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# Expected Versus Experienced Liveability for Amenity Migrants in Cairns, Australia: The Grass is not Always Greener in the Tropics

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores Australian amenity migrants' experiences in Cairns, comparing expectations of a tropical paradise with lived realities. Using episodic narrative interviews and Importance-Performance Analysis of liveability indicators, it uncovers discrepancies between idealised imaginaries and actual experiences. Key concerns include housing, safety, jobs, living costs, and challenges in building community connections. The findings highlight the gap between the tropical paradise image attracting migrants and liveability challenges of a regional city. This mixed-methods approach offers a transferable tool for examining expectation-experience gaps in amenity destinations, providing insights for policymakers to address liveability issues and build communities that meet diverse residents' aspirations.

## 摘要

本研究探讨了澳大利亚舒适移民在凯恩斯的经历，将对热带天堂的期望与现实生活进行了比较。通过情节叙事访谈和宜居性指标的重要性表现分析，揭示了理想化想象与实际体验之间的差异。主要关注的问题包括住房、安全、工作、生活成本以及建立社区联系的挑战。研究结果突显了吸引移民的热带天堂形象与地区城市宜居性挑战之间的差距。这种混合方法为检查舒适目的地的期望与体验差距提供了一种可转移的工具，为政策制定者解决宜居性问题和建设满足不同居民愿望的社区提供见解。

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## 1. Introduction

The allure of tropical landscapes and the return to nature in times of crisis are both rooted in historic perceptions of places with natural amenities as “refuge” (Arnold 2000, Hilmi and Burbi 2016). This fascination with the tropics can be traced back to European colonialism and the Age of Exploration, when early European explorers often described tropical regions in hyperbolic terms, depicting them as abundant Edens overflowing with natural riches (Grove 1996). This trope was further solidified in art, literature, and travel writing of the 17th-19th centuries, which commonly portrayed tropical areas as exotic utopias epitomising natural splendour and primal innocence (Nixon 2011). The legacy of this tropical idealisation has made tropical regions attractive

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destinations for amenity migrants seeking an enhanced quality of life in a warm and seemingly pristine natural setting (see Gosnell and Abrams 2011, Glorioso and Moss 2012).

Amenity migrants, drawn by the allure of natural or cultural amenities (Moss 2006), often hold idealised perceptions of tropical regions that may not align with reality (Baldacchino 2019, Law 2019). These perceptions reflect a broader nostalgia and yearning for a different future (Halfacree and Boyle 1993), a form of counterurbanisation or escape from life in intensely urbanising and suburbanising areas (Buckle and Osbaldiston 2022). Local authorities often valorise and market tropical landscapes and lifestyles for their idyllic or exotic qualities (see Short 2006, Wilke 2015), shaping the expectations of amenity migrants. These imagined futures and perceived amenities create a dynamic interplay between images of urban and regional/rural spaces (Argent *et al.* 2010), influencing the decision-making process of potential migrants. Researchers have explored amenity migration through concepts such as the “rural idyll”, which romanticises migrant destinations as simpler and happier, and by examining various “pull factors” like lower costs of living (Bjelland *et al.* 2006, Kearney 2006). However, there remains a gap in understanding how these pre-migration perceptions align with the actual experiences of amenity migrants after relocation.

In the Australian context, amenity migration has reached its zenith since 2018, with net migration to regional areas surging (Commonwealth Bank of Australia & Regional Australia Institute 2023). This trend is often popularised by media-friendly labels such as “sea change” (see Curry *et al.* 2001, Osbaldiston 2012) or “tree change” (see Ragusa 2010), which describe the movement of Australian amenity migrants from the hustle and bustle of big cities to “high amenity coastal areas” (Gurran and Blakely 2007) or regional areas with better access to nature. These destinations, often far from metropolitan cities (Burnley and Murphy 2004), usually promise superior untouched amenities, both natural and cultural (Moss *et al.* 2009), as well as attractive housing and lifestyle options (Burnley and Murphy 2004). These promised superior amenities can shape potential migrants’ expectations of a place.

One way to enhance our understanding of the expectations of amenity migrants and their post-migration experiences is through a more nuanced understanding of liveability. According to the Major Cities Unit (2010), “liveable cities are socially inclusive, affordable, accessible, healthy, safe, and resilient to the impacts of climate change. They have attractive built and natural environments. Liveable cities provide choice and opportunity for people to live their lives and raise their families to their fullest potential.” However, the concept of liveability remains underexplored in amenity migration literature despite its crucial role in shaping migrants’ experiences. By integrating liveability into amenity migration studies, we aim to better understand the discrepancies between migrants’ pre-relocation expectations and post-migration experiences. This approach helps us address the inconsistencies between expected and experienced liveability among amenity migrants in Cairns.

