

# ALBERNI VALLEY VISITOR PROFILE - 2023



ALBERNI VALLEY  
*tourism*



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## Introduction

The Alberni Valley is both a destination and a gateway to the highly promoted resort Westcoast destinations of Tofino and Ucluelet. Starting at the eastern end of Cameron Lake and extending to the western tip of Sproat Lake, the Alberni Valley is home to the iconic Mount Arrowsmith, Cathedral Grove (MacMillan Provincial Park), and Della Falls, as well as several provincial parks. Known for salmon fishing, hiking, camping, and sports tourism, the City of Port Alberni is in the Valley's heart.

During the summer of 2023, wildfires on the Cameron Lake Bluffs impacted travel within the Alberni Valley. They forced the closer of Highway 4 in early June and reduced traffic volumes (alternating traffic with occasional full closures) through the summer season. While the traffic line-ups allowed the research team to recruit participants, they also devastated Port Alberni, Ucluelet, and Tofino businesses.<sup>1</sup> The results present in this report need to be understood in the context of a summer of disruption and changing messaging about visiting the Alberni Valley and areas adjacent to it.<sup>2</sup>

## Methods

This study used a survey designed to collect data from visitors to the Alberni Valley. The online questionnaire was hosted on SurveyMonkey and deployed through several means, including:

- Face-to-face intercepts at key locations (e.g., farmers' markets, Harbour Quay, and hiking trails).
- Face-to-face intercepts at traffic line-ups for those leaving the Alberni Valley.
- Face-to-face intercepts at a local music festival.
- Business drop-boxes that led to email follow-up.
- Social media ads targeting those residents of Vancouver Island, British Columbia, Alberta, and Washington State.
  - Ads targeted those who may have visited and residents of the Alberni Valley who may have hosted visitors.

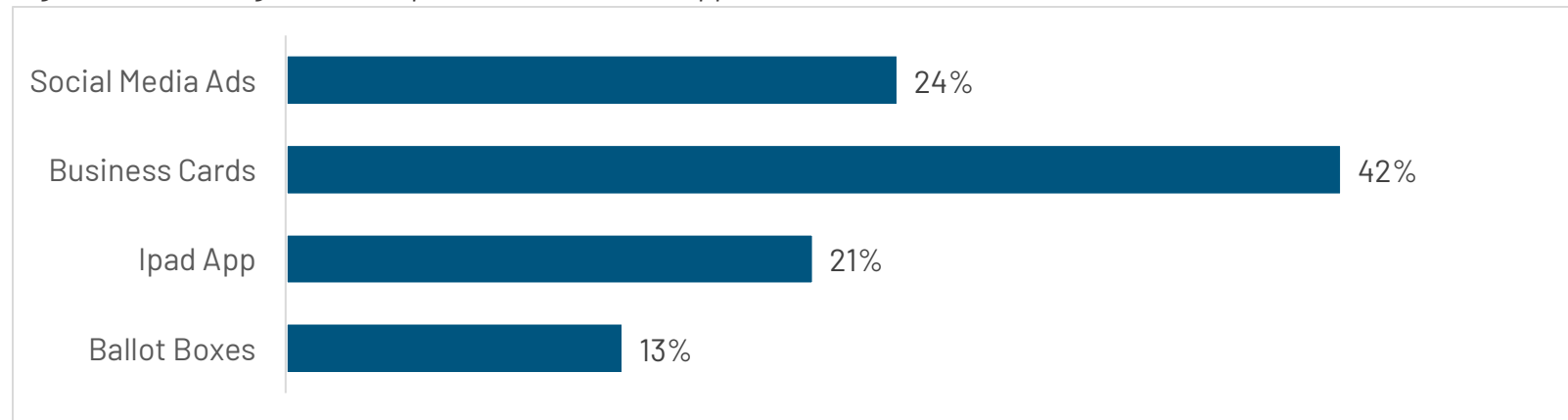
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<sup>1</sup> [Survey shows Highway 4 closure cost Tofino-Ucluelet businesses \\$44M.](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Alberni Valley and West Coast encourage people to limit travel.](#)

Participants recruited through face-to-face intercepts were asked to complete an online questionnaire on an iPad (immediately) or were provided a business card with a QR code and the URL. While accounting for the lowest percentage of participants, the most efficient form of recruitment was using ballot boxes, with the highest percentage of participants contacted completing the full survey. Figure one illustrates the percentage of participants who started the survey by recruitment approaches (not everyone completed it).

Figure 1: Percentage of Participants Recruited Per Approach (n=120)



### Data Analysis

Before the analysis started, data were cleaned to remove participants who had answered less than 50% of the questions or indicated that they had not visited Alberni Valley during the study period. This process removed 27 participants who started but did not complete the survey. Participants recruited via social media were most likely (n=15) not to complete the survey, and those who provided their email addresses via the drop boxes were the most likely to finish once they started. The final sample used for data analysis included responses from 93 visitors.

### Sample Description

Thirty-one percent of participants identified as male, 67% as female, and 2% did not disclose. Most visitors (40%) were from Vancouver Island or the Gulf Islands, and 31% were from other BC communities. Europeans (17%) and Albertans (6%)

were the largest non-BC visitor groups (Figure 2). The average age of participants was 47 years ( $SD=14.4$ ), with nearly half (49%) being between 30 and 49 years of age (Figure 3).

