

Rapa Nui

Easter Island



Tim
Lucas

'Mythical Sunrise'



It must surely have been by design that the Ahu Tongariki platform is positioned in such a manner that the sun rises directly behind the sacred platform. In this image the sun appears to be exiting the mouth of a fallen Moai....

A Brief History of Rapa Nui

A thousand years ago, a small group of Polynesians paddled the world's greatest ocean in search of a new land. For generations, their ancestors had expanded eastwards in the vast Pacific Ocean, guided only by the stars. A new piece of land was found. The settlers of this tiny virgin island called their new home Te Pito o te Henua, meaning "The Navel of the World". The name was seen fit as they were thinking that there can be no place more distant than this... and they were right.

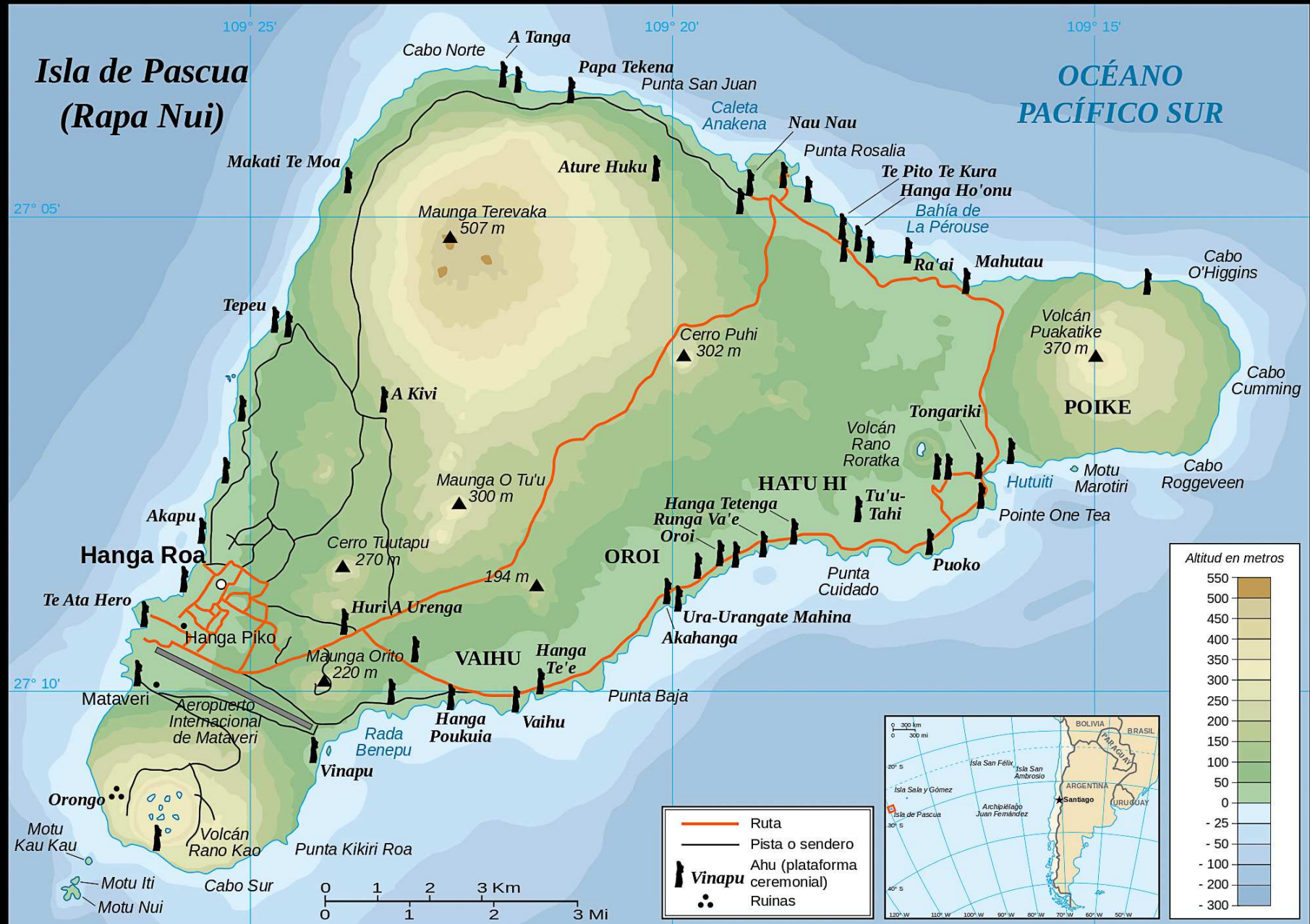
Generations passed, and the inhabitants of what was to be known as Rapa Nui, built a civilization of art, capable of carving, raising and transporting hundreds of gigantic monolith statues, using nothing but their own hands and stone. A glyphic writing called rongorongo was evolved. A culture had risen, full of achievements, intellect, music and legends - against all odds - in an environment where one would least expect it. Children were well taught of their history and of who they are. Up until today, the Rapa Nui people remember their lineage back to the time when King Hotu Matu'a disembarked at the beach of Anakena lifetimes ago.

