

Spending and visitor numbers down

Many Waiheke businesses are feeling the pinch, with the number of visitors to the island and the total spend in December 2020 down compared to the previous year.

Restaurants were hardest hit in the run-up to Christmas with diners spending only two-thirds of what they had done last year, and some establishments still struggling to find staff because of the lack of overseas backpacker workers.

The lack of international tourists over December appears to have reduced spending on the island compared to December 2019, according to Eftpos NZ debit and credit card transactions.

Justin Lester, government director at consulting agency Dot Loves Data, says the total consumer spend for 1 December to 31 December 2020 was down 2.3 percent compared to the previous year. Justin says the busiest days for Waiheke were 22, 23 and 24 December.

“Last-minute shopping for Christmas provisions and presents meant transactions and total consumer spend reached their peaks for the month on these days.”

According to the data company, island restaurants were hit hard in December 2020 with total restaurant spending down 32.1 percent compared to December 2019.

For November 2020, patronage on the Waiheke Fullers360 ferry services was at approximately 90 percent of November 2019's volume, and for December 2020 passenger numbers were at roughly 80 percent of those recorded in December 2019.

CEO Mike Horne says these numbers indicate a lift in domestic visitation to Waiheke compared to 2019.

“With no international visitors however, the total volume is slightly lower than summer 2019, although our services continue to be well patronaged with many locals making the most of exploring Auckland's blue backyard, supported by our ongoing domestic marketing focus.”

In contrast, Sealink representatives say November and December 2020 were busier than expected. However, citing confidentiality reasons, a spokesperson said the company would not provide any ferry-user numbers or stats.

Waiheke Island Tourism Incorporated (WITI) chairperson Christina Hyde says many tourism forum members reported a 10 percent rise or dip in profits for most of the latter months of 2020.

“Those hit hardest tend to be transport and tour operators and activity providers,” says Christina.

Gavin Oliver, the managing director at Eco Zip Waiheke, says that despite a focus on marketing, December 2020 saw a 25



Sue McCann of Shop the Rock in Oneroa Village says she's grateful for the support of locals and visitors this summer as many retailers feel the lack of big-spending overseas tourists. Photo Sophie Boladeras

percent drop in business compared to the previous year. Gavin predicts January will be even worse. “We have always had good domestic patronage, but international visitors top it up. It's an interesting dynamic at the moment and it's tough.”

Gavin says it's hard to forecast how the year ahead will progress, and when it comes to promoting the business and getting the word out, his team is leaving no stone unturned.

“There isn't any government help for businesses at the moment that are affected by the border closure. You simply cannot rest on your laurels. We are constantly thinking about our next promotion and keeping Eco Zip in the public eye.”

Meanwhile, Raw food market in Ostend has been less affected by the impacts of Covid-19 and owner Richard Wilton says the lack of international visitors hasn't had an enormous effect on profits.

“My gut feeling is that there were fewer people on the island the week before Christmas compared to the previous year. However, in regards to sales, our average dollar spend per transaction was up quite dramatically. I would say the business did better in December 2020 compared to 2019, however we tend to do better year on year.”

Over in Oneroa Village, it's been a mixed bag for retailers, many of who adjusted their usual offerings to cater to visitors from the Auckland region and further afield.

Sue McCann who owns Shop the Rock says she switched out some of her souvenirs designed to appeal to international visitors.

“Business is OK, but it's not the same as it was. The number of people coming in-store

to browse is the same, but the demographic has changed. We are finding that people are leaving a lot earlier - up until last year it was hard for me to shut by 6.30pm, but now, by around 4.30, there aren't people coming in and there isn't that same evening rush which we had in the past.”

This year, Shop the Rock is an official America's Cup merchandise operator, which, Sue says, has bolstered sales.

“Things are ticking along, we've always had great local support and we're really grateful for that.”

Christina Hyde of WITI says a big question mark hangs over how the island will do in February and March.

“The destination wedding market traditionally supports this period and it's likely a lack of large international destination weddings will have a big impact on many businesses - from vineyards and restaurants through to wedding planners and accommodation providers.”

Looking ahead, Christina says the focus for many islanders is to develop a more sustainable model of tourism and business with less reliance on cashed-up international visitors. She says that despite the downturn in tourists, spirits remain high, with innovative ideas, ad campaigns and events planned in the hopes of drawing more domestic visitors to the island over the coming months.

One exciting large-scale venture spearheaded by Waiheke Island Tourism Incorporated will see the launch of a harvest festival in May. The weekend-long festivities are set to feature Waiheke food, wine, art and music events held at more than 10 local vineyards. • Sophie Boladeras