Figure 2: Where Study Participants Were From (n=90)

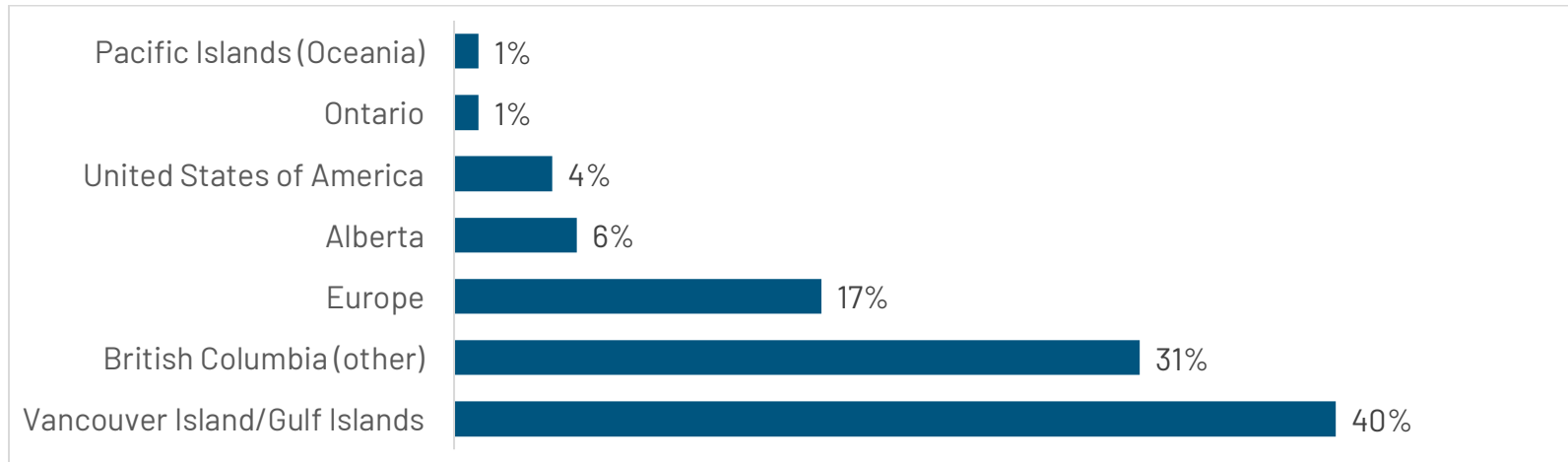
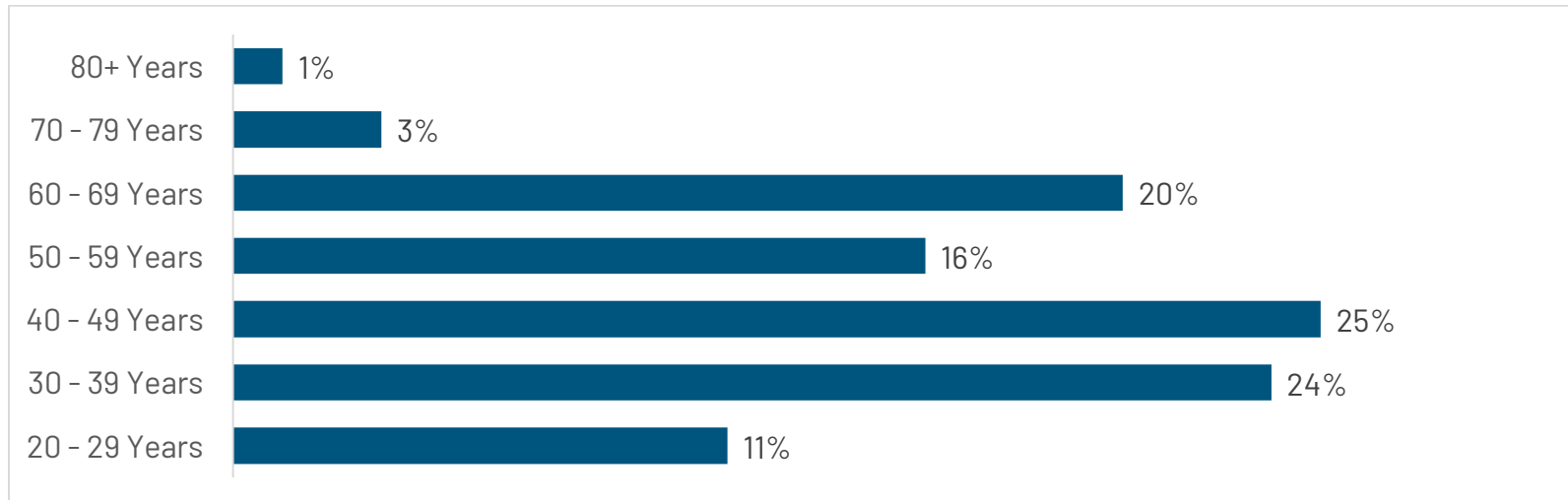


Figure 3 Percentage of Participants by Age Group (n=89)



## Results

The results of this study are organized into several sections that speak to different aspects of the visitors' profiles. This section presents visitors' reasons for travel, activity participation, and satisfaction with their visit. Results linked to the Net Promoter Score and open-ended questions are also presented in this section.

### *Past Travel & Reasons for Current Trip*

Participants were asked to select a descriptor that best fit their previous travels to the Alberni Valley. Approximately 14% noted that they had driven through the Valley on their way to another destination, and 19% had never visited it. As shown in Table 3, approximately 17% had stopped for a short break or supplies en route to another destination, and 22% had had overnight stays in the past.