This drawing of an Easter Island man was made by Hodges in 1777 for the work *Maps and Pictures from Cook's Third Voyage*, volume 1. It was drawn after indications given by the men of James Cook's voyage to Easter Island in 1774..



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Location Map of key places on Rapa Nui



Isla de Pascua is the Spanish name of what many westerners call Easter Island. This name came about as the island was 'discovered' on Easter Sunday by Dutch explorer Jacob Roggeveen. The local name of Rapa Nui was adopted later in the island's history.

Why Travel to Rapa Nui?

For many years Easter Island (as I had always known it) had been in the back of my mind as a place of wonder and isolation. Like most people who had seen the standing Moai the 'how' and 'why' thoughts were nagging away. When I decided to follow another dream and travel to Antarctica it seemed almost fitting to travel to two of the most remote places in the world in the one trip. And so the planning began....

Getting to Rapa Nui is relatively easy these days – with regular direct flights to the island from Santiago, with some flights coming from Tahiti. The plan was simple, fly from Santiago to Rapa Nui, then head home via Tahiti... BUT, that plan did not work and instead the trip to/from Rapa Nui was via Santiago.

Once on the island I enlisted the services of a local guide (Easter Island Spirit) and whilst it is easy enough to see the Island without a guide the added extras of the historical knowledge makes this an almost must do. A total of 4 nights was spent on the Island, and I managed to time my trip (by accident) to be at the same time as the annual festival (Tapati). Even being a non Spanish speaker the opening night of this event was not to be missed!

Would I travel to Rapa Nui again? I think the answer to that is yes, but I would like a little more time to cycle/hike around some of the more remote areas (its only 68 square miles in area). Perhaps do some SCUBA diving and stay for a longer period of the Tapati festival...



Large turtles are found in the harbour at Hanga Roa

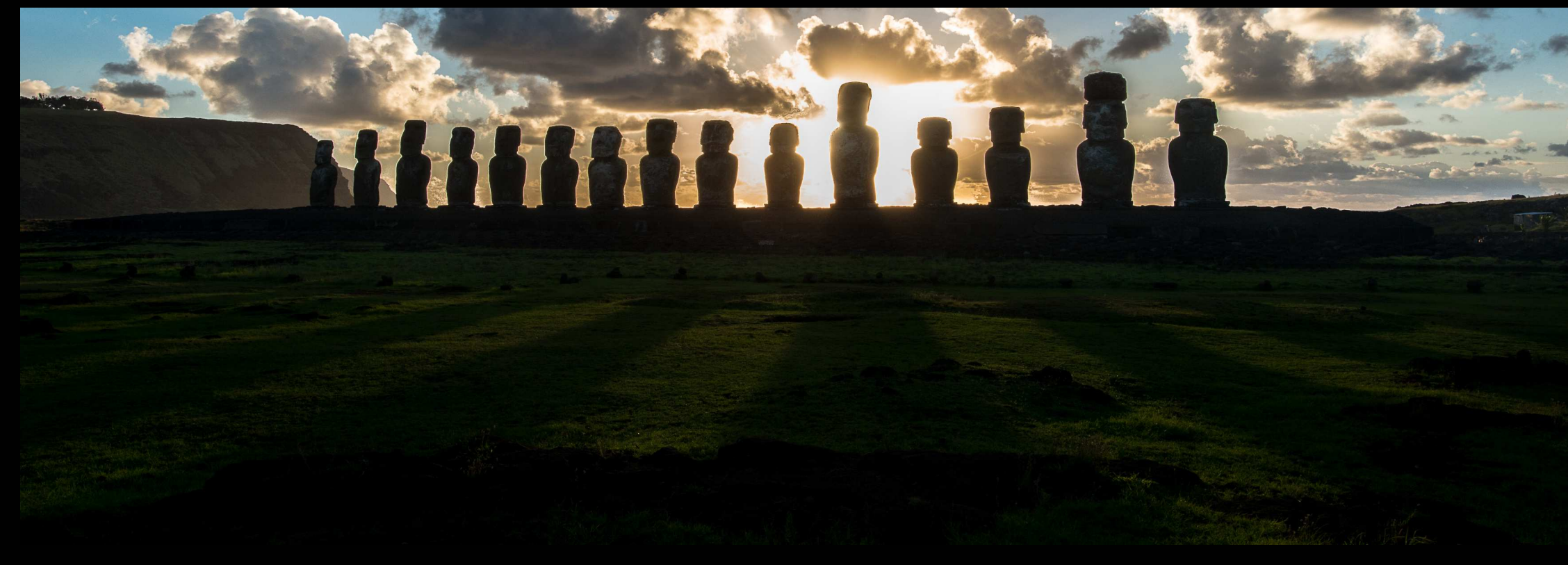
'Standing Moai - Ahu Tongariki'