Following the introduction, a literature review synthesises existing research on amenity migration and liveability. After an overview of Cairns as a tropical destination, the methodology section details the research design and data collection methods. The analysis section utilises Importance-Performance Analysis (IPA), a strategic tool used to assess the importance and performance of various attributes across different fields, to map divergences in liveability, covering critical issues such as housing affordability and safety. IPA has never been used in migration or liveability studies. The discussion outlines research implications and provides policy and planning suggestions to address the findings. The conclusion proposes avenues for future research and summarises key insights.

## 2. Liveability in the Context of Amenity Migration

Amenity migration refers to the movement of people to places perceived to offer a higher quality of life, often driven by natural or cultural amenities (Moss 2009). The search for a better lifestyle and improved well-being is at the core of this phenomenon. Cost of living is frequently cited as the primary facilitator for many amenity migrants (Burnley and Murphy 2004, Cebula 2005, Moss 2009), while other influential factors such as economic opportunities (Glorioso and Moss 2011) and

perceived climate change threats (Osboldiston *et al.* 2020) also play a role. Interestingly, these factors align with key issues raised in liveability literature.

Liveability, a multi-faceted concept encompassing social, physical, and economic characteristics, contributes to quality of life and well-being at both individual and community levels (Baldwin and Stafford 2019). Liveability indicators are measurable attributes used to assess and compare the quality of life and well-being in different locations. These indicators include factors such as crime rates, access to public transportation, housing affordability, job opportunities, safety, health services accessibility, air quality, mobility, walkability, open public spaces, diverse food and alcohol environments, social cohesion, and local democracy (Badland *et al.* 2014, Lowe 2015 Arundel *et al.* 2017.). In Australia, liveability is often seen as a competitive advantage among cities, conceptualised as the extent to which a locale fosters quality of life, health, and well-being. Australian cities, known for their high amenities, accessibility, and environmental sustainability, are often depicted as epitomes of liveability, offering a combination of safety, affordability, and aesthetic appeal that attracts amenity migrants.

The literature paints a picture of liveability as a multifaceted concept intricately interwoven with a range of social, physical, and economic characteristics that collectively contribute to the quality of life in a location (Howley *et al.* 2009). These characteristics play a crucial role in determining the liveability of a place and promoting healthy, safe, and harmonious living environments. Overall, liveability is a complex and multidimensional concept that requires careful consideration of various factors to create attractive and desirable living spaces.

Despite the growing body of research on amenity migration and liveability, discussions on these topics often occur in parallel rather than in dialogue. This disconnect may stem from the fact that amenity migration literature traditionally focuses on movement towards regional or rural areas, whereas liveability factors are typically considered in the context of urban environments. There is a significant gap in understanding how these two concepts intersect, particularly in the context of non-metropolitan urban areas, small towns, and rural areas. This gap calls for a more integrated approach that considers liveability in relation to amenity migration, especially in light of the discrepancies between migrants' expectations and lived experiences in such destinations, including Cairns.

### 3. Cairns as Tropical Destination

Cairns is a tropical city located in Far North Queensland, Australia. Surrounded by world heritage-listed reefs and rainforests, Cairns has a distinctive regional identity shaped by its isolation, small size, and abundance of natural amenities. Cairns' proximity to the Great Barrier Reef and tropical rainforest hinterland has made tourism the backbone of its economy and multicultural social fabric since its founding in the 1870s (Prideaux *et al.* 2008). Today, Cairns is popularly known for its youthful, transient population and relaxed tropical lifestyle. Interestingly, many of the migrants interviewed for this research had initially experienced Cairns as tourists, which subsequently influenced their decision to relocate, highlighting the city's dual appeal as both a tourist destination and a potential home.

Cairns has experienced steady population growth over the past two decades, with an estimated resident population of 172,272 as of June 2022 (Cairns Regional Council *n.d.*). Between 2016 and 2021, the population increased by 10,042 (6.4%), representing an average annual growth rate of 1.25%. The age profile of Cairns is young when compared to the broader Regional Queensland area, with higher proportions of children, teenagers, and young adults. The migration patterns show the largest net gains are from interstate, especially New South Wales and Victoria. The 25-to 34-year-old age group had the highest net migration gain between 2016-2021, indicating the appeal of Cairns to young workforce entrants and those establishing families (Cairns Regional Council 2021).

Cairns is usually portrayed as an idyllic holiday haven defined by the Great Barrier Reef, secluded beaches, and exotic rainforests. Tourism marketing focuses on outdoor adventures and showcases the region's natural splendour (Figure 1). The combination of large natural attractions, such as the



**Figure 1.** Tourism Tropical North Queensland. (2023). Cairns destination brochures.

Great Barrier Reef and UNESCO-listed rainforests, alongside urban facilities enhance the city’s desirability as a destination that integrates the natural and urban (referred to as “tropical urbanism”, see Law and Musso 2020). Moreover, Cairns is a modern small city with a growing art scene and new infrastructure projects that are reshaping the urban landscape (Dadpour and Law 2022). This cosmopolitan dimension enhances the image of Cairns as a gateway to the reef and tropical hinterlands, improving its liveability.

