

Easter Island—Rapa Nui by Malcolm Scriven

In December 2019 we were lucky enough to visit Easter Island, or Rapa Nui as it is called by Chileans and the local islanders. I had always wanted to go there to find out more about the enigmatic 'face' sculptures that are found all over the island. We had the services of Chris Browder, an excellent American guide, for two days. He married an Easter Island girl and has lived on the island for more than twenty years. He was an amazing teacher.

Rapa Nui is a sub-tropical volcanic island 64 square miles in size and located in the South Pacific 2,180 miles from the coast of Chile, and over 1,000 miles from its nearest island neighbour. It was discovered and colonised in the first millennium by Polynesian navigators sailing on large double canoe catamarans. The largest of the ancient statues, called mōai, were carved in the 14th-16th centuries. Typically, they are around 4 metres tall and weigh about 10 tons although some are up to 10 metres and 85 tons. They were carved from compacted volcanic ash in the cliffs of the quarry volcano, Rano Raraku. Hundreds were successfully transported up to 15 kilometres showing that the Rapanui were one of the most advanced stone age civilisations.



The only restored Mōai where they have replaced the coral eyes at Tahai



Mōai on their Ahu at Anakena

The mōai were placed on top of ceremonial platforms call ahu. The ahu contained the remains of deceased tribal chiefs or kings and the mōai looked over the tribe's principal village to protect it.



The Mōai quarry at Rano Raraku and the statues 'walking' to their Ahu

Originally, the island was covered in a dense subtropical forest including some of the largest palm trees in the world, but a growing population and overexploitation of resources led to tribal warfare and the eventual collapse of society. The island was virtually treeless when the first Europeans arrived on Easter Sunday in 1722. The first objective in any tribal conflict was to topple your enemies mōai, and by the mid-1800s all had been knocked off their ahu. For once, Europeans were not responsible for the devastation – the islanders were the architects of their own destruction. The 'Bird Man' cult was introduced to try and limit the tribal conflict but that is another (fascinating) story.

The history of the island over the last two centuries has not been happy. In the 1860s Peruvian slave raids coupled with introduced diseases nearly wiped out the population. The island was annexed by Chile in 1888 and most of the island was used by foreigners for sheep and cattle ranching while the local population was confined to the capital, Hanga Roa, behind barbed wire until the 1960s. They were finally recognised as Chilean citizens in 1966 and there has been some progress since. It looks like a tropical paradise today, but the island still has problems – there have been 4 drug related murders in the last 5 years – a depressing statistic for a population of 8,000.



The cargo ship from Valparaiso. The harbour at Hanga Roa is too small for it, so everything must be loaded and unloaded by crane into small landing craft....



...and again, at the harbour.

However, islanders now pay no taxes while receiving the same benefits as other Chileans, and they are supplied regularly by a small cargo ship from Valparaiso. There are schemes to encourage local crafts, and tourism is a growing industry as people begin to appreciate the skill and sophistication of the original Rapa Nui culture.



Sunset from Hanga Roa.