

# ***Santiago and Easter Island***



*October 2019*

*Bob and Molly Hillery*

*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!*

# *Santiago and Easter Island, Chile; October 2019*

## **Tuesday October 15/Wednesday October 16**

We left home shortly before 3:30pm to drive to the airport. Our first flight, to Atlanta, left about 30 minutes after the scheduled departure of 6:30 and, despite very rough and rainy weather near ATL, we arrived only a few minutes late. This gave us a good hour in the lounge before boarding our overnight flight to Santiago. This nine-hour leg was quite rough in places but we both managed a few hours sleep after dinner on board.

We arrived in Santiago a little early at 8:30 am (Chile is one hour AHEAD of Eastern Time) and were through immigration and customs relatively quickly and soon found the official taxi kiosk. It was about a 30-minute ride to the Marriott, where we arrived before 10am. Obviously, our room wasn't ready but we were able to use the lounge for breakfast and a place to relax until about 12:30 when we got into our suite.

We unpacked and soon were catching up on missed sleep. We later made some arrangements for our city tour tomorrow and – equally important – for dinner tonight. For ease, we chose the restaurant in the hotel and (here's the Spanish influence) the opening time was 8:30. Consequently we were the first there!

In the meantime, we went to the lounge for a bite to eat and a drink. Dinner in the Latin Grill was very good and – in the true Mediterranean style – took 2 ½ hours. A great way to start this short holiday.

## **Thursday October 17**

After breakfast in the hotel lounge, we walked about 15 minutes to get tickets for the Hop On/Hop Off bus. Although departures were said to be every 30 minutes, we waited an hour for ours to arrive and can only assume that we are not in the high season. Certainly, there were very few people on the buses all day.

The weather had started out overcast and cool (below 50F) but the temperature rose and the skies became sunny as time progressed, to the point where it was very pleasant for strolling and for sitting on the open top deck of the bus.

The drive into the central downtown area took about an hour, during which we passed through several districts that have now been subsumed in the greater Santiago city. The general impression is of a very modern city with many new high-rise buildings for both commercial and residential use. We saw very few single-family homes but some older residences that must have been quite grand in their day but which today are probably divided into smaller apartments. In general, the streets were very wide in the European style





and, in fact, the whole city often seemed more like a European capital city than the New World.

The bus commentary gave a history of the country, particularly the era since the Spanish arrived. Chile (or perhaps part of the country) was ruled by the Viceroy of Peru for a period and the history of the two countries, and their fight for independence from Spain, seem very much intertwined.

Once in the main downtown area, we got off the bus at the Plaza de Armes, one of two huge squares that house most of the historical civic and religious buildings and many of the major places of interest for visitors.







## *Historic Santiago*

The map given us by the bus company was very difficult to follow so we were able to identify only a few of the dozens of fine buildings. However, we found it very pleasant to simply walk along the major boulevards and pedestrian areas and take in the flavor of this prosperous-looking capital. A stop for a coffee in a sidewalk café and a good deal of people-watching made for an easy but interesting three hours in Santiago.

The ride back on the bus took almost an hour and it was almost 5pm before we got back to the room.

Tonight we ate at a Chilean restaurant on the third floor of the nearby mall. The food and service were very good (although portions were extremely large) but we enjoyed the experience of dining in a local restaurant. On the face of it, this could have been any one of several that we frequent in Cincinnati, but the overall ambiance was so much different. We can't really say what's different – but it is a feeling that we invariably get when eating out in a foreign country; people watching seems to be so much more interesting!





## Friday October 17

We were up shortly after 6am as we had ordered a taxi to the airport for 7. It didn't take us long to finish packing and check out and, as the taxi was available, we were on our way by 6:40 and at the airport by 7. Check-in, security and getting "approvals" to visit Easter Island were also quite efficient so we were in plenty of time for our 9:30 LATAM flight. This was a five hour flight and our first experience on the Dreamliner and we can say that the aircraft was very comfortable. LATAM service, however, was no better than we receive on Delta, so a little disappointing.



*Main Terminal*

*Easter Island Airport*



We arrived on Easter Island at 12:30 and, after quite a wait for the bags, we were greeted with a lei before taking a shuttle for the short ride to the resort. Here we had a welcome drink, got checked in and arranged our tours for the stay. We were then able to go to our room, which has a fantastic view over the ocean.



