

A Return to Rapa Nui

(aka Easter Island, Te Pito O Te Henua,
Te Kainga and Isla de Pascua)

This island, one of the most isolated places on earth, is a bucket-list destination for many. I must have two buckets as I find myself here again.

Five years ago I had the pleasure of traveling to the island with Overseas Adventure Travel (OAT). We did “the circuit” visiting the highlights of: Orongo (stone houses, Birdman Cult area), Ranu Raraku or quarry (the soft, volcanic cliffs where the Moai were carved), Tongariki (15 Moai in a row looking very picturesque) and Anakena, a white sand beach where Hotu Motu'am the first king, is thought to have originally landed and where Thor Heyerdahl and his team camped during months of research.



Matua'a, our excellent local guide, hinted that there is so much more.... secret caves, hidden petroglyphs, cave paintings, lava tubes and nice hiking opportunities.

So I crossed my fingers and hope to be back someday.

That someday arrived thanks to Ponant Cruises and their sailing from Easter Island, thru French Polynesia and ending in Hawaii. In a straight line, it is 5,000 miles. But we are not going in a straight line as we have many stops along the way during a back-to-back cruises.



Easter Island is considered a “corner” of the Polynesian Triangle, the other corners being Hawaii and New Zealand. I’m visiting two corners of the Triangle with the third corner, New Zealand, visited previously.

This is not the easiest place to get to. My original air routing was Chicago-Miami-Lima-Santiago-Easter Island. But thanks to a schedule change on LATAM Airlines, American Airlines re-routed me Chicago-Miami-Santiago, overnight at Santiago's airport hotel, then to Easter Island the next morning. Much more humane!

Of course I want a good guide and know exactly who -- Matua'a! He now works with Maururu Travel and because I request him along with a custom itinerary and private guiding, the three days on my own is not an inexpensive undertaking.

And how lucky could I be as on a Zegrehm Expeditions trip last year I was fortunate to meet Fred B., who has done work on the island, knows it like the back of his hand and is kind enough to help me plan my adventure.

Thanks to his suggestion, I stay at the lovely Taura'a Hotel, located just off Hanga Roa's main street with rooms set around a garden.



This is Room #1 at the Taura'a Hotel and the view from my porch.

And as luck would have it, OAT had a group on the island just before my arrival, and forum friend Shelley M. sent me restaurant and weather information.

Nothing is easy on this island and the best laid plans can change in a heartbeat.

Crisis #1: Matua'a is ill and cannot be my guide.

A few days before my departure from home I learn that Matua'a is not available. I am not happy. One of our planned activities is an eight hour hike to a remote cave to see unusual petroglyphs, but I am less enthusiastic about it with a guide I won't know. So for a substitute, I request a native Rapa Nuan, well versed in archaeology and who speaks English well. And knowing I wouldn't be doing the eight hour hike, I am able to talk the company into providing a car for that day at no extra charge.

Miguel Angel meets my criteria. He is a bit light on his history and archaeology but that turns out to be OK. Like many others on the island, he works several jobs -- he is a free-lance guide, often working for Explora, the only 5-star property on the island and a few nights a week, he is a dancer with Kari Kari, a folkloric group considered the best on the island.



Miguel by day (left); and at night (right). I apologize for the fuzzy dance photo, as I took it off the web.



On the first day we sit for a bit and plan our touring. He knows where important as well as obscure petroglyphs are located (this is a special interest), and how to get to the more accessible caves.

I ask to return to the small artisan market at Ranu Raraku (the quarry). Know that there is very little quality items to buy on the island and most of the souvenir shops have pretty much the same things:

- * earrings, necklaces and bracelets made from shells and feathers
- * pareos (cover-ups) made from rayon
- * shirts, aprons and tablecloths with floral Polynesian designs
- * Moai in every incantation and size made from: lava rock, granite, wood, resin or plastic.



Some items are suspicious -- possibly made in China?? There is one store that sells imported silver jewelry; and another has South Sea pearls from Tahiti. That's it.

