

Land of the giants: A solitary moai on the slopes of Rano Raraku (left) is the island's most distinctive figure; and (above) Anakena B

Where time st

Trapped by the spell of ancient spirits, Stephanie Jackson returns to the magic of Easter Island, where the famous stone giants maintain their vigil

TEARS trickled slowly down my face as the plane descended through a curtain of clouds, which opened to reveal a stunning view of a remote Pacific island.

I had seen its emerald hills, its rocky shore, and its rugged cliffs that rise from the heart of the ocean many times before, but that first glimpse of Easter Island triggers tears of joy at each emotional return. This is an island I love with a passion.

The legendary traveller Hotu Matua must have shed tears of joy too when, at the conclusion of an epic voyage in about 450AD, he stepped from his canoe on to the shores of the island where he would ultimately become king.

There was no one to welcome him to the land that Dutch explorer Jacob Roggeveen named Easter Island when he sailed past on Easter Sunday, 1722. And no one welcomed visitors who anchored offshore in the 1860s, for they brought nothing but misery.

They were Peruvian slave traders; islanders returning after escaping slavery and who carried smallpox that decimated the population; and Christian missionaries who brought the scourge of tuberculosis.

I brought nothing other than the tourist dollars on which the island's fragile economy

depends, and was welcomed to the village of Hanga Roa that hums with friendly voices. It's a village where modern houses stand beside rundown, unfinished and abandoned buildings; where vacant allotments are overgrown with lush vegetation; and where dogs and wild chickens roam the streets.

Neither the village nor its 3800 residents have pretensions because the grandeur of Easter Island, known locally as Rapa Nui, lies beyond its increasingly congested streets. Its splendour is its stone giants — the moai.

More than 900 moai are scattered across the landscape and are believed to have been created between 450AD and 1100AD, either to honour kings or as religious symbols. The exact reason remains a mystery.

They rose from the slopes of the extinct volcano Rano Raraku, where they had been carved using only primitive stone tools and, according to local legend, strode proudly to their resting places aided only by manna, the magical power of the high priests.

During civil wars in the 18th and 19th centuries, rival clans sent the moai of their enemies toppling, and when peace finally sang out most lay shattered. Only those at Rano Raraku had been spared.

A visit to the ancient quarry was high on

my agenda. As I drove along the pot-holed trail that follows the island's rocky coast, I thought, for a fleeting moment, that I heard words of welcome whispered on the wind.

Almost 400 moai, some standing, some incomplete and some still lying where they fell centuries ago, spread across the plains to the island's shore.

I meandered past their familiar stoic faces; strolled into Rano Raraku's heart where an azure lake is lined with totora reeds; and wandered among the wild, flowering lupins.

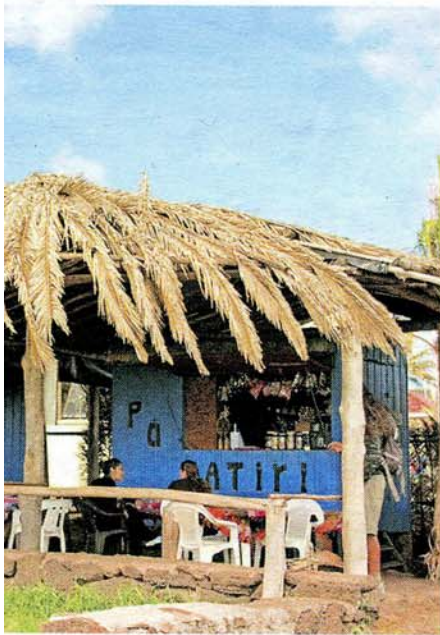
As I passed moai standing in the shadows of the volcano's jagged rim and other sleeping giants that will gaze at the heavens for eternity, only the thunder of hooves as wild horses raced through the crater fractured the awesome silence.

From a lofty perch on the rocks that divide one rugged peak of the crater from another, I gazed down on the moai of Ahu Tongariki that appeared more like fragile matchstick figures than the 6m to 7m-high 10-tonne giants that they are in reality.

Here, where religious ceremonies had been conducted, mumbled prayers might have mingled with the incessant roar of waves that crash on the rugged coastline.

It was screams of terror that were once carried on ocean breezes to the summit of another extinct volcano, but Rano Kau's crater was quiet when I reached its rim.

Seething volcanic anger has been replaced by the tranquillity of a reed-choked lake



Beach, the restaurant at Hanga Roa and 15 moai at Ahu Tongariki

tands still

280m below the immense crater's rim, which is crowned with the ruins of the ancient ceremonial village of Orongo.

Here, islanders had enthusiastically prepared themselves for the annual birdman competition that honours their deity, Makemake. Death often came, uninvited, to claim its own grim prize as men plummeted from the cliff face to the rock strewn ocean 400m below.

Others were drowned or attacked by sharks as they swam to the tiny island of Motu Nui. Victor was the first man to clamber back up to the village with a seabird egg from the barren crag that is Motu Nui.

As the day drew to a close, and with grey visions of those who had lost their lives in the gruelling ordeal that was a highlight of island life for 300 years, I headed back to my accommodation at Residencial Tahai.

The next day, the owner introduced me to her son-in-law Patricio, who offered to show me places I had not yet discovered.

I clambered enthusiastically into his old Kombi van and we dawdled out of Hanga Roa to the Ana Tai Tangata caves where religious rituals were once conducted, and then on to Vinapu.

Here, all that remains of a once-immense and ancient building is a stone wall draped in mystery. It has no similarity to any other structure on the island, but is an exact replica of the stonework built by the Incas in Peru, which is more than 4000km away.

At the extinct volcano Puna Pau, where stone hats were carved, we discussed varied theories of how a primitive people might have raised a two-tonne block of stone on to the head of a moai.

We strolled across the white sands of Anakena beach where Hotu Matua landed long ago and visited Ahu Akivi, where the moai, unlike all others that stare inland, face the sea. Beyond fields of pineapples, maize and taro, Patricio led me into the darkness of a network of subterranean caverns where islanders, fearing the return of slave traders, had hidden their wives and children whenever a ship appeared on the horizon.

▲ Late afternoon, we made our way back to Residencial Tahai and, leaving Patricio to chat to his mother-in-law, I walked down to the water. The sun slithered behind grey clouds hanging over the raging sea. A man galloped by on his horse and a rainbow led to the feet of a solitary moai.

Tourists see the moai as stone statues, but a young islander told me, as we sheltered together in a tiny cave when rain began to fall, they have a spirit you can feel and hear.

Anyone who feels the spirits of the island will come back to Rapa Nui time and time again, he added with an infectious smile. I knew exactly what he meant.

Easter Island had cast its captivating spell on me and I knew, with unquestionable certainty, that I would return to this unique and beguiling island of giants.



EASTER ISLAND

FLY Lan Airlines is the only company to provide flights to Easter Island, with two flights a week departing from Tahiti and four a week from Santiago in Chile.

STAY There are several hotels in the village and a wide range of guest houses. Cost of accommodation at Residencial Tahai, my favourite, which is a short distance from the village, is about \$85 a person a night.

TRANSPORT The island's major roads are sealed, but other tracks are notoriously rough, particularly after rain. Cars, small four-wheel-drives, motorcycles and mountain bikes are available for hire. There is a range of tours on offer, including horseback. The tour offered by Patricio Ballerino of AO Tours is highly recommended. A full day costs about \$70 a person.

ACTIVITIES While visiting the island's major historical sites is the main item on the agenda for most visitors, a wide range of other activities are on offer, including scuba-diving, surfing, horse-riding and hiking.