Despite the natural amenities that enhance Cairns’ liveability, the city faces challenges related to its small size and geographic isolation, such as socioeconomic disadvantage, housing stress, and petty crime rates surpassing those in major Australian cities (Queensland Government Statistician’s Office 2022). The city’s heavy reliance on tourism also limits its economic diversity, although Cairns offers high-quality infrastructure, services, cultural institutions, and lifestyle offerings comparable to larger urban centres. The influx of amenity migrants to small, tropical cities like Cairns, known for their natural beauty but strained by the incoming population’s demands, highlights the need for a more nuanced understanding of how liveability factors shape the expectations and experiences of amenity migrants in non-metropolitan settings. Addressing this gap would provide valuable insights for policymakers and planners seeking to create liveable communities that meet the needs and aspirations of both long-term residents and amenity migrants.

#### 4. Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative data from episodic narrative interviews with 27 recent migrants to Cairns and quantitative data from participants ranking the importance and performance of 32 liveability indicators derived from the literature. Participants were recruited using purposive sampling through local Cairns groups on social media, the local radio station, and the James Cook University website and newsletter, as well as snowball sampling to identify additional participants. The James Cook University ethics committee granted research ethics approval, and participant anonymity was maintained by removing personal identifiers during analysis and reporting and replacing real names with pseudonyms.

To capture the perspectives of recent amenity migrants, specific inclusion criteria were established. Only those who had relocated to Cairns from elsewhere in Australia within the past 5 years (between 2016–2021), predominantly for natural and lifestyle-related amenities (Matarrita-Cascante *et al.* 2017), were included in the sample. This focus on recent migrants allowed for a targeted exploration of the expectations and experiences of those who had recently made the decision to move to Cairns, with experiences still fresh in their minds. The 5-year timeframe provided a large enough pool of potential participants while ensuring a relatively recent transition, as long-term residents may have difficulty accurately recalling their initial motivation and expectations, and recent migrants are best able to highlight current gaps between expectations and on-the-ground realities. By concentrating on migration within Australia, the study controlled for certain variables, as all participants were familiar with Australian cities, culture, and norms, in contrast to international migrants who may face additional adaptation challenges due to cultural and linguistic differences. These inclusion criteria aimed to obtain a more homogeneous sample, reducing the influence of confounding factors and enabling a clearer understanding of the liveability perceptions and experiences of recent Australian amenity migrants in Cairns.

The sample included a diverse range of ages and backgrounds. Over 90% had previously relocated to other Australian cities and were drawn to Cairns for its natural amenities, perceived idyllic lifestyle, or employment opportunities. As shown in Table 1, most participants were between 26–45 years old, highly educated, and employed either full- or part-time. Specifically, 63% were female, 33% male, and 4% other. About 30% were in the 26–35 age group, and over half were 26–45 years old. Additionally, 63% had attained a university degree, with 41% holding a master’s degree or higher. Finally, 67% were employed either full-time or part-time.

A mixed-method approach was used to examine discrepancies between participants’ pre-migration image of Cairns and their post-migration experiential image. Episodic narrative interviews (ENI) were employed to gather these experiential insights, focusing on extracting specific migration narratives and spatial stories while respecting participants’ subjective meanings (Mueller 2019). ENI uses open-ended questions and a flexible semi-structured interview guide to allow participants to tell stories on their own terms, emphasising the elicitation of “small stories” (Georgakopoulou 2006) – vignettes, anecdotes, and episodes that provide insight into participants’ experiences, relationships, values, and identity. Participants were prompted to describe their migration experience, detailing their place of origin, perceptions of liveability in both their previous location and Cairns, and their understanding of the concept of liveability. Amenity maps of Cairns were provided during interviews to help contextualise narratives and offer insights into how people perceive, engage with, and form attachments to their surroundings.

At the conclusion of each interview participants were asked to rank the importance and performance of 32 liveability indicators – Access to Professional Business Services, Access to

**Table 1.** Participant Demographics.

	Sample Percentages
Gender	
Female	63%
Male	33%
Other	4%
Age Group	
26–35 years	30%
36–45 years	52%
+45 years	18%
Education	
Tertiary Education (university or college)	63%
High School Certificate (HSC)	37%
Employment	
Employed	67%
Unemployed	33%



Support Services, Art & Culture, Career Development, Childcare, Density, Dine & Wine, Diversity, Education, Employment, Health, Housing, Inclusion, Information Access, Internet and Mobile Connection, Urban Landscape, Lifestyle, Living Cost, Natural Environment, Parks & Open Spaces, Physical Activities, Public Transport, Recreation & Entertainment, Road Infrastructure, Safety & Crime, Sense of Belonging, Shopping, Sustainability, Training, Volunteering, Walkability, Workplace Collaboration. These indicators were derived from existing literature and assessed via a Likert-scale survey. Participants ranked these indicators based on their perceived importance to their own circumstances and their experiences of everyday life in Cairns post-migration.

