

Mysterious and beautiful, Easter Island is defined by its utter isolation. But by bringing one of its moai to Paris, a major luxury brand is raising awareness of the urgent need to preserve its mesmerising statues.
 Claire Wrathall reports.

Remote, mysterious and far, far away, Easter Island – or Rapa Nui, as it's known to the Polynesians, who it is thought settled there some time between AD250 and AD400 – is a place defined by its isolation. Marooned in the Pacific on the same latitude as Brisbane, this lonely speck of an isle lies in the middle of nowhere. The nearest inhabited land is Pitcairn Island, about 2,000km northwest; the closest continent South America, nearly twice that distance to the east; the closest airport the Chilean capital Santiago, the city from which it is governed and a five-hour flight away. Look south from its highest point, the volcano Maunga Terevaka (506m), and only the inky waters of the South Pacific separate you from Antarctica.

Yet for all the effort involved in getting here from almost anywhere, more than 50,000

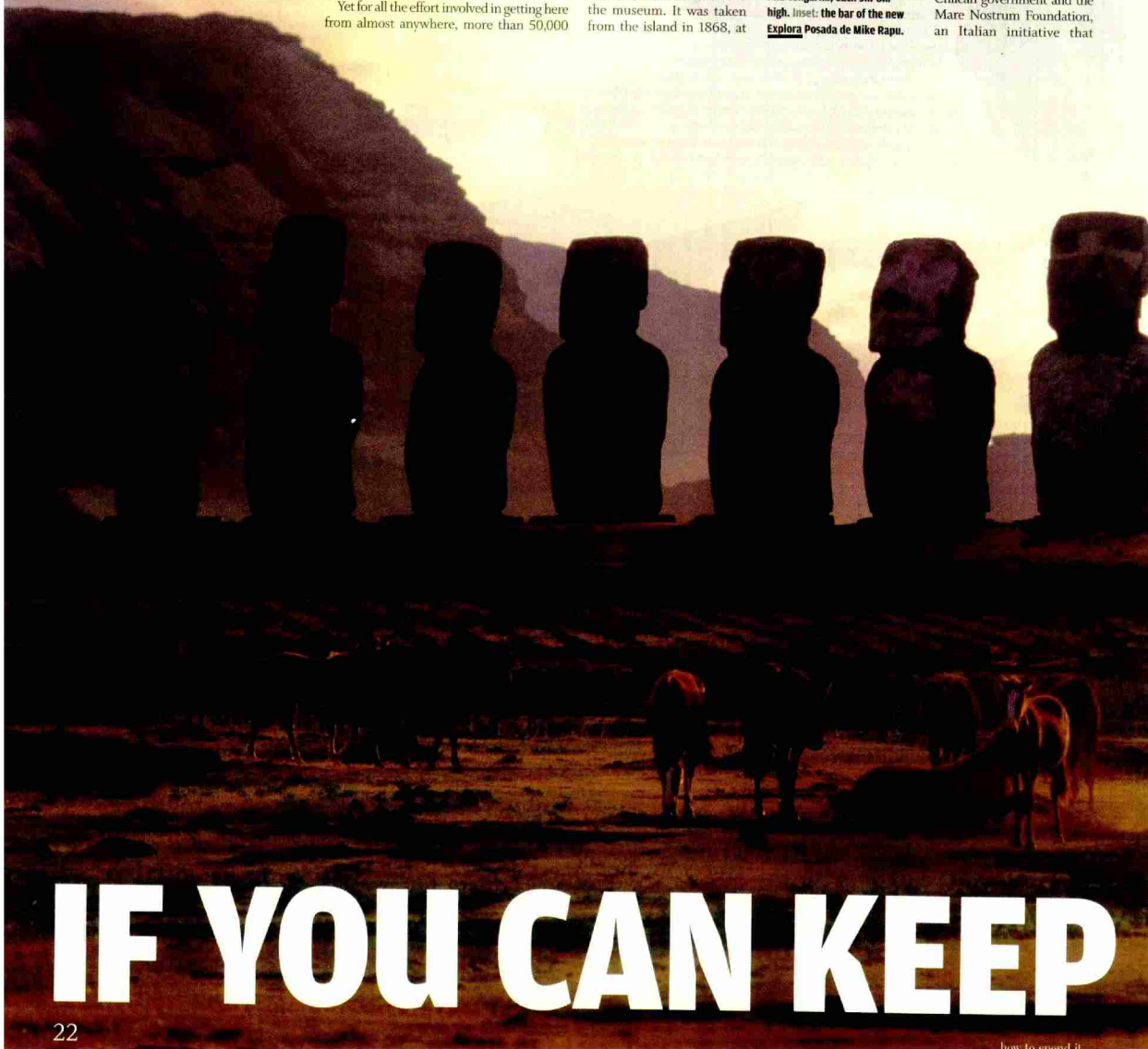
tourists a year now make the journey to marvel at the moai, the monumental, monolithic heads (and sometimes torsos) carved from volcanic rock between 500 and 1,000 years ago. Little is known of these immense, unexpectedly expressive "living faces" (*aringa ora*), with their Modigliani-like features, though they are thought to commemorate important ancestral figures. But to see them for real, to be among them, is an oddly mesmerising, even meditative experience.

My first encounter with a moai came in London's British Museum. This splendidly intact figure, its back a swirl of petroglyphs evoking the bird-like tattoos that still adorn men on the island, had been presented to Queen Victoria, who donated it to the museum. It was taken from the island in 1868, at

a time when these statues outnumbered people on Easter Island by about 10 to one. But even so its removal, by the crew of HMS *Topaz*, is a sore point that I began to tire of being harangued about, for it's not as though there aren't moai in many museums, among them those in Auckland, Brussels, Santiago, Washington and Paris.

