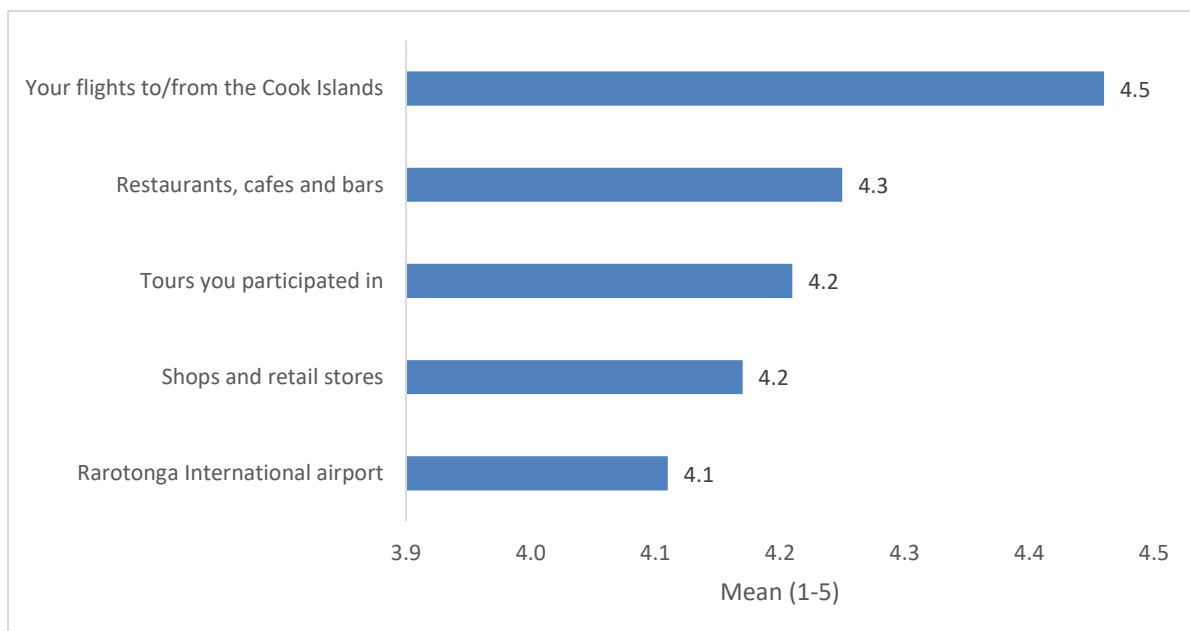
April to June 2022 visitors feel less satisfied across all of these variables when compared to their January to March 2022, July to August, and May to June 2021 counterparts (Figure 24).

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



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 scores (all above 4 out of 5) across a range of activities and sectors. The health and safety aspects of Rarotonga International airport received the lowest score (4.1).

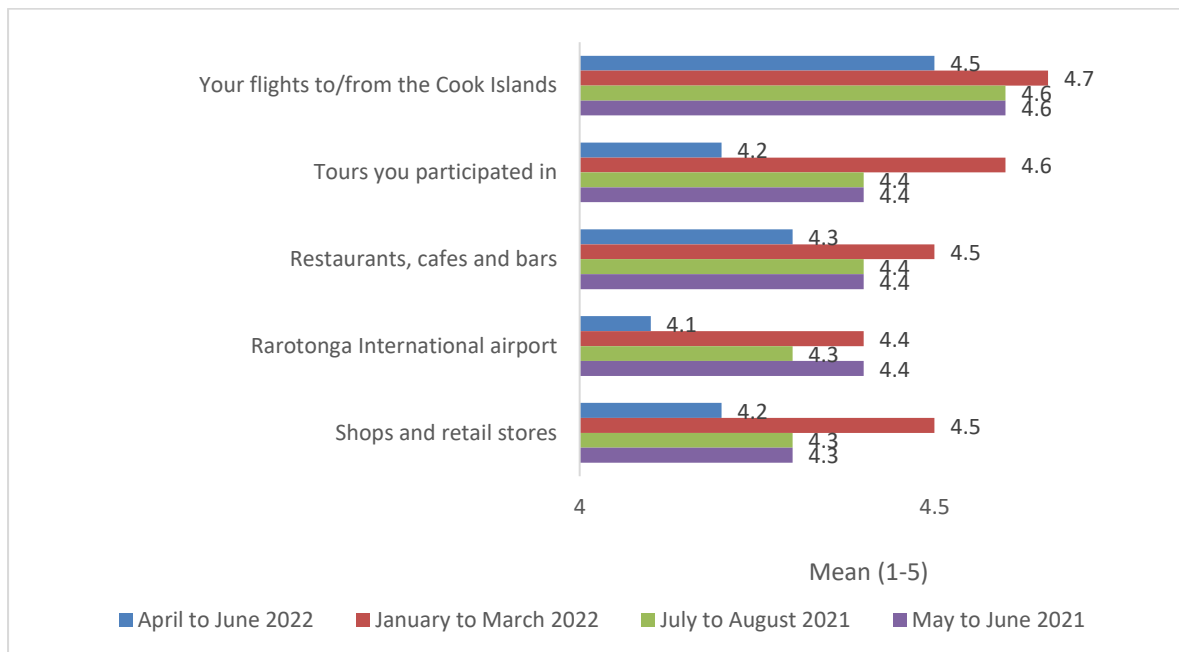
**Figure 25: Degree of satisfaction with health and safety measures (n = 424-611)**



April to June 2022 visitors again feel less satisfied across all variables when compared to their January to March 2022, July to August, and May to June 2021 counterparts (Figure 26).



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



A total of 160 respondents provided further comments about their perception of COVID-19 related management during their time in the Cook Islands. Nearly half (49%) of comments were negative in nature, including: concerns over certain COVID-19 protocols; getting COVID during or after the trip, arrival or departure experiences in Rarotonga airport; pre-departure COVID tests; problems using the scanner or the CookSafe app; no room for social distancing; and feeling disappointed to see that the Cook Islands is no longer “COVID-free”. Negative comments include:

**Poor protocols and concerns**

*“The shops with ‘please wear a mask’ did not ask people to do this, our server was coughing one day and touched my sons face, the tourist operators outside manage risk well in the fresh air, no mask enforcement seen of tourists at breakfast buffet, bus or cultural show, airport terminal.”*

*“Had RAT tests pre departure which nobody looked at!”*

*“Bus drivers didn’t always wear masks. Buffet meals at big events not good idea during COVID.”*

*“Not taken seriously...”*

*“There are no safety measures in place other than vaccination.”*

*“Activities at resort did not cater well in reducing COVID transference. Taste sharing and help yourself buffets. Having guests coughing and not wearing face coverings. I caught COVID while there and had to isolate. It was a horrible experience.”*

*“No obvious COVID restrictions. Airport packed, no social distancing or checking on masks.”*

### **Getting COVID**

*“We all caught COVID didn’t realise it was so prevalent on the island.”*

*“No information available on sanitation of snorkelling or diving equipment...people grab them and throw them altogether after they used it... people just have no idea who had it last time... a large number of people coming back to NZ with COVID after their stay in Raro and I am sure this is part of the cause.”*

*“Unfortunately, four within the group contracted COVID: cultural buffet was a possible risk, I believe.”*

*“We caught COVID while there which ruined our holiday.”*

*“However we returned to NZ with COVID and probably got it from someone who sat next to us with a 'cold' at the culture night.”*

*“Both adults, even with measures in place, contracted COVID-19 within 24 hours of arriving home.”*

