

# CAUSE FOR THOUGHTS

*Home to a Polynesian population that traces its roots back over a thousand years, Easter Island has long been an exotic, but virtually ignored, atoll in the South Pacific. 100 Points contributing editor, **Joe Yogerst**, travels to the island known as Rapa Nui to explore the local Moai and indigenous culture, and finds himself pondering life, the universe and everything.*

PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

IT'S ABOUT AN HOUR BEFORE SUNSET AND I find myself sitting on a wall overlooking a busy little harbor watching the world go by. Dive boats are just coming in from a day exploring the area's underwater wonders, sliding up next to fishermen making final preparations for heading out to sea. A lone seal bobs among the boats, mesmerized by something onshore, either the kids splashing along a thin sliver of sand or teenagers engaged in pickup soccer on a field right behind the beach. Old men sip coffee at waterfront cafes, young lovers lean against a light post while an old lady hawks T-shirts and other souvenirs from a perch at the base of a Blessed Mary statue near the breakwater.

And I think to myself: This could be anywhere. A thousand different islands around the world. Very little hint of where I am or who these people are. Until you hear them speak – Spanish and Polynesian. Which whittles down the choices to just a single spot on the planet: Rapa Nui. Or to use its more familiar appellation: Easter Island in the South Pacific.

Before landing on Easter Island, I never thought much about the people who live here. With so much emphasis on the island's giant stone heads – and the long lost people who erected them – little is said about those who currently populate one of the world's most enigmatic places. You figure there have to be park rangers, archeologists and others involved in protecting or investigating the island's heritage. But it doesn't occur, until you get here, that the secluded volcanic isle also supports a "civilian" population, ordinary people with the same triumphs and struggles as communities anywhere else.

And quite a few of them too: around 5,000 in total by the best government estimate. Almost two-thirds of them are native Rapa Nui, descendants of the Polynesian mariners who migrated to this south-east corner of the Pacific between 900 and 1,300 years ago. The others are mostly mainland Chileans, mostly recent migrants who ventured to Isla de Pascua (the Spanish name) in search of the

social mobility and economic opportunity they couldn't find back home.

With more than 90% of the island set aside as national park, almost everyone lives in laid-back Hanga Roa, the island's capital and commercial center. The town centers around two harbors on the island's western shore, one of the bays set aside for the Chilean Navy and cargo operations, the one where I'm hanging out reserved for the small fishing fleet and tourism related maritime endeavors like the sleek Zegrahm expedition ship that's anchored about a half mile offshore.

"We still fish the old way – with rocks and a line," says one of the old salts, his face dark and deeply creased from so many years exposed to the elements. "We hook and bait the lines, tie them to rocks we collect from shore and toss them overboard. Ten or 15 lines from one boat. That's how we catch tuna, mahi mahi . . . and sometimes even swordfish that are bigger than our boats."

Hanga Roa is surrounded by market gardens that grow fresh fruit and vegetables for local residents, restaurants and hotels. The produce is trucked into a farmer's market that unfolds each day along Avenida Atamu Tekena, the main drag and the only stretch of road on the entire island where you are likely to encounter bumper-to-bumper traffic –

*Change is inevitable just about anywhere. But unlike most places, the Easter islanders can trace their development to two distinct occurrences, both of them with American roots.*

from locals slowing to examine copious mangoes, melons and sweet potatoes.

The island doesn't have a car dealership, and so I ask a farmer where everyone got their pickup trucks. "You have to go to Santiago," he explains. "Buy the vehicle, pay your tax and license, and then find a ship to bring it back to Rapa Nui. And then pray the ship doesn't sink – which actually happened once."

Ramon Pakomio, a local guide, shop owner and jack-of-all-trades, is old enough to remember a time when there was only a handful of vehicles on the whole island and none of the roads were paved. "All of the things we have now," he tells me over cold beers in one of the waterfront cafes, "electricity, running water, flush toilets – this is also fairly recent, only since the 1960s. The first time I wore shoes, I was 14 years old. I can't tell you how this island has changed since I was a child."

Change is inevitable just about anywhere. But unlike most places, the Easter islanders can trace their development to two distinct occurrences, both of them with American roots. The first was the construction of an airport in the late 1960s – at the behest of the US Air Force – allowing people to fly to the island for the first time rather than taking the long sea passage from Chile. That was the start of tourism. The second was the filming of the big budget Hollywood movie *Rapa Nui* in 1994. Director Kevin Costner basically took over the island for six months and nearly every resident was somehow involved in the production as extras, set builders or suppliers of some sort.