Yet, despite the presence of two moais and a smaller head in the Louvre and Musée de l'Homme, the reputation of the French on Easter Island is very high just now, thanks to the largesse of Louis Vuitton, which has donated "a substantial amount" to the island as part of a preservation and sustainable development project it is funding in collaboration with the Chilean government and the Mare Nostrum Foundation, an Italian initiative that

Main picture: the 15 moai at Ahu Tongariki, each 5m-8m high. Inset: the bar of the new Explora Posada de Mike Rapu.



IF YOU CAN KEEP



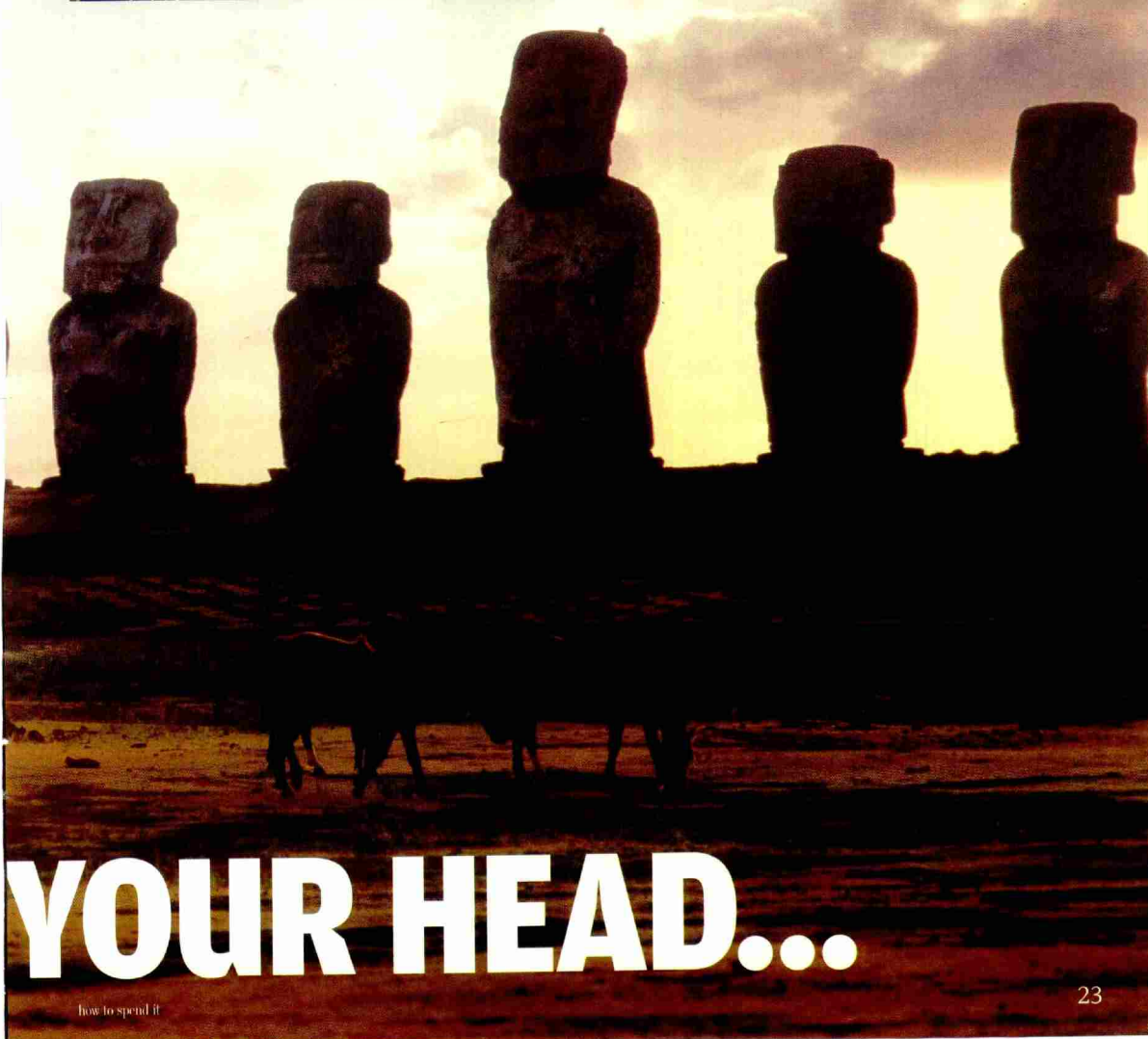
aims, as its founder and president Orlando Pandolfi puts it, "to empower islands by protecting their heritage, preserving their tradition and cultures as well as enhancing social actions and communications".

"In making this long-term commitment, Louis Vuitton hopes to raise awareness of the challenges that the Rapa Nui people face today and of the importance of protecting their patrimony," says Pietro Beccari, Louis Vuitton's senior vice-president of marketing and communications, stressing that the project will run for at least five years – probably longer.

"We hope to become a speakerphone – a voice – for their culture and values," he continues. "But the project is equally about sustainable development, to which end we hope it will enable them to establish a recycling plant on the island. We also want

to encourage travel to the island, on which its economy depends. Louis Vuitton is synonymous with travel, and we believe Easter Island represents the acme of voyages. It represents a mythical island, and remains one of the few places, perhaps the only one left, where, because of the distance involved in getting there, the trip is still an adventure."

Last but not least is the element of cultural exchange, to support education on the island and "to get learning about Rapa Nui culture out to the world". To this end, a collapsed moai will be restored and then flown to Paris, where it will be exhibited for about 16 days in the Jardin des Tuileries next year, to raise awareness of Easter Island and its heritage. The event will be complemented by