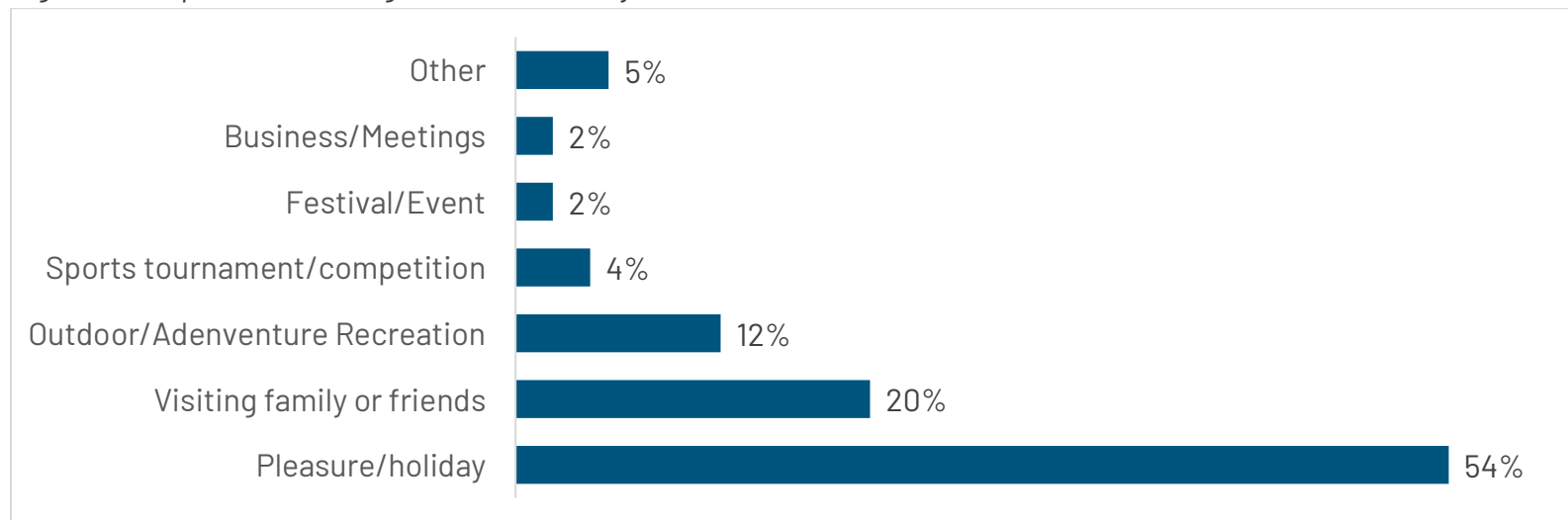
*Table 1: Past Travel in the Alberni Valley (n=92)*

Reason	Percentage
Never been before	19
Driven through	14
Stopped for supplies	3
Stopped for a short break	14
Day trip(s)	9
Overnight Stay(s)	22
My family lives here	16
I used to live here	3

More than half of the participants indicated that they visited the Alberni Valley for pleasure or a holiday (54%). Visiting family or friends (20%) and Outdoor Recreation or Adventure (12%) were the other most common reasons for visiting (Figure 4). *Other* reasons for travel included going to church, dropping people off, and grocery shopping.



Figure 4: Purpose for Visiting the Alberni Valley (n=93)



#### ***Importance of Different Destination Attributes and Attractions on Decision to Visit***

Using a five-point scale from *Not at All Important (1)* to *Very Important (5)*, participants were asked to rate how important a series of factors were to their decision to travel to the Alberni Valley. The most important destination attribute (Figure 5) was its overall atmosphere (60%), followed by how easy it was to access (52%). The last characteristic was surprising due to the road closure challenges; however, getting to the Alberni Valley is relatively easy for those living on the Island or already visiting.

The most important destination amenities was parks and open spaces (83%), and the least important for these visitors was boating and marinas (48%). Figure 6 illustrates that many individuals indicated camping opportunities (48%) were also important.

Figure 7 illustrates the activities that were most important for visitors: opportunities for outdoor recreation and adventure (71%), beaches and swimming (66%), and food and dining (68%). Fishing (17%) was lower than anticipated; however, this group of visitors is also harder to reach as they would have been out fishing when the face-to-face intercepts were done. The lack of importance for fishing (48%) and mountain bike trails (49%) may also be explained by the demographic characteristics of the visitors.

Figure 5: Importance of Destination Attributes on Decision to Visit (n=93)