The platform at Ahu Tongariki is the largest example of standing Moai on Easter Island. The Moai face inland, and are standing on a sacred platform and forecourt area.



Like all the Moai on Rapa Nui, the fifteen Moai on Ahu Tongariki were toppled by the 17th century as a result of tribal war. After battles the victors pushed the Moai over, often positioning rocks where they fell to try and break the head from the body. Fortunately none of them were broken at Ahu Tongariki and they remained on the ground during the next centuries. Following the Valdivia earthquake of 22 May 1960 a large tsunami took the fallen statues and the pukao (scoria top-knot stone), scattering them a couple of hundred metres inland from their original location! In 1992 an agreement was reached between the Government of Chile and the Moai Restoration Committee of Japan to restore the Moai of Ahu Tongariki to their original standing positions. The work was completed in 1996.



Ahu Tongariki Ceremonial Platform, complete with resident wild horses!



With one known exception, the Moai were all positioned facing inland, standing on a ceremonial platform known as an Ahu. This platform is made with perfectly joined stones and was (and still is) treated as sacred ground. There is only one statue sporting a pukao at Ahu Tongariki - these were only placed on larger, more important, statues - and this occurred many years after the original Moai had been raised.

The Scoria used was cut from a different quarry to that of the bodies, and most likely rolled into the location before finally being cut to size and decorated (carved).





Ahu Tongariki ceremonial platform, showing the forecourt area, and the relationship to the ocean.

Left: Ahu Tongariki ceremonial platform, complete with resident wild horse – can you see it? The position of the horse helps provide a sense of scale.



Rano Raraku



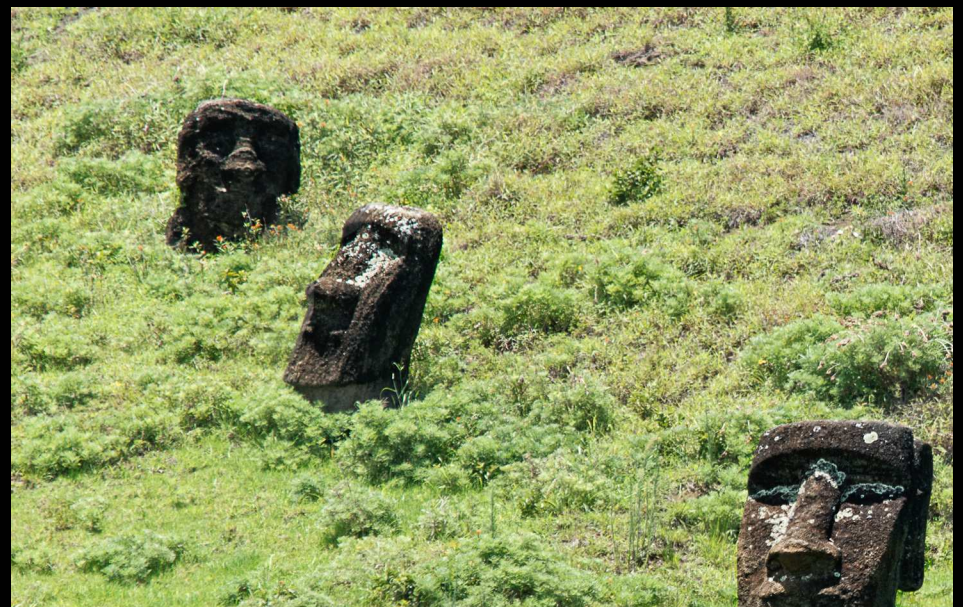
This ancient volcano is the source of all the Moai bodies. The pukao (scoria topknots) were carved from another volcano - 'Puna Pau'. Many of the Moai statues were carved INSIDE the crater!!! They were then taken over the rim and down to be delivered to the destination Ahu.

