

This was our second visit to Santiago (the last time being in 2006) but our first experience with Rapa Nui, Easter Island.

We had booked a three-day stay at one of a number of resorts on Easter Island, but decided to extend the trip with a couple of days in Santiago before and after the visit to this remote South Pacific island.

In the capital of Chile, we visited many of the places that we had seen during our previous stay but, as usual, we found it interesting to re-visit and, especially after such a long gap, many aspects seemed new. As we often do in major cities, we used the Hop On/Hop Off bus as a means of getting from the hotel to the central downtown area where we did our sightseeing.

After two days in Santiago, we got a morning flight to Easter Island and arrived at our resort in the early afternoon, following a five-hour journey. The island is about 15.3 miles long by 7.6 miles at its widest point; its overall shape is triangular. Hanga Roa where we stayed, is in the southwestern corner and its population (sans tourists) of 3500 accounts for 90% of the total for the island.

Our stay at the resort included three tours which we selected from a total of about eight offered. Naturally, we had to see the statues (which we did on two of our excursions) but we also took a tour which climbed the outer rim of the island's largest volcano. Easter Island has three main volcanoes and over 70 other vents but the last eruption was over 100,000 years ago. The island was formed from volcanic eruptions, however, and lava—in its various forms—is everywhere.

To see the statues (moai) up close was, of course, the highlight of the visit and the major reason for our trip to this very remote island. However, as we have so often found, there is so much more to see and learn about in addition to the “main attraction”. Easter Island was no exception and the history of its people, their culture and beliefs, added so much more to our enjoyment.

On our return to the mainland, we found Santiago (and many other cities) to be under a state of emergency and a dusk to dawn curfew. Consequently, the tours that we had planned for our final two days were cancelled and many services in and around the hotel were curtailed. So, our final 48 hours in Chile were spent mostly in our hotel room—with views of the Andes we had planned to visit!

This Post covers only our time on Easter Island.

Saturday October 19

We were ready for the start of our first tour at 9:30. The van took us out of the village and to the rim of the largest volcanic crater on the island. We stopped here for about 20 minutes to look into the crater (with its 12 meter deep water – the original source of water for the island) and to climb a little further for views over Hanga Roa (where our resort is) and, indeed, the whole of Easter Island.



We were told that the original inhabitants of the island (1000 to 1400 years ago, depending on the source) were actually quite sophisticated in astrology and earth sciences and, in fact, that the platforms of the “heads” were strategically placed in a manner similar to the stones of Stonehenge and other world astrological sites. Listening to our guide (who spoke very good English and seemed very knowledgeable – and claimed to be a direct descendant of the original inhabitants) we learned that two warring factions centuries ago eventually settled their differences and established supremacy by the “Birdman Challenge”.

The Manutara (Sooty Tern) bird came to Easter Island from its home on a small island several hundred miles away and became entwined in the history of this place. Apparently, it was the only migratory bird to come here and, as an added distinction, did not build nests but simply laid eggs on the ground. Somehow the bird’s head was “attached” to the human body and this is now not only the major symbol on the island but also has a spiritual significance from which all manner of myths and legends have emerged. (The stories we heard may seem somewhat fanciful to us today but are no less believable than many we have heard around the world and which have formed the basis for a civilization’s beliefs – including, perhaps, those of the major religions).

In any event, the birdman challenge (for all young men as a rite of passage) consisted of getting down the 300 feet high outer rim of the crater to the ocean, swimming a mile to a small island where the bird laid its eggs, finding an egg, and returning to the mainland (UP the cliff side) to present the undamaged egg to the high priest. Success meant that the winner was given a priestly rank for a year and live accordingly until “de-throned” the next spring.



We visited the village on the crater rim where the victor would live for at least part of his “rule” but which for the rest of the year was inhabited only by “priests”. Interestingly, this village and its construction mirrors that of places like SKara Brae in Scotland, fortified towns we have seen in Sardinia and even a 9000 year-old village we most recently saw in Cyprus. It really is fascinating how cultures thousands of miles apart – and often thousands of years different in time – have designed and

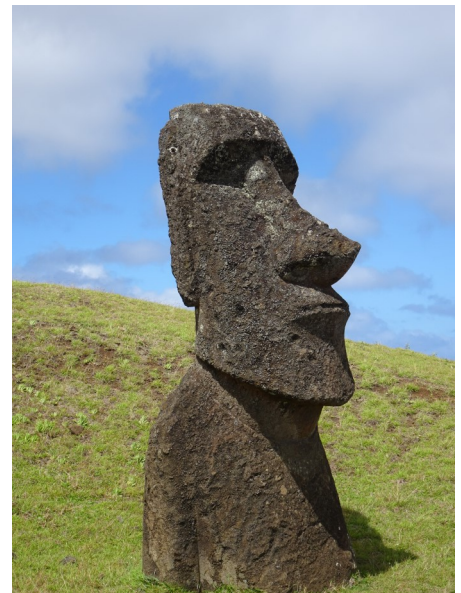


built homes and entire towns with very similar style and materials.

