



Mysteries of Easter Island

Easter Island, also known as Rapa Nui and Isla de Pascua, is the most isolated inhabited island in the world, located about 2,000 miles from Chile and Tahiti. Until the Mataverí International Airport was built in the 1960s, the island was only accessible by ship.

The island was discovered in 1772 by the Dutch, when Admiral Jacob Roggeveen landed there on Easter Sunday and gave the island its nonnative name. He was the first European to describe the unusual statues carved from the volcanic rock from Rano Raraku. Standing as tall as 18 feet and weighing many tons, the statues are known as “moai,” and each is a representation of the same figure, perhaps a god or an ancestor figure. The moais stood in a row along the coast, a few looking out to sea as guardians of the people of Rapa Nui, but most faced inland, as if overseeing the activity of the island. Additional statues of varying sizes and stages of completion were also discovered on the slopes of the volcano.

Admiral Roggeveen estimated the population at more than 10,000. In the late 18th century when English, Spanish and French expeditions visited the island, they found a much smaller population, many moais were toppled and very little land was cultivated. Whalers made the island a stop, and in 1862 slave traders captured 1,000 natives and took them to work the Guano Islands off the shore of Peru. Of the 100 who survived, 15 came back to Rapa Nui with smallpox. The 1881 census listed less than 200 people.

Chile annexed the island in 1888 during a period of

expansion. The Compañía Exploradora de la Isla de Pascua (CEDIP) was the de facto governing body until the 1950s when the Chilean government revoked CEDIP's lease and the Chilean navy administered the island. With improvements to the basic quality of life, living on Rapa Nui became easier.

Today, with air travel, supplies and greater interest around the world, Easter Island's population is growing. Residents live in Hanga Roa, the only town on the island. There are regular flights from Santiago and tourists, scientists and curiosity seekers come to examine the moais, learn about the island's past and ponder the lessons Easter Island has for the future.

Mysteries

There are many mysteries to Easter Island. For a small island, about 64 square miles, there is much to be discovered and interpreted. For example, what happened to the missing population between the visits of Admiral Jacob Roggeveen and Captain James Cook in 1774? The accepted explanation is that the island's agriculture couldn't feed the growing population. Instead, the inhabitants cut down the trees, and without the means to build canoes and leave the island, they eventually resorted to war and cannibalism. The moais were pulled down as first one faction then the other destroyed their statues. Many who see what happened on Easter Island, have labeled it Rapa Nui Syndrome, as a warning to the rest

of Earth's population. Another mystery is the moai statues of Rapa Nui. What are they? Who are they? One theory is each moai is a representation of a god or ancestor, and it gave power, or mana, to the people who erected and maintained the statue. If each family or clan on the island had its own moais, then it is easy to understand why warring clans would want to destroy the source of each other's power.

This doesn't explain the placement of the moais, nor why some look so different from the ones with prevalent long ears, thin lips and unsmiling expressions.

As the moais were toppled or abandoned, and no new ones created, the culture shifted to what is now called the cult of the BirdMan. This was still in existence and documented in the 1860s. More than 150 carvings or petroglyphs exist in the rocks around the ruins of the village of Orongo, near the caldera of Rano Kau. The carvings depict a man's body with a bird's head, sometimes holding an egg in one hand. The theory

is that this image demonstrates the desire to escape the island. The basic ceremony of this cult was the task of finding the first egg laid each spring on an offshore island by Manu Tara, a sacred bird. Each clan chief sent one candidate, or hopu, to swim to Moto Nui, the largest island below Orongo, to wait for the eggs to be laid. When the hopu found an egg, he strapped it to his forehead and then made the dangerous swim back, climbed the cliffs and presented the unbroken egg to his chief. This chief would become BirdMan for the coming year, with powers and privileges.

Travel Tips

GETTING THERE

LAN Chile is the only airline that flies to Easter Island. There are three weekly connections from Santiago or two weekly from Papeete, Tahiti.

WHEN TO GO

Easter Island's temperature rarely exceeds 85 degrees and does not drop below 57 degrees. Be prepared for wind, which keeps the temperature comfortable, and for a light rain several times a day.

May is the rainiest month, but the porous volcanic soil drains quickly. Bring comfortable clothes, good walking shoes or boots, a sweater or sweatshirt, and a wind-breaker. The most expensive months are during the summer season of December to March.

THINGS TO DO AND SEE

Depending on how long your stay is—it really would not be worthwhile to travel all that way and not spend four or five days there—you can plan to see the entire island by foot, 4x4, horse or motor bike. If on a bike or on foot, remember to take plenty of water, sunscreen, a hat and sunglasses. Remember to take a snack since no stores are available outside of Hanga Roa. The roads and tracks are rough, but there's not much traffic and you'll be safe. The islanders like to say the only thing occupying the jail are the spiderwebs. You can plan a drive with stops at some of the more famous moai, or a detailed study of each. Visit Ahu Akivi, Ahu Nau Nau, Ahu Tahai and Rano Raraku. There are fees to enter the Ceremonial Village of Orongo and Ahu Tahai.

To date, there are no off-limits areas, but do respect the archaeological work, as one-third of the island is the Parque Nacional Rapa Nui (a national park). You will not be allowed to remove any artifacts. You can buy replicas of moais and other local artifacts in the markets.

THE TERRAIN

Easter Island is roughly triangular, with a volcano anchoring each corner. Maunga Pukatikei at 1,200 feet occupies the northeast corner; Rano Kau at 1,353 feet the southeast corner; and the highest peak, Maunga Terevaka at 2,151.6 feet occupies over the northwest corner. The slopes are barren, and you'll get your exercise climbing up and down gentle hills.

LODGING, DINING AND MORE

There are several hotels on the island, numerous guest houses, and you may camp on the north coast, but all water and food must be carried in. Some families will permit you to camp on their grounds.

Because everything is imported, be prepared for higher food costs. It may be less expensive to buy your breakfast and lunch needs from a local store (there are two supermarkets) and dine in a restaurant for your evening meal.

Spanish and the local language are spoken, and there are various local festivals, such as Rapa Nui Tapati Fiesta held every February.

You'll find Easter Island a pleasant, hospitable place to visit, but don't be surprised if you experience a sense of the mysterious and the pull of the ancient moais.

Fast Facts

Easter Island lies in the eastern South Pacific Ocean, due south of Salt Lake City, Utah, and due east of Brisbane, Australia.

The Pacific Ocean's largest body of archaeological sites is on Easter Island.

Three-quarters of Easter Island's 3,800 inhabitants are Polynesian. Today, they are citizens of Chile.

