

Seasonal fluctuations in short-term traveller numbers





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Citation

Stats NZ (2017). *Seasonal fluctuations in short-term traveller numbers*. Retrieved from www.stats.govt.nz.

ISBN 978-0-908350-91-9 (online)

Published in February 2017 by
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Introduction

In the year ended December 2016, 3.5 million overseas visitors arrived in New Zealand. But how many visitors are in New Zealand on any given day of the year?

The question has practical importance. Visitors to New Zealand create demand for goods and services, including transportation, accommodation, and tourist activities. They also have an impact on local infrastructure. Knowing how many visitors are in New Zealand on any given day might be important for civil defence or flu pandemic planning.

This report explores the seasonal fluctuations of visitors to New Zealand and New Zealand residents travelling overseas. This is based on short-term trips – those travelling for less than 12 months.

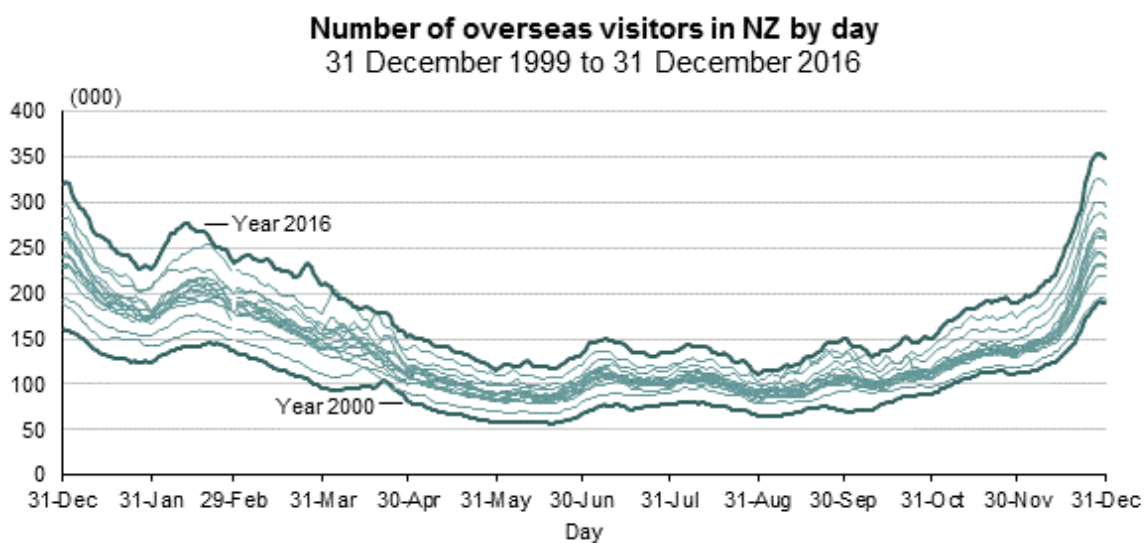
Summary of key points

- In 2016, the number of overseas visitors in New Zealand ranged from 112,000 on 31 August to 354,000 on 29 December.
- In contrast, in 2016 the number of New Zealand residents temporarily overseas ranged from 72,000 on 1 March to 235,000 on 29 December.
- In both cases, the late December peak reflects an upsurge in travellers visiting friends and family, as well as an upsurge in those visiting for holidays.

Peak visitor day in 2016 was 29 December

There are strong seasonal patterns in visitor numbers (see figure 1). In recent years the number of visitors in New Zealand peaked in the week of 27 December to 2 January. The peak day was 29 December in 2011–13 and 2016, and 28 December in 2014 and 2015.

Figure 1



At that peak in 2016, the number of overseas visitors in New Zealand was 354,000. This compares with a peak of 191,000 in 2000. Since 2000, the number of visitors in New Zealand has increased across every day of the year, but more during the summer months (December to March).

Lowest visitor day in 2016 was 31 August

The number of visitors in New Zealand tends to be at its lowest in late August, early September, and mid-June. On 31 August 2016, there were an estimated 112,000 overseas visitors in New Zealand. This is 242,000 less than the peak reached on 29 December.