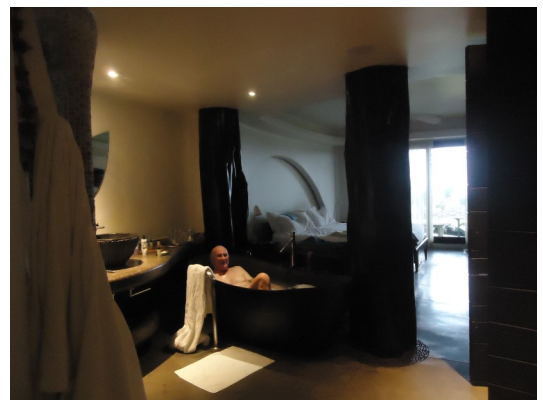
*Hanga  
Roa  
Resort*

*Our patio*





The rooms are in blocks of about six and are remote from the lobby and the dining/bar areas. A series of brick pathways stretch through the complex. The room itself is very nice, if a little bit in the Flint-stone fashion. There's a nice shower, a super king-size bed and a bath out in the bedroom which made for an interesting evening ablution.



I went for an almost 2 mile walk around the headland near the resort. Some roads are paved, but most are red dust pounded flat-ish. The whole island is volcanic and the beach that I saw is black lava rather than sand. Apparently there are some sandy areas on the island but not in this immediate



area. The houses and restaurants that I saw were modest but, apart from being set in a dusty yard, appeared to be well kept and clean. There are lots of old pickup trucks, motor bikes and cycles for local transportation. No doubt we will get a better flavor for the island as a whole when we take our tours over the next few days.





Around 6:30 we sat outside our room and waited for the sun to set over the Pacific (it was actually after 8:30 when it set) before walking to the bar for our sunset cocktail. This was followed by dinner at 8pm to end our first day on Rapa Nui. The meal was good and the wine flowed freely!

### **Saturday October 19**

We had breakfast in the main dining room and were ready for the start of our first tour at 9:30. ***(A map of Easter Island shown on Page 19 details all the areas we visited on all three of our tours).*** The van took us out of the village and to the rim of the largest volcanic crater on the island, Rano Kau. 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.



***The Birdman Challenge.***

***Down the outer rim (right), swim to the large island (1 mile), gather an egg, swim back and scale the cliff!***





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.

We thought that our first tour was excellent and thought it interesting that we had not yet seen any of the Moai (the Heads) that are the fascination of Easter Island and the reason we came! We did,

however, see the base of a now lost Moa and it was here that our guide told us of the astrological features of the statues. At this spot, he claimed, at the winter solstice (we are in the southern hemisphere), the sun rises directly over this site which he suggested was probably aligned with other stones in the area. We need to come back in June!



After our tour we had a very light lunch and later in the afternoon, I rented a bicycle from the collection at the resort. The bike had seen better days and could have used a drop of oil, but it was fun to get out (in the very strong winds) and see a little bit of the island from another vantage point. I did just over 10 miles but it took well over an hour!

Tonight we had another very pleasant dinner but had to take our sunset cocktails inside as there was a threat of rain and it was still very windy.



## Sunday October 20

We were up a little later as our tour today was in the afternoon. We had a leisurely breakfast and then relaxed on our patio until a little after noon when we took a walk to a local coffee shop. Google estimated ten minutes but it took us almost 20 – more than that on the way there as a result of my map reading!

We sat outside and had coffee and cake, watching the waves roll in across the small inlet. The weather was sunny and mild (high 60s) but the wind was very strong



and made for some very spectacular waves and spray.



A little after 3pm 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.

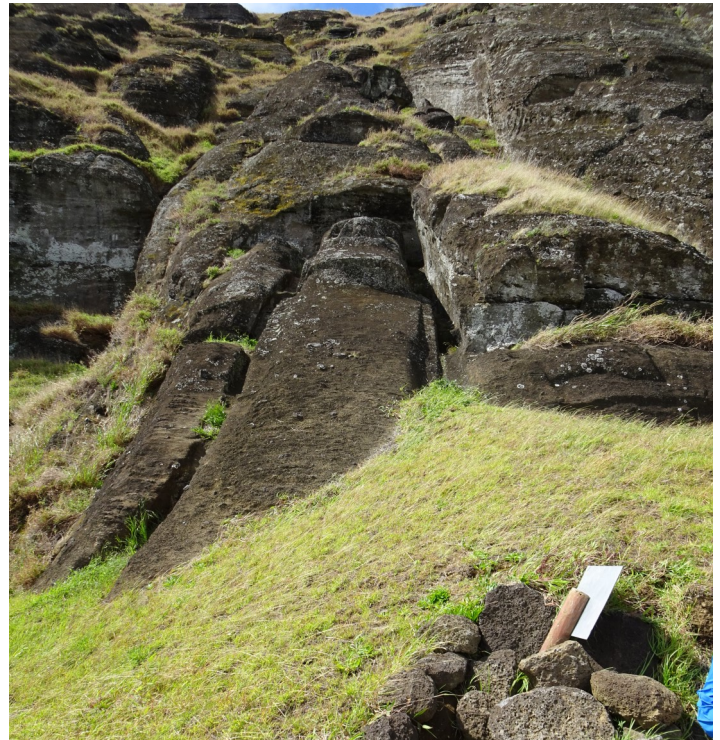
It should be remembered that the statues were carved over a period of many centuries (generally, it seems, in two major waves) and, as such, the size, design and features changed somewhat as time (and technology) progressed. In fact, each “generation” of carvers often left statues semi-finished so that 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.