"The movie changed everything," says Ramon, "in the sense that we suddenly had more money to start a new business or build a new house or buy a car. People came here from the mainland to work on the film and decided to stay. So the population grew. And because the movie company was willing to pay whatever you asked for something, prices went up and never came down."

The other big change in recent years is the islanders' attitude about what it means to be Rapa



HANGA ROA TOWN HARBOUR



PHOTOS: GETTY IMAGES

DANCERS PERFORMING DURING  
TAPATI FESTIVAL, EASTER ISLAND, CHILE



Nui. “The sense of pride is very recent,” says local archeologist Patricia Vargas, who has lived on Easter Island since the 1970s. “It wasn’t there 30 years ago. When I first came here you couldn’t get local people interested in saving the *moai* (giant stone heads). They’d say ‘Why bother? There’s a thousand of them!’ But now there is an intense sense of pride. And young people are no longer leaving the island like they once did. They want to be part of what is happening here, this incredible revival.”

That pride plays itself out in various ways. All of a sudden it’s hip to have Polynesian tattoos and go by your Rapa Nui rather than Spanish name. Traditional dance was snatched from the verge of extinction by blending other Polynesian dance forms (like the Maori *haka*) with the dances portrayed in grainy black-and-white newsreels of Easter Island from the 1930s. More and more young couples are opting for traditional island weddings that involve a ritual meal of chicken and yams in an *uma pae* (stone-lined pit). The bride and groom consume a small portion of the feast, but the bulk is buried in the ground as a sacrifice to the *moai*.

“The interesting thing,” Vargas tells me, “is that this pride came from the outside in the beginning. All of these tourists and archeologists coming here, telling local people how incredible their culture was. And finally they started to believe themselves.”

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It might be chic to say I went all the way to Easter Island and *didn’t* see the *moai*. But there’s no way I am going to venture to one of Earth’s most secluded landfalls and not see the reason why it’s world famous. However, I don’t want to see them like everyone else. Most visitors are shuttled around by vans or small buses, or hire a car in Hanga Roa and take off on their own on a triangular route that takes them out along the south shore and back via the north coast.

I, on the other hand, will walk. Not alone, but in the company of two other hikers and a guide

*“Our oral tradition says that the *moai* “walked” from the quarry to sacred places along the coast where they stand today. That’s because they were moved in an upright position – pushed and pulled along a bed of big toromiro palm tree trunks.”*

– YOYO RODRIGO, EXPLORA LODGE

from the Explora Lodge. His name is Yoyo Rodrigo, tall and affable, with a killer smile and a seemingly limitless knowledge of his native island and ancient Polynesian ancestors. A van drops us off in what seems like the middle of nowhere, and we head inland along a grassy path edged in the low, scrub-like vegetation that covers most of the island.

“We’re walking on a very special road,” Yoyo explains as we amble up the path. “For hundreds of years, my people used these kind of roads to move *moai*. Our oral tradition says that the *moai* “walked” from the quarry to sacred places along the coast where they stand today. That’s because they were moved in an upright position – pushed and pulled along a bed of big toromiro palm tree trunks. That’s the reason we have so few trees on Rapa Nui today – they cut down so many palms to move the *moai*.”

As we continue up the road, Yoyo points out rocky clumps that I would probably mistake as ordinary piles of stone if not for his guidance. There is a cluster of ancient hearths at the center of what

must have been a fairly large village, and further along the foundation stones of an aristocrat’s house. One structure along the sacred way has been rebuilt – a rectangular *hare moa* or stone chicken coop, constructed during the later stages of Rapa Nui’s decline when food became scarce and chickens worth their weight in gold.

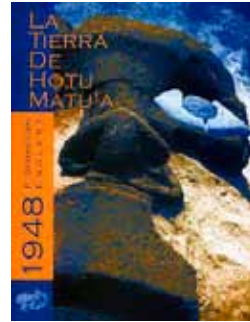
There would be far more ancient buildings for us to examine if not for the fact that 19th century sheep ranchers used the rocks to construct the ubiquitous stone walls that crisscross Easter Island today – yet another clue to the island’s peculiar history. Although “discovered” by Dutch mariners in 1722, nobody laid claim to the island until 1888 when Chile annexed the isolated landfall. Shortly thereafter, the Chileans leased the entire island to Williamson-Balfour Company, a British sheep conglomerate that transformed Easter into a patchwork quilt of sheep paddocks. By this time the population had fallen to around 100 native Rapa Nui, who were summarily rounded up, resettled at Hanga Roa and forced to work as virtual slaves for the sheep company.

