Easter Island, Chile

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I have learned that if you want to see someone’s head turn, casually mention that you are going to Easter Island. The island’s isolation, mysterious history, and fascinating stone moai statues generate a natural, appealing curiosity. The local natives call the island “Rapa Nui” (Big Rapa), which refers to the island of Rapa in the Bass Islands in Polynesia. Easter Island is triangular in shape, has an area of 65 square miles (less than that of Martha’s Vineyard), and has a current population of about 5,000 people. It is likely the most isolated, inhabited place on the planet – it lies 2,180 miles west of the coast of Chile, 4,300 miles southeast of Hawaii, 2,000 miles east of Tahiti, and 2,700 miles north of Antarctica.

The history of Easter Island is spellbinding, mysterious, controversial, and filled with intrigue and uncertainty. Because of this and its famous moai, historians, archaeologists, artists, and travelers alike are drawn to the island, an open air museum with 20,000 archaeological sites. In addition, the island has pristine beaches, some of the best scuba diving on the earth, excellent surfing, and a Polynesian culture that attracted approximately 70,000 visitors in 2011. It is projected that up to 200,000 visitors will visit this UNESCO World Heritage site by 2020.
The history of the island graphically illustrates how the altering of only a single aspect of one’s environment (deforestation) can lead to dire consequences for its inhabitants. The first settlers of Easter Island arrived from Polynesia in sea-faring canoes and catamarans sometime between 400 and 1200 A.D. (1994 DNA tests confirm that the original natives were from Polynesia, not from South America). These natives found the island to be covered with a dense forest of giant palm trees. For hundreds of years after that, the natives had no contact with the outside world, and the population on the island split into 10 tribes.

The island was named by a Dutch sailor who encountered the island on Easter Sunday, 1722. At that time, the population of the island had dropped to 2500 from a high of 12,000 a century earlier, with 21 species of trees becoming extinct and the vanishing of most land birds. Captain Cook visited the island in 1774 and reported that there were no trees over ten feet in height. In 1821, Captain Thomas Raine noted the absence of canoes on the island, with the natives swimming out to his ship.
For decades, the prevailing explanation for the deforestation claims that although some of it was caused by climate change and rats, the Rapa Nuians had blatantly plundered the timber on the island for the construction of homes, canoes, rope, and for using wood to move the heavy stone moai. The deforestation that occurred on Easter Island resulted in new homes not being constructed, and people were forced to live in caves or cold, damp stone dwellings. Without wood, canoes could no longer be constructed, resulting in diminished fishing catches. Without trees, both land and sea birds disappeared, soil erosion became common place, and rope could not be fabricated. The natives were literally trapped on the island. The significant reduction in resources resulted in wars between the different tribes, greatly reducing the population of the island. In the middle of the 19th century, approximately 97% of the island’s population was lost in just one decade, along with much of the island’s culture and history.

A new theory as to what caused the deforestation has been recently suggested by Terry Hunt and Carl Lipo in their book, *The Statues that Walked: Unraveling the Mystery of Easter Island* (2011). The authors provide scientific evidence that claims that the vast majority of the deforestation was due solely to the rats on the island. They claim that the rats (whose population can double in size in just 47 days), brought about the extinction of the island’s palm trees by consuming their seeds, thus seriously minimizing and even halting the growth of new generations of trees. The authors believe that the residents of the island did not bring about ecological Armageddon ... in fact, the authors believe that the natives were remarkable environmentalists, developing skillful methods to increase the island’s agricultural capacity under adverse conditions.
In addition to deforestation, other factors such as tribal conflicts, diseases brought by Europeans, slave raids and kidnappings, resulted in the island’s population falling to a meager 111 in 1877. The population of Easter Island has slowly recovered since then, with Chile annexing it in 1888. In the first half of the twentieth century the Rapa Nui natives were treated as prisoners, being confined to a fenced area while the rest of the island was used as a sheep farm by the Williamson-Balfour Company in Scotland. In 1966 the Easter Island natives were given Chilean citizenship.

The island’s famous moai, the giant monolithic stone statues, are the principal magnet that attracts visitors from all parts of the world. The remains of 887 moai have been inventoried, each one having taken 5-6 men approximately one year to carve in a quarry using primitive stone hand chisels called tokis. The moai are essentially located at one of three places on the island; 1) 288 moai at an ahu, which is a stone burial platform near the ocean, 2) 397 moai at the Rano Raraku Quarry, and 3) 92 moai scattered throughout the island, abandoned while in transit to an ahu.