The seasonality of visitor numbers presents challenges to the tourism sector. These challenges include:

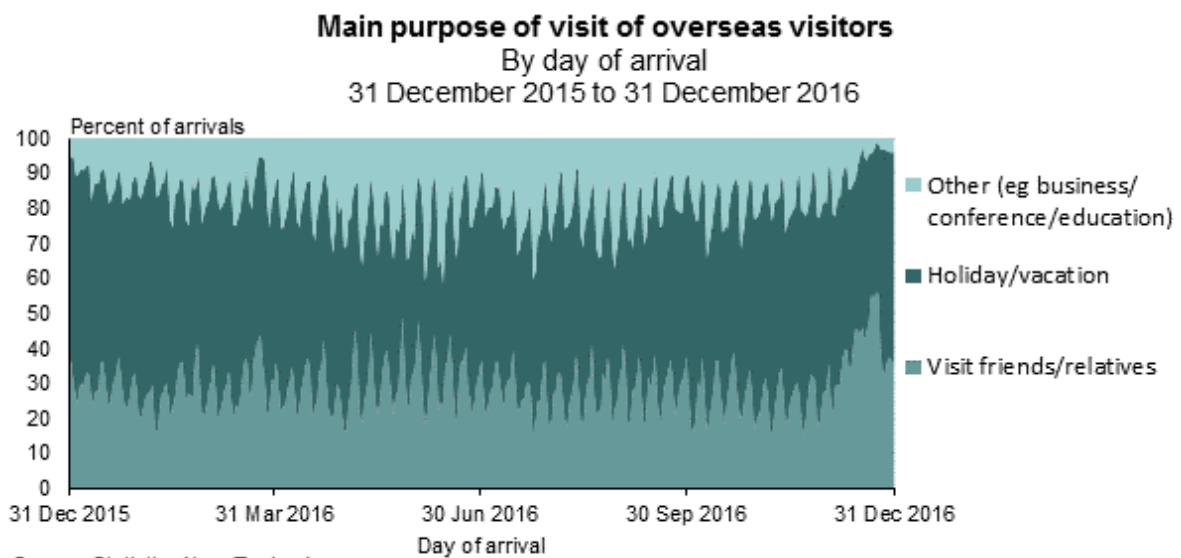
- managing the peak summer influx of visitors
- marketing New Zealand as a destination at other times of the year, in order to spread visitor numbers throughout the year.

Peaks driven by summer and holidays

The number of visitors in New Zealand is highest during the summer months, and is otherwise influenced by holidays. The timing of Australian school holidays is important, as 2 in 5 visitors are from Australia. The timing of Chinese New Year (moving between late January and late February) and Easter (moving between late March and late April) also affects visitor numbers.

At any time of the year, roughly half of all visitors are travelling mainly for holiday/vacation purposes (see figure 2). However, people visiting friends/relatives in New Zealand make a large contribution to the late December peak in visitors. Many of these visitors are New Zealand citizens who live overseas. Of the 99,000 New Zealand citizen visitors who arrived in December 2016, three-quarters were living in Australia.

Figure 2



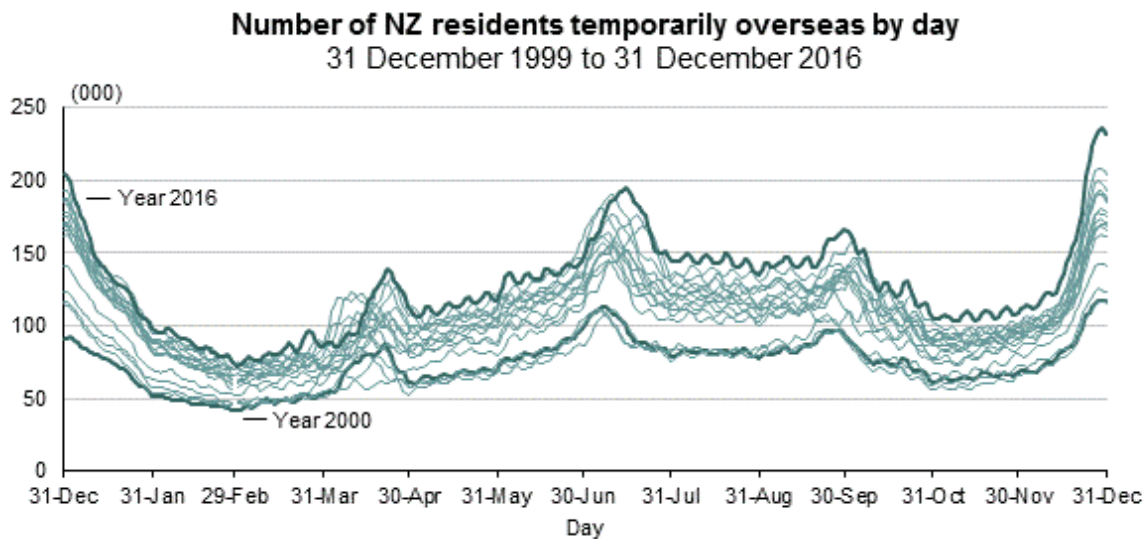
The jagged pattern (see figure 2) reflects business travellers tending to arrive near the start of the working week (Sunday and Monday). In contrast, those travelling for holiday/vacation or visiting friends/relatives tend to arrive near the start of the weekend (Friday and Saturday).