“They let the sheep run riot over the island,” Yoyo laments. “Destroy what little was left of the local flora . . . and our ancient culture.”

One thing the sheep ranchers couldn’t destroy – or move – were the giant stone heads. During our hike we come across around a dozen *moai* toppled over at the side of the road. Nobody knows why these statues were abandoned before reaching their final destination at sacred sites along the coast. But for modern visitors it’s a chance to get up close and personal with the porous volcanic stone from which they were carved. Etched into the side of the reclining heads are faint serial numbers, a clue not to the island’s distant past but its more recent history.

“This number was made by Father Sebastian Englert,” says Yoyo, “A German Capuchin monk who was the first to identify the significance of the *moai* and other Rapa Nui archeology. He learned how to speak our language, got to know my people and our oral history, and because of





LA TIERRA DE HOTU MATU'A ("THE LAND OF HOTU MATU'A")

him we learned along about our past that had been forgotten in modern times.”

Stationed on Easter Island from 1935-69, Father Sebastian mixed his missionary work with an avid interest in anthropology and local history. He undertook the first study of local archeology and published his work in a landmark book called *La Tierra de Hotu Matu'a* (“*The Land of Hotu Matu'a*”) that for the first time exposed the wonders and mystery of Easter Island to the outside world.

A squall blows in from the south and we brave the final mile of our hike in pouring rain, making our way through thick brush populated with wild flowers and stunted guava trees. The sun is blazing again by the time we reach the end of the trail at Rano Raraku, an extinct volcano where the vast majority of the moai were quarried with little more than stone chisels and human sweat. Nearly 400 stone heads remain in situ around the volcano, in various stages of completion from barely started to nearly done. Once again, archeologists can only surmise why they were never finished or relocated, or why the quarry appears to have been abandoned with such haste. Among these is the largest of all

– a 71-foot high moai estimated to weigh around 270 tons.

Yoyo leads us through a gap into the low-slung crater, much of the interior filled by a deep-blue lake and surrounding swamp. There’s a glint in his eyes as he explains how the crater is the centerpiece of Tapati Rapa Nui, a cultural festival that unfolds every February over several weeks. The event was launched in 1975 as a means to celebrate ancient Polynesian ways and means, not just art, music and food but also the physical prowess that was once part of everyday life on the island.

Rano Raraku is the sight of an event called Tau’a Rapa Nui. “It’s our version of the triathlon,” says Yoyo, who participated for many years. “You start by paddling across the lake in a small reed boat. Then there’s a footrace around the inside of the crater – with a bunch of bananas balanced on your shoulders. Last you have to swim across the lake using a float that you’re supposed to make yourself from the reeds that grow around the edge of the water.” And you do this virtually stark naked, wearing nothing but loincloth and henna tattoos based on bygone Polynesian designs.

A few years ago, the energy drink company Red Bull tried to introduce an even more extreme event – a modern version of the ancient Tangata Manu or Bird Man competition in which young lads scramble down a thousand-foot cliff and swim across shark-infested waters to a rocky islet where they must fetch a seabird egg and carry it back to the cliff-top without breaking. “When I was younger, I would have done that for sure,” Yoyo smiles. “But now? No way! I’m too smart for that.”

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One of those inspired by the writings of the archeologist monk was Thor Heyerdahl. The legendary Norwegian author and explorer landed on Easter Island in the 1950s during his famous “Kon Tiki” period, during which he tried to prove that Polynesia was settled from South America.

## HOW TO GET READY

Learn more about Easter Island from **Turismo Chile** ([www.visit-chile.org](http://www.visit-chile.org)), the website of the nonprofit **Easter Island Foundation** (<http://islandheritage.org>) as well as a local website called the Easter Island Home Page ([www.netaxs.com/~trance/rapanui.html](http://www.netaxs.com/~trance/rapanui.html)). It didn’t get great reviews or do much box office in the US, but the 1994 film **Rapa Nui** (directed by Kevin Cosner) was filmed entirely on Easter Island and presents one interpretation of what might have doomed the ancient Rapa Nui. ***Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*** by Jared Diamond offers an entertaining scholarly take on the demise of the people who carved the giant heads. ***Easter Island*** by Jennifer Vanderbes blends archeology and wartime intrigue in a fictional account of two Western women living on Rapa Nui over a 60-year span.

