

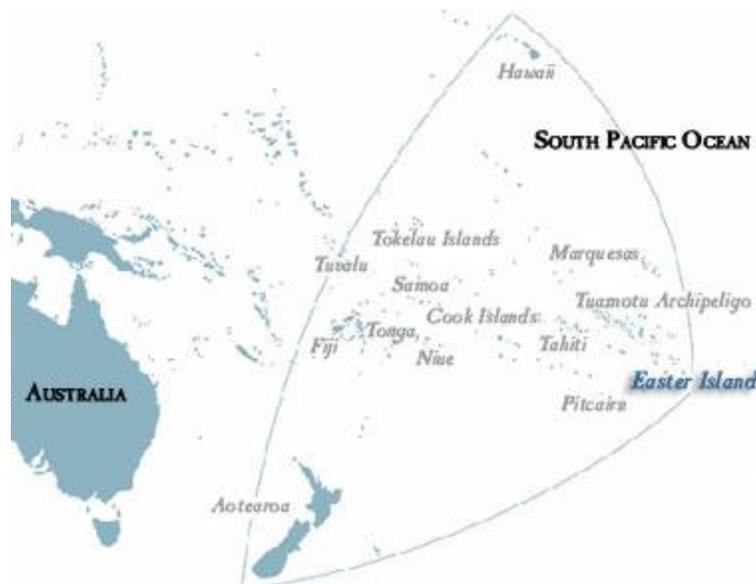
Islands of Rapa Nui

Overview

Rapa Nui ("Great Rapa") or Te Pito o te Henua ("Navel of the World") was first settled about 1,500 years ago. The adventurous chief, Hotu Matu'a, led his people to the isolated island of Rapa Nui where they lived in isolation from the rest of Polynesia for many generations. They called their home Te pito o te henua – "the navel [or center] of the world," as the phrase is often translated; however, it can also mean "the end of the land" – which aptly describes the distant map-dot. About a century ago a visiting Tahitian thought the shape of the island reminded him of one of his home islands, Rapa Iti [Small Rapa], and he gave the island its widely known Polynesian name, Rapa Nui [Big Rapa]. Today, while the people there are citizens of Chile, they still share a common Polynesian heritage with their "cousins" throughout the rest of Polynesia.

Location

Rapa Nui is located about 4,300 miles southeast of Hawai'i (it's actually closer to Antarctica). It is approximately 2,000 miles to the East of Tahiti and approximately 2,200 miles off the coast of Chile, making it one of the most isolated islands in the world. Its nearest neighbor, tiny Pitcairn Island where the mutineers from HMS Bounty and their Polynesian family and friends settled in 1790, is over 1,200 miles away.



Geography

Rapa Nui, or Easter Island as it is currently called, is a small volcanic island that encompasses about 67 square miles of land mass, and at its highest point rises to about 1,700 feet. According to research and oral traditions, it was once covered with trees, which have since all been cut down, possibly to aid in the construction and transportation of the almost 900

moai or stone monuments. The main community is located at Hanga Roa ('Great Bay'). Thanks to the U.S. space program, NASA extended an existing runway into a full-length airstrip capable of handling an emergency landing of the space shuttle. Today, Lan Chile, the official carrier of Chile, provides regularly scheduled commercial air service to Rapa Nui.

Population

Just under 3,000 people live on Rapa Nui today, most of them Polynesians. Like many of the other Pacific islands during the 18th through early 20th centuries, European diseases and indentured labor practices decimated the population. For example, as many as 5,000 islanders were carried away to work in Peru, and only a few ever returned. About 1875, 500 more were taken to work the sugar plantations in Tahiti, where a small number of Easter Islanders remain to this day. At one point in the early 1900s there were only 111 Rapa Nui people left on the island; and while the slowly growing population has managed to hang on to much of their Polynesian culture, a great deal was also lost forever. For example, the people of Rapa Nui may have been the only Polynesians to have something akin to a writing system in the form of their rongorongo tablets, a few samples of which have survived to present times in widespread museums. The ability to translate them, however, seems to have been lost forever.