***Works in Progress***

***Right: The largest Moa***

***12 meters tall***



When we returned to the hotel (via the beautiful south coast) after a very interesting tour on which we saw what we had expected of Easter Island, we checked the time for tomorrow’s tour, only to find that the one we had booked did not go on Mondays! To cut a very long story short, during which the hotel blamed the tour operators and vice versa, we were offered a private tour of the area we had wanted to see. While the hotel staff were apologetic, the experience soured things for us and took the edge of what until then had been a perfect experience.



Nevertheless, we enjoyed our sunset cocktail and dinner once again and retired with one more tour before leaving the island.



## Monday October 21

**We were** up around 7:30 to finish our packing, have breakfast and get ready for our 9:30 tour. Since we were supposed to leave immediately after the tour, our bags were to be stored for us until our departure. However, there were anticipated delays in flights to Santiago (yesterday's had been cancelled) due to a state of emergency existing in the city. (People were upset a steep rises in fares on public transportation and a number of people had been killed in the riots, prompting a 10pm to 7am curfew). Consequently, getting in and out of Santiago and, indeed, getting about within the city, was difficult and delays were frequent. Because of all this (and, I suspect, the mix-up on the tour) we were told that our room would be available after the normal checkout time until we would eventually leave for the airport.

The guide that we had for our private 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.

Markings and carvings on the torso of the statues revealed more about the person now entombed. Also, the eyes (now no longer present, although there are examples in museums) were combinations of stones, usually obsidian for the pupil and brighter colors inlaid around that. With the painting on the statue itself, a red top knot and multiple markings, the whole must have been a quite spectacular sight.

From the beach (“The Navel of the World”) we drove first to a “magnetic stone” (which had been used in navigation but for about which further explanation escaped us) and then 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 seven 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.

We arrived back at the hotel about 1pm and were told that the flight to Santiago would leave at 5, so we were to get the shuttle at a little before 3pm. This gave us time to go back to our room, clean up a little and change, and have a coffee before leaving. The drive to the airport was less than 10 minutes but then we had about an hour of check-in (quick) and security/passport control (slow). After that it wasn’t too long before we started boarding – for which we were very thankful as we had been warned that there was a possibility of a last minute cancellation if Santiago conditions decreed. Not that more time on Easter Island would necessarily be a bad thing (it was a wonderful visit) but we do need to get back to Ohio sometime.

The 4 ½ hour flight was uneventful and we arrived in Santiago soon after 11pm. It was a relatively quick process to get our bags and a taxi and we were at our hotel before midnight. Traffic on the road into town was almost non-existent as a result of the night curfew and, once at the hotel (doors locked for security) we were told that many amenities in the building and, indeed, most in the surrounding area had been suspended or curtailed. At this point, however, all we wanted was our room and a bed.

### ***Farewell to Easter Island***



#### **Tuesday October 22**

We were up about 9:30 and had breakfast in the main restaurant of the hotel as the concierge lounge was closed. We then stopped by the desk and were told that our tour scheduled for the afternoon was definitely cancelled. Since the likelihood of anything changing dramatically to allow us to see more of the city and surroundings during our stay, we considered changing our flight and leaving tonight rather than Wednesday evening. However, there were no seats available to Atlanta (we guessed that others may have had a similar idea) so we reconciled to staying as planned and gazing at the Andes from our hotel room, rather than actually visiting.

We had coffee sitting outside in the early afternoon (very warm and sunny) and went to the only place open for dinner – a buffet meal in the hotel. It turned out to be very good, especially when accompanied by a bottle of Chilean Sauvignon Blanc. Other than that it was a slow day!

### **Wednesday October 23**

We had a late breakfast again in the main dining room as, once again, most other services in the hotel were closed down. It was a beautiful, sunny morning and it seemed a shame not to be spending time out in the city or its surroundings. However, there really was nowhere we could go as public places (like the mall near the hotel) were still closed.

Around 3:30 we left the hotel and had an uneventful taxi ride to the airport (although there was quite a lot of traffic on the roads by now). We had several hours before our flight but we left on time around 8:30 for the overnight trip to Atlanta. This arrived a little ahead of time – in fact, before the airport opened! – but we were soon at the gate waiting for our last leg to Cincinnati. Unfortunately, a mechanical issue with the plane caused a two-hour delay but we eventually arrived home around noon on Thursday.



***It had been a wonderful trip, despite the problems in Santiago and we really enjoyed our three days on Easter Island.***



## Our Tours on Easter Island

### Rapa Nui

Tour 3



Tour 1

Tour 2