## WHAT TO PACK

Easter Island is farther south than the rest of Polynesia and the climate more Mediterranean than tropical. T-shirt and shorts are fine for daytime, but you’ll need long pants and a light jacket after sundown when the temperature drops. Expect highs in the 70s during the winter months and 80s during the summer. A poncho or rain jacket isn’t a bad idea either. And don’t forget sturdy footwear – hiking boots or similar – for the scrambling up volcanic trails.

## HOW TO GET THERE

**LAN Chile** offers seven flights a week between Santiago and Mataverí International Airport on Easter Island, and two flights a week between Papeete (Tahiti) and Easter Island. No other airline serves the island ([www.lan.com](http://www.lan.com)). Cruise ship lines call on Easter Island with much more frequency than years past. Seattle-based **Zeghram Expeditions** offers cruises to/from Tahiti several times each year ([www.zeco.com](http://www.zeco.com)). Even the smallest cruise ships are too large to dock at Easter Island, so they anchor just offshore and passengers are shuttled to La Caleta jetty in Hanga Roa, the island’s only town.



EXPLORA LODGE

## WHERE TO STAY

**Explora Lodge** offers the poshest digs on Easter Island. Organized along the same lines as its sister lodges in Patagonia and the Atacama Desert, the lodge is an all-inclusive adventure resort with a variety of half and full day excursions lead by knowledgeable local guides. The sleek, modern design is straight out of *Architectural Digest*, the guest rooms rustic but very comfortable with large picture windows that look out onto the island landscape. The all-inclusive price includes accommodation, meals and guides. Explora also boasts a swimming pool and small spa. The one drawback is a secluded location about 20 minutes drive from town. (doubles from \$600; [www.explora.com](http://www.explora.com)).

Also new on Easter Island is the **Altiplanico**, another eco resort with very interesting architecture. Inspired by the boat-shaped homes of the island’s original inhabitants, the oblong bungalows feature private patios (with wicker swinging chairs) and outdoor showers heated by solar panels. Located in a eucalyptus grove about six minute by taxi or 25 by foot north of town, many of the rooms look out over the Pacific Ocean and tranquil farmland. Breakfast is included in the room rate, but lunch and dinner at the Altiplanico restaurant is extra. Free wifi in the lobby, bar and restaurant area (doubles from \$350; [www.altiplanico.com](http://www.altiplanico.com)).

Easter Island’s poshest digs is scheduled to open in July of 2010 – the **Hanga Roa Eco Village**



EASTER ISLAND (CHILE) - CYCLING THE SOUTH COAST

**& Spa** on the site of the old Hanga Roa Hotel. Constructed with natural materials like cypress logs, clay and volcanic rock, the design is inspired by the ancient stone dwellings of Orongo, home of the legendary Bird Man Cult (doubles from \$1,233; [www.hotelhangaraoa.cl](http://www.hotelhangaraoa.cl)).

## WHAT TO SEE AND DO

Most people join one of the many tours offered by hotels and travel agencies in town. These can range in size from four people in a Land Rover to 25 or 30 in a large bus. Private guides are another option: multilingual locals with a deep understanding of island history and traditions who will take you around the various archeological sites in their own vehicles. **Ramon Edmunds** and his American wife Josie are highly recommended (email: [haumaka@entelchile.net](mailto:haumaka@entelchile.net); tel: (56) (32) 100-274).

It’s also possible to rent your own vehicle.

CHILE, EASTER ISLAND, RANO RARAKU, VOLCANIC LAKE







DETAIL OF FINE STONework AHU VINAPU - EASTER ISLAND

Part of his evidence was an *ahu* (stone platform) at Vinapu on the island's south shore that bares an uncanny resemblance to the Inca stonework of the Peruvian Andes.

