

**Rock stars:** Easter Island is famous for Morrison tales and Moai

# Cast in stone

Easter Island has benefited from its isolation. It remains the last vestige of a vibrant culture of monoliths and mysteries



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All those of you who have ever loved The Doors are sure to have heard of Easter Island. A bunch of Jim Morrison's fans, who were in denial about his death, floated the theory was that he mysteriously sailed away with a guitar to Easter Island, hoping that no one would find him. I was one of those believers too, and that's how I first heard of Easter Island.

## An island of mysteries

There are as many theories about the rockstars who fled to Easter Island as there are about the island itself. Easter Island is located at the south-eastern tip of the Polynesian triangle, 3,500 km away from the coast of Chile. Dutch explorer Jacob Roggeven discovered it on Easter Sunday in 1722, which is how it got its name.

It also goes by the Polynesian name Rapa Nui. The name is a reminder of the mysterious Polynesian civilisation that once thrived on the island. The popula-

tion of ethnic Polynesians has dwindled drastically in recent years. Famous for its giant, monolithic stone figures called the Moai, the island is a natural, open-air museum of a distant culture that very little is still known about.

Easter Island has always called out to travellers with the spirit of Indiana Jones and the dough to back it up. I had the spirit but lacked the money. Drinking lovely Chilean red wine with my Indian friend and her Colombian fiancé in the comfort of their apartment in Santiago, I debated my long standing dream to visit Easter Island. Santiago and Tahiti are the only two locations in the world from where you can catch a flight to Easter Island. I was so close to my dream, yet so far. Finally, I decided to take the plunge.

## Polynesian hospitality

After a five-hour flight and a rather incredulous landing on a narrow runway with a view of the aquamarine waters, I walked out of the small Mataverí airport, only to be greeted by a Polynesian man waiting with a pink and white garland. Having stayed only in youth hostels or cheap backpacker accommodations on my travels, I wasn't used to being received at the airport. I was pleasantly surprised considering that I had booked the cheapest possible accommodation — a tent at Mihinoa Camping. Rapa Nui took its hospitality very seriously, I realised. I was already beginning to like this island.

I settled into my tent, which had a beautiful view of the ocean, with a map of the island and a plan for the week ahead. I decided to rent a scooter and ride

around the triangular island. With a single road, navigation was hardly an issue.

The topography consists of three large, extinct volcanoes — Terevaka, Poike and the most impressive, Rano Kau, which has a natural, blue-green crater lake. Not as large in size but equally significant is the central Rano Raraku. The Moai, one of the first places I visited on the island, is made of the volcanic rock from the Rano Raraku.

## More than monoliths

Walking amidst hundreds of magnificent Moai, I couldn't help but wonder how they were transported to the various parts of the island. The Moai have distinct eyes, long ears and rectangular torsos, and some of them even sport hats made of volcanic rock. They can be found all over the island, erected on ceremonial platforms called Ahus. There is much debate on what these figures, known to the world as Easter Island heads, represent: Gods, kings or the common man. Whatever they may represent, they certainly stir the soul.

Whether you're witnessing a stunning sunrise at Ahu Tongariki, a site which has 15 Moais, or spending a lazy afternoon with the Ahu Akivi in the centre of the island, you are sure to be moved.

For a break from these looming monoliths, I hiked to the beautiful volcanic crater of Rano Kau and swam in the white-sand Anakena beach. An evening at a cultural centre watching the Rapa Nui men and women perform their tribal dance was a visual feast but the most exotic treat was a 40-minute scuba dive, my first underwater experience.

Curious about the Polynesian civili-



Look who's talking: Moais at Ahu Tahai



Fire extinguisher: When the Rano Kau volcano became extinct, a crater lake took its place



Writing on the wall: Petroglyphs or prehistoric drawings in Orongo ceremonial village

## EASTER ISLAND

### CHILE



### GETTING THERE

As someone once said, "Easter Island is not alone, it is just far away." Getting to this remote Polynesian island isn't easy. Santiago and Tahiti are the only two destinations from where you can catch a flight to the island. You can fly to Santiago on Air France via Paris. The Chilean national carrier LAN Chile offers flights to the capital from various destinations in the US, UK and Spain.

sation, I quizzed every Rapa Nui I met. The civilisation, which is believed to have existed between 800 and 1200 AD, was destroyed by another cult called the Birdman's cult. The beautiful stone houses in the Orongo ceremonial village and the mysterious Rongorongo script were the result of the Birdman's cult. Sadly, this civilisation was destroyed with the Peruvian colonisation of the island.

The week in Easter Island was the longest I spent on my own, away from other travellers. But I was not alone. I was just far away, in the heart of a civilisation believed to be dead, but still alive for some.

*Aparna is a former brand manager who took a year off to travel*



An inside view: Caves are a common sight in Easter Island