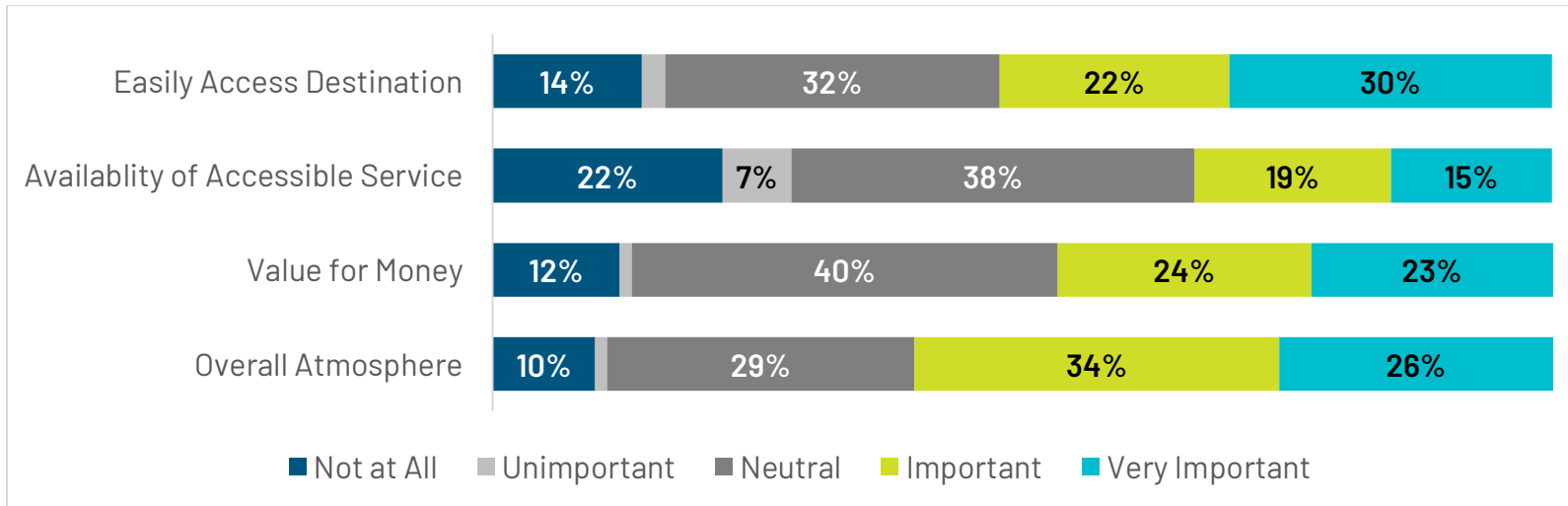


Figure 6: Importance of Destination Amenities on Decision to Visit (n=93)

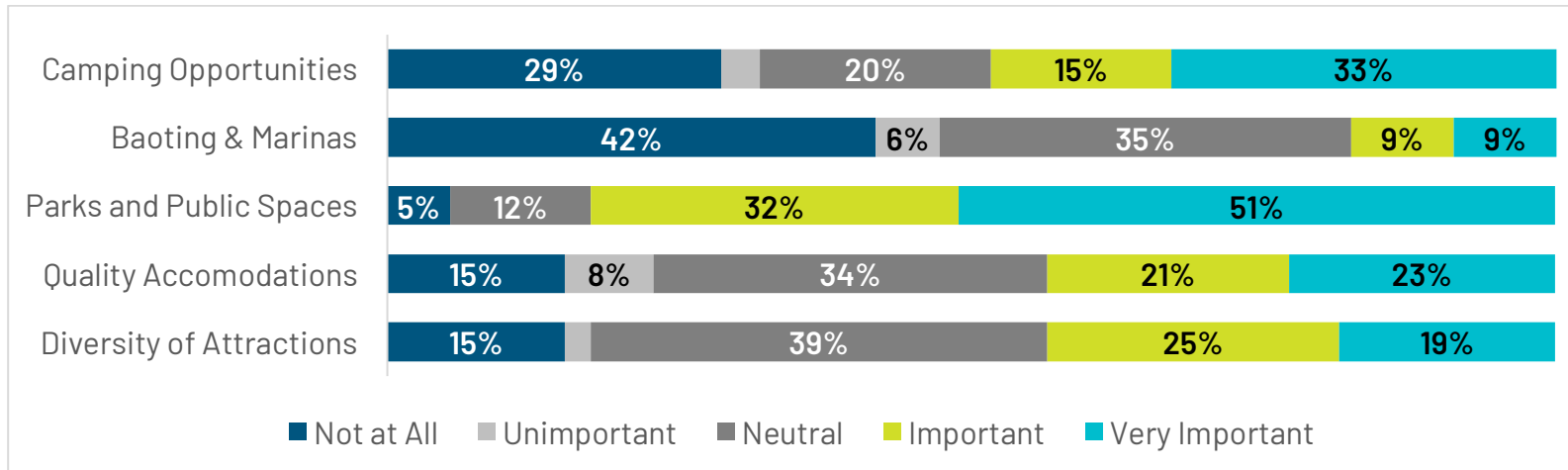
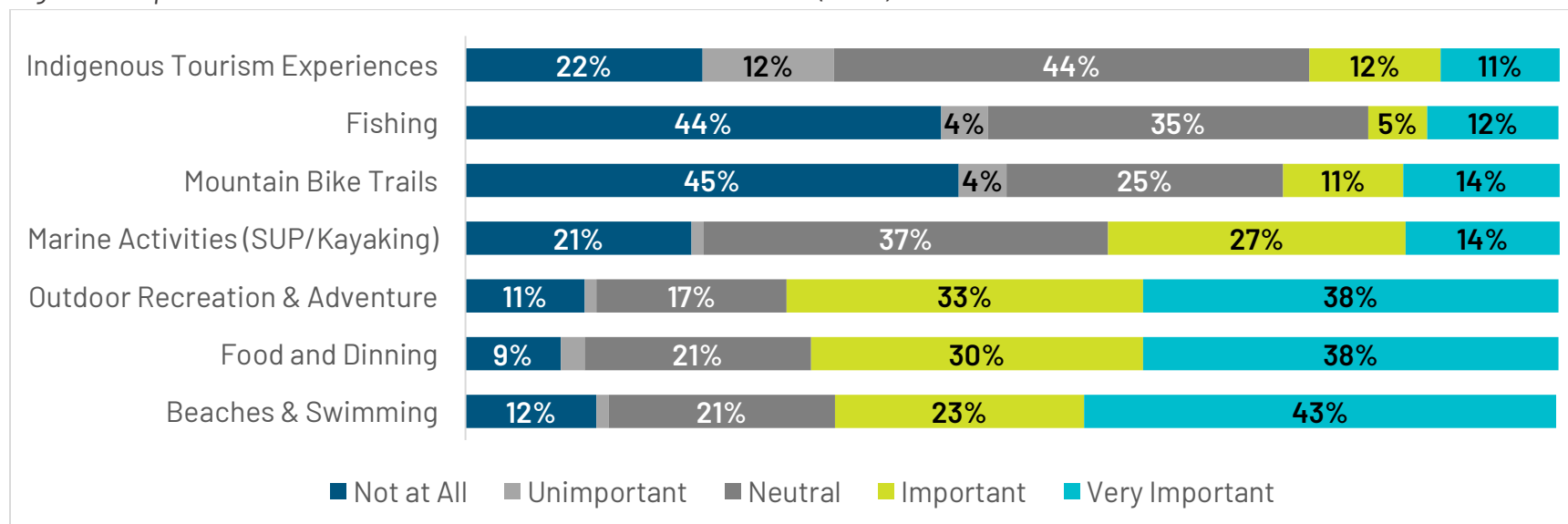


Figure 7: Importance of Destination Activities for Decision to Visit (n=93)



Seventy-one percent of participants spent at least one night in the Alberni Valley (Figure 8). Most visitors spent between 3-7 nights (31.2%). The most likely forms of accommodation used in the Alberni Valley were staying with friends or family (25%), at a campground or RV park (24%), or booking a short-term rental using Airbnb or VRBO (17%).

