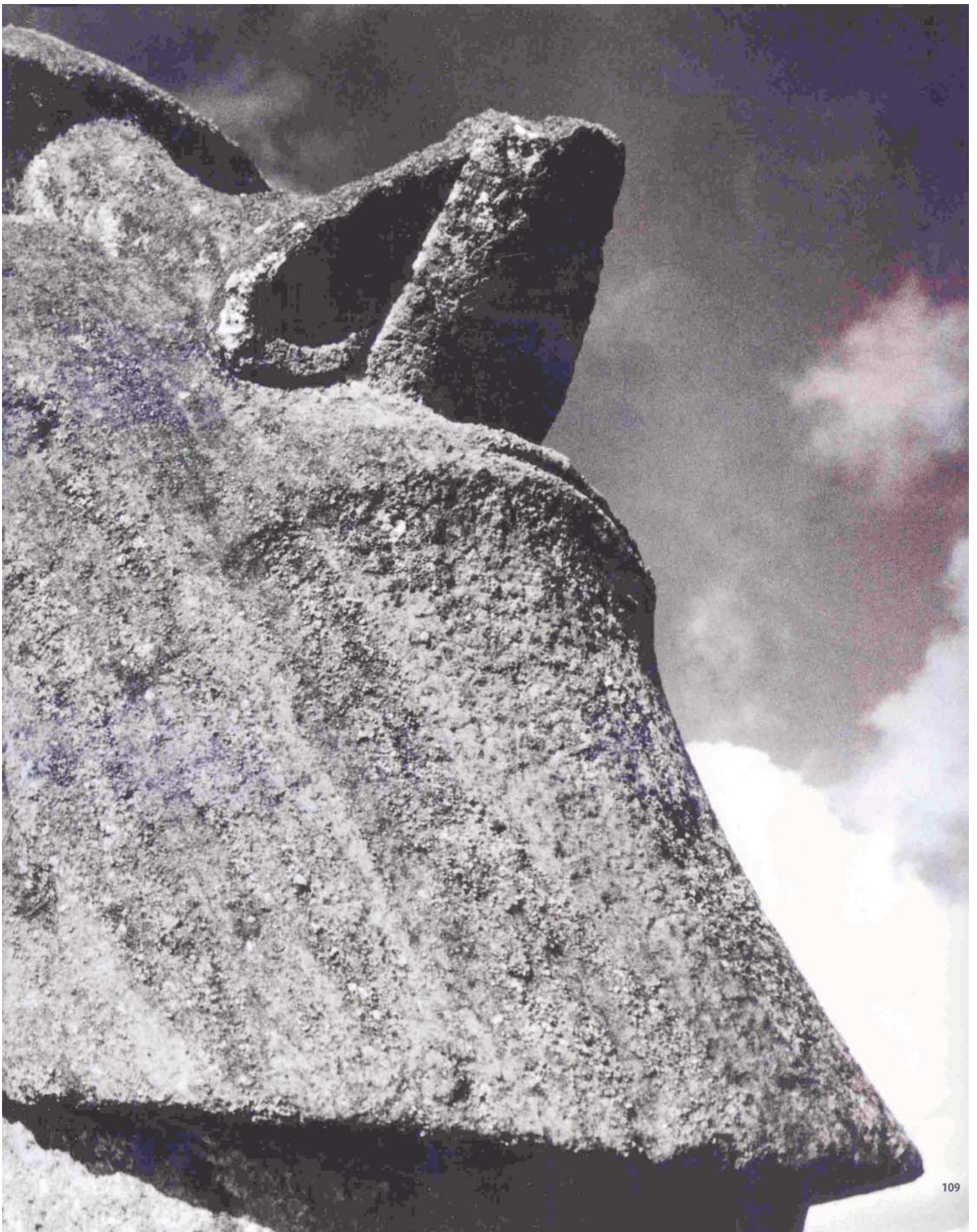


# THE ULTIMATE MYSTERY ISLAND

Storied, impossibly remote,  
and ever intriguing: **Easter  
Island** captures the imagination.

**BY JEFF GREENWALD**

Heavy hitters: An  
average-size Easter  
Island stone head  
weighs about 14 tons.



# IF YOU'VE SEEN ONE GIANT HEAD, YOU'VE SEEN THEM ALL.

A variation on Ronald Reagan's infamous remark – the late president was speaking, of course, about redwoods – plays through my mind as the outline of Easter Island, shaggy with meadow grass, fills the airplane window. Easter Island is a place we've all "seen" dozens of times, in pictures. Its famous *moai* – the signature heads carved from volcanic stone – are so familiar that actually *visiting* the place seems almost redundant. But here, as in so many other places we

know only from photographs, reality surpasses expectations.