Holiday peaks for New Zealand residents temporarily overseas

New Zealand residents made 2.6 million short-term trips overseas in the year ended December 2016. This compares with 1.3 million trips in 2000.

The highest peaks in the number of New Zealand residents temporarily overseas coincide with school holiday, Christmas, and Easter periods (see figure 3). Smaller peaks coincide with weekends. Near the end of December 2016, over 230,000 New Zealand residents were temporarily overseas (away for less than 12 months).

Figure 3

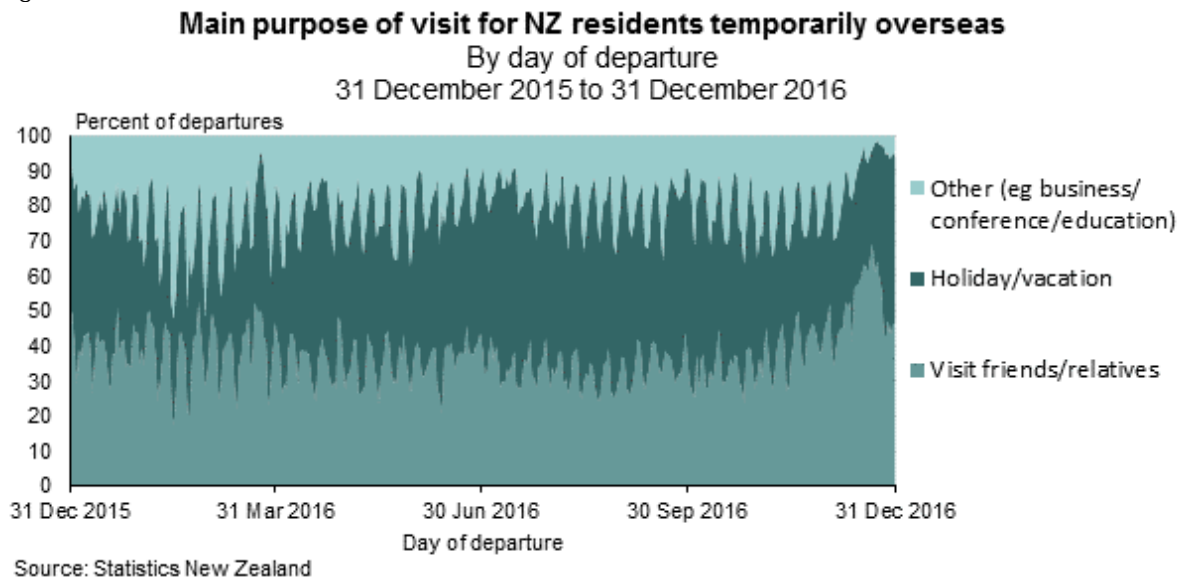


Family connections drive December peak

Many of the New Zealand residents temporarily overseas have overseas connections. Of the 217,000 New Zealand resident short-term departures in December 2012 (the last December month to collect country of birth for all resident departures), 46 percent were born overseas. This is much higher than the 25 percent of the 2013 Census usually resident population who were born overseas.

As with visitors to New Zealand, visiting friends/relatives is the main purpose for most New Zealand resident travellers in December (see figure 4). At other times of the year, especially April to October, holiday/vacation is the most common purpose.

Figure 4



The jagged pattern (see figure 4), as with visitors to New Zealand, reflects business travellers tending to depart near the start of the working week (Sunday and Monday). In contrast, those travelling for holiday/vacation or visiting friends/relatives tend to depart near the start of the weekend (Friday and Saturday).

