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AN OCEAN LEGEND

Rapa Nui showcases a distinctive blend of ancient Polynesian culture and mysterious archaeological wonders on a remote island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean

Never has a tiny speck of land aroused so much curiosity throughout history like Rapa Nui has. Located more than 2,000 miles off the Pacific Coast of continental Chile, the 63-square-mile Polynesian island, also known as Easter Island, is the most remote inhabited island on the planet. Yet, people travel from near and far for an up-close look at Rapa Nui's most fabled attraction: nearly a thousand larger-than-life moai statues dotting the volcanic landscape. Weighing an average of 14 tons and rising up to 70 feet tall, these anthropomorphic monoliths are a window into an ancient civilization that still remains shrouded in enigma.

"It's the 21st century and it's still a mystery how the moai were built and transported around the island," said Brigitte Lämmle, a Director at Abercrombie & Kent, a luxury outfitter that specializes in trips to Rapa Nui. "It's so interesting to hear tour guides recount the different theories, some of which have been passed down through oral tradition, and others proposed by prominent archaeologists and anthropologists who travel from all over the world to study the moai."

There's also question marks as to when the island was first settled (research points to somewhere between 300 and 700 AD) and from where its original inhabitants arrived. Local lore has it that Ariki (king) Hotu Matu'a lived on a magnificent continent that he believed was destined to sink, so he sent seven explorers to find fertile land to relocate his kingdom. When they discovered Rapa Nui, King Hotu Matu'a gathered his tribe in two hulking outrigger canoes and sailed to the island, declaring their new home *te pito o te henua*, or the navel of the world.



WORDS: Nora Walsh, IMAGE © Explora Rapa Nui

Easter Island, also known as Rapa Nui, is most famous for its large moai statues that were carved by native peoples between 1250 and 1500

Steeped in myth and *mana* (which roughly translates to spiritual power), the megalithic culture of Rapa Nui manifests itself as much in modern identity as it does in stone monuments. Locals speak Rapa Nui, dance Rapa Nui and maintain age-old customs that define Rapa Nui. “It’s such a magical place,” said Lämmle. “It’s so different from anywhere else in the world.”

The UNESCO-listed Rapa Nui National Park covers more than 40% of the triangular island formed by three extinct volcanoes. An extensive network of trails makes it easy for active travelers to hike, bike or horseback ride to white-sand beaches, volcanic craters and hundreds of archaeological sites.

Two of Rapa Nui’s prominent luxury hotels offer a roster of daily excursions led by seasoned local guides who provide incredible insight into the history, culture and beauty of the island. The Nayara Hangarua, a plush oceanside property blossoming with native hibiscus flowers and fragrant tipanie, is within walking distance of Rapa Nui’s town center, Hanga Roa. Each room enjoys broad ocean views framed by floor-to-ceiling windows and a covered terrace. Large freestanding clay tubs anchor spacious open-plan layouts designed with earthy touches and organic curves that mirror ancient stone dwellings found on the island. Bamboo therapies and hot stone massages are on offer at the spa, perfect before or after a soak in the open-air



Opposite (top): Horseback riding is a great way to explore the impressive volcanic landscapes of Rapa Nui

Opposite (bottom): The UNESCO-listed Rapa Nui National Park covers more than 40% of the island with a network of oceanside trails

Above: Explora Rapa Nui sits in a privileged and secluded location with far-reaching views over the vast, blue Pacific Ocean



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jacuzzi. The service is warm and genuine, whether you’re sipping on a Guayaba Sour at the poolside restaurant or dining on island-sourced cuisine at its two eateries with sunset patio views. Upon arrival, the hotel’s activities director works with guests to customize excursion itineraries based on their interests. Two half-day excursions are offered daily, with time for lunch and relaxation in between, as well as a range of adventures including scuba diving, ATV (all-terrain vehicle) expeditions and volcano trekking.

For a more remote experience, check into Explora Rapa Nui in Te Miro O’one. Here, the LEED-certified lodge overlooks the southern coast from a secluded property home to wild horses and grazing cattle. While Explora focuses on conservation and sustainability, it doesn’t compromise on design and comfort. Outside, the low-slung base camp blends into the hillside, while inside timber-lined gathering spaces stand out with Scandinavian-

style furnishings gazing out to water views. Its 30 rooms are just as stunning wrapped in a modern melange of blonde pine wood, slate and concrete with big picture windows and deep-soaking tubs. Stays are inclusive of accommodation, gourmet meals, premium wines, well-mixed beverages, and more than 30 locally guided land and sea explorations that range from gentle to vigorous. Travelers who push their endurance to the limit can recover in the poolside sauna or with a deep tissue massage in spa cabins cooled by ocean breezes.