### **Arrival or departure experience**

*“The long processing time on arrival in a very crowded area has the potential to be a problem. Example - no room for social distancing.”*

*“It was very stressful coming into the Cook Islands, and returning to NZ, due to the requirements around COVID-19 testing and the forms to fill in on-line.”*

*“All the extra forms to be provided were a pain.”*

*“The airport is an absolute hot bed for COVID. No social distancing, no ventilation, almost every person with their mask hanging half way off their faces. Hugely risky.”*

*“Did not see hand sanitiser at the airport.”*

*“At the airport on arrival, everyone was lined up very close to one another. We felt very vulnerable.”*

*“Koru club at airport was too full, only one cafe in your departure lounge that would take cash only.”*

### **Pre-departure test**

*“Pre departure COVID testing prices too high!”*

*"I was disappointed to be tested at Rarotonga airport and paying for it, before leaving for Aitutaki, when Aitutaki was full of COVID and I ended up contacting it there which was fine, it was just the pre testing."*

*"It was a bit of a shock to find out during check-in that the baby in our group needed a pre-departure COVID test, as the pharmacy didn't know that."*

Over a third (34%) of comments provided are positive in nature, including: appreciation of being able to enjoy the visit; appreciation of the well managed COVID-19 precaution system; feeling happy to wear or not wear a face mask, and positive comments on the mask wearing behaviours of the local people. Positive comments included:

### **Enjoy the stay**

*"We were pleased to see that the public places were generally clean and tidy. Pleased to see that food handling was also very good."*

*"It was nice to feel like life was normal for a few days."*

*"We went to Rarotonga this time as it was easier to travel there due to its very low COVID cases. I had no COVID concerns at all while in the Cook Islands."*

### **Well managed; no issues**

*"From our observations of properties being cordoned off with tape and signs up about no visitors we were impressed at how serious the Cooks Islands were in trying to prevent spread of COVID."*

*"The current situation with regards to the COVID-19 response/set up to keep everyone one safe was great...I have no concerns..."*

*"It was really clear that people were being responsible about it, isolating at home when sick and that with the high rate of vaccination was a big part of us choosing to travel to the Cooks. Also the requirement for travellers to be vaccinated, and tested prior to travel. "*

*"Well managed and great health system response."*

*"TMO and the community are doing a great job."*

### **Face mask wearing behaviours**

*"We had no problems. Everyone happy to wear masks."*

*"Tour operators and everyone on Aitutaki observed mask wearing behaviours etc extremely well."*

*"We felt after arriving wearing masks on Air NZ flight the Cook Islands were relaxed about the use of masks which was very refreshing."*

*“It was nice to go somewhere where COVID wasn’t mentioned and no one wore masks. The other side of that is that ignorance might lead to COVID.”*

*“Wasn't worried about COVID at all and it was so refreshing to not have to wear masks!”*

A further 6% of comments gave constructive suggestions for possible improvements or offered best wishes for the future. Comments include:

*“Would have preferred that mask-wearing remained compulsory inside venues such as shops.”*

*“An advice to wear mask for protection. Better safe than never.”*

*“We got COVID while in Rarotonga, and it took us a while to work out what we had to do. It would be useful for visitors to receive a card on arrival that says ‘if you get COVID, here's what will happen’.”*

*“More contactless payment availability would have been good.”*

## Visitor Satisfaction

Visitors were asked to indicate their overall satisfaction with their experience of their visit to the Cook Islands on a scale from 1 'very dissatisfied' to 5 'very satisfied' (Figure 27). Nearly seven in ten (68%) 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 January to March 2022 is lower than all visitors in May to June 2021 (77%) but higher than NZ visitors who came during the same period in 2019 (62%). The average overall satisfaction score is 4.6 which is slightly lower than May to June 2021 period (4.7), but higher than NZ visitors who came during the same period in 2019 (4.5).

**Figure 27: Overall satisfaction with experience of the Cook Islands (n = 635)**

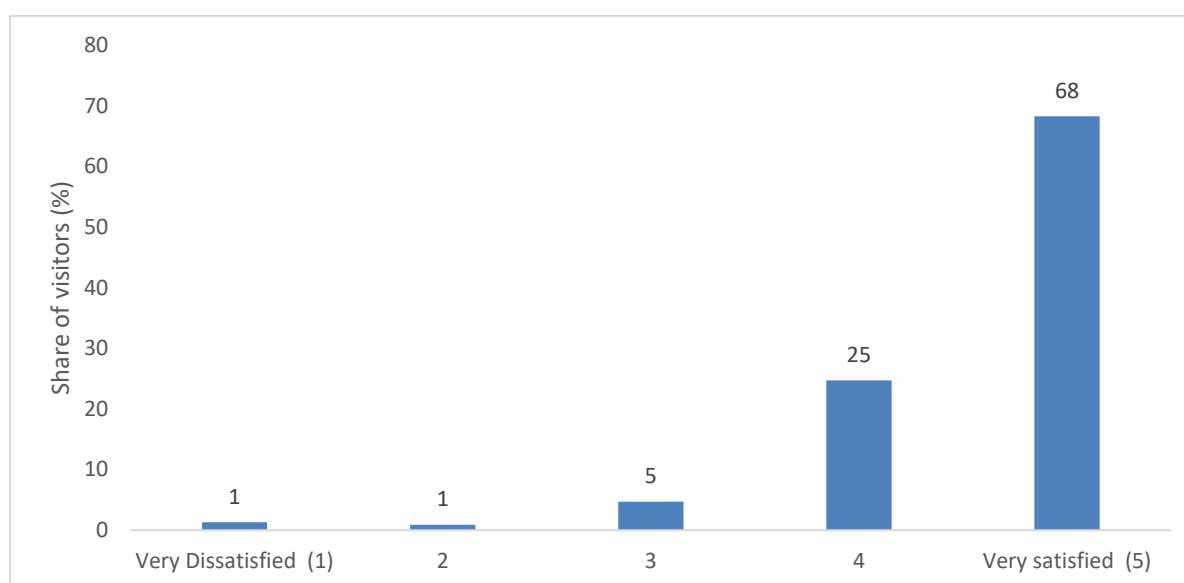
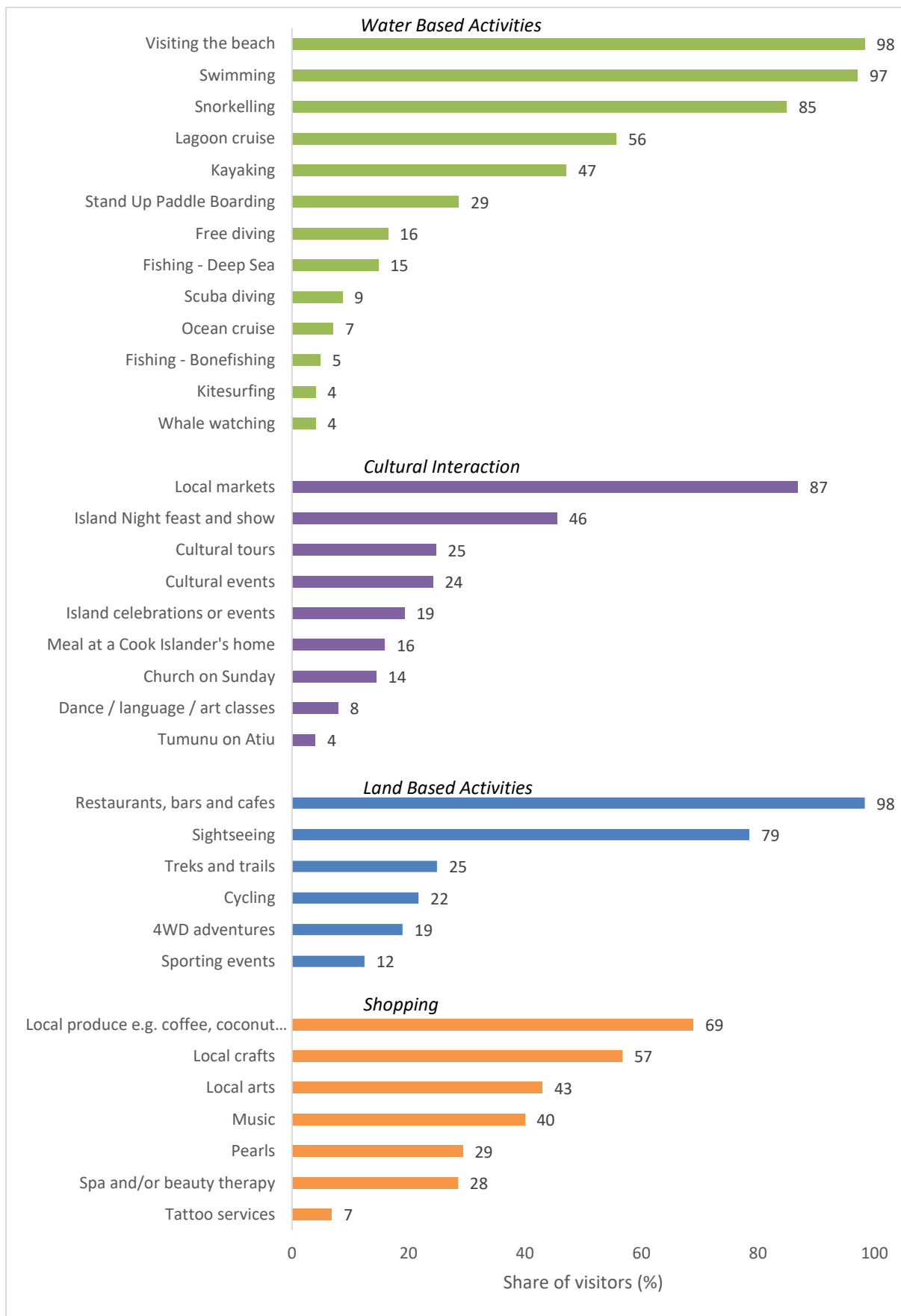