"A lot of archeologists don't like Heyerdahl," says Patricia Vargas as we examine the rock wall at Vinapu that sparked his controversial premise. "He was very flamboyant, a natural showman – the opposite of most scientists. A lot of them have spent the past 50 years trying to disprove his theories. But I think he was partially right about the contact between the South Pacific and South America. He just got the direction wrong. Nowadays there is a strong belief among many researchers that

Polynesian people reached South America at some point and brought back knowledge of Inca building technology to Easter Island."

Vargas also credits Heyerdahl with picking up where Father Sebastian left off in terms of scientific study. Hoping to prove his theory beyond a shadow of doubt, the Norwegian brought some of the greatest scientific minds of the time to Easter Island, including the American anthropologist William Mulloy, who made more than 20 trips to the island over three decades and motivated eager young researchers (like Vargas) to devote their careers to uncovering the secrets of Easter Island.

She has her own theories on why the civilization

collapsed. "By cutting down all the trees, they ran out of material to make oceanic canoes. So they trapped themselves, cut themselves off from the rest of Polynesia. And when you are trapped on an island for years, you start to go a little crazy and you focus on small things. A very narrow view of life rather than the big picture. In the case of the Rapa Nui, it was bigger and bigger moai at the expense of all else."

Why larger statues? Vargas postulates that when resources began to dwindle – because of climate change, natural disasters, human overuse or a combination of all three – the islanders assumed they had offended the gods. To get back in favor, the

chiefs mandated the construction of larger statues. And when that didn't halt environmental decline, they figured it was because the new heads weren't large enough, a vicious cycle in which everything took a back seat to creating larger and more elaborate moai. The downward spiral eventually lead to civil war and possibly cannibalism amongst the various clans.

Vargas and other community leaders see a similar trend unfolding on Easter Island today. The population boom of recent years has lead to intense competition for local resources and heated discussion among various factions over the future of the island.

At his hilltop home overlooking Hanga Roa, former governor Sergio Rapu tells me about the dilemmas facing the island today. "Convention 169 (in international agreement passed in 1989) has given a lot of rights to indigenous people around the world and one of them is the right to decide on issues that determine your own well being." The core issue on Easter Island, says Rapu, is how quickly the island is changing through tourism and immigration. "We are not self sufficient any more. We must import food to feed everyone. There is not enough ground water, insufficient health care." As well as a sense that Rapa Nui culture – so recently revived – could once again be overwhelmed by outside forces.

Rapu and others have proposed that the Chilean government award Easter Island special status similar to the Galapagos Islands of Ecuador, in which a maximum human carrying capacity is established and restrictions placed on both migration from the mainland and the number of tourists who are allowed to come ashore. Last year, hundreds of islanders blocked the airport runway for 48 hours to bring attention to their demand for more autonomy, and the Chilean government responded by pledging changes in the constitution.

Another recent dispute was whether or not Louis Vuitton should be allowed to borrow one of

the giant moai for an outdoor exhibition in Paris. The French luxury company offered a half-million-dollar preservation fund in exchange for the right to display the statue outside the Louvre. But in early April [2010], islanders voted overwhelming (89% opposed) to ban the exchange. "It's like me asking to borrow the Statue of Liberty or Venus de Milo to bring to Easter Island," says Rapu. "Ridiculous! We are tired of letting other people use our heritage to raise money and promote themselves."

"It really reminds me of the olden times," says Vargas as we drive back into Hanga Roa from the south coast. "The clan system . . . people fighting over scarce resources. Before it was maybe sweet potatoes. Now it's money. But it's really the same thing. And if it wasn't Louis Vuitton it would be something else."

She wonders out loud if Easter Island – both past and present – offers a cautionary tale to all of mankind. "The last time I flew back here from the mainland, they were showing Al Gore's movie about climate change. And I thought, 'That's just what happened on Easter Island.' You run out of resources and start to panic. There is intense competition for what is left. And our leaders tell us that if we just building something bigger and better all of our problems will be solved."

Before the bygone Rapa Nui it was giant stone heads; today it's modern technology. "The people of Easter Island didn't have all this research to tell them that disaster was coming. We do, yet so many people ignore it – just like the ancient people of Easter Island. You have to wonder if the same thing will happen to the whole planet that happened here before."

It's an awful lot to think about sitting on that wall overlooking the harbor at Hanga Roa, another great mystery yet to be solved. You come to the South Pacific on holiday and leave with your head full of new ideas on what life on this planet really means. But that's the kind of place Easter Island is – as surely as you can't leave your camera at home, you better be prepared to think. ■