Last time I visited, a man who makes silver jewelry had a booth at the quarry's artisan market. I bought two beautiful rings from him, but didn't have enough money on me for a magnificent silver and lapis Moai pendant. I was crushed, but knew I would get more use from the rings



Well, guess what he is still here!

Juan Fernandez is a master silversmith who has lived on the island for many years. His designs are exquisite and all his pieces are

signed. And he still makes his trademark silver and lapis Moai pendant.



All comes to she who waits!



Forty percent of the Island is National Park and was declared a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1995. There is only one town, Hanga Roa which has two main streets. It is impossible to get lost here. It is thanks to the U.S. that there is a well-functioning airport here as in 1985, NASA foot the bill to extend the existing runway as a back-up landing site for the space shuttle. Though it was never used for this purpose, the extension now allows the biggest wide-bodied planes to land here, helping out with tourism.

Crisis #2: My boots disintegrate.

The days are horribly hot and humid and since the island is volcanic, we are always walking on rough, uneven terrain. While going up a hill in Rano Raraku (the quarry) the sole of my boot decides to unattach itself! And when I investigate further, the other boot is coming apart too.

Miguel says he has seen this happen before - an unlucky combination of extreme heat and rough terrain. And, not surprisingly - there is no shoe repair on the island! Luckily he knows of a store that might have replacement boots for me. If it has been the last week of my trip, I wouldn't have bothered with a new pair. But I know boots are needed for places like Pitcairn and other Islands. There aren't that many choices here so I select something suitable and slap down a credit card. Sometimes, cost can't matter.

Armed with new boots, Miguel and I spend three days together driving and walking all over the 64 square mile island.

Miguel makes sure we spend time at Papa Vaka, a site with extensive petroglyphs, mostly relating to fishing and the sea. We climb up on risers so we can look straight down at them.

Rush hour on Rapa Nui. Its wonderful to have the island practically to yourself. Here we are at the north part of the island near Hanga Oteo



As we tour other sites, we come across earth ovens and, on the ground, bone and obsidian fragments. He notices everything and makes sure I do too.



I am intrigued by what seems like piles of rocks here and there. They are chicken coops! Only one stone needs to be removed to let chickens in or out. Very clever.

Miguel never stops talking -- my kind of guy. He tells of island traditions and compares them to those on other islands. We talk about ancient beliefs and he even bemoans the younger generation for not being interested in learning folklore and traditions or even the Rapa Nui language. So even though he is a bit light on history and his archaeology is a bit muddled, he turns out to be a good cultural interpreter.

The hike I enjoy most (with thanks to Fred for suggesting it) is the “Moai Road” from the quarry to the seafront. This is the path ancient Rapa Nuans took to move their 12+ ton Moai from the place where they were quarried to their ahu (platforms) by the sea.

Unfortunately many didn't make it, and as we walk along the path there are fallen and broken Moai all over, with bits and pieces here and there hidden in the tall grasses.



Crisis #3. Embarkation day. Where are you?

Promptly at 4pm, I am ready for the transfer from the hotel to the dock. Embarkation on Le Soleal takes place during a one-hour window and I had arranged and paid for a transfer with Maururu Travel.

Time passes slowly.....no one comes for me.

Bill, the owner of the hotel, tries to call Maururu Travel -- their phone is busy, busy, busy. At 4:30 he tells Andres, the hotel helper, to put my luggage in the car and drive me to the dock.

Embarkation is not that easy as Hanga Roa does not have a port. One of the ships zodiacs waits at the fishing dock to whisk me and my luggage across the bay to the Le Soleal where embarkation formalities will take place. If I had waited any longer, I could have missed the zodiac transfer.

My cabin for the next three days has a straight-on view of town. We use the ship as a hotel for three nights, and go back and forth to the dock for two solid days of non-stop touring.

With about 175 people on board, the ship commandeers every tourist vehicle and guide on the island. I am able to revisit many sites, often hanging back to take photographs or to sit and enjoy the ambience.

We sail out of Hanga Roa's bay at sunset and I stand on my balcony for a last look at Rapa Nui, grateful to have been able to spend time on this most magnificent spot on earth.



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