### Activity Participation by Participants

Participants were asked whether they participated in various activities while visiting the Alberni Valley. The results validate the importance of natural landscapes, parks, camping, and outdoor recreation, as the three activities with the highest level of participation were self-guided sightseeing (43%), hiking (42%), and beach activities (42%). However, those activities are also affordable and accessible, and participation can be more spontaneous, leading to increased engagement. In contrast, the activities in which less than 5% of visitors participated tend to be more expensive and often require more planning (boating/sailing, golfing, guided tours, scuba diving/snorkelling, sport fishing, bird watching, theatre, concerts, live performances). Figure 9 shows the activities in which at least 10% of visitors participated.

Figure 8: How Long Did Visitors Stay in the Alberni Valley (n=93)

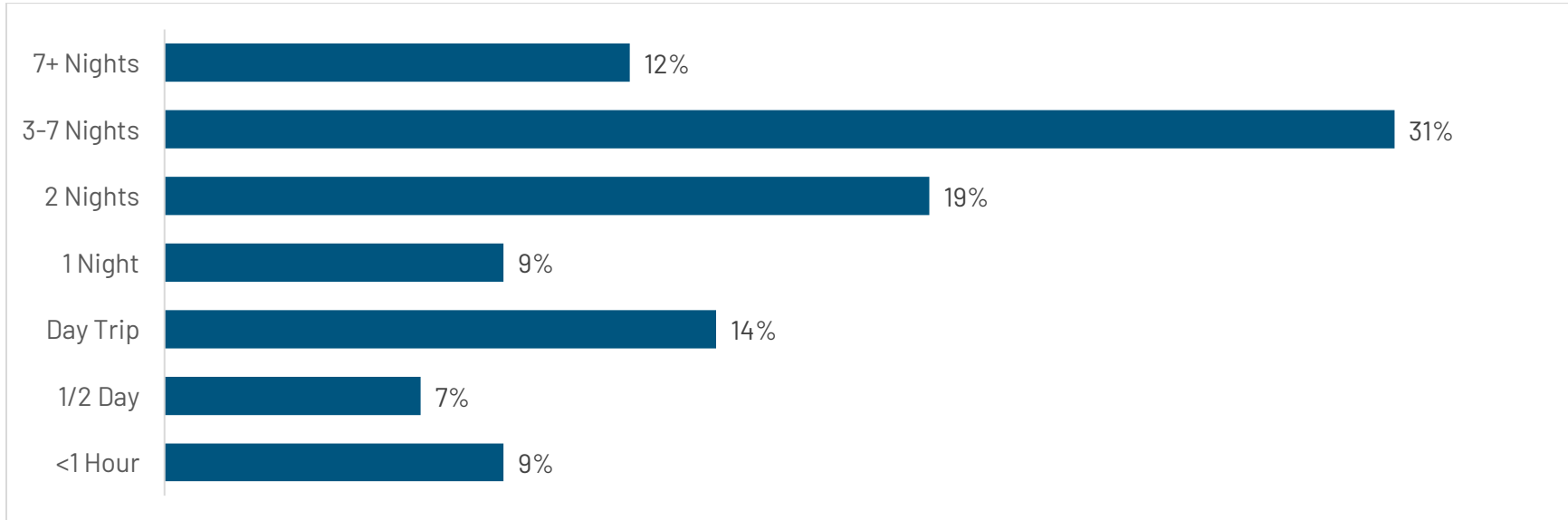
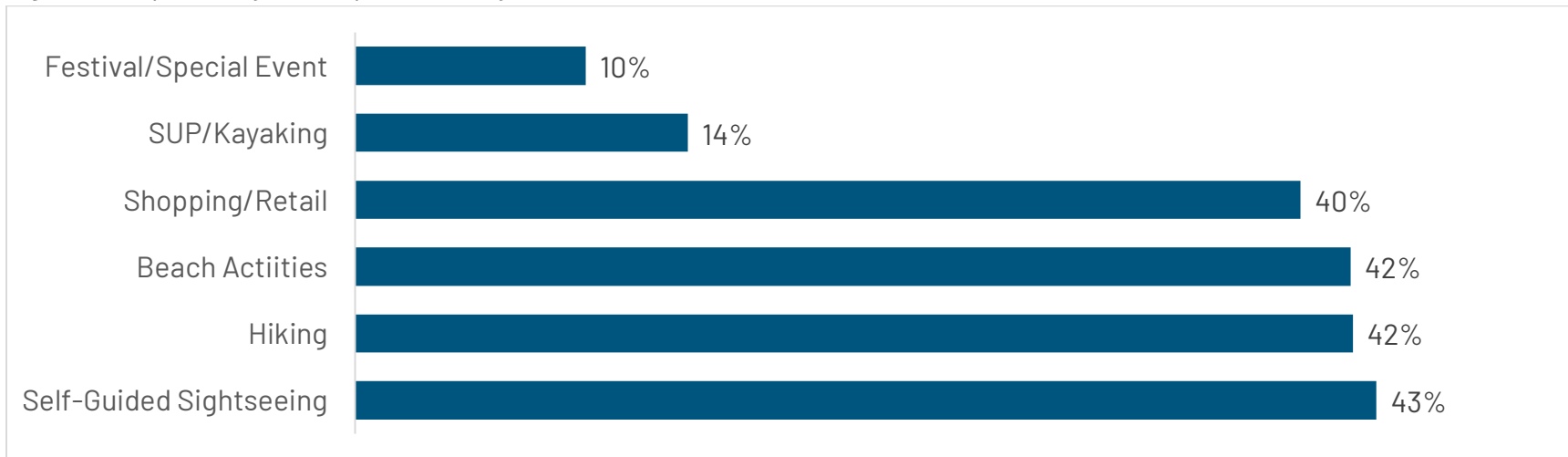