Left : Ahu Tongatiki from behind.



On the rim of the Rano Raraku crater lake you can just make out small shapes - these are small standing Moai, perhaps awaiting delivery that never happened?

Close up view of the small Moai heads as seen on the rim of the Rano Raraku crater.





Over time the path through these Moai was becoming eroded and the Moai were being damaged. This path is now closed, but the location is still quite evident.

Many of the statues are quite 'generous' in body size, however the odd one or two are very thin. Was this by design, or maybe the rock split?



Front View



Side View



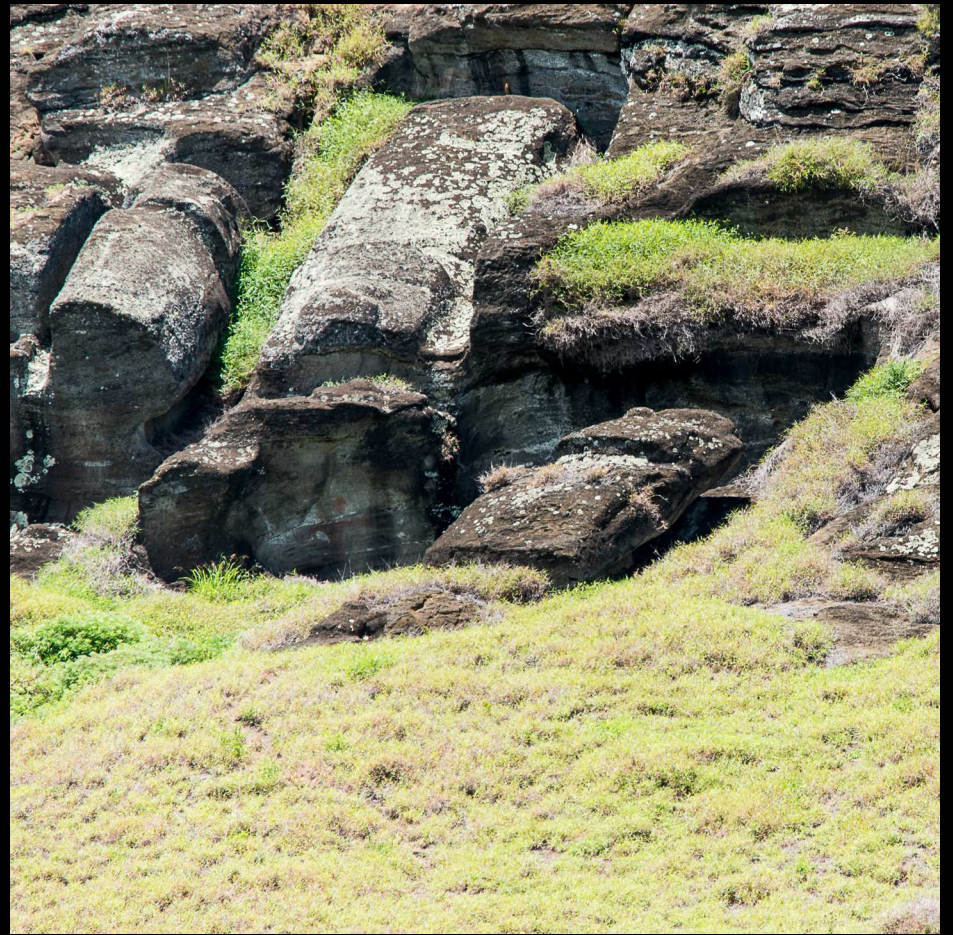
Path amongst Moai, around the outer rim of Rano Raraku.