Easter Island is the Southern Hemisphere's Timbuktu: Lying 2,237 miles west of continental Chile, it is an isolated landfall synonymous with lore, anthropology, and adventure. The tiny, triangular isle (about one-twelfth the size of Maui) beckons you into its mysteries from first approach. The closer you get, the faster its name changes – like an elusive destination from Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*.



Stone sentries: Fifteen *moai* at Ahu Tongariki watch over some of the island's many horses.

What we know as Easter Island back home (named for the first visit by the Dutch, on Easter Sunday, 1722) – becomes Isla de Pasqua on the boarding passes in Santiago. A few hours after landing, you find you are actually on Rapa Nui: the Big Island. And as you move deeper into the landscape, across grassy hills punctuated by fallen and restored *moai*, you hear another, quieter name: Te Pito O Te Henua, the Navel of the World.

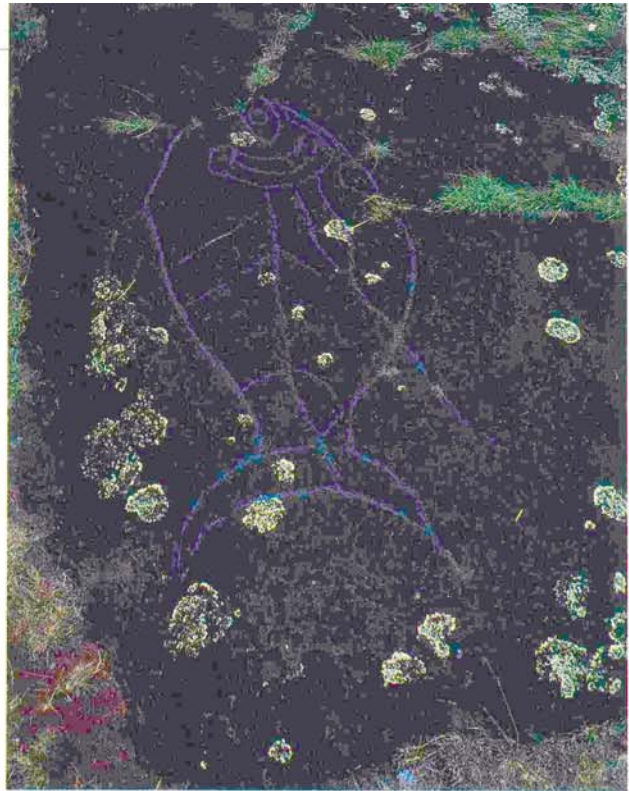
Easter Island is a place I never imagined I'd see, and the invitation to visit – from a friend arranging a spontaneous trip – was impossible to refuse. I was especially excited to explore Rapa Nui with a series of day hikes, arranged by Casas Rapa Nui, a small compound of guest-houses run by Explora, the Chilean eco-lodge pioneers, and located on the outskirts of Hanga Roa (the island's main, and only, town). It

seemed like a great opportunity to enjoy Rapa Nui as the residents do: on foot, encountering the *moai* as part of the landscape. Afterward, we'd return to Casas Rapa Nui for gourmet meals featuring local seafood, freshly baked bread, and the most exquisite mangoes on earth.

On my very first afternoon, I dropped off my bags and began explorations with a hike to Rano Raraku, the ancient volcanic slopes where the great heads were quarried and sculpted.

**THE MOAI WERE NOT BUILT** by aliens. Rapa Nui is not to be confused with the pyramids of Egypt, Stonehenge, or the Nazca Lines (all well-known alien artifacts). Although it's not certain how the *moai* were carved or transported – the oral histories are unclear – there are a number of good theories. Visiting anthropologists, including Thor





Steeped in tradition (clockwise from top left): Members of the Kari Kari folk-dance group prepare for a performance, a cliffside petroglyph remains as a vestige of the Birdman cult near the stone village of Orongo, and terns' eggs on Motu Nui offshore of Orongo beckoned the Birdmen.



WOMEN: TOMAS ARNOLD; THE NEW YORK TIMES; BRUCE  
PETROGLYPH: BOB SACCHINASTOC; WATER VIEW: JEFF GREENHALL.

Heyerdahl in the 1950s, commissioned the building of new *moai*, demonstrating how it might have been done.

The *moai* took shape from tuff and basalt chopped from the slopes of Rano Raraku, one of three ancient volcanoes located near each point of the triangular island. This is where the *moai* were carved, freed from the stone, and transported to their various locations. (“Transported” is a contentious word; local legend claims the heads actually walked to their present locations using *mana*, or spiritual power. Some scientists believe this alleged “walking” motion was caused by the way the statues were moved: rocked forward, inch by inch, by ropes and levers.)