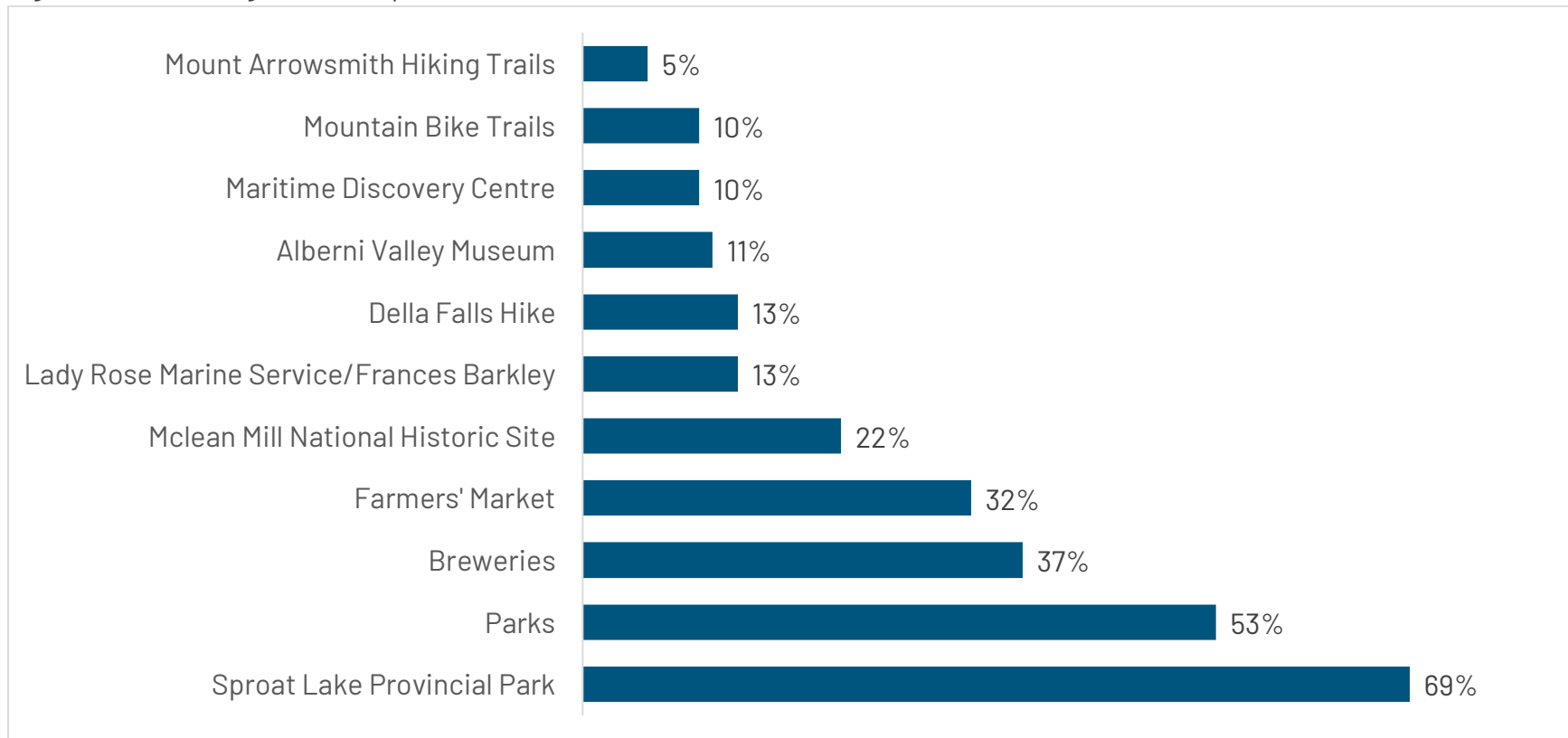
Figure 9: Top Activity Participation (%) by Visitors (n=93)



### Attractions Visited While in the Alberni Valley

Sproat Lake (69%), parks in general (53%), and breweries (37%) were the most visited attractions. Mount Arrowsmith hiking trails (5%), mountain bike trails (10%), and the Maritime Discovery Centre (10%) were the three least visited attractions (Figure 10).

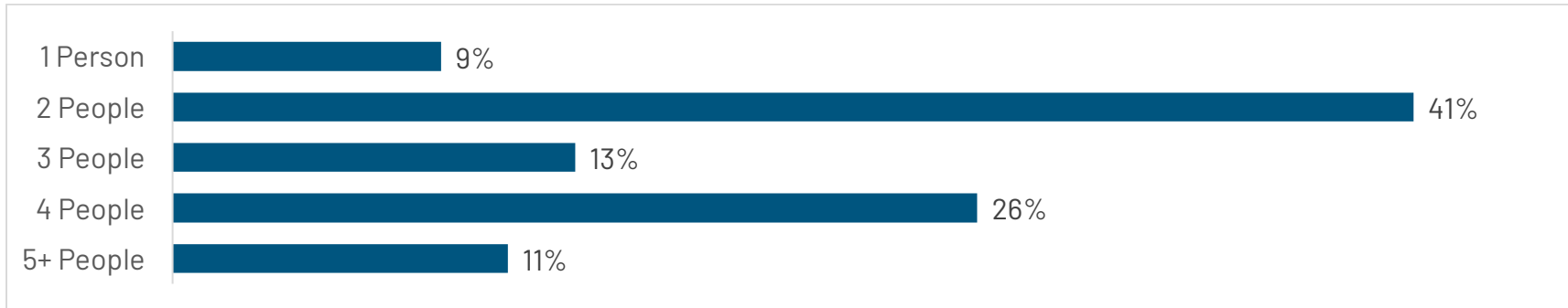
Figure 10: Percentage of Participants Who Visited Each Attraction (n=93)