The craftsmen who created the Moai followed the natural flow of the rock, taking advantage of every piece of stone. Note that in this image there are three incomplete Moai visible.



Many of the Moai were around 10m tall, but this unfinished Moai is 21 metres tall and weighing in at 270 tonnes...



Numerous unfinished Moai.



There is debate over whether the Moai is leaning because it slipped, or perhaps it was carved badly - or even carved this way by design....



Standing Moai head, with close up expanding the detail of the nose and mouth.

Head Shot of Rano Raraku Moai



This Moai is an example of the taller/thinner style seen in a small number of statues.



These three images show the different aspects of the only known 'Sitting Moai' on Rapa Nui.



Previous Page: Apart from the three main volcanic peaks that formed Rapa Nui, the island is extremely flat. The one exception being this small volcanic cone.



A pair of archaeologists that were in the last stages of a research dig. There is significant debate amongst the local population if such work should continue or not, and this extends to the question of whether to stand any further Moai or not...

Positioned not far from the edge of platform are several carved stones. The position of these may not reflect the original location as all the objects were moved by a Tsunami in 1960. It seems fitting though that this stone is pointing towards the largest of the Moai on the Ahu.





Intact Moai, complete with carved fingers and sporting a pukao (Topknot).

The following pages show detailed views of the waist and head of this large Moai - located on the Ahu Tongariki ceremonial platform.







A small number of Moai have a large scoria head piece often called a 'topknot', but more correctly referred to as the 'pukao'. These pukao were added at a later stage in the history of Moai making and only on the largest Moai, even then only on the most important Ahu. There have been less than 100 pukao found, 30 of which still remaining within (or in the vicinity of) the Puna Pau quarry. Historians generally agree that the pukao were added during tribal rivalries - in an effort to make more impressive and elaborate Ahu. The addition appears to look like a hat, but in fact it is a representation of hair, hence often the common name of 'topknot'.



The dimensions of the pukao vary according to the size of the Moai it was destined for. Many of them are around 2 metres (6ft 6") in diameter and 2 metres high and weigh around 11 tons. Some of the pukao at Puna Pau are slightly larger with a diameter of 3 metres (10ft). It is assumed that these were larger so that the designs could be carved into them once they had been delivered to the Ahu. It is thought that the pukao, being round, were rolled to their intended sites but how they were eventually placed on top is still unknown. One of the theories being that a large ramp was built to roll them up.

The examples shown on these two pages are up to 2m tall!







European accounts of Rapa Nui began with the visit in 1722 by Dutch sailor Jacob Roggeveen, and later Spanish reports from visits around 1770. The Spanish ships reported seeing standing statues, however in 1774 James Cook visited the island, and reported that many of the Moai were toppled. The huri mo'ai (statue-toppling) continued into the 1830's as a part of internal conflicts among islanders. By 1838 the only standing moai were on the slopes of Rano Raraku and Hoa Hakananai'a at Orongo.

In about 60 years, islanders had deliberately damaged this part of their ancestors' heritage, possibly due to civil struggles between tribes. It is thought that during the tribal conflicts a large stone was placed where the neck of the Moai would land, with the aim being to break the head of the Moai, and in such an action remove the 'magic' or 'spirit' represented by the Moai.

In modern times, Moai have been restored at Orongo, Ahu Tongariki, Ahu Akivi and Hanga Roa. There is a lot of internal conflict regarding restoration, with many locals not wanting this process to continue.

This page : Solitary Moai head.

Next page: Fallen Moai group.

Previous Page: A new addition to Ahu Tongariki...

Following page: Fallen Moai pair & Single Moai with broken neck.









Ahu Vai Ure is a part of the Rapa Nui National Park, within which stand five Moai that overlook a broad grassy plaza. This plaza is home to several fallen statues, as well as several heads and other pieces. During huri mo'ai (Moai toppling) the Moai standing on Ahu Vai Ure were badly damaged. Two of the Moai have been broken at the neck, half of the face of one has been lost, and the tiniest Moai is little more than a headless stone pillar. Archaeologist William Mulloy restored them in 1974. The one with the somewhat bird-like appearance is in the best condition and it's speculated that it may be the youngest, perhaps cut from Rano Ranaku during the era of the Bird-men.