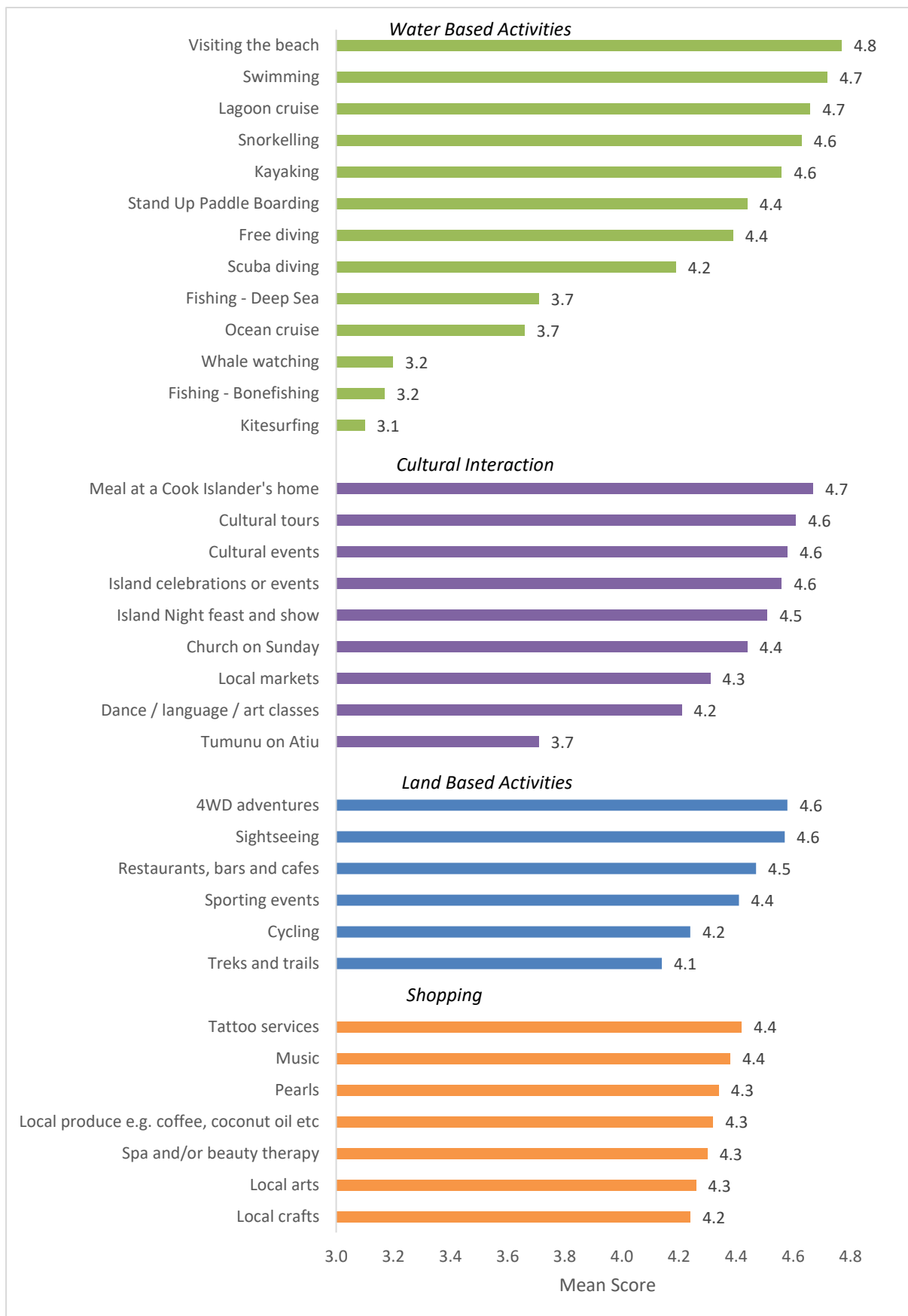
Figure 28 shows the percentage of respondents who undertook specific activities while on their visit to the Cook Islands. Almost all visitors visited a beach (98%) and frequented at least one restaurant or café (98%) during their trip. Most of the respondents either go swimming (97%) or visit a local market (87%), and 85% of visitors state that they also tried snorkelling. Rates of shopping participation 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 (average satisfaction of 4.4), land-based products (4.4), and shopping (4.3) are rated higher than water-based experiences (4.1). It should be noted here that whale watching, kitesurfing, and Tumunu on Atiu are rated by a relatively low numbers of participants (n = 20-21).

**Figure 28: Degree of participation in activities (n = 20-650)**



**Figure 29: Degree of satisfaction with activities participated in**

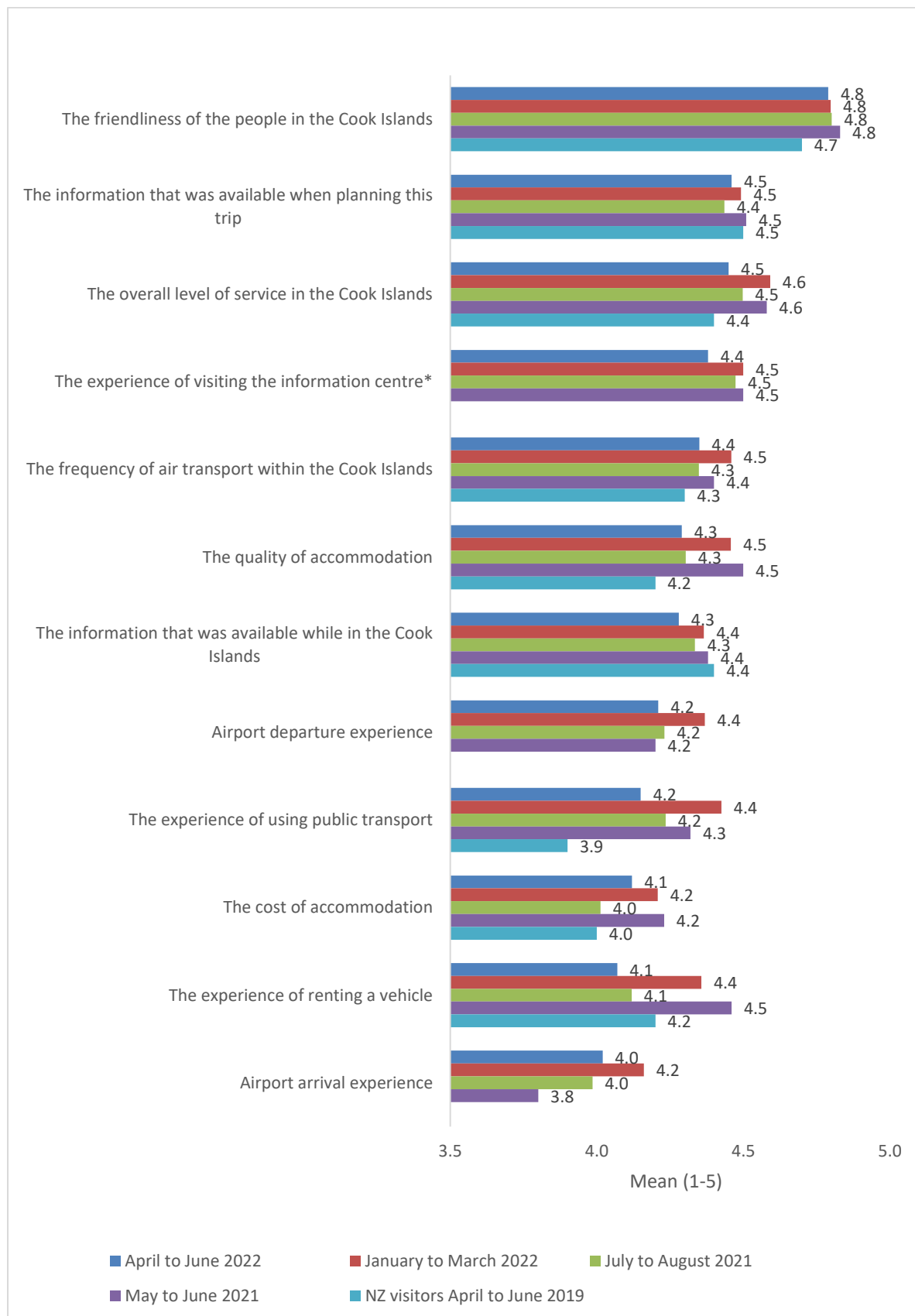


Visitors were asked to rate their level of satisfaction with nine different statements relating to their most recent visit to the Cook Islands. Responses from the period April to June 2022 are compared to the visitors of May to June 2021 and NZ visitors in the same quarter of 2019 (Figure 30).

The degree of satisfaction with the majority of items in April to June 2022 is lower or similar satisfaction with most of the items presented when compared with January to March 2022, May to June, and July to August 2021 visitors (Figure 31) and similar or lightly higher than NZ visitors of the same period in April to March 2019. April to June 2022 visitors especially feel less satisfied with the information that was available while in the Cook Islands and the experience of visiting the information centre compared with the other periods.



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



Note: \* New items from 2021

## Most appealing aspects of the Cook Islands

Visitors were asked “What did you find most attractive or appealing about the Cook Islands on your most recent visit?” (Table 3). The most appealing elements for visitors are the natural environment, cleanliness and weather (55%), the friendly and welcoming local people (34%), the tourist attractions and activities on offer (32%) and the peacefulness and relaxing atmosphere of the country (24%). Smaller numbers of comments mentioned aspects such as food and beverage (14%), accommodation (9%), convenience and safety (7%), and level of service (4%).

**Table 3: Most appealing aspects of the Cook Islands (n = 638)**

Themes	Share of respondent comments (%)*
<b>Environment, cleanliness &amp; weather</b>	55
<b>Local people</b>	34
<b>Activities, attractions and entertainment, events</b>	32
<b>Atmosphere</b>	24
<b>Food and beverage</b>	14
<b>Accommodation</b>	9
<b>Convenience and safety</b>	7
<b>Level of service</b>	4
<b>Not commercialised or touristy</b>	2
<b>Culture</b>	2
<b>Overall good experience</b>	2
<b>COVID resilience and travel availability</b>	2
<b>Family friends</b>	2
<b>Emotional connection</b>	1
<b>Price of Goods and Services</b>	1
<b>Friendly dogs</b>	1
<b>Family friendly</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 lagoons, and warm weather in the Cook Islands were mentioned by more than a half (55%) of respondents as the most appealing aspect of their trip. Words like ‘beautiful’, ‘warm’, ‘tidy’, ‘crystal’, ‘incredible’, ‘tropical’ and ‘amazing’ are used to describe the attraction of the local environment. Most comments here focused on the beauty and the cleanliness of the beaches and lagoons, the warm weather, the beautiful scenery, and the landscapes of the islands in general. Comments included:

*“We went for a walk into the mountains and the scenery was incredible.”*

*"The landscape and uniqueness of the places."*

*"The beauty of a spectacular island."*

*"The clear water and abundant fish."*

*"The beautiful beaches, the snorkelling, the sunny and warm weather."*

*"Beautiful tropical island with very warm weather."*

*"Nice warm weather. Nice mountain bush backdrop."*

*"Weather is brilliant, even when it's raining!"*

*"Being able to relax in warm weather and water."*

*"The whole island looked like it had a spring clean - not that it has ever been really unattractive but there was no rubbish anywhere and everyone had tidied their homes for Easter."*

*"So clean of any rubbish lying around and grounds gardens very tidy."*

### **Local people**

Over a third (34%) of comments expressed that the warmth and welcoming nature of local people was a most appealing aspect of the travel experience. Key words that dominated the responses include "friendly", "helpful", "kind", "welcoming", "lovely", "beautiful", and "cool". Comments included:

*"Love the people always willing to go that extra mile to make sure you are comfortable."*

*"The friendly locals who go out of their way to help out."*

*"The kindness of everyone in the Cook Islands."*

*"The friendliness of the Cook Islands people is always a highlight!"*

*"The dry witty sense of humour the people showed and their friendliness."*

*"Lovely locals especially the ladies doing tivaevae in the market."*

*"Warmth, friendliness of Cook Islanders."*

*"Everyone was friendly and welcoming."*

*"The people were great, very friendly."*

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

Activities, attractions, entertainment, and events featured in nearly a third (32%) of respondent comments on the most appealing element of their visits. The accessibility of water related activities including snorkelling, swimming, lagoon cruise, fishing/bone fishing and swimming with turtles are mentioned frequently. Also, land-based activities like sightseeing/tours and biking/walking/scooter tours are mentioned by many respondents. In addition, comments on tours to Aitutaki are highlighted by some respondents. Comments included:

*“World class snorkelling experience.”*

*“The snorkelling was way better than previous visits, it’s like the lagoon has had a chance to rejuvenate without all the tourists.”*

*“Did not need to be an expert diver to experience.”*

*“Muri lagoon and kayaking in the lovely weather.”*

*“The amazing swimming.”*

*“Bonefish - this is the primary reason for me to visit the Cook Islands.”*

*“The turtle tour was the biggest highlight.”*

*“Turtle swimming was amazing even in the choppy water.”*

*“The cross island walk and diving were highlights.”*

*“Loved hiring a mini convertible and driving around the island.”*

*“Being able ride around the Island on a scooter exploring.”*

*“Loved biking around the Island everyday & getting off the beaten track. Did heaps of beautiful (and muddy) walks.”*

*“Walking around the island.”*

*“We really enjoyed our trip to Aitutaki it was a perfect getaway. The people were very friendly, the food was far too good, the Lagoon cruise cultural night was great! We wish we had spent longer on the island.”*

*“Aitutaki was spectacular.”*

*“Aitutaki was lovely to see.”*

## **Atmosphere**

The Cook Islands is described as a very relaxing, peaceful, quiet, and laid-back destination by respondents and this atmosphere is mentioned as an appealing factor in 24% of comments made. Most used words to describe the atmosphere in Cook Islands are “relaxing”, “peaceful”, “tranquil”, “unwind”, “peace” and “laid back”. Comments included:

*“An escape to the sunshine and a relaxing and quiet environment.”*

*“Slow way of life.”*

*“Peace and tranquillity when you wanted it.”*

*“The rest relaxation and family holiday in warmth during winter and of course escape from the world and chaos.”*

*“Laid back way of life is what is attractive about the Cook Islands.”*

*“Isolation from rest of the world. A chance to completely relax and unwind.”*

*“Relaxing, friendly and completely stress free.”*

*“The peaceful ambience.”*

*“Ability to switch off and relax.”*

## **Food and beverage**

Food and beverages were identified as an appealing aspect in 14% 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:

*“The food was far too good,”*

*“The fresh fruit, and delicious food.”*

*“Wonderful Ika Mata.”*

*“Some nice eating experiences.”*

*“The quality of the food, consistent and good sized portions.”*

*“The variety of food available at the various events and its quality.”*

*“Great bar on the beach. Free avocados, bananas.”*

*“Some cool new bars since our last visit.”*

### **Accommodation**

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

*“Superb service /advice at accommodation especially reception.”*

*“Staff were amazing with us and our young baby (on his first trip away from NZ).”*

*“The staff at our resort were amazing even though they were understaffed.”*

*“The accommodation was lovely and the staff were very helpful and friendly.”*

*“Amazing facilities and great staff.”*

### **Convenience and safety**

Seven 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:

*“The ease of getting around and discovering places we hadn’t visited on our first visit.”*

*“Everyone speaks English so no issue with communication, can use NZ dollar no need to exchange currency, size of island, ease of access to the whole island, lovely and helpful bus drivers. People are friendly and felt very safe being on my own.”*

*“That it felt very safe, relaxed, and as a Kiwi it was easy for us.”*

*“The ease of travel. Love the size and ability to loop the whole thing.”*

*“We feel safe from both personal safety and security perspectives.”*

*“Having transport on hand to go to different locations.”*

### **Level of service**

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

*“Lots of help and support for my husband, who has mobility issues - so we could participate in lots of activities.”*

*“Service brilliant for coeliac help for myself.”*

*“The staff were very helpful and friendly.”*

*“All flights are lovely, RAT testing staff informative and friendly.”*

*“Everyone being so friendly and helpful even with limited staff.”*

*“Warm, welcoming and professional.”*

### **Not commercialised or touristy**

Two percent of the survey participants commented that the Cook Islands is appealing because it is not over-commercialised or ‘too touristy’. Some visitors appreciated that the Cook Islands’ environment and cleanliness improved because of fewer tourists. Comments included:

*“Not being overrun by hundreds of other tourists!”*

*“Not having messy tourists for a while would have decreased rubbish too!”*

*“Not too many tourists this time.”*

*“Not overloaded with tourists.”*

*“The quiet atmosphere as it wasn’t overrun by tourists just opening after COVID.”*

### **Culture**

Two 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:

*“Rarotonga is rich in culture. Church was authentic.”*

*“Culture and laid back way of life is what is attractive about the Cook Islands.”*

*“Sabbath day of rest when there is no commerce and lovely peace to enjoy the scenery.”*

*“Village life was so interesting.”*

### **Overall good experience**

Visitors also commented (2%) 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:

*“The whole experience.”*

*“Everything was great.”*

*“In general, just a delightful visit.”*

*“How reliable it is in terms of having an amazing experience. Never disappoints.”*

*“Always felt welcome.”*

### **COVID resilience and appreciation of travel availability**

Another two 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 country. Comments included:

*“Just being able to travel relax and enjoy the beach, markets.”*

*“We could actually go!!!”*

*“Have visited Rarotonga 4 times now. We always have a great time. Think the Cook Islands have done a great job in getting their Islands ready to receive overseas visitors again.”*

*“As when we went it was at the time the only place for kiwis to travel to.”*

*“The fact we could travel after 2 years of trying.”*

*“Being outside, no masks and little threat from COVID.”*

### **Being able to visit 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:

*“Catching up with friends who are locals.”*

*“We were there for a friend’s 50th.”*

*“Quality time with friends.”*

*“Visiting grandson.”*

### **Emotional Connection**

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

*“Not a lot had changed since our last trip in 2018 which was awesome because the true culture and look of the island stood the same which entices me to visit the beautiful Rarotonga.”*

*“It took me back to my childhood in NZ: this is a compliment. One can rush about all too much or respond to pressures such as reading social media and/or responding*



[to] e-mails.”

“It feels like a second home.”

“...We feel at home there.”

“This is our third time there; everyone is so welcoming and we will be back.”

### **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:

“Cost- it was a decent price for a 5 night trip.”

“Affordable prices.”

“Relatively affordable.”

“Ease of booking and participating in activities at reasonable prices.”

### **Friendly dogs**

An emerging thread of comments (1%) is on the friendliness and well-controlled street dogs. Further comments included:

“The Dogs are being controlled and looked after more.”

“We love the dogs and the care and control put in place for them.”

“The friendly dogs, (it) was like a home having them around.”

“Friendly dogs.”

### **Family Friendly**

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

“Offers something for all the family.”

“Easy for a family.”

## 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 included issues with public services, facilities and infrastructure (22%), stray animals and mosquitos (9%), prices of goods and services (8%), the limited range and availability of food and beverages (8%), things not being open or fully operational (8%), rental cars or scooters (7%), rubbish and natural environment care (7%) and customer service (7%).

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

Themes	Share of respondent comments (%)*
<b>Public services and facilities and infrastructure</b>	22%
<b>Food and beverage</b>	11%
<b>Stray animals and mosquitos</b>	9%
<b>Price of goods and services</b>	8%
<b>Not open or not ready to operate</b>	8%
<b>Rental cars or scooters</b>	7%
<b>Rubbish and natural environment care</b>	7%
<b>Customer service</b>	7%
<b>Accommodation</b>	7%
<b>Attractions and activities</b>	5%
<b>Labour shortage</b>	4%
<b>Lack of information</b>	3%
<b>Poor weather</b>	2%
<b>Flight related issues</b>	2%
<b>Other tourists</b>	1%
<b>Booking issues</b>	1%
<b>Local people</b>	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-two percent of respondent comments mentioned the destination’s public services and facilities as being the least appealing aspects of their Cook Islands experience. Most comments focused on the lengthy waiting time at the airport. Other comments focused on the facilities at the airport, road conditions, limited and unreliable public transport, and poor internet connection. Feedback included:

*“Airport queue on arrival was slow but understand extra work involved in processing arrivals at this time.”*

*“Standing in the queue to enter on arrival (one and half hours).”*

*"The long wait at the airport on arrival. People fainted!"*

*"The only thing we didn't like was arriving and having to stand around in the heat for 2 1/2 hours waiting for customs."*

*"Probably the wait in line for passport control at entry. Very hot and uncomfortable standing in line for such a long time."*

*"Cost of Wi-Fi & airport arrival line."*

*"The rough main road and potholes. And hazardous coconuts on the road. Lack of signage for the walks. e.g up to the water tanks and the hospital walk... Also road works could have happened."*

*"Some of the stalls at market were just full of imported clothes; and more expensive than in main street shops. Needed some nice budget T shirts - Rarotonga. The internet-having to reconnect when moving around island and not being able to use prepaid at Sanctuary and having to use theirs! And just by luck finding the \$15 special. Not well promoted."*

*"Poor and expensive WIFI."*

*"Internet access/cost."*

*"Potholes on the road."*

*"The island roads need resealing with an addition of a walking, cycling edge."*

*"The potholes (not great when cycling around) and no mobile data coverage."*

*"Lack of rubbish bins around island some of which have still not been emptied at beaches."*

*"Lack of transport available. Lots of rubbish on the ground near the main road."*

*"Lack of change rooms, public toilets at beaches - and / or the filth of those that did exist or inability to use. High use of disposable cups etc at cafes - most seemed to say it was because they were short staffed, but it did nothing to create a sense of concern for the environment. Lack of footpaths."*

### **Food and beverage**

Eleven percent of respondent comments noted that food and beverage offerings in the Cook Islands were a least appealing aspect of their visit. Comments tended to focus on the limited food choice and the lack of local produce. Comments included:

*"Lack of restaurants."*

*"Availability of fruits and price for drinking coconuts too expensive even though it's produced locally."*

*"No fish to eat- that was super disappointing. I get there was none available, but..."*

*"Lack of local food available."*

*"I was a little disappointed not to find fish and fresh fruit easily."*

*"Lack of variety regarding good options for dietary requirements."*

*"There were some challenges with the menu items but everyone was coming out of COVID lock down with limited supplies."*

*"Lack of restaurants to just walk up to and eat always had to book."*

*"The price of food and the variety of foods available was poor – however it is understandable due to shipping and transport logistics."*

*"Food quality was poor and I got food poisoning so the last 2 days were spent vomiting."*

*"Food! After COVID the food available isn't what it used to be. A lot of places are struggling for Staff too."*

### **Stray animals and mosquitos**

Stray animals, noisy roosters, chickens and mosquitoes/insects were mentioned by nine percent of respondent comments. Dogs tended to dominate. Comments included:

*"Dogs barking and fighting, roaming every night."*

*"Dogs - need to get those under control both barking incessantly and night and roving in packs. Over the years visiting this issue has got worse and worse."*

*"Dogs everywhere that follow you."*

*"Too many dogs in Rarotonga - unfriendly when on back roads Roosters crowing 24 hrs day."*

*"Although I didn't mind the dogs, I did find at night that they seemed a bit more aggressive and would sometimes rush at you on your scooter."*

*"The 12, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5am wake up calls from the roosters." "The crowing chickens early hours of morning."*

*"Insect bites and hornet sting."*

*"Catching dengue fever."*

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

Eight percent of the respondent comments stated that the least appealing part of their visit was the price of goods and services, with feedback largely focused on the cost of food, accommodation, internet and transportation. Key words that dominated the responses included “expensive” and “overpriced”. Comments included:

*“Internet access/cost.”*

*“The cost of food, but expected as it’s an island in the middle of nowhere.”*

*“Accommodation tends to be on the expensive side.”*

*“Supermarket prices are high and the locals are underpaid.”*

*“Poor and expensive WIFI.”*

*“Difficulty getting around restaurants for a reasonable price. Taxis were very expensive.”*

*“Costs of accommodation and the standard. The wait times for service and food.”*

*“Everything is so expensive. Doesn't make sense to spend 3x the amount I would in NZ...”*

*“Expensive accommodation and restaurants.”*

*“... Also the data rates was shocking, but then again, it has been monopolised by large corporations.”*

*“Very overpriced goods, services and activities.”*

### ***Not open or not ready for full operation***

A further eight percent of respondent comments mentioned businesses/attractions in the Cook Islands being ‘not open’. Respondents lamented that they would like to spend more time/money, and some activities/services that were not available during their visit. Many visitors expressed that it was understandable because of the COVID impacts. Comments included:

*“Most of the restaurants were shut.”*

*“Lot of shops and restaurants were closed.”*

*“Unpredictability of opening hours at cafes.”*

*“Not as many cafe and restaurants open due to COVID or as the result of COVID, no longer being in business.”*

*“Facilities open and available at both places we stayed at did not match the website”*

*“Difficulties finding places to eat, what was open when and limited availability. Lack of 4G or Wi-Fi to look things up. Arrival at the airport was really slow and hot. Lack of vegetarian good options at some places.”*

*“Understandably the markets and roadside stalls weren't operating at full capacity yet, but this will return once tourism increases again.”*

*“Many restaurants had reduced menus and open hours due to staff shortage.”*

*“Irregular shops & eateries are open.”*

*“Lots of stuff still felt like it was reopening post COVID so it was a little challenging to get certain things. No one's fault though.”*

*“Some business closed because they were too busy?”*

### **Rental cars or scooters**

Seven percent of comments mentioned rental cars and scooters as least appealing aspects of the Cook Islands visit. Respondents referred to the quality and the availability of rental vehicles, the waiting time for a scooter license, the lack of information about the process of renting vehicles and unreliable service. Comments included:

*“3 hour wait to get scooter licence.”*

*“Car Rental. Expensive, old, difficult to drive, brakes poor, not very clean car. No power steering. Asked for a change but refused. Returned key to wrong box. Charged \$240 for replacement. Advised it was not electronic and we had to open door manually. No response from Raro Cars. Very disappointing. Left a sour note after a wonderful holiday.”*

*“Having to get a scooter license put us off renting.”*

*“Our rental car was taken off us earlier than we anticipated and left us stranded the day needed to get to airport.”*

*“Car rental. Left booking until late because wanted a scooter. When leaving NZ nothing available online (assumed this was because we were arriving on a Sunday). When asking at Lagoon Breeze office next day where to go had no problem getting a rental. Turned out no problem but if rentals were available would have preferred certainty before leaving. Next time would book a car rental well in advance.”*

*“Waiting a whole day trying to get scooter license and scooter hire.”*

*“Lack of availability of rental vehicles.”*

*"The state of the rental car."*

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

Rubbish and natural environment care were mentioned by 7% of respondent comments as a least appealing element of the visit to the Cook Islands. Comments mostly focused on the degradation of coral reefs, the amount of rubbish, water pollution, poor condition of the lagoons and beaches, plastic waste, glass waste, rubbish burning, and threatened marine life. Comments included:

*"Muri lagoon water was very dirty."*

*"The very coral beaches."*

*"Muri Lagoon looking grubby and sad - the trees missing around the place. Not enough shade in the constitution park."*

*"The state of the Muri area...dirty beaches and scruffy market...in the past its been far superior...this is our 4th visit."*

*"A lot of broken glass on the beach every day."*

*"The rubbish on the beach."*

*"Some litter along the street and around tourist places."*

*"Some overflowing rubbish bins."*

*"Smoke on the island (burning trash) kept us indoors for an afternoon."*

*"Sea cucumbers in water and deterioration of roads."*

*"Sea cucumbers, they made walking in the sea a challenge!"*

*"Sea slugs- so many of them. Wonder if they could be cleaned up."*

### **Customer service**

Seven percent of respondent comments mentioned customer service as their least appealing aspect of their holiday in the Cook Islands. Comments often focused on customer service in restaurants, accommodation and transport. Comments included:

*"We were both really surprised about the service/friendliness of the Cook Islanders – thought they would be happier to see us Kiwis! Often left unserved at a bar for 5 minutes while they did other things...was below average compared to other holiday destinations (like Hawaii, NZ, Fiji, New Caledonia, Caribbean)."*

*"The staff really weren't into it this time, the European male manager was VERY openly rude to staff in front of guests multiple times, the staff need better hours and working conditions I really feel for them."*

*"Poor customer service."*

*"Sometimes there was a long wait for food etc, but this can't be helped with COVID and the number of visitors on the island."*

*"The lack of service but appreciate that is an ongoing issue due to the effects of COVID."*

*"Baby wasn't allowed in a few stores. Can't shop if one parent has to stay outside."*

*"Slow service at restaurants/resorts (Muri Beach Club has the best service on the whole island) everywhere else is very slow. And the price of groceries at the supermarket."*

*"Unfortunately, this time around the people were not as accommodating, felt like they didn't want us there unlike when we were over a few years back, the locals were super accommodating."*

### **Accommodation**

Another seven percent of visitor comments mentioned their accommodation while in the Cook Islands as being one of the least appealing aspects of their stay. Comments include the cost of accommodation, bad customer service, and some also pointed out that certain places needed an upgrade of facilities and/or services:

*"Double booking of accommodation with no notification or ownership by provider."*

*"Some accommodation definitely need upgrade. We have seen some travellers are fishing among coral near the beach, should be abandoned."*

*"Our resort was a shambles. Absolutely awful and no interest in addressing our concerns. We were a group of 28 in total and NONE of us were happy or would ever return."*

*"Poor state of the resort."*

*"To be honest, at \$600 per night, I thought the resort was very 'tired' and although COVID was around the room maintenance was poor. There was a lot of cracked and discoloured grouting around the pool. The tiles around the pool are unsatisfactory for being outside (a friend we made at the hotel took a TERRIBLE fall and was offered a Bandaid), my bed was remade but a top sheet was omitted - leaving me to put my face on a duvet inner (that had not been washed in between guests)."*



*"The resort was a huge let-down. We paid more to stay at the expensive resort, but the accommodation was so noisy we could hardly sleep. the beach was full of sea cucumbers and no fish."*

*"The poor service of my accommodation."*

*"Hotel has wrongly advertised features that were not present."*

*"The lack of maintenance at the resort & meals provided."*

### **Attractions and activities**

Five percent of respondent comments mentioned attractions and activities as the least appealing aspect of their Cook Islands visit. Their concerns focused on the limited range of attractions and activities available, and poor activity experiences. Many visitors complained that they could not participate in more activities because the businesses were not open or fully open due to COVID. Comments included:

*"King tides, kids couldn't enjoy snorkelling much."*

*"Came during Easter so a couple days we felt stranded and didn't know what to do."*

*"The sea scooters trip wasn't a good experience either - wasn't really fun and couldn't see anything."*

*"The hiking trails - felt risky."*

### **Labour shortage**

Four percent of comments mentioned labour shortage as one of the least appealing aspects of the Cook Islands visit. Respondents mentioned the quality of the service was often largely affected by staff shortages. Comments included:

*"Lack of staff at some places."*

*"The lack of people/ tourists and some places not open due to staff shortages."*

*"The inability to book some experiences, due to staff shortages. I know this is a petty complaint...as the effects of COVID were being felt by the island. so please take this as a comment...not a complaint."*

*"COVID has left many businesses short staffed."*

*"Many restaurants had reduced menus and open hours due to staff shortage."*

*"Opening hours of facilities, restaurants, shops, etc, seemed very random and hard to figure out. Often places were closed, alcohol not available, etc Staff shortages were VERY noticeable."*

### **Lack of information**

A lack of available information was mentioned in three percent of visitor comments regarding least appealing aspects of their visit. Areas raised included: limited information updates on COVID-19, a need for better transportation schedules, and more accurate information on business opening hours. Comments included:

*“Unpredictability of opening hours at cafes.”*

*“Lack of help and information.”*

*“Places said they were open when they were closed. Misleading information.”*

*“Information services on activities not very easy to access.”*

*“Hard to know when a museum or other attraction was open. Websites not accurate. Difficult to visit more than 1 attraction due to bus schedule.”*

### **Poor weather**

Two percent of visitor comments mentioned poor weather while in the Cook Islands. More specifically, visitors complained about the rain and wind, but several also acknowledged that the weather was seasonal and nobody’s fault.

*“Weather highly variable and cooler than expected.”*

*“Island cruise was cancelled 3 days in a row because of winds but that wasn't anyone's fault.”*

*“Windier than we were expecting - but that can't be helped.”*

### **Flight related issues**

Two percent of comments mentioned flight related issues as the least appealing aspect of the visit to the Cook Islands. Visitors mentioned flight delays, COVID-19 testing requirements, airport arrival and departures. Comments included:

*“The airport, massive lines at air nz leaving despite being there 3 hours before departure and being premium gold air nz customer. Tiny koru lounge. Arrival staff not particularly friendly, lucky we were first in the line as huge wait for others.”*

*“The departing hours for take-off at the airports weren't followed. We took off one hour later on our way from Rarotonga to Aitutaki and the same to come back to Rarotonga.”*

### **Other tourists**

One percent of respondent comments noted that the least appealing part of the visit was the number of other tourists in the Cook Islands. Comments included:

*"It's getting as busy as it was, prior to COVID."*

*"How busy/booked out most places were."*

### **Booking issues**

A small group (1%) of respondent comments noted that the least appealing part of the visit was attractions and/ or activities being booked out. Comments included:

*"Not knowing to book things in advance, we missed a lot of attractions due to them being booked out."*

*"Everything was booked out, eh swimming with turtles, we were not able to go on our safari trip as the driver got sick (not his fault but there were not many days available to book when we got there), unable to book scooter as all booked out? I think if we had known this before we left, we would have planned & booked online, however I guess the situation with the country opening up to tourists again was the cause of many of these things being booked out. I think we would also go earlier in the year as there were a lot of currents in the ocean over the time we were there, which made it difficult to swim & snorkel."*

### **Local people**

Another small group (1%) of respondent comments noted that the least appealing part of the visit was the reaction of local people in the Cook Islands to the return of visitors. Comments included:

*"... and some people are not very friendly."*

*"Feeling tricked by a woman who didn't identify herself as taxi driver, who offered us a ride from the airport when our ride fell through."*

## 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 focused on public services and infrastructure, mainly airport arrival and departure processes (25%), the need for more entertainment, activities, transport (14%), accommodation or quarantine hotels (11%), quality, availability and price of food & drinks (11%), businesses needing to be fully operational (10%), environment, safety and animal care (8%), the need for better information (6%), the attitudes of locals and customer services (5%), COVID practices (4%), law and legislation (4%), availability and suggestions on flights (2%), and better value for money (2%). Comments on these themes included:

*“Quicker arrival experience in the airport.”*

*“Better system and procedure for arriving into the country.”*

*“Have refreshments or cold water available to travellers when standing in a queue in 30degrees for an hour and a half.”*

*“Longer time to arrange pre-departure COVID-tests. We live in a provincial town and it was very stressful to get the tests done in time, and uploaded to documents.”*

*“Just give us paper forms. The relaxation of the trip was almost stripped away.”*

*“Better access to public wifi to be able to check correspondence with companies.”*

*“A bus to the market from the airport, at least.”*

*“Affordable Roaming data for NZ Vodafone customers.”*

*“Business open and close hours are not good and very difficult to navigate.”*

*“Don't let it over develop and over promote. Overcrowding will kill the Golden Goose!”*

*“Goodness it is way overdue to tidy up the area around the Chicken Place and Trader Jacks.”*

*“Have workers that clear the public beach foreshore, as it would be prestigious to have all beach or foreshore presented in the best form and of course the added wow factor to a tourist.”*

*“I disliked the arrival area. Very close to all passengers. Very slow processing and people crushed into the arrivals lounge. Poor ventilation and very close: behind beside left and right and in front. There was no 2meter space as per COVID*

*recommendation!"*

*"I was hoping there would be more home stalls on the side of the road, with fresh fruit and maybe Island Eis."*

*"...hopefully more people will move to the island so staff levels can increase."*

*"Making it easier to find information on activities. The airport had very little, our resort had a booking desk that knew nothing. Information centre was helpful but still not a lot of printed matter that you can look through to find the less mainstream activities."*

*"More clarity around licenses, was looking for a motorcycle license but got various requirements from websites. (I have a NZ bike license but wasn't sure if I still needed to get the CI one)."*

*"No burning fires. When you are sitting on the beach or resort the smoky fires are not nice."*

*"Realise maintaining an individual website can be costly but would be helpful to have pages for different services on a main site where tourists can visit and either know opening hours or if they are even closed. Also don't like how everyone gets charged a flat fee of \$20 per taxi trip - seems unfair if there are 3 or 4 of you travelling!"*

*"Remove the mask rule. Pointless having rule in 50% of stores."*

*"Some of our locals need to improve their attitude towards their own people visiting from overseas. Serving white visitors 1st even when we brown customers got there earlier and ordered 1st. White privilege is certainly alive and well there."*

*"The roads - need sealing. Maybe a small tax on car registration and car rentals to help pay for it, although a taxi driver pointed out a bad storm will just wipe it out again?"*

*"The Toilet facilities around the island - need attention."*

*"Would have loved more info on car rental a little earlier in the trip so we could have planned better. Didn't know how or if I could attend church and would have loved to have experienced this."*

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

Nearly all visitors (95%) indicated that they would consider re-visiting the Cook Islands in the future. This figure is slightly lower than May to June 2021 period (97%), but higher than NZ visitors exhibited in the same quarter of 2019 (90%). Of the five percent of visitors who indicated they would not want to return to the Cook Islands, the majority stated that did not wish to return because of the perceived poor value for money, disappointment about certain businesses being shut or closed down , and the desire to explore more destinations in future. Comments included:

*“Been twice now - not enough to do or see there. Great for a relax but we prefer more activity.”*

*“Hopefully they will get their act together with the bikes/helmets etc so people that have booked them actually get them on time. They also need to reopen places so you can get beauty stuff done over there. There were 10 of us that would have got 2-3 massages each on holiday but nowhere available to get one. Places we have been in the past were closed down.”*

*“I have visited twice now and is wonderful but there are other places I want to see.”*

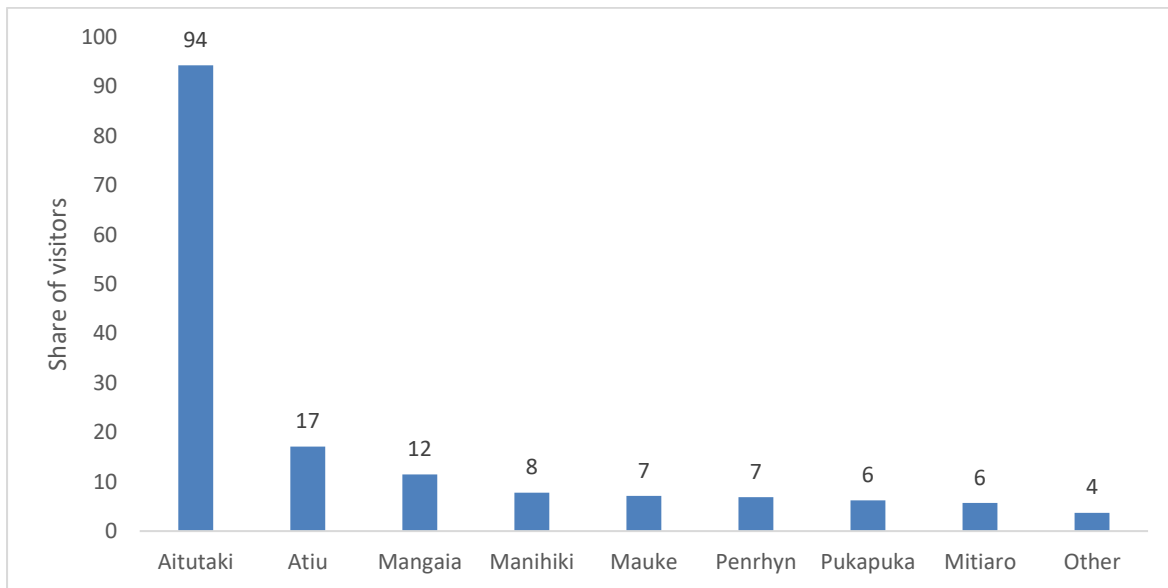
*“Nothing was open, disappointed.”*

*“Overpriced, hotels need upgrading.”*

*“... my husband has a progressive auto immune illness and mobility issues will prevent future visit. As well, the COVID-19 requirements for international travel are very stressful. We will do domestic travel in the future.”*

Nearly half (49%) of the visitors who said they would return stated that they would definitely include the outer islands on their next visit. A further 48% of visitors indicated they would “maybe” visit outer islands next time. Of those who said they may visit outer islands the next time, most (94%) mentioned they would like to include Aitutaki. Atiu was the second most mentioned island at 17% (Figure 31).

**Figure 31: Islands that visitors said they would include on their next visit (n = 563)**



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

Nearly all visitors surveyed (99%) said that they would recommend the destination to their family and friends which is consistent with previous survey periods. Only 1% of visitors would not recommend the Cook Islands to others. Comments included:

*“It’s a lovely location but several people commented on the roosters.”*

*“Not at moment but once everything gets sorted better I would. They have had 2 years to get everything sorted to welcome back tourists.”*

*“Other places to go that are cheaper and have more to do.”*

*“Well overpriced, greedy people, low quality food.”*

*“Because of your anti-gay laws and your plans to make them harsher.”*

## Final Observations

This report shows that the Cook Islands tourism industry performed extremely well during the survey period of April to June 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 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 or other travel options as the rest of the world is opened to New Zealand travellers.

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 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.

Visitors were generally impressed with COVID 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.

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.