### ***Travel Party Size and Composition***

The two most common travel party sizes were two people (41%) and four people (26%); however, 89% of all visitors were in travel parties of one to four people (Figure 11). Forty-one percent of all trips included at least one person aged 55 or older, and only 33% included children under 18.

Figure 11: Travel Party Size (n=91)



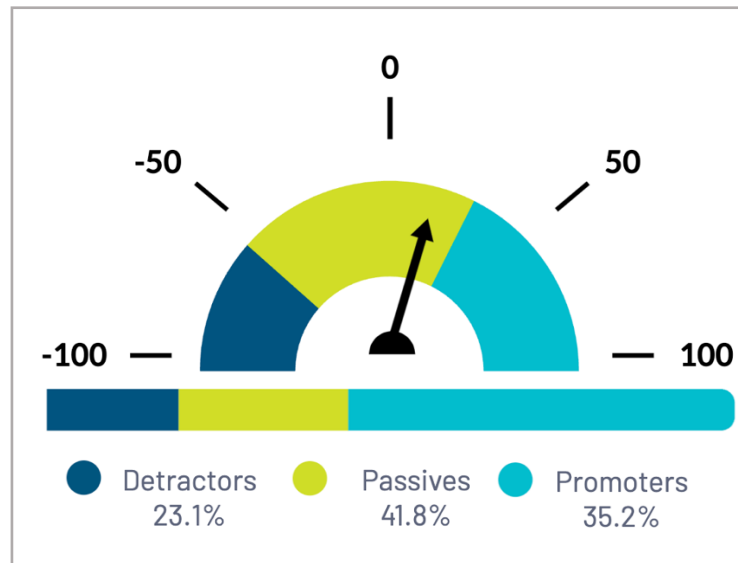
### ***Satisfaction with Accessible Services***

Twelve percent of participants (n=11) indicated that they or someone in their travel party required accessible services. While the sample size is too small for decision-making, the results provide insights into the satisfaction level of those requiring accessible services. Sixty percent were satisfied with food and beverage services, 55% with attractions, and 50% with shopping. Approximately half of those needing accessible travel services stayed at least one night (n=6), and 67% were satisfied with their accommodations.

### Net Promoter Score & Organized Comments

Study participants were asked how likely they were to recommend visiting the Alberni Valley to friends and colleagues; this measure is known as the Net Promoter Score (NPS)<sup>3</sup>. Scored on a scale of 0-10, participants are divided into three groups representing detractors (0-6), passives (7-8), and promoters (9-10). The NPS is calculated by subtracting the percentage of detractors from the percentage of promoters. During the summer and fall of 2023, the NPS for the Alberni Valley was 13 (Figure 12). While this score can be interpreted as *good*<sup>4</sup>, it is considerably lower than other destinations in the Central Island Region (e.g., Nanaimo, Cowichan, & Comox Valley). The best use of this score is as a benchmark for future comparisons and measures of improvement. As important as the score (and arguably more useful) are the comments that visitors gave to explain their rating.

Figure 12: Net Promoter Score (n=91)



<sup>3</sup> Visit [Destination BC](#) for an introduction to using Net Promoters Scores in tourism.

<sup>4</sup> [Qualtrics research organization](#) provides a general interpretation of NPS scores.

Participants were asked why they gave the score they did for the NPS question. Below are the comments provided, sorted by the NPS groups to which the participants belonged. Comments are presented as written, with only minor edits for typos and clarity. Promoters were keen on the outdoor environment, wildlife, and the people (Table 2). Passives were positive overall but were impacted by the road closures, and some felt more could be done (Table 3). Detractors spoke about driving through, not enough to do, or only outdoor activities available (Table 4).

*Table 2: Why Promoters Gave Scores of 9 or 10 (n=32)*

- 
- A hidden gem!
  - It has a great taco restaurant as well as a doughnut shop. A quiet town with all your requirements for a stopover before heading for your next adventure.
  - Beautiful and good resources for all needs
  - Because I love the small town atmosphere and easy access to Sproat lake beaches
  - Because I love this place 😊
  - Awesome place
  - Because it is very beautiful
  - Excellent town and friendly people!
  - It is so beautiful the view
  - I already do recommend it! I've been going for 27 years!
  - I always enjoy the day trips to the Alberni Valley. I cannot presently afford to spend a lot on trips, so mostly they end up as simple day trips, and Alberni is very enjoyable as a day drip.
  - It got me fit
  - Because it is a beautiful city with a lot of nature there. It has the perfect mix out of nature and city
  - It is lovely - wouldn't suggest until construction done
  - Good camping, Sproat lake
  - Grew up here, so many awesome activities to see and do.
  - It's an amazing area and I hope to come back soon.
  - It's a beautiful nostalgic valley



- Salmon jumping etc
  - Stamp falls salmon run exceeded expectations. Easy to access and so much to see.
  - Stunning outdoors, nice people, great experience
  - The island is a beautiful place
  - Love the port
  - Love it
  - We come here often from Ucluelet for shopping, vet, swimming. It's way more affordable and the lake is beautiful.
  - Nice place/ friendly people/warm lake
  - We love Canada and we love Vancouver Island
  - wonderful place to visit
- 