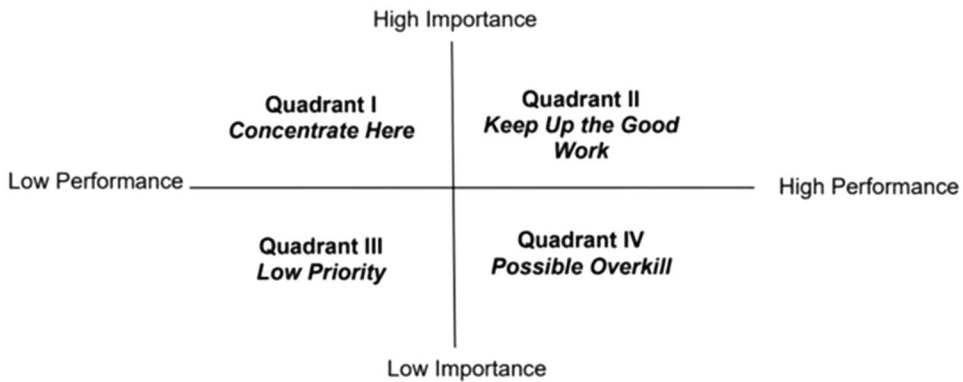
## 5. Data Analysis

An inductive approach was employed to identify key themes emerging from the interview transcripts, allowing the data to drive the analysis rather than imposing predetermined categories. This approach is particularly useful when exploring complex or understudied phenomena, as it enables the discovery of new insights and ideas that may not have been anticipated by the researcher. The process began with open coding, where meaningful segments of text were identified and assigned codes or labels that captured their essence or meaning. As the coding progressed, patterns and relationships among the codes were recognised, leading to the categorisation of similar codes into sub-themes that represented broader concepts or ideas. NVivo Pro (QSR) TM 11.0 was used to facilitate the thematic coding process as its ability to create nodes, apply codes, and visualise relationships between themes aided in uncovering patterns in how participants discussed their expectations and experiences of liveability in Cairns (Vaismoradi *et al.* 2013).

After identifying the key themes, they were compared to the 32 liveability indicators derived from the existing literature on amenity migration and liveability. These indicators were assessed via a Likert-scale survey, which provided a quantitative measure of the participants' expectations and experiences. The comparison between the inductively derived themes and the literature-based indicators served to ensure consistency and alignment between the qualitative and quantitative components of the study. This process helped to validate the choice of indicators used in the survey and demonstrated the relevance of the identified themes to the broader academic discourse on amenity migration and liveability. SPSS (IBM)TM version 24 was then used to inform an Importance-Performance Analysis to assess liveability expectations and experiences among participants.

Importance-Performance Analysis (IPA) is a versatile tool that has been adapted and applied across various fields to understand needs and preferences and prioritise provision strategies (Riviezzo *et al.* 2009, Sever 2015). Its applications span diverse sectors, including tourism and hospitality (e.g. Boley *et al.* 2017), health care (e.g. Lee 2015), education (e.g. McLeay *et al.* 2017), ecosystem services (e.g. Hua and Chen 2019), protected area management (e.g. Tonge and Moore 2007), leisure and recreation (e.g. Oh 2001), water conservation (e.g. Warner *et al.* 2016), and government services (e.g. Seng Wong *et al.* 2011). Urban scholars have employed Importance-Performance Analysis (IPA) to assess various aspects of urban life, including city vitality and viability (Riviezzo *et al.* 2009), dwellers' satisfaction with urban services (Das *et al.* 2022), sustainability in cities (Lee and Xue 2021), quality of life among public housing residents (Vialita and Rahmawati 2020), and intervention priorities for improving urban and peri-urban socio-ecohydrological systems (Danie-laini *et al.* 2019). Adapting IPA in this study provides a novel approach to understanding disparities between liveability expectations and experiences among amenity migrants in Cairns.

In the IPA analysis for this study, all ranking lists produced by participants were combined using the TopKLists R package. This process generated a final aggregated ranking of 32 liveability indicators, considering both their importance and performance. The aggregation was performed using the rank aggregation (RA) method (Li *et al.* 2019), which ensures a robust and reliable representation of the collective preferences and experiences of the participants. To visualise the results, the means of importance and performance for each indicator were plotted on an IPA matrix



**Figure 2.** IPA Traditional Matrix.

using an XY Scatter Chart, as shown in [Figure 2](#). The matrix is divided into four quadrants, each representing a different combination of importance and performance levels (Azzopardi and Nash 2013), allowing for a clear understanding of the areas where resources should be allocated to maximise satisfaction and retention of amenity migrants.