Mythic monuments look their best the first time we see them: when the mists of imagination part, and we step into the world of direct experience. And if you are going to see the *moai* for the first time, it’s best to see them in the early morning or late afternoon, when long shadows and caramel light coax every detail from the volcanic stone and austere landscape.

There are nearly 900 *moai* in all. About half of them, finished and unfinished, are found at Rano Raraku. Every one is different. They tower from the grass or rubble, often askew. Hawks perch on their heads, and lichens nibble their cheeks. I searched for the *moai* that looks like Elvis, as seen in the *Weekly World News*. No luck. But the biggest *moai* of all is here, incomplete, abandoned mid-project, its blank eyes staring skyward. At 70 feet, it would have cut a stupendous figure – the tallest *moai* now standing is half that height. But, according to some theories, work was abandoned when tribal fighting, foreign invasions, and deforestation (trees were used to transport and erect the figures) ended the era of monumental carvings. (Jared Diamond discusses this in his 2005 book, *Collapse*; the best seller about why civilizations fail has created a spike in interest surrounding the island, although my local guide hotly contests Diamond’s thesis that the island was entirely deforested by locals.)

The *moai* look stern, but not especially mean. They were not meant to threaten. These were protector deities, and once they were erected (in rows along the rocky coastline) they faced not toward the sea but toward home, watching over their sponsors.

After the statues were in place, their eyes – made of white coral, with red scoria or obsidian irises – were installed. With this ceremony the *moai* were officially power objects, suffused with *mana*.

Somehow, during the restorations of the past 50 years, almost all of the original eyes have vanished. No one knows exactly when, or to where; into the private collections, no doubt, of well-heeled art thieves (where’s Indiana Jones when we need him?). Only a few eyes remain, one of which is in the local museum.

A single *moai*, located near Ahu Tahai, a site near Hanga Roa, has been fitted with false eyes. They’re eerily convincing. Looking up at the figure at sunset, as the sky streaks with red and gold, one can almost believe it walked there by itself.

**TWO OF THE VOLCANOES** are filled with beautiful freshwater lakes. One is the ancient quarry; the other is the crater of Rano Kau, whose sharp cliffs overlook the island’s southwestern tip. This is where the notorious “Birdman” ritual – a Polynesian triathlon to determine the next ruler of Rapa Nui – was staged.

## ISLAND INSIGHT

Exploring far-flung –  
and far-out – Easter Island.

### Rock and Ramble

Discover the land of toppled giants with **Sports-tour**’s five-day hiking adventure based at the nine-room exploratory Casas Rapa Nui. Half-day treks reveal Easter Island’s dreamlike setting, with time to savor windswept volcanoes and the world-famous *moai* (stone heads). Guides combine archaeological exploration with



gourmet picnics. Evening activities include soaks in Casas Rapa Nui’s open-air Jacuzzi, cocktails on the property’s terrace, and luxurious dinners on site or in town. Departures: Any day through 2007; from \$1,800, including accommodations, all meals and beverages, and most activities.

### Chilean Extremes

Magnificent Andean peaks, the arid terrain of the Tara Salt Flats, and a soak in the Geysers del Tatio highlight Chile’s geographic beauty on **Horizon & Co.**’s private 11-day tour. Travelers unlock Easter Island’s mysteries during four days that include a horseback ride to

Terevaka Volcano and sunrise at Ahu Tongariki. Visits to the artisan market and Hanga Roa village offer a break from the archaeological wanderings. Departures: Daily throughout 2007; from \$9,940.

### Romancing the Stones

**Ladatco Tours** reveals how Easter Island’s revered stonework compares to that of the pre-Columbian empires of Peru and Bolivia. After visiting Machu Picchu, the Sacred Valley of the Incas, and Lake Titicaca, the group finishes the 21-day journey on Chile’s most famous island. The three days include explorations of Rano Raraku, where more than 300 *moai* remain, and Ahu Vinapu, which bears a striking resemblance to Machu Picchu’s masonry. Departures: Daily through 2007; from \$11,220.

### Paradise-Hopping

A blend of islands and palm-shaded beaches forms **Princess Cruises**’ 26-day voyage through the South Pacific to Chile on the 670-passenger *Pacific Princess*. From Tahiti and Bora Bora, sail to Easter Island’s remote shores and spend a half day experiencing the striking landscape, as well as the celebrated stone heads. The adventure continues through the Panama Canal to Fort Lauderdale. Departure: December 15, 2007; from \$3,945.

—LAURA SLAVIK FORTIN

(I know all about the Birdman ritual, having seen the 1994 film *Rapa Nui*. The film has the best line ever spoken in a B movie, delivered by a beleaguered chief: "I don't need this," he frets. "I have chicken entrails to read.")