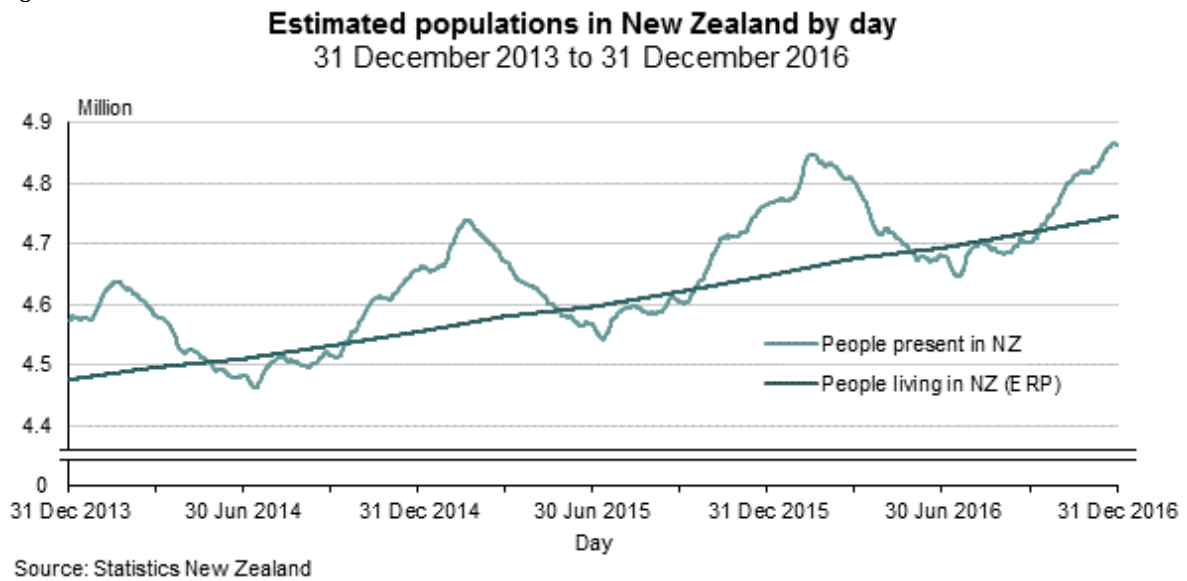
Fewest New Zealanders away overseas in early March

In early March, students are generally back in primary, secondary, and tertiary education. This is one of the reasons the New Zealand Census of Population and Dwellings has been held at that time of year since 1986. This census timing also reflects the long daylight hours (and daylight saving) and climate in early March, which is conducive to census fieldwork.

Total number of people in New Zealand

The combined impact of visitors and New Zealand residents travelling in and out of New Zealand is that the number of people actually in New Zealand on any given day ranged from 186,000 higher to 56,000 lower than the 'estimated resident population' (ERP) in 2014–16 (see figure 5). The biggest difference occurs in mid-February when the number of visitors in New Zealand is relatively high, while the number of New Zealand residents temporarily overseas is relatively low. In contrast, in mid-July there are more New Zealand residents temporarily overseas than visitors in New Zealand.

Figure 5



Visitors are excluded from most official population statistics, which are focused on the ERP. ERP gives the best available measure of the number of people living throughout New Zealand and is most useful for analysis and planning for schools, health, housing, and electoral purposes.

However, for some other purposes, the number of people actually in an area (the 'de facto' population), either living or visiting, is more relevant. The de facto population can be significantly higher than the resident population. Accommodation statistics show that visitor numbers also vary between areas of New Zealand.

Method

1. The number of overseas visitors in New Zealand on a given day is a function of arrivals and departures on each day, and the duration of stay of each traveller. We estimate the number using the intended length of stay reported on arrival cards completed by travellers **crossing New Zealand's border over the previous year. While intended length of stay may differ from actual length of stay, it is a useful and timely indication of traveller numbers by day of year.**
2. The number of New Zealand residents temporarily overseas is estimated in a similar way, but using the intended length of absence reported on departure cards.
3. The estimated number of people living in New Zealand by day of year is derived from quarterly estimates of the resident population as at 31 March, 30 June, 30 September, and 31 December, with all other dates linearly interpolated.
4. The estimated number of people present in New Zealand by day of year is derived by adding the estimates of the resident population and visitors in New Zealand, and subtracting estimates of New Zealand residents temporarily overseas.

Further information

Use [Infoshare](#) to find the data used in this article:

Subject category: Tourism

Group: International Travel and Migration – ITM

- Visitors – average number in New Zealand each day...
- NZ-resident travellers – average number overseas each day...

Subject category: Population

Group: Population Estimates – DPE

- Estimated Resident Population...

See [Accommodation](#) statistics for more information about short-term visitors.

References

Statistics NZ (2007). [Estimates of short-term travellers in and out of New Zealand](#).

Statistics NZ (1999). [Effects of changing from de facto population estimates to resident population estimates](#).