



Easter Island October 2012

Talk about a once-in-a-lifetime experience! Easter Island (named in 1722 when it was “discovered” by the Dutch) has been on my bucket list ever since I learned the word. It is the most remote island in the world -- 2500 miles from the coast of Chile and 2000 miles from Pitcairn Island -- the next blob of land west. Its “real” name is Rapa Nui as that is what the natives call it and that is what I will call it too.

The best part of this part of the month-long trip was there was only seven of us, so it was nice and private. Our next stop would be Buenos Aires, where we join eight more people to make up a group of 15 for the two weeks in Patagonia.

OUR LOCAL GUIDE

HE approached and gave me a cheek-kiss. I liked it. Tall, tan, buff, long shiny blue-black hair and great looking. Matu’a is an enthusiastic Rapa Nuain named after the first king of the island. Olive skin and wearing a striking native American necklace given to him by a former client. (for sure, he is the kind of guy that gets lots of gifts from women), he has a gorgeous native-American look about him.



After kissing us all (very traditional here) he proclaimed us all MATATOA!! (this word meaning strong, warrior and is always shouted). It's a nice feeling. Matu'a is 40 and looks 20. He's had all kinds of jobs on the island from construction work (he worked on our hotel), to special effects when Kevin Costner was filming "Rapa Nui" in the early 1990's, and now tour guide. (Later, when I got home, I bought the DVD!) Enthusiastic, he freely shares his love of the culture and island, and did mention he was good looking? What more could we want! He brought the culture alive for us and we loved every second of being with him. As we departed the island after four days, he gave each of us a miniature moai necklace. We wore them proudly.

Matu'a explains the significance of a group of sacred stones found on the island.

THE MAIN EVENT

OK -- the main event is the moai. But the whole 64 square mile island is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. You can't go anywhere without running across (sometimes tripping over) moai, petroglyphs, geoglyphs or zoomorphic rocks. No one knows exactly how the moai were carved then moved nor why they were built. When the second wave of people came from Polynesia to the island (about 400 A.D.), the moai were already there.



Ring-around-the-Moai. This gives an idea of the size of the smaller moai found on the island. There are very few we are allowed to get close to, and this one is a replica used in the movie "Rapa Nui."

Archaeologists surmise they are god-like “protectors” erected over tombs to watch over the inhabitants.

Most have the same face -- the one you see in all the photos. But the early moais were squatter, wider with almost a negroid look. All, except for 6, face inward to the island and away from the ocean.

In the four days we saw pretty much everything including walking thru lava tube caves. Most of the touring was with the group, but we had a nice bit of time on our own to walk around and explore. There were groups of moai within a 5 minute walk in either direction from our hotel. We had maps, good directions from both our local (Matu'a) and OAT guide (Christian) and the willingness to explore. This is a great place for people who like to walk.

DOGS

Rapa Nui's people population is about 7000, mostly descended from the same 32 families. And the dog population must be about 20,000. They are everywhere and are the most docile, laid-back animals I have ever met. Apparently each belongs to someone, but are let loose during the day to wander and explore. Most often we were followed by at least two dogs -- maybe we seemed/smelled exotic to them. I had read dog biscuits are a real treat here, so bought a box in Santiago. I soon learned to give them out as we left an archaeological site, rather than on arrival or we had a “friend” glued to us for the stay. They were wonderful -- even when we had a light dinner our last evening at Tahai Beach (with some of the earliest moai are located), four of them sat like silent sentinels watching us eat and not bothering anyone. Of course they enjoyed everyone's leftovers and the last of the dog biscuits afterwards.

And everyone has a horse and residents ride into town and they roam around the island as well. There are no wild horses and everyone knows which horse belongs to whom. During our lunch at the Rano Raraku quarry a herd stampeded by.

FOOD

Like seafood? Come to Easter Island!!! You've already read of the magnificent food in Santiago and Easter Island is even better. Since all staples are flown in from either Chile or Tahiti, **everything** is expensive. A salad lunch was \$22.; dinner entrees start at \$25. At a mini-mart, I bought four (1 liter) bottles of water and two cans of diet coke -- \$14.!

ARCHITECTURE

Besides the Moai, what is there to see? Think Hawaii 100 years ago or Phuket 50 years ago. Most buildings are 1 storey with an occasional 2 storey structure. And of those, most are a store on the first floor and the family's living quarters on the second. Only Rapa Nuians can own land, so there is plenty of space and most people have large yards.

MAIN TOWN

Hanga Roa is about 10 square blocks and it is the only town on the island. Its a combination of cute souvenir shops, small restaurants, a few dive shops and mini-marts. It is impossible to get lost as you just look for the ocean and you are immediately oriented.



The most interesting structure on the main street is the Catholic church which is decorated with copies of glyphs. The statues inside have moai-like faces -- angular with wide-open eyes. It is a beautiful blending of Catholicism and local traditions.

SHOPPING

Lets talk shopping! I love to shop, but after over doing it in Colombia, I have vowed not to buy anything. And that is a good decision as everything on Easter Island is soooo expensive. T shirts -- \$20 and up; carved wooden Moais \$140+; simple shell jewelry in the \$30-\$50 range -- even earrings. The most inexpensive items were of molded resin and weren't that nice.

Some of us bought moai replicas directly from the carvers. This man also wanted my yellow rain jacket. He got it!



But Christian (our OAT guide) knows a family of carvers and on one of our long exploratory walks took us to their house/factory where we were offered the \$140 moais for \$60. Believe it or not, this was a bargain and I think you can guess who bought one.

WEATHER

We were blessed with good weather -- sometimes showers in the morning, but it always cleared up by the time we were ready to depart the hotel. What got to us was the wind -- a constant 20 - 30 miles per hour. And since it carries sand, we got a complimentary exfoliation every time we went outside. We all returned to Santiago sporting ruddy faces.

COMMUNICATION

My international phone didn't work on the island. Entel has exclusive rights for cell and internet communication and my phone connects to Movistar. Internet was slow and unstable because its a satellite communication. Also our guide implied that the hotels wi-fi was \$5. per hour which was too steep for me. Later I found out the cost was \$5 for the entire stay. Here is the code if you ever stay at the Tahahai Hotel:

t1h1-t13 (yes, you need the dash)

Its slow, but not bad in a pinch.

So Rapa Nui was an incredible experience and I have about 500 pictures to prove it. Let me know when you are ready and I'll show them to you.

Our next stop is Buenos Aires to meet with the rest of the group, then our adventures in Patagonia begin.



A local bar shows "Rapa Nui" a film by Kevin Costner several times a week. It was shot entirely on the island using locals as extras.