## 6. Findings: Key Liveability Concerns

Our ENI findings show that participants largely held positive perceptions of Cairns as an idyllic tropical destination with abundant natural amenities, outdoor recreation, and a relaxing lifestyle. One participant expressed their love for the city, saying, “I love Cairns. I do love the climate because I don’t really like the cold weather. And I love the beauty of the place. I love plants. Plants are my thing and I love all the tropical plants. You know, we’ve got the Botanic Gardens, and we’re living between the mountains and the sea. And there’s all these bushwalks everywhere. And it’s just beautiful to look at, isn’t it?” These initial impressions of Cairns as a beautiful and serene place were common among many participants.

Many were drawn by the idealised image of Cairns as a tropical paradise. Some imagined integrating into a cohesive local community. One participant shared their experience of visiting Cairns from Sydney: “We travelled to Cairns from Sydney for a long weekend, and I just fell in love [...] I remember thinking, this feels like home. I just had this lightbulb moment. And I thought this is weird. I feel like I’ve come home to something.” The sense of belonging and connection to Cairns was a strong motivator for many participants to make the move.

However, for many, the reality of life in Cairns did not match the imagination of a tropical paradise. One participant reflected on their initial impression and subsequent experience: “I appreciated the peaceful lifestyle of the area when we first visited Cairns for a holiday [...] but after living here for a few years, I can now say that it’s a bit backwards.” After relocating, participants encountered unanticipated challenges such as finding affordable housing, securing stable employment, feeling socially included, and managing costs of living. Crime and safety concerns also emerged during interviews. As one participant notes: “my impression was housing is cheaper here compared to bigger cities, but probably the biggest thing is just lack of housing at the moment” These narratives highlight the discrepancy between the idealised expectations and the lived experiences of liveability in Cairns. The IPA findings confirm the disparities between the idyllic imagery of Cairns as a tropical paradise and the everyday experiences of amenity migrants in the city. [Table 2](#) shows the positioning of the 32 liveability factors in the IPA matrix based on the expectations and experiences of our participants.

[Table 2](#) is sorted into different IPA Quadrants that are graphically presented in the IPA matrix ([Figure 3](#)). This matrix helps to map key gaps between liveability expectations and experiences,

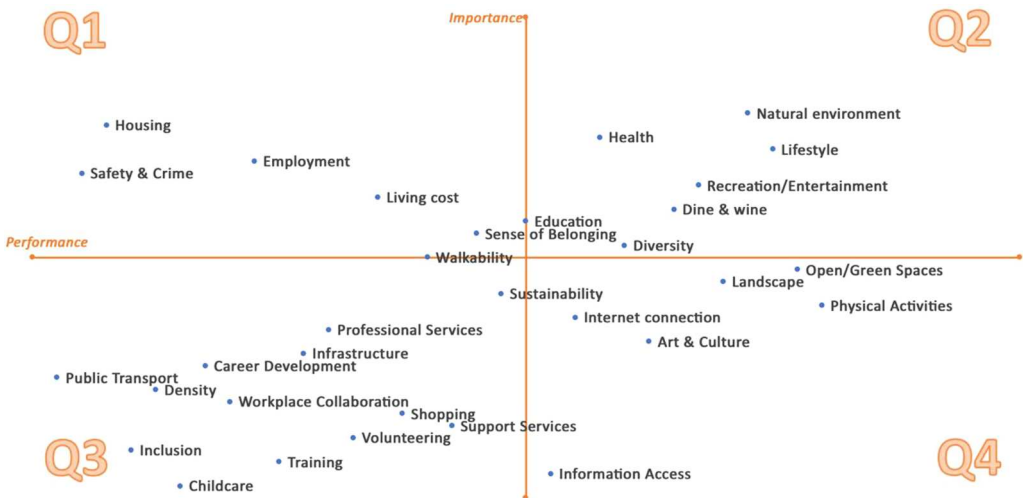


**Table 2.** The 32 liveability indicators and their IPA Quadrant.

Q1 liveability indicators	Q2 liveability indicators	Q3 liveability indicators	Q4 liveability indicators
Employment	Dine & Wine	Career Development	Art & Culture
Housing	Diversity	Childcare	Information Access
Living Costs	Health Services	Density	Internet Connection
Safety & Crime	Lifestyle	Inclusion	Landscape
Sense of Belonging	Natural Environment	Professional Business Services	Open Spaces
Education	Physical Activities	Public Transport	
Walkability	Recreation/Entertainment	Road Infrastructure	
		Shopping	
		Support Services	
		Sustainability	
		Training	
		Volunteering	
		Workplace Collaboration	

offering insights into areas where Cairns may underperform concerning quality of life indicators that newcomers value. Quadrant I of the matrix identifies areas with high importance but low performance. Quadrant II, on the other hand, consists of indicators with both high importance and high performance, which present opportunities for Cairns to maintain or enhance its competitive advantage. These strengths include the natural environment, lifestyle, diversity, health services, and a vibrant dining scene, which attract amenity migrants from across Australia. Quadrant III includes low-priority indicators that exhibit low performance, representing minor weaknesses that do not necessitate additional effort. In Cairns, these factors are volunteering opportunities, shopping, and public transport. Lastly, Quadrant IV contains indicators characterised by low importance and high performance, suggesting that further allocation of resources to these areas would be excessive and better utilised elsewhere.

