

Island businesses down but not out after tourist downturn

An 11 percent decrease in island visitors this year has hit some Waiheke businesses hard - but others are going strong despite the downturn.

Figures released last month by Auckland Transport show 307,153 people visited the island in January 2018 compared with 345,294 in the same month last year - a drop of 38,041. Figures for Matiatia terminal, where most tourists arrive, tell the same story; 244,417 in January 2018 compared with 273,886 in January 2017, a decline of 29,469.

"We have definitely noticed a change," says Oriini Willis, who works at Oneroa's Himalayan Trading Post. "It was way quieter this summer and not as manic as last year at all."

A staff member at the Solar Cafe, directly above the Trading Post, says they have felt the pinch too. "January this year was much, much quieter, for sure. It was all right during the first week of January, but then we experienced a massive drop off all of a sudden. February was maybe a bit busier than usual, but November and December were quite normal." Other Oneroa shops agreed they too had felt a dip.

"January and February were down, but a number of factors play into this," Fullers CEO Mike Horne says. The ferry service relies heavily on marketing Waiheke and other gulf destinations such as Devonport and Rangitoto to international tourists during the peak visitor season. "We had two major weather events and no other key events or concerts on the island during this time, so it is difficult to know if the numbers would be any different with or without those factors," he says.

"Our numbers in December and No-



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vember were okay. We are also expecting winter numbers to be okay but, like anything, it is difficult to predict a trend when so much is based on the weather pattern. When the sun is shining, people are happier to travel."

Jillian Allison, long-time owner of Oneroa gift store

Agent Jones, says a number of key events last year ballooned the number of visitors. The biennial *Sculpture on the Gulf* event in late January, April's World Masters Games in Auckland and June and July's British and Irish Lions rugby tour increased the tourist buzz for Auckland and led to

heightened interest in Waiheke last year, she says.

"You really have to put it in perspective.

Last year was very, very busy, so it is a hard year to beat."

Evidence from Fullers helps to back this up: last March the travel company reported record tourism

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rates for summer 2016/17.

"Big picture, I'd say this season has been more like a normal year," Jillian says. "November and December were good for us, and January and February not so, but overall I'd say it has averaged out. It is even up slightly at the moment than from

Daphne Mitten NZILA
Landscape architect

previous years, with about 80 percent of our customers being day trippers."

Other Oneroa stores report overall normal-to-good interest levels, and have noticed marked increases in the proportion of international tourists. "I'd have to say the double deckers have been a good thing for Oneroa," one shop owner told *Gulf News*. "Before, lots of tourists would

get off at the top of the village and not come for a walk into the shops. Now I'd say they do in higher numbers. From our view, November was up because summer started particularly early. Without seeing the figures, I wouldn't have reported such a big change myself."

In October 2015, Waiheke attracted increased international attention after

it was rated the number five region to visit in Lonely Planet's Best In Travel 2016 publication. Around the same time, it was ranked as fourth best island in the world by influential travel magazine *Condé Nast*.

Auckland Transport will release island visitor figures for February in its April report for the local board. • Richard Jones