Close to the Ahu is a stone memorial with a metal plaque dedicated to the late William Mulloy, who is buried in the complex.

During the restoration process William Mulloy and his team had to recreate sections of missing and worn stone. In this case the Moai's neck had been broken, and concrete was used to 're-attach' it. Note the base, where concrete and rocks were used to replace the missing or degraded original stone.



The three Moai below are located on the Ahu Vai Ure ceremonial platform. They are in different states of repair, and perhaps they never will be repaired beyond this position....





The Moai's features changed over time, with erosion further affecting the appearance (both before and after the huri mo'ai).

Previous page : Two of the Moai have been broken at the neck, whilst two have half of their face missing.

This page : This Moai has a somewhat bird-like appearance. It is in the best condition of all those on Ahu Vai Ure.





Rapa Nui was formed millions of years ago from three separate volcanoes, and like many places that formed as a result of volcanic activity it is riddled with lava tunnels....



The oldest name for Rapa Nui is 'Te Pitoote Hanua', which is sometimes translated as 'The Navel of the World', but another source suggests it should actually be 'The Centre and the World'. As a UNESCO registered location the entire island is protected into the future and visitors are not allowed to touch or tamper with any of the Moai or other archaeological sites. There is one exception though - this group of spherical rocks.... Where visitors are encouraged to sit and ponder the mysteries that they have discovered on Rapa Nui.



Anakena is a white coral sand beach (one of two, both small) that, according to island oral traditions, was the landing place of Hotu Matu'a, the Polynesian chief who led a two-canoe settlement party here and founded the first settlement on Rapa Nui.



Next page: Ahu Anakena - with modern addition of fence to mark 'no go' areas.





Many of the Moai had carvings on the rear of the bodies, however on most that had fallen forwards these carvings had been eroded away.

Any Moai that had fallen backwards was at least partially preserved by the soil from erosion. These two Moai, located on Ahu Anakena, show the carvings on their lower backs.



Stone carvings are found all over Rapa Nui, but in some places they are more common, and more complex than others. Papa Vaka is one such place - with many carvings - such as this large fish present on the stone.





Next Page: The seemingly innocent stone, standing 2 feet tall, is decorated with beautiful carvings.

This rock is far more than that though – its actually a musical instrument. The rock has many hollow channels. These allow the ‘musician’ to play it, with the channels acting much like a flute would.





The Ahu Tahira, located in the Vinapu region, is an example of the amazing engineering skills that the stone workers of the Vinapu region equate this work to that of the Incas and Mayans, and some researchers have suggested that there is a high level of craftsmanship - perhaps not in such size and quantity that is found on Rapa Nui.

Next page: Close up view of the joins in the rock.



workers must have had. The precision with which the stone is cut, using primitive tools, is amazing. Many
is evidence of links between these cultures. Other regions within the Polynesian Triangle show similar levels of



Ahu Tahia

This archaeological site has three Ahu, but it also has the remains of a Rapa Nui village which includes a rather unusual chicken coop, an underground hideaway and a boat ramp.

The Tahai site was restored in 1974 by an American archaeologist Dr. William Mulloy. He is buried in the cemetery located next to this site.

There are three Ahu on this site, the first is Ko Te Riku which is rather special as he is the only one with fully restored eyes. The other two are the Tahai Ahu and the Vai Ure Ahu.





Remains of house at Ahu Tahia. The entrance points directly towards the Ahu.



Boat ramp used to launch canoes - Ahu Tahia.

After the demise of the Moai era on Rapa Nui, another significant period of the Island's history revolved around the Birdman cult.

A paramount chief - 'ariki mau' - held the original power in the society, as was typical throughout Polynesia. Over time, the chief's influence declined and the warrior class seized the power on the island. These warriors were known as 'matatoa', and it was this group that was represented by the Birdman emblem. It is thought that this resulted in a decline in the old religion of ancestor worship and an increase in acts of warfare. At same time statue making appears to have ceased, and the Birdman cult came into being.