A visit to the Father Sebastian Englert Anthropological Museum in town is a great introduction to Rapa Nui’s history and culture. It houses an array of artifacts including the island’s only female moai and Rongo Rongo writing tablets that still baffle linguists. To understand how the moai were constructed, head to the Rano Raraku volcano where you can see dozens of moai in different stages



Above: Ahu Tongariki is famous for its 15 giant moai standing shoulder-to-shoulder on a ceremonial platform

Below: For a dip in the ocean, Rapa Nui has beautiful tropical beaches, including Anakena and Ovahe (pictured below)

Opposite: Music and dance have been part of the Rapa Nui culture since the island was first settled between 300 and 700 AD

of completion—from tall upright statues to half-carved figures still embedded in the hard tuff of the mountainside. Knowledgeable guides are on hand to explain the history and significance of the moai, construction techniques and theories on how the monoliths were transported around the island.

Down the road from the quarry sits Ahu Tongariki, one of the island's most impressive and photographed moai sites. Fifteen mighty stone giants stand shoulder-to-shoulder on a 300-foot-plus *ahu* (ceremonial platform) backed by a rocky coastline and the scenic cliffs of Poike. The moai are believed to personify important leaders of the different clans that once inhabited the island. It's said that once eyes of coral and obsidian were affixed to each statue, it was imbued with ancestors' living spirit, and their *mana* protected the community over which it presided.

Another fascinating cultural site is the Orongo Ceremonial Village whose circular stone dwellings inspired the architectural design of both the Nayara Hangaroa and Explora hotels. This complex, along with the offshore island Motu Nui, was where the annual Birdman competition took place. During the Moai period, resources became scarce and a civil war ensued. It eventually led to a new system of governance based on a decathlon-style



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EMBRAER TIP

As the furthest-flying midsize jet with a range of 3,340 nm, the Praetor 500 allows you to add a trip to your Chilean itinerary and fly directly to Easter Island (IPC) from Santiago de Chile (SCL) in just over five hours.

contest among the clans. During the Birdman race, the first man to secure and bring back a Manutara bird's egg from Motu Nui would become the reigning leader for the following year.

As a seafaring people, the ocean also plays a key role in Rapa Nui's culture. Travelers can surf with locals in Hanga Roa harbor, scuba dive crystalline waters to see underwater moai, and swim in turquoise bays at Ovahe and Anakena Beach. Fresh tuna is the island's signature dish, which is served up at restaurants all over town. Don't miss Explora's melt-in-your-mouth tuna tartare with dollops of mango and avocado.

Lively Rapa Nui performances from the Kari Kari Cultural Ballet to Mana Maohi at restaurant Te Moana showcase impressive spectacles of traditional song, dance, dress, and body painting. "Rapa Nui people feel responsible for showing the world how we are evolving but always preserving our roots," said Mahina Pakarati, Owner of Mahatua, an artisan market in Hanga Roa brimming with souvenirs.

In late January and early February, the island hosts the Tapati Festival, a two-week extravaganza of Rapa Nui culture. A vibrant calendar of competitive events includes singing, swimming, fishing and horse-riding contests, as well as more extreme disciplines like the tortora reed raft race held inside the Rano Raraku volcano, and a risky sledding competition where contestants rocket down a hillside on two banana tree trunks fastened together. Craft exhibitions, theater performances and participatory street parades culminate in the crowning of a Rapa Nui queen.

"Our guests always say that three to four days in Rapa Nui is not enough. They wish they had more time," said Lämmle, "which makes the Polynesian custom of gifting travelers a local shell necklace to beckon a safe return to the island. It's a lovely sentiment and memento." ←



THE STORY OF THE MOAI

In 2011, Hotu Iti Araki founded the musical theater group Mana Maohi with the goal of preserving Rapa Nui culture. Araki has spent years interviewing local families to compile traditional Rapa Nui stories that have been passed from generation to generation. "The idea is to trace different versions back to reliable origin stories and turn them into cultural performances," he said. Inspired by the stories he collected, Araki created "The Story of the Moai," a seven-act show (which he directs and live narrates in English and Spanish) that features an ensemble of seven musicians and 15 dancers, including his parents and two siblings. While Araki composed much of the score, wrote the script, choreographed the dances, and produced the show, his father designed and handcrafted the intricate costumes adorned with bird feathers, sea shells, and vegetable fibers. Over the course of 90 minutes, the audience is mesmerized by vignettes that tell the story of the Rapa Nui people through music, song and dance. "I work with many young people so that they learn our history, language and identity in order to safeguard Rapa Nui traditions before they disappear." Travelers can help support the conservation of Rapa Nui culture by attending Mana Maohi's weekly shows at Te Moana restaurant and purchasing their album of original music.