Some indicators, such as employment, living costs, and education, were expected to rank high in importance, given their frequent mention in prior studies as critical factors influencing migration decisions and the perceived liveability of a location. However, high importance of some other indicators, like sense of belonging, emerged as more surprising. While often overlooked in traditional liveability studies (Khorrami et al. 2020), the prominence of sense of belonging in our findings underscores the importance of social and emotional ties in migrants’ perceptions of a place. It suggests that beyond tangible amenities and services, the intangible feelings of acceptance,



**Figure 3.** Importance-Performance Analysis of Cairns’ Liveability Indicators.

integration, and community connection play a pivotal role in shaping the liveability experiences of amenity migrants in Cairns.

## 7. Discussion

In this study, we focus our discussion on the five indicators that fell into Quadrant I of the IPA matrix, representing areas of high importance but very low performance: housing, employment, safety and crime, living costs, and a sense of belonging. These indicators are critical in shaping the liveability experiences of amenity migrants in Cairns, and their underperformance highlights significant gaps between expectations and reality. Housing and living costs are fundamental considerations for migrants when choosing a destination, and their poor performance in Cairns can significantly impact the attractiveness of the city to potential newcomers. Similarly, employment opportunities and safety are crucial factors that influence the decision to migrate and the overall quality of life in the new location. The prominence of sense of belonging in Quadrant I underscores the importance of social and emotional ties in migrants' perceptions of a place, suggesting that beyond tangible amenities and services, the intangible feelings of acceptance, integration, and community connection play a pivotal role in shaping the liveability experiences of amenity migrants in Cairns. While often overlooked in traditional liveability studies (Khorrami *et al.* 2020), our findings highlight the essential role of sense of belonging for the successful integration of migrants into the local community and their long-term retention in the area. By focusing on these five indicators that performed poorly despite their high importance, we aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of the most pressing liveability challenges faced by amenity migrants in Cairns and offer targeted recommendations for improving the city's performance in these critical areas.

### 7.1. Housing Affordability and Availability

The findings of this study highlight the critical role of housing affordability and availability in shaping the experiences and decision-making processes of migrants in Cairns. Consistent with previous research (Zheng *et al.* 2020), securing affordable and stable housing emerged as a fundamental prerequisite for migrants to establish themselves, access employment and services, and integrate into the community. The narratives from the interviews underscore the disparity between migrants' expectations and experiences regarding housing costs and availability in Cairns, mirroring the challenges faced by migrants in other Australian contexts such as Sydney, Melbourne, and amenity destinations like Castlemaine (Costello 2009, Birrell and Healy 2018).

Cairns' housing market presented unanticipated obstacles for many participants, despite their initial hopes and dreams. One participant expressed their original intention, stating, "Our goal was to buy property and everything, that's what attracted us to Cairns: property prices." However, the allure of affordable housing quickly faded as they faced the harsh realities of steep rental prices and a scarcity of available properties. The acute housing shortage in Cairns, particularly in terms of housing diversity (Gibson and Law 2022), poses significant barriers for migrants seeking to actualise their aspirations for home ownership or secure rental homes within their budgets.

Numerous migrants encounter difficulties when trying to enter Cairns' housing market, frequently having to resort to short-term housing solutions until they can secure a permanent place to call home. One participant, along with their young family, had to reside in a caravan park within the city for several weeks before eventually moving into a villa. As evidenced by the participants' accounts, unaffordable and scarce housing options create major hardships, exposing migrants to risks of homelessness, overcrowded housing, excessive living costs, and disconnection from the community. These findings align with the broader literature on the impact of housing affordability and availability on migrant settlement and well-being (Teixeira and Li 2015, Ziersch *et al.* 2017).

The sizable housing gap in Cairns, as identified in the IPA, has profound implications for migrant retention and the city's ability to attract and sustain a diverse population. Without

adequate and affordable housing options, migrants may be compelled to leave the city in search of more favourable living conditions, potentially undermining the social and economic benefits of amenity migration for the local community (Gosnell and Abrams 2011). As one participant put it: “So we thought well, you know, we can sit here and wait for things to get better, or we go somewhere else”. As such, addressing the housing challenges faced by migrants should be a key priority for policymakers and community stakeholders in Cairns. Innovative housing solutions, such as community-led housing initiatives or collaborative housing models (Czischke and Huisman 2018) may offer more affordable and diverse housing options for migrants in Cairns and other regional destinations.