It worked like this: Every year, an athlete from each clan would isolate himself in a stone house on the nearby cliffs, waiting for sooty terns to nest on the nearby islet of Motu Nui. The competitors then raced down Rano Kau's nearly vertical cliffs, swam to Motu Nui, recovered an egg from a tern's nest, swam back to Rapa Nui, and presented the (hopefully unbroken) egg to their chief. The winner's clan gained control over the island's resources for the year.

Foul play was part of the fun. Strategies (in the film, at least) included pushing competitors off the cliffs, cutting them with stones so they'd be eaten by sharks, and laughing maniacally. The tradition ended in the mid-1800s, shortly after the first Catholic missionaries arrived on the island.

**I WALK RANO KAU'S RIM** with Uri, one of the superb guides from *explora*. She is a local woman with thick black hair and a gardenia tucked behind her left ear. Uri points into the caldera, at the patchwork of lapis blue water and emerald green marshes. Coffee, citrus, and native flowers thrive in the shadows.

"That is the dark hole of Hau Maka," Uri explains. "The lake provides drinking water for the island, and protects our endemic plants. It has a microclimate all its own. It's another world down there. We call it *manavai*: an ancestral garden, like a paradise."

Driving back toward our lodge, we pass scores of horses. There are horses all over the island. There are more horses, Uri sighs, than people – and there are about 4,000 people.

"What are they used for?"

"The people here don't really use the horses," she shrugs. "Mostly, they are just for decoration."

The horses, Uri says, are a picturesque nuisance. They eat the grass, competing with the cattle. Why are they allowed to multiply and inundate the island? One possible explanation is that horses confer status on their owners. No one is quite sure, however.

"The farmers love the horses," explains Uri. "They love them – but they won't say why. You ask them why, and they won't tell you."

The riddle of the horses is typical of the vagueness – the *mystery* – surrounding every aspect of Rapa Nui culture. When was the island settled? Sometime, depending on the historian, between AD 400 and 800. When were the *moai* built? Between the ninth and seventeenth centuries, give or take a million years. How were they moved and erected? There are at least five competing theories (including *mana*, but not including aliens). Was the island deforested by palm-seed-

eating rats, *moai*-obsessed chiefs, or a mini ice age? And did anyone, at some point, really cut down the Last Tree? (A scene that Jared Diamond, in *Collapse*, seems to have lifted directly from *Rapa Nui*.)

History, on Rapa Nui, is a pliant commodity. Stories have been passed along, within families, between families, to archaeologists and journalists and crackpots, and through guidebooks and dissertations and other quasi-reliable sources. A reasonably clear picture of the island's past is taking shape based on archaeologists' and historians' findings. But a surfeit of gray areas remains.

At first, this lack of clarity can be frustrating. After a while, you can't imagine it any other way. Ambiguity, on Rapa Nui, becomes poetry; one is invited to interpret, rather than define.

**THE YOUNGEST OF RAPA NUI'S** three volcanoes is Terevaka. From its 1,600-foot summit, the highest point on the island, one can look east to Anakena, one of Rapa Nui's two white-sand beaches.

On the sands stand seven *moai*, representing the first navigators to reach the island. About 2,000 years ago they set sail from a homeland called Hiva-Oa, near the Marquesas, searching for Rapa Nui: an island seen only in a shaman's vision. They had no sextant, no compass. Using starlight and ocean currents, and watching the paths of migratory birds, they traveled some 2,000 miles before landing at the snug harbor of Anakena.

A movement is in progress, spearheaded by Swiss-born explorer Bernard Weber, to name the New Seven Wonders of the World, based on a list originally drawn up in 220 BC by a Greek mathematician named Philon. The Easter Island *moai* are among the finalists, along with such heavy hitters as Machu Picchu, Angkor Wat, and China's Great Wall. (Anyone can vote simply by visiting [www.new7wonders.com](http://www.new7wonders.com). Winners will be announced on July 7 of this year.)

As I gaze down toward the Anakena navigators from the summit of Terevaka, another guide – a well-traveled young man named Tito, with tribal tattoos on the backs of his hands – asks if I'll vote for the *moai*.

This gives me pause. Do these giant heads truly compare with the pyramids, or the Taj Mahal? They're evocative, and certainly iconic – but I'm frankly more impressed by redwoods.

If I could, though, I'd cast my vote for the entire island. Rapa Nui as a whole, from the feat of its discovery to the drama of the Birdman cult, is indeed one of the world's wonders. It is a land that exists not outside time, but hovering above it; a place that has made me rethink my notions about mythology, anthropology, and horses.

Visiting the island is an experience that no photograph can capture: a head trip in the best sense of the term. **V**



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Earthy origins: The crater of Rano Raraku volcano (above) cradles a lagoon, and the tuff and basalt quarried from its slopes (below) provided raw materials from which islanders carved most of the island's 900 *moai*. Opposite: Many *moai* remain unfinished or have toppled into disrepair.

