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Posada de Mike Rapu

Chile's Archaeological Wonders Inspire a New Luxury Resort on Easter Island

Architecture and Interior Design by José Cruz Ovalle and Associates

Text by Jeffrey Simpson/Photography by Michael Calderwood Published May 2009



Easter Island is a place of visible ghosts. Eerie moai, monolithic statues carved from volcanic rock hundreds of years ago, still brood over the landscape. Known in its Polynesian name as Rapa Nui, Easter Island is one of the most isolated places in the world. (The better-known name comes from Dutch explorer Jacob Roggeveen, who first encountered the island on Easter Day 1722.) A triangular volcanic speck only 63 square miles in area, it lies alone in the vast expanse of the southeastern Pacific Ocean, 2,300 miles west of Chile and over 1,100 miles east of Pitcairn Island. It was settled by Polynesians, who navigated canoes or catamarans eastward from islands thousands of miles away sometime between 400 and 800.

More than 800 moai, the average weighing an estimated 14 tons, once covered the island; they were erected as a form of ancestor worship and remained largely untouched until the late 18th century, when, during civil wars among the islanders, many of them were toppled. Today 50 have been restored and reerected on their ahu, or ceremonial

platforms, some of which originally served as sarcophagi.

“I felt the moai observing me,” says José Cruz Ovalle, a Chilean architect who has created the first luxury hotel on the island, Posada de Mike Rapu. Owned by Explora, it is one of several hotels developed by the Chilean company, which specializes in exotic locations, with other properties in Patagonia and the Chilean desert and one in Peru that is under construction.

“The moai form a sort of archipelago across the surface of the island,” explains Cruz, “and that is what I tried to do with my hotel. The buildings are set up on stone bases, with open spaces between them, the same way the moai are set up on their ahu. The buildings are held in a relationship by the spaces between them.”

Cruz went to the island three times before he started any designing. He developed a deep feeling for the place, its archaeology and its people. “I spent a lot of time writing and observing,” he says. “I observed the moai.”

Ultimately the hotel took 18 months to build. “I divided the work into two parts,” he says. “The surfaces of the hotel had to correspond to the landscape and its relationship to the sky and the sea. I employed about 100 local artisans to build the bases of the buildings according to ancient traditions using local stone.

“Then I brought in wood from Chile and employed another 100 artisans from the mainland to build the lighter superstructure with its large windows and support posts stretching upward toward the sky.”

The top structure unfolds “as an expansion of space,” he notes. “There are closed and semiclosed spaces, covered and semicovered spaces and open spaces—always with the spaces between them.”

As might be expected with an architect as sensitive to his environment as José Cruz Ovalle, the resort is “green.” It is the first LEED-certified hotel in Latin America. Whenever possible, indigenous materials were used, such as the stone in the bases of the buildings and a boiled red volcanic clay called hani hani on the rooftops. The hotel has 30 guest rooms, including four suites. All have baths with spas, sitting areas and ocean views.

Guests are offered a variety of guided walking tours around the island. Visitors are shown such sights as the summit of Mount Terevaka, the highest point on the island; Ara O Te Moai, the trail once used to transport the moai; Rano Raraku, the quarry where the ancient Easter Islanders carved the unfinished moai still lying in the volcanic crater; and the petroglyphs at Orongo, the ceremonial site of the Tangata Manu, or Bird Man, the cult that supplanted the earlier ancestor worship of the islander religion in an era of social and environmental upheaval.

Although about 50,000 people visit the island every year, many come for just the day (despite the five-hour flight from Santiago). Outside Hanga Roa, the island’s only village, the land is virtually unpopulated, so the hotel floats in a landscape of earth, sea and sky, enveloped in the ancient past, with the quarry of the moai visible in the distance and the figures themselves standing guard just over the hill.

Posada de Mike Rapu
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