### **7.2. Neighbourhood Safety and Crime Rates**

Our findings reveal that neighbourhood safety and crime rates in Cairns vary significantly, with some areas of the city perceived as less safe than others. Participants’ narratives highlight the uneven distribution of safety across the city, largely dependent on the specific neighbourhood. This aligns with previous research on the varied nature of safety perceptions in various contexts (George 2003). The lived experiences of crime and safety in Cairns present a more complex picture than the idealised image of an idyllic tropical paradise. Certain areas of Cairns, particularly the city centre, provoke continuous concern and feelings of insecurity among participants, especially after dark. This sentiment echoes prior research on violence and crime hotspots in Cairns (Botterill *et al.* 2013). The absence of safety has a profound impact on migrants’ overall experiences, influencing their daily routines, neighbourhood selection, and overall sense of security, well-being and quality of life (Lorenc *et al.* 2012).

The conflicting experiences and perceptions of safety among participants reflect Cairns’ fragmentation and deep socio-spatial division. Participants’ avoidance of suburbs “starting with M or W,” which are well-known multicultural suburbs with poor socio-economic outcomes, highlights the clear social boundaries that demarcate “safe” and “unsafe” areas. This territorial stigmatisation marginalises entire neighbourhoods, despite most having both safe and unsafe pockets, aligning with research on the spatial concentration of disadvantage and its impact on residents’ experiences and perceptions of safety (Leerkes and Bernasco 2010). The uneven geography of safety in Cairns shapes the urban landscape and reveals the complex interplay between space, power, and inequality in shaping liveability in this supposedly idyllic tropical setting. Balancing amenity richness and accessibility with density and land use diversity can promote safer and healthier communities (Zandiatashbar and Laurito 2023).

### **7.3. Employment Opportunities and Career Prospects**

Our findings highlight the significant challenges faced by amenity migrants in Cairns regarding employment opportunities and career prospects. The participants’ narratives reveal a stark contrast between their initial expectations and the realities of the local labour market. The limited availability of stable, full-time positions and the prevalence of casual employment create a precarious situation for migrants seeking to establish themselves in their new community. “As soon as you’re in the market, it’s casual, you know, it’s not seen as, as stable as like a full-time job” one participant explained, reflecting a broader trend of underemployment and job insecurity among migrants in Cairns.

While some studies have found that tourism employment acts as a pull factor for the in-migration of highly skilled and well-paid individuals (Thulemark *et al.* 2014), other research highlights the vulnerabilities faced by migrant workers in Australia, particularly in regions heavily dependent on tourism (Boese and Moran 2021). Participants often experienced a disparity between their imagined employment prospects and their actual experiences due to factors such as lack of local networks, limited knowledge of the local job market, and competition with established

residents. Furthermore, the casualisation of the workforce and the seasonal nature of many jobs in Cairns' tourism industry left some trapped in a cycle of precarious employment. This precarity hindered their ability to achieve economic stability and social integration, exacerbating the challenges they face in their new environment. As a result, while tourism employment may initially attract migrants, the realities of the industry can lead to ongoing struggles and limitations for those seeking to establish themselves in their new communities.

Employment is a crucial avenue for social integration, as it provides opportunities for interaction with the local community and a sense of belonging (Ager and Strang 2008). Without access to secure and meaningful employment, amenity migrants may struggle to establish social networks, leading to feelings of isolation and marginalisation. Policymakers must address the structural barriers that hinder migrants' access to stable employment opportunities in Cairns. This may include initiatives to provide targeted skills training, support local job search assistance programmes, and encourage the diversification of the local economy to reduce the overreliance on tourism (Froy 2006).

#### 7.4. The Cost of Living

The IPA revealed a stark contrast between participants' initial expectations of affordability and the realities of living in Cairns. The narratives confirmed that unexpectedly high expenses for everyday necessities, such as groceries, electricity, and house insurance, place a significant burden on migrants' budgets and overall quality of life. "I think we thought it would be a lot cheaper to live up here, but like our [house] insurance is dear, I guess because of cyclones. We find that electricity is dear because there's no competitors. We find that groceries are more expensive probably they've got extra freight" one participant explained. This collective sentiment reflects a broader trend of rising living costs in regional Australia (Yue *et al.* 2014). The high costs of essentials in Cairns can be attributed to various factors, including the city's regional location, limited market competition, and additional freight costs for goods and services. These factors contribute to the financial strain experienced by amenity migrants, who may have relocated to Cairns with the expectation of a more affordable lifestyle compared to metropolitan cities.