The jagged faced and long bodied moai can be up to 30 feet in height and weigh 80 tons. It is surmised that each moai statue represented a deceased chief or an important ancestor. The moai would transmit power, called “mana,” to a living tribal chief. In fact, in the Rapa Nui societies, it was believed that there was a relationship between the dead and the living – the dead provided the living with the necessities of life such as good health, fertile land, protection, and animals, while through offerings, the living gave the dead a better place in the spirit world.
Anywhere from one to fifteen moai were placed on one of the dozens of ahus on the island, the sacred stone burial platforms found mainly on the coastlines. The ahus are fairly evenly distributed along the coasts, with a number of them strategically constructed with alignments towards one of the solstices or the equinox. Except for one group of moai, all of the moai on the ahus face inland, watching over their descendents in the coastal villages, with their backs to the spirit world in the sea.

By the mid-1800’s all of the original moai at the ahus were broken and/or toppled over due to tribal wars. It was believed that toppling the moai would destroy the mana of a tribal chief. The present standing moai on the ahus of Easter Island have been faithfully reconstructed by archaeologists and historians.
The largest ahu is Ahu Tongariki with 15 moai of various heights. This ahu was swept inland in 1960 by a tsunami and restored in 1997. The Ahu Akivi has 7 moai and is special in that it is a bit inland and is the only ahu on Easter Island whose moai face the ocean. According to folklore, the 7 moai represent the 7 explorers who were sent as a reconnaissance team prior to the first arrivals on the island. Ahu Vaihu has 8 moai in an unrestored state, lying face down on the same turf where they were toppled during tribal wars centuries ago. At Anakena Beach there is an ahu containing 6 moai. It is believed that Polynesian chief Hotu Matu’a and his family arrived at this beach to found the first settlement on Rapa Nui. The Ahu Tahai has a single, restored moai with eyes, the only one of its kind on the island.

Rano Kau is one of three extinct volcanoes on Easter Island. It has a pretty crater lake which is one of only three natural bodies of fresh water on the island. Approximately 1000 feet tall and with a diameter of one mile, the crater also has marshes at its bottom and attractive brown and green streaks of vegetation on its sides. In the 1880’s an ahu with several moai was observed at the crater, but it had fallen into the ocean by the early 1900’s. Our guide said that as a child she used to walk with her mother down a side of the crater to its bottom to wash clothes in the fresh water. They would typically sleep there overnight as their clothes dried, and then depart from the crater the next day.
Strange birdman carvings on rocks can be seen on Easter Island. The upper part of the carvings has a man’s body and a bird’s head, with an egg often held in one hand - an indication of the “Bird Man” cult. This cult involved a competition between the different tribes to find the first egg laid by the sacred migratory manutara bird each spring. One member from each tribe would scale down very steep cliffs, swim through shark infested waters to the Moto Nui islet, and then fast for weeks, waiting for the first egg to be laid there. Successfully returning with the egg would give the chief of the tribe the title of Bird Man for the year, and he would be given special privileges and powers.
Orongo is the ceremonial city on the Rano Kau crater lip used between 1600 and 1866 to worship the birdmen cult. The city consists of 53 mostly elliptically shaped houses used by chiefs and participants in the birdmen contest. These stone houses were constructed with flat basalt slabs found in the Rano Kao crater. They had small square shaped entrances facing the ocean which the natives crawled through.

These imaginative dwellings were built up against a wall of earth or rock – in some instances the wall serving as the back wall of the building. Their ceilings consisted of large rock slabs that spanned the side walls, over which dirt and sod was piled to form a round shaped roof. It must have been a bleak existence living inside the Orongo stone houses – the floors consisted of just the bare earth, and the one small door opening resulted in poor ventilation leading to a dark, damp, and moldy environment.
The natives built “manavai,” rock enclosures which aided the growth of crops by protecting the plants from the wind, salt spray, and which maximized the use of water. The manavai were typically circular in shape, and ranged in height from 1-6 feet. The Rapa Nuians frequently burned their garbage in the manavai which added nutrients to the soil.