Activities associated with the Birdman Cult took place at the sacred site of Orongo. The figure shown on this page, half man and half bird, represents this period of Rapa Nui's history.

The Birdman cult festivities were held at one of the most dramatic locations on Rapa Nui, Orongo, on a narrow ridge between a 1,000 foot drop into the ocean on one side and a deep crater on the other.

The most sacred area at Orongo is called Mata Ngarau, where priests chanted and prayed for success in the annual egg hunt.

The purpose of the Birdman contest was to obtain the first egg of the season from the offshore islet Motu Nui. Contestants descended the sheer cliffs of Orongo and swam to Motu Nui where they awaited the coming of the birds. Having procured an egg, the contestant swam back and presented it to his sponsor, who then was declared Birdman for that year, an important status position.





Rano Kau is a 324 m (1,063 ft) tall extinct volcano that forms the south western headland of Rapa Nui. The crater lake is one of the island's only three natural bodies of fresh water. Most of the volcano is on the coast and has been eroded back to form high sea cliffs. On its northern side, the volcano slopes down towards the Mataverí International Airport. The principal archaeological site on Rano Kau is the ruined ceremonial village of Orongo. The village is located at the point where the sea cliff and inner crater wall converge. One Ahu with several Moai were recorded on the cliffs at Rano Kau in the 1880s, but this had fallen to the beach by 1914. The crater is almost a mile across and has its own micro climate. Sheltered from the winds that effect most of the rest of the island, figs and vines flourish at Rano Kau. The inner slope was the site of the last toromiro tree in the wild until the specimen was chopped down for firewood in 1960.



Partially restored, Orongo stone house.



Stone houses at Orongo ceremonial village used during the Birdman era.



Orongo was the centre of the Birdman cult. It was from here that the cult hosted an annual race to bring the first manutara (Sooty Tern) egg from the islet of Motu Nui to Orongo. The site has numerous petroglyphs, mainly of tangata manu (birdmen). By the 1860s disease, and the slave trade meant that most of the Rapa Nui islanders were killed or taken. Those that remained were converted to Christianity by the missionaries that had arrived on the island. It was around this time the village of Orongo then fell into disuse. The site of Orongo was suffering severe soil erosion that was made worse by the increased foot traffic that resulted from the tourist trade. The site was first listed by the World Monuments Watch in 1996, then again in 2000. After these listings a site management plan was created, and in 2009 further funding was announced for the construction of a sustainable visitor center. This is now completed.



Motu Nui is the largest of three islets just south of Rapa Nui and is the most westerly place in Chile. This island was an essential location for the Tangata manu ("Birdman") cult. The island itself is the summit of a large volcanic mountain that rises over 2,000 meters from the sea bed. It measures 3.9 hectares in land area and is the largest of the five satellite islets of Rapa Nui.

The Tangata Manu cult's last competition took place in 1888. Visitors to Rapa Nui can see these islands by taking a short boat excursions from Hanga Roa. The diving around the islands is exceptional, and is a highly sought after scuba diving location for dive enthusiasts from around the world.



Petroglyphs located at the sacred village of Orongo.



Petroglyphs are found all over Rapa Nui, and in most cases they are carved in relief - a labour intensive method where the stone pattern is created by removing the excess stone and leaving the desired pattern raised.

These carvings are representations from the Birdman cult era.



Rapa Nui and NASA

Mataverí International Airport (Isla de Pascua Airport) is located at Hanga Roa on Rapa Nui (Easter Island, Isla de Pascua in Spanish). It is the most remote airport in the world, BUT it has one of the longest runways in the world – 3,318m long.

Why it's so long comes down to one thing NASA! In 1987 the runway was lengthened as it was designated as an abort site for the U.S. Space Shuttle. The side effect of this project was that wide-bodied jets were now able to land here, the result being a significant boost to tourism to the island.

Some facts about Rapa Nui

When did Easter Island become known as Rapa Nui?

French Polynesian officials didn't recognize the name Easter Island (or an older name Te Pito te o Henua), so they renamed it after a similar Tahitian island, Rapa Iti. Easter Island was bigger and so it was called Rapa Nui, or Great Rapa.

Western Diseases on Rapa Nui

In 1862 Peruvian slavers raided the Island bringing with them smallpox... Later a group of slaves was returned to the island. Unfortunately upon return they brought with them tuberculosis – which spread and killed many of the remaining native population.