The persistent financial strain experienced by migrants in Cairns can have far-reaching consequences beyond immediate economic concerns. Over time, these pressures may deteriorate the overall living experience and quality of life, potentially influencing migrants' decisions to stay in or leave Cairns. This, in turn, can have significant implications for the city's ability to attract and retain a diverse and skilled workforce, which is crucial for its long-term economic and social sustainability. Policymakers must address the structural factors contributing to the high cost of living in Cairns and implement measures to alleviate the financial burdens faced by migrants and other residents. This may include initiatives to promote market competition and regulate essential services.

#### 7.5. Building a Sense of Belonging

The findings of this study highlight the challenges faced by amenity migrants in building a sense of belonging and integrating into the Cairns community. The participant's narrative highlights the difficulties in establishing social connections and meeting people, which can lead to feelings of isolation and exclusion. One participant shared: "I don't know anyone here. I've moved to Cairns by myself. I found that people are very cliquey and I did find it hard to meet people socially. I love things like just walking and talking to someone for no reason, you know [...] but it is not happening, I don't know why probably because of too many tourists I think. It has been a sort of off-putting". These narratives shared by participants find parallels in the broader literature about migrants' struggles of integrating into new communities (Baldwin and Stafford 2019).

The observation that the high number of tourists in Cairns may contribute to the difficulty in forming social connections suggests that the transient nature of the population can hinder the

development of stable, long-lasting relationships. Moreover, experiences of finding people “cliquey” and the struggle to meet people socially indicates the presence of social barriers that can further impede the integration process. This is consistent with previous research that highlights the importance of social networks and support systems in facilitating migrants’ adaptation to new environments (Ryan 2011). The presence of social tension and the challenges faced by newcomers in building relationships can have far-reaching consequences for their overall well-being and long-term commitment to the area.

Feeling part of a community is crucial for migrants’ social interactions, mental health, and sense of belonging (de Haan *et al.* 2014), and the challenges faced by amenity migrants underscore the need for targeted interventions and support systems. Policymakers and community organisations should prioritise the development and implementation of inclusive community programmes and spaces that promote social interaction, cultural exchange, and a sense of belonging (see Phillimore 2021). These initiatives can include regular community events, multicultural festivals, and mentorship programmes that connect newcomers with established residents. Additionally, local authorities should work towards creating a more welcoming and inclusive environment for migrants by promoting cultural sensitivity, combating discrimination, and ensuring equal access to resources and services (Ager and Strang 2008).

Investing in initiatives that foster social cohesion and support the integration of amenity migrants is not only crucial for their individual well-being but also for the long-term sustainability and resilience of the Cairns community. By addressing the social challenges faced by migrants and promoting a sense of belonging, policymakers can encourage the retention of skilled individuals, and contribute to its overall social and economic development. In conclusion, the experiences of amenity migrants in Cairns regarding liveability highlight the need for targeted policies and initiatives that promote inclusivity, affordability, and resilience. By prioritising these issues, policymakers can create a more welcoming environment that enables migrants to establish roots, form meaningful connections, and contribute to the region’s long-term prosperity.

The study’s limitations, such as the small, non-random sample and reliance on cross-sectional self-report data, should be acknowledged. These limitations may affect the generalisability of the findings and introduce biases. However, the methodology employed contributes to a broader understanding of amenity migration trends and highlights the importance of context-specific strategies to enhance liveability. Future studies should consider utilising larger, randomly selected samples across multiple time points and locations to allow for more robust causal inferences. Despite these limitations, the present study provides valuable insights into the expectations and experiences of amenity migrants in Cairns and can serve as a foundation for further research.

## 8. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has shed light on the complex dynamics of amenity migration and the challenges faced by migrants in Cairns, Australia. By illuminating the contradictions between imagined tropical Edens and the lived experiences of amenity migrants, this research highlights the importance of addressing the disjuncture between expectations and post-relocation experiences regarding housing, employment, safety, costs, and belonging. The findings of this study, derived from the systematic mapping of liveability gaps through Importance–Performance Analysis, underscore the urgent need for targeted interventions and policies that enhance the quality of life across multiple domains. Bridging the gap between migrant expectations and on-the-ground realities is crucial for the sustainability of amenity destinations and the long-term retention of newcomers who can contribute to the revitalisation of regional communities. The findings underscore the need for a more holistic approach, ensuring that future studies and policies are attuned to the lived experiences of migrants in search of their envisioned paradises. As global connectivity and the pursuit of idyllic lifestyles continue to drive amenity migration, it is imperative that researchers, policymakers, and community stakeholders collaborate to develop evidence-based strategies that

promote sustainable, liveable, and inclusive regional communities. By prioritising the needs and experiences of amenity migrants and addressing the challenges they face, we can work towards creating vibrant, resilient, and welcoming destinations that benefit both newcomers and long-term residents alike.

## Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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