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Many happy Kiwi returns in the air

TOURISM leaders have set their sights on enticing more than 70,000 Kiwi tourists across the ditch as Cairns opens its gates and arms to its first dose of international tourism in 15 months.

The first Qantas direct flight from Auckland is due to land on Saturday afternoon with about 130 people on board, although those numbers are predicted to steadily climb alongside capacity with both Qantas and Air New Zealand taking on the route.

Cairns Airport chief executive Richard Barker said they would peak at seven weekly flights and an extra 2700 seats – far higher than pre-Covid figures – with hopes of making it a yearround route instead of seasonal.

New Zealanders looking to escape the winter chill and Far Northerners heading for ski slopes are set to pack out the planes with hopes visitor numbers will exceed the average 60,000-70,000 who usually head across the Tasman.

"We're pretty confident we can build visitor numbers back to and exceeding the peak," Mr Barker said.

"With the limitations on countries that Kiwis can travel to, we're expecting to take advantage of our position as a tropical oasis and be highly attractive to people who would have otherwise gone elsewhere."

Cairns' international terminal is prepped for the influx with new red and green zones, in keeping with emerging international standards, to keep passengers from different destinations segregated.

"There are minimal chances of mistakes," Mr Barker said.

He said he had hoped for an earlier opening of the travel bubble but getting the safety details right had taken time and was vital.

Tourism Tropical North Queensland boss Mark Olsen said Kiwi visitors typically spent \$280 per person per day with stays of about five days, which would be a welcome boost to the local economy.

Among those poised to hop on a flight is Cairns woman Leeahna Ratima, who has not seen her New Zealand family for almost two years.

Younger sister Grace will fly to Cairns on Friday before the siblings jet back two weeks later.

"I'm counting down the days," the 21-year-old trainee beauty therapist said. "I've missed out on a lot of celebrations and weddings.

"We've got FaceTime and we still keep in contact but it's not the same."

Ms Ratima's family were longtime Cairns residents but moved back to New Zealand prior to the pandemic, while she decided to stay on to live independently and study.

She said during her trip back to her hometown Tokoroa, which is near Rotorua on the North Island, she was most looking forward to family catch-ups, food and spending time with her elderly grandmother.

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