History and Discovery

As with all other Polynesian people, the islanders of Rapa Nui left no written history, but anthropologists believe they came from the area now called French Polynesia about 1,600 years ago. There is no indication of other subsequent contact with Polynesia; but some anthropologists believe there was also contact with or from South America because of the stone moai – which they believe could reflect Incan or Meso-American influence, as well as sweet potatoes – which botanists have proved came from the Americas. Oral tradition says the years between Hotu Matu'a and first contact with the western world were filled with growth to a population as large as 10,000, as well as the creation of the moai, but also with civil warfare, cannibalism and the complete deforestation of the land. Dutch admiral Jacob Roggeveen came upon Rapa Nui on Easter Sunday, 1722, hence the English name Easter Island. Rapa Nui is also known by its Spanish name, Isla de Pascua, which is the transliteration of the English name. Rampant inter-clan warfare began within a few decades of this contact, and resulted in all of the moai being toppled by 1864. British explorer Capt. James Cook came in 1774. Other explorers followed – all of whom marveled at the stone moai. In 1888 Chile annexed the island, which remains a territory of that nation to this day. In the 1950s the famous anthropologist Thor Heyerdahl, whose successful rafting voyage from Peru to Tahiti a few years earlier suggested a connection between South America and Polynesia, came to Rapa Nui to study and excavate the moai. His visit probably spurred subsequent efforts to restore some of the ahu platforms and the moai to their upright

positions. The work continues to this day, with a number of Rapa people involved. For example, Sergio Rapu, a former governor of the island who previously worked at the Polynesian Cultural Center, has done extensive archeological and anthropological research on his homeland.

Language

The predominant language is Rapa Nui and Spanish, with a limited amount of English. The Rapa Nui language is very similar to other Polynesian languages, particularly Tahitian. The Rapa greeting word, *lorana*, for example, is nearly identical to Tahiti's greeting. You'll also notice that the Rapa word for house, *hare*, is similar to the Tahitian *fare* [pronounce both syllables].

Rapa Nui Moai

Since they came to the attention of the outside world, the moai have captured the fascination of everyone who sees them. These stone statues range from just a few feet high to almost 80 feet high, and are made from scoria — or hardened volcanic ash. Unfortunately, scoria is not very durable, and ongoing conservation of the existing moai is a major concern. In all, the islanders created almost 900 statues, although the majority of those were never transported or erected on ahu platforms, or even finished.

Many theories have been put forth about why they were carved and how people without sophisticated machinery could move the heavy megaliths. One island tradition says those moai that were eventually set up on ahu platforms facing the ocean "walked" there. Those with more of an engineering orientation say this is feasible, suggesting the people may have used a series of long ropes and log rollers to tip a moai a little toward one side and then pivot it forward on the resting point, much as one person can move a heavy object by rocking it forward without having to pick it up. This and similar theories also suggest that all of the trees on the island were eventually cut down to provide the log rollers. Another widely publicized author at one time suggested extraterrestrial beings were somehow involved in the process.

But most of the islanders, including the four carvers who came to the Polynesian Cultural Center to create the ones here, today believe the moai represent their ancestors. They point to the fact that no two moai were or are carved the same. The carvers also believe the capstones, usually made from reddish scoria rock, represent their ancestors' hair or top-knots. Asked why one of the moai at the Cultural Center's Ahu Tu'u Koihu doesn't have "hair," the lead carver responded (through a translator), "He was bald."

The carvers told how they each dived and brought pieces of white coral and dark scoria with them to Hawai'i to make the "eyes" for the moai; and after they placed these eyes into the

sockets they had carved, then the moai were no longer "blind," but now "could see. The eyes give life to the moai and, therefore, to the people who were [traditionally] buried under the ahu."

The carvers also explained that moai were erected on an ahu platform, which is where their ancient ancestors buried their ariki or high chiefs. "Today, we interpret these moai as sculptures of particular ariki who were buried in this ahu. In the Rapa Nui culture when a high chief passed away, the family or perhaps the wife, would make a moai representing the person buried in the ahu." Finally, the four carvers said, "Although this ahu is a partial replica of Ahu Nau Nau in Rapa Nui, we have chosen to give it the name Ahu Tu'u Koihu. Tu'u Koihu was an ancient ariki [high chief] from Rapa Nui who initiated the art of carving moai.

Interesting Facts

Since it was not practical to import scoria from Rapa Nui, or prudent because that volcanic slag is not very durable, the Rapa Nui carvers who came to the Polynesian Cultural Center worked with local engineers and a cement factory to create a cement-like compound they felt was similar to the stones they were used to carving. The carvers then used traditional toki or adzes as well as modern steel chisels, hammers, and even jackhammers to shape the ma'ea or stone into moai.