*Table 3: Why Passives Gave Scores of 7 or 8 (n=38)*

---

- Accessibility, great hiking, lots of water activities (swimming, sup, kayak, etc). Available services. Good restaurants/local breweries.
- Cameron Lake was closed due to rock scaling. It is a favourite destination of ours.
- Easy, cozy and comfortable
- Had good amenities
- It a great place to see
- Especially in summer, there are many outdoor activities close to amenities. I would have rated higher if the road in was more reliable.
- I gave this rating because port Alberni really is a beautiful place but I'm a strong believer in things can always be better,
  - The Orange bridge should be painted Orange and some recognition of the territorial land and the horrific things that happen at the residential school and the burials that were found there.
  - It'd be nice if they had an area at Sproat lake specifically for families with dogs, (crescent beach has a fenced area for families/tourists with dogs as well as Buntzen Lake.
- Good outdoor options close to town & good restaurants & brew pubs

- Great place to get away, yet travel can be delayed with the current road closures.
  - It's reputation as a "mill town" is a misnomer. So many things to explore and do, many are "hidden". (Hole in the Wall)
  - Lots of great restaurants and a cool parks by the water. Not a ton of sight seeing
  - Like the nature
  - Nice lake and good point to explore upper island. Fishing good
  - Nice and cute city
  - Outstanding geography, limited services. Overall pretty good.
  - The provincial park is great but there are lots of great prov park experiences
  - Pretty scenic
  - Passed through when travelling
  - The road being closed was a problem, fixed now which is great. I have not been hiking or mt. biking yet so need to do that so that I can recommend. The brewery we went to we have recommended to family though.
  - We were happy with our trip
  - It's a great place but we didn't stay long enough to know more
  - So far we've mainly been at the campsite and there are so many nice places in BC it's hard to know how much this trip will stand out.
  - Lots of sports, restaurants, beautiful scenery and Indigenous experiences
  - It's beautiful here.
  - Not enough signage giving information on things to do in the valley
  - Spent time at Sproat Lake very great experience
  - It's beautiful but the road closure is a major barrier.
  - Stamp falls, you see salmon and bears! Hooboy that is exciting!
  - We liked it...
  - We loved our stay in PA
  - The valley needs more family friendly activities and more sight-seeing activities. None of the hiking trails are all that well maintained and there's very few (If any?) places to rent bikes, kayaks, sups etc
-

Table 4: Why Detractors Gave Scores of 0 to 6 (n=21)

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Beautiful once you get there. Accessing the town is always a challenge. Worse now due to temporary road closures</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stop over town but is slowly changing to a destination stop. City needs to develop water front and also upgrade boat ramp situation</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Because I only have one friend</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dirty town, people begging for money on street corners.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Don't know what to do</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Don't know it very well</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Everyone I know has been there</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I didn't have time to explore the city.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I don't recommend</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Only for outdoor Activity appropriate</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In October , we found most of the places to be closed</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Looks like a depressed area</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nice lakes and hikes but not that much else going on. Very hard to get around without a car. Food is expensive, not many cultural events happening unless you like fish.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Port Alberni was just a through on the way from Tofino to go back to the mainland. We stopped and had lunch in Port Alberni on our way to Tofino - perhaps if there were a lot of quick nice places to stop we would have stayed a bit longer</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We didn't stay here just passing through with a stop off to swim in Sproat Lake and a vegan ice cream at Coombs county candy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We went through it fairly quickly en route to the ferry and just stopped at the ice cream shop - which was much better than expected actually!</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There is fishing and hiking</li> </ul>	

### Conclusions and Considerations

Most participants in this study stayed at least one night, most staying either for a weekend or up to a week. While most were travelling for pleasure, the visiting friends and family group also accounted for a strong portion of those who stayed longer. Those who stop briefly or who do not stop at all are the hardest participants to capture, so it is likely that they are

under-represented in the study results. However, these individuals represent a potential market as they would be the easiest to capture for a short stop or day trip.

Outdoor activities and attractions were the most popular for all visitors to the Alberni Valley. This fits with the Alberni-specific marketing and Vancouver Island in general. Food and beverage (particularly breweries) were also popular and can serve as reasons for drive-through and day visitors to spend more time and money in the Valley. This is supported by comments from the visitors who noted that they only stopped for lunch or an ice cream. However, it was also noted that visitors (particularly detractors) were unaware of other reasons for spending time in Port Alberni.

Most visitors to the Alberni Valley were classified as passives, meaning that while they liked their visit, they were unlikely to promote visiting. This group of visitors is the easiest to swing into the promoter category, but it requires targeted interventions to improve the issues identified. In the summer of 2023, the highway closures had an impactful, if limited duration, influence on visitors' perspectives; therefore, future seasons should see more positive responses from those visitors. Improved and increased service availability, signage, and clearer promotion of the diversity of experiences in the Valley are all places to start.

There is a clear connection between past residents and those visiting family members in the Valley. Targeted efforts to promote and incentivize "homecomings" have worked for other destinations and could provide an opportunity for off-season visitation. There are also hundreds of potential visitors travelling through to the West Coast. While this group may be hard to attract for overnight stays, there are opportunities to promote and incentivize short stays (2-3 hours) to enjoy the many attractions and businesses that do not exist on the Highway 4 corridor through Port Alberni.

### **Future Visitor Monitoring**

The ballot boxes distributed to local businesses were the most efficient form of recruiting participants. Future efforts to gain insights from visitors to the Valley should consider using this approach in partnership with the Chamber of Commerce and its members. With the right incentives and local business buy-in, Alberni Valley Tourism should be able to collect a robust list of potential participants at a lower cost. In addition, asking festival and event organizers to share the questionnaire links with their registered participants could also result in a more robust sample for analysis.