Is there any written history on Rapa Nui?

During the Birdman era a language known as Rongorongo was used to transcribe onto stone tablets. These hieroglyphics have never been translated, and only 21 tablets have survived destruction during the period of the missionaries. Rongorongo is written in a method called reversed boustrophedon. It is a kind of writing where, instead of going from left to right and then down to the next line, left to right and then upside down until it reaches the other side again!

Conversion to Christianity

The first Christian missionary, Eugène Eyraud, arrived in January 1864 and stayed almost a year on the island. However it was not till 1866, when he returned with Father Hippolyte Roussel, and several others, that mass conversion took place. It was during this period that a lot of the Rongorongo tablets from the Birdman era were destroyed. The island is now almost 100% Roman Catholic.

How did the original inhabitants of Easter Island get there?

It is thought that they came from Polynesia around 400 A.D. They arrived in their outrigger canoes, which are sea-going canoes with floats on either side to help keep them from capsizing.

Oral legend states that a Polynesian chief named Hotu Matu'a dreamed of a remote island, and that he then sailed here in a double canoe with his wife and extended family. Hotu Matu'a and his family is said to have landed on Te-Pito-te-Henua (an early name for the island), roughly translated this means "end of the land" or "land's end". They are said to have landed at Anakena Beach.

How many Moai are there?

Estimates vary but the suggested number ranges from 800 to 1,000. Different sources suggest varying numbers but around 288 were transported to their destination Ahu, around 90 are to be found between Rano Raraku and an unknown destination. The remainder are either still inside the quarry, or were not completed.

Tapati Festival

During the first two weeks of February each year, the entire island comes together for a unique celebration of their culture, involving music, dance and traditional sports. The Tapati festival was first held in 1969 and was originally called 'Semana de Rapa Nui'. The early events were a summer festival featuring singing, dancing and a small parade.

The modern version, now known as Tapati, evolved into a spectacular festival, that engages most of the island's population (including many visitors). The event includes dancing, ritual chants, art exhibits, carving competitions, horse and boat races, body painting, a string figure (kai-kai) contest, the selection of a queen, an amazing parade and a triathlon event, amongst other attractions such haka pei, where participants slide down the side of a mountain on banana trunks at top speeds.

The festival has always been organised by the locals for the locals, and is not merely a commercial show put on for tourists. Nevertheless, visitors are strongly encouraged to attend, and even participate. If you can arrange your stay to coincide with the festival, it's certainly an un-missable experience.

Festival activities take place both during the day and into the evening. Highlights include the Haka Pei (sliding down the island's steepest slope on banana trunks), the Rapa Nui triathlon, horse racing and the group dance competitions in the evenings.

The opening night is a very large affair, as the next few pages represent part of the processing leading to the event stage.











The rainbow on the yacht, moored just out from the harbour on the main town of Hanga Roa, summed up the Rapa Nui experience - peaceful, surprising & relaxing.



As the sun set on Rapa Nui, the kayaker in the water seemed a fitting way to leave, ocean paddling in one of the remotest places in the world....

References to web sites used to gather historical information

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<http://www.funtrivia.com/en/subtopics/Mysterious-Easter-Island-262077.html>
http://www.pacificislandtravel.com/easter_island/about_destin/howandwhy.asp
http://www.southamerica.cl/Chile/Easter_Island.htm

The following site has a glossary of terms relating to Rapa Nui:

http://www.bradshawfoundation.com/easter/easter_island_glossary.php



Easter Island Spirit

Whilst on Rapa Nui, I hired a guide through Easter Island Spirit. My guide was Chris Browder who originated in the the U.S. but has been living and guiding on Rapa Nui for over a decade. He speaks fluent English and Rapa Nui, and has great knowledge of the island's history. I would have no hesitation in recommending Easter Island Spirit as a tour guide for any visitors to Rapa Nui!

www.easterislandspirit.com



Designed using Adobe Photoshop Lightroom



In February 2013 Tim spent 4 days on Rapa Nui as part of a larger trip that included Patagonia and Antarctica. This book includes images captured during the 3 days spent touring, along with historical and cultural information about Rapa Nui, its people and its mysterious past.