Rano Raraku quarry is located on one side of the Rano Raraku volcano, one of three volcanoes on the island. Approximately 95% of the island’s moai were carved here. It is where hundreds of original moai remain embedded in the ground, facing away from the quarry and crater. Many of the lower parts of these moai are 10-20 feet underground ... centuries of erosion on the slopes covering all but the tops. There are unfinished moai at the quarry, including the tallest moai of all – 69 feet in height, completely carved, but not removed from the quarry wall.
How the moai were transported from the quarry to the ahus on the coastline is uncertain. Many believe that the moai were moved on the top of a wooden sled, while others think that they were transported over a track of logs. Another theory believes that they were simply dragged down to the water using ropes from the bark of the hau-hau tree. Norwegian adventurer Thor Heyerdahl of Kon-Tiki fame wrote in his 1958 book, Aku-Aku that the moai were actually walked down to the ahus, as one would move a refrigerator in a side to side manner.

The moai were typically carved with deep elliptical shaped eye sockets. Eyes were sometimes placed in the moai for special ceremonial occasions. The white of the eyeball was made of coral and the pupil was made of black obsidian. Some of the moai had red topknots (hats) called “pukao,” carved from the very light volcanic stone, scoria. Pukao may have represented dressed hair, or the colored feathers worn by chiefs.
The rongorongo hieroglyphics script of the Rapa Nuians was discovered in the late nineteenth century on Easter Island. Rongorongo is the modern Rapa Nuian name for the script, which translates to “to recite, to chat out.” Numerous attempts to decipher the script have been unsuccessful. Some linguists believe that rongorongo is not true writing, as it avoids encoding grammatical words, making it difficult to reconstruct the meaning intended by the author. It is a reversed boustrophedon script where every other line of writing is flipped or reversed, with reversed letters.
There is one small town on the island called Hanga Roa which consists of essentially two intersecting roads that are typically occupied by motorcycles and taxis whizzing up and down these paths. The streets are mostly lined with restaurants, tour companies, and handicraft shops. There is a small museum in the town – a bit of a disappointment except for the literally dozens of remarkable miniature models of the fishing vessels that the islanders used centuries ago.

It was interesting to see the stone footing of what was called a “boat house.” These elliptically shaped thatched huts obtained their name because they looked like overturned boats or canoes. They ranged in length from 30-120 feet, widths of 4-12 feet at their widest central axis in the center of the house, and had maximum heights of 4-9 feet. The doorway was quite small, just large enough for one person to crawl through. Boat houses were the most common dwelling of the natives when the Europeans first arrived on the island.
Easter Island has numerous caves on the coastline, often set in dramatic settings, with the Pacific Ocean waves crashing down on them. Caves were used over the centuries as domiciles, storage facilities, and places where fishermen could stay for a night, allowing them to get an early start the next day. A number of caves have names such as the Ana Kai Tangata cave. Translated as “man-eating cave,” this name may have led to the rumors of cannibalism on the island. On the ceiling of this cave, one can find remains of paintings related to the Birdman cult. Amazingly, there are people still living in caves on Easter Island today.
Every February the Tapati Festival is held on Easter Island, with two families (formerly tribes) competing in a number of competitions based on ancient activities such as canoeing, sliding down a cliff on a banana tree, dancing, and swimming. The festival is so popular among tourists that one must book a trip to the island at least a year in advance.

A visit to a cemetery on Easter Island revealed some very different grave sites, to include ones with miniature moai, tile floors, and beds of flowers. The runway of the island’s airport was increased to 3.5 miles by the United States to provide an emergency landing strip for the space shuttle. Legend has it that the original natives called the island “te pitoo te henua,” translated as “the naval of the world”. The naval is represented as a large round boulder on the island believed to have mana which can heal pain.
It will be interesting to see what the future brings to Easter Island. There are unresolved disputes over land and sovereignty between the native Rapa Nui and the mainland Chileans. In fact, a lawsuit has been filed in which the islanders are seeking independence from Chile, attempting to void the annexation treaty.

It was captivating to visit this fascinating land - the intimidating moai, the island’s mysterious history, its imposing isolation and natural beauty all make it a place well worth visiting. One tends to leave Easter Island in amazement and with more questions about it than when first arriving.