Likewise, the stories that are woven around these man-made habitats are often amazingly similar and each supports the legends that are unique to the region and era – yet are anything but unique when viewed from our perspective today. Once again, we feel privileged to be able to travel and witness the uniqueness, and the sameness, for ourselves.

A little after 3pm on Sunday our tour departed for the south central part of the island – less than a 30 minute drive. Here we walked a total of perhaps a mile but parts of it were very steep and had poor footing. However, the visit was very rewarding. We were walking at the base of the quarry from which most, if not all, the moai had been carved and we were told that there were over 400 in this relatively small region alone. Walking between the statues and admiring the engineering and artistic feat obvious in their carving, we felt that we were now well and truly on Easter Island. These were the iconic statues of countless National Geographic articles and BBC documentaries of visits by Thor Heyerdahl and others. It was an amazing experience.

Our guide gave us good descriptions of the process used - the statues were carved in situ on the quarry wall before being cut along the back (hence the flat rear) and allowed to fall down the grassy slope. Many were damaged in this fall but those deemed acceptable were then transported (sometimes over a number of miles) along three major “roads” using ropes as pulling aids. We were told that the heads had a 6 degree “lean” forwards which not only was helpful in the moving process but also gave the best perspective when mounted on the pedestals.



It should be remembered that the statues were carved over a period of many centuries (generally, it seems, in two major waves) and, as such, the size, design and features changed somewhat as time (and technology) progressed. In fact, each “generation” of carvers often left statues semi-finished so that their ancestors could not only see the methodology but have

something with which to work. Again these are the words of one person – our guide – but in the absence of any better explanation, this one works well and can explain many of the different features that we saw.



Above: Work in Progress

The guide that we had for our Monday morning tour was very talkative but also very informative as he explained a lot about the history and culture of the Rapa Nui. Our first stop was at a beach on the northeast coast where, it is said,



that the first inhabitants of Easter Island came ashore. There are here also a number of moai, which have been very well preserved, having been covered by sand for centuries. We learned a little more of the methods by which the statues were transported to the site for mounting on the ahu (platform) and the explanation gave a rationale for the legend that they had walked! In fact, a rope sling system by which several (many?) men actually rocked them from side to side giving an impression of walking.

We also learned that the “top knots” were the artists’ impression of the way the long hair was tied and colored. These were of a different material to that of the main statue

(actually they looked like spongy lava) and came from a different part of the island than the quarry we had seen yesterday. While the statues were carved at the quarry, the toppers were added after the main body was mounted in situ, at which time final carvings of markings were inscribed on the bodies.



Completely new to us was the fact that each statue and its base were placed over the buried bones of a deceased person of high rank. Once the burial had taken place and the ahu covered the tomb, word was given to start the work on the moai at the quarry. Since the carving and transportation could take a very long time (as much as several centuries was mentioned), it is not at all clear who looked after the original shallow tomb and, indeed, how the identity of its “owner” (now long deceased) was maintained.

From the beach (“The Navel of the World”) we drove another 20 minutes to the most famous group of moai, a line of fifteen near the water on the south coast. These had been toppled by a tsunami in the middle of the last century but had later been restored and placed on a higher platform by a Japanese team in the late 1900s. They are all of different size and features, only one has a top knot, but together they form a grand line of statues and are perhaps the most iconic grouping on the island. Certainly they form one of the ‘pictures’ that come to mind when Easter Island is mentioned.



Our final stop was at another line of five moai, again restored on their platform, and are unusual in that they all face out towards the sea and, we were told, are perfectly aligned for major astrological occurrences at solstice and equinox. True or not, they are an impressive grouping.



Finally, a word about the ‘religious’ or spiritual significance of the statues and the respect they are afforded even today, when most inhabitants of Easter Island are Catholic. Since they sit atop a tomb and cover not only the bones of the deceased but also the spirit (and are mostly of high-ranking individuals) they are essentially “hallowed ground”. In fact, they are often regarded as the “second life” of the deceased and deserving of the utmost respect. Consequently, locals will not touch the moai and, today, no-one is allowed to get close to them, although that is mainly for preservation, rather than religious reasons.



Behind this statue can be seen the quarry in which all the moai were carved.

An amazing experience.