

Visitor arrival numbers slump in the Pacific Island Countries and Territories



Tourism and the Pandemic

All around the world, COVID-19 is having serious impacts on the tourism industry. The Pacific Island Countries and Territories (PICTs) are no exception.

Data available on visitor arrivals for the first six months of 2020 for twelve PICTs (Cook Islands, Guam, Fiji, Kiribati, New Caledonia, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu) show that on average arrival numbers have dropped by 62.4 % as compared to the same period in 2019. In the first quarter of the year arrival numbers were down by 18.7% on average over the same quarter of 2019. In the second quarter of 2019, as border closures were extended to all PICTs and many source countries, the decline in arrival numbers reached an average of 99.3%.

The sheer drop in visitor arrival numbers points to the seriousness of the impact of the pandemic on the national economies of PICTs, particularly those that heavily rely on tourism. Tourism earnings have diminished, and many jobs have been lost. The aviation sector is at a standstill, forcing many flight crew and ground staff to look for alternative jobs until tourism resumes. The cruise ship industry has also been hit hard: Vanuatu and New Caledonia, which were two of the most popular cruise-ship ports-of-call, have not seen a visit since March. Tour and rental car operators have registered declines in their businesses. Hotels have reported zero or very low occupancy rates. Restaurants and bars have lost business, and some are reported to have closed. Most tourism attractions have no visitors. Retail business activity has also slowed down. Many small-time operators including market vendors and food sellers, and those manufacturing and selling handicrafts have lost their livelihoods and income. PICT governments have lost-out on the much-needed foreign exchange as well as taxation revenue, especially in those countries where consumption tax is levied on tourism and related services.

The collective expenditure of *mostly* international visitors which includes a considerable number of overseas-based Pacific Islanders visiting friends and relatives in their home countries has direct, indirect and induced effects across the different sectors of the PICTs economies. All in all, these wide-ranging economic impacts are feared to have adverse socio-economic effects on individuals and families leading to more inequality and possibly a deterioration in social conditions. There is also anecdotal evidence that many people are now turning to subsistence production and informal activities for a livelihood.

Looking Ahead

In discussion with Mr Christopher Cocker, the Chief Executive Officer of the South Pacific Tourism Organisation, it is felt that the travel bans are likely to remain in place for some time as the priority is

to get the pandemic contained. But even when borders open many people may exercise caution for some time before they travel. However, the tourism industry is resilient and will bounce back when normalcy eventually resumes – this however could take time. Until then and where possible, domestic tourism needs to be promoted and the Pacific digitally promoted to international visitors for them to keep Pacific in their minds when planning travel when it resumes. Furthermore, the maintenance and the upkeep of the tourism facilities and attractions is critical so that they can be readily brought back into operation again. To bring back visitors PICTs will need to conduct effective digital marketing activities, promote attractive and competitive packages, and ensure health and safety protocols are in place before borders re-open. This will require careful planning and cooperation between CROP agencies, PICTs authorities, the tourism operators and development partners.

Monitoring the Impacts

The Statistics for Development Division of the Pacific Community continues to monitor trends in tourism and other key indicators and updates will be issued as new data emerges.

Monthly and quarterly data from those PICTs that publish regular social and economic statistics can be found at <https://sdd.spc.int/disasters-data>. SDD has also identified a number of administrative datasets that could be made available by national authorities to provide more information on impacts; <https://sdd.spc.int/disasters-data/covid-19/measuring-and-monitoring-socio-economic-impacts-covid-19-pandemic-economies>.

The following table and charts provide detailed data for the twelve countries covered in this brief. Table 1 shows the performance of visitor arrivals from January to June 2020 relative to the same period of 2019. This information has been further split into quarters to show the impact of the decline after the travel bans were imposed late in Quarter 1. The charts show that all twelve PICTs show a similar downward trend for visitor arrivals.

Table 1: Performance of visitor arrivals: January to June 2020 relative to the same period of 2019

Country	Period	% Δ
Cook Islands	January to June 2020 compared to the same period 2019	-65.8
	- of which January to March 2020 compared to the same period 2019	-12.9
	- of which April to June 2020 compared to the same period 2019	-99.8
Fiji Islands	January to June 2020 compared to the same period 2019	-65.3
	- of which January to March 2020 compared to the same period 2019	-18.7
	- of which April to June 2020 compared to the same period 2019	-99.2
Guam	January to June 2020 compared to the same period 2019	-60.5
	- of which January to March 2020 compared to the same period 2019	-28.2
	- of which April to June 2020 compared to the same period 2019	-98.6
Kiribati	January to June 2020 compared to the same period 2019	-64.2
	- of which January to March 2020 compared to the same period 2019	-35.3
	- of which April to June 2020 compared to the same period 2019	-100.0
New Caledonia	January to June 2020 compared to the same period 2019	-52.5
	- of which January to March 2020 compared to the same period 2019	-7.3
	- of which April to June 2020 compared to the same period 2019	-97.3
Palau	January to June 2020 compared to the same period 2019	-62.3
	- of which January to March 2020 compared to the same period 2019	-30.7
	- of which April to June 2020 compared to the same period 2019	-100.0
Papua New Guinea	January to June 2020 compared to the same period 2019	-66.6
	- of which January to March 2020 compared to the same period 2019	-29.7
	- of which April to June 2020 compared to the same period 2019	-98.5
Samoa	January to June 2020 compared to the same period 2019	-71.4
	- of which January to March 2020 compared to the same period 2019	-36.2
	- of which April to June 2020 compared to the same period 2019	-98.5
Solomon Islands	January to June 2020 compared to the same period 2019	-68.8
	- of which January to March 2020 compared to the same period 2019	-32.2
	- of which April to June 2020 compared to the same period 2019	-100.0
Tonga	January to June 2020 compared to the same period 2019	-62.7
	- of which January to March 2020 compared to the same period 2019	-20.8
	- of which April to June 2020 compared to the same period 2019	-100.0
Tuvalu	January to June 2020 compared to the same period 2019	-52.3
	- of which January to March 2020 compared to the same period 2019	29.2
	- of which April to June 2020 compared to the same period 2019	-100.0
Vanuatu	January to June 2020 compared to the same period 2019	-56.8
	- of which January to March 2020 compared to the same period 2019	-2.0
	- of which April to June 2020 compared to the same period 2019	-100.0

Graphs: Visitor arrivals

