

International visitor surveys: more than just numbers

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International visitor surveys (IVS) are traditionally designed to provide destinations with marketing data and intelligence. The New Zealand Tourism Research Institute has been developing new approaches to IVS implementation and data collection in the Pacific Islands that can provide a much richer source of information [1]. The research outlined here is the first to utilise an IVS to explore the positioning of cuisine in the culinary identity of a destination – specifically, the cuisine of the Cook Islands. The Cook Islands is known primarily for its sun, sea and sand features, rather than its culinary attributes. Drawing on data mining of the Cook Islands IVS (2012–2016) and a web audit of destination websites and menus, this paper considers the positioning of food and food-related activities within the Pacific nation’s tourism experience.

National tourism organisations are increasingly seeking competitive advantage by utilising their local cuisines as tourist attractions. Research suggests that distinctive local cuisines can act as both a tourism attraction, and as a means of shaping the identity of a destination [2, 3]. In addition to providing an important source of marketable images, local cuisine can also provide a unique experience for tourists. This reinforces the competitiveness and sustainability of the destination [2].

The cuisine of the Cook Islands has come up repeatedly in recommendations for how the country can grow its tourism revenue. Recommendations have been made to improve the food product on offer, develop a distinctive Cook Islands cuisine based on fresh, local produce, and to promote a Cook Islands cuisine experience [4, 5], and to use these to market the Cook Islands as a destination for local food tourism experiences [4]. Despite these recommendations, Cook Island cuisine features less prominently than stereotypical sun, sea, and sand marketing images, and little is known about tourists’ perceptions of and satisfaction with food and food-related activities [6]. Our research addresses this gap by mining IVS data to gain a deeper understanding of tourists’ experiences and perceptions of food in the Cook Islands and assessing whether local food can be positioned as means of creating a unique destination identity.

Two methods were used to develop a picture of where food sits in the Cook Islands tourist experience: one focussed on tourist feedback; and the other focused on how food is portrayed in relevant online media. Analysis of all food-related data collected as part of the national IVS between 1 April 2012 and 30 June 2016 was conducted (N = 10,950). A web audit also focused on how food is positioned

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as part of the Cook Islands tourism product.

After identifying the quantitative food-related questions in the IVS, satisfaction with these activities was analysed. Qualitative comments related to food experiences were also examined. The results suggest that participation in food-related activities is generally a positive feature of the visitor experience. The web-audit revealed, however, that food is not a salient feature in the majority of Cook Islands-related websites, and when food did feature, it tended to be oriented towards international cuisine with a ‘touch of the Pacific’ rather than specifically Cook Islands cuisine. This reinforced findings from the IVS data mining that Cook Islands food is presented as a generic tropical ‘seafood and fruit’ cuisine that, largely, lacks the defining and differentiating features of authentic Cook Island cuisine.

High participation rates in food-related activities and overall positive evaluations by visitors emerged from the IVS data, yet a dearth of images and information on the country’s food suggests that the Cook Islands is not exploiting its cuisine and food experiences to their full potential. As a direct result of this secondary analysis of IVS data, which highlighted the importance of and potential for food-related activities, the Cook Islands Government is now actively addressing this gap by developing a range of food-related resources and information that can better link tourism to local cuisine. In addition to developing a greater presence of local food in online resources, the Cook Islands Tourism Corporation has also taken on board the messages from the IVS to drive the development of Takurua [7] – an initiative to develop and document local, traditional cuisine and share it with the world. This approach is part of a broader ongoing effort to differentiate the Cook Islands from other South Pacific destinations through its unique cultural attributes.

Data mining and secondary analysis of IVS data has not been restricted to the identification of food-related opportunities. Secondary analysis of IVS data in the Pacific has also been used to investigate the impact of other niche markets such as events [8] and to gauge the impact of environmental incidents, for example Cyclone Pam in Vanuatu [9] and algal bloom in the Cook Islands [10], thus reinforcing that IVS data are a rich source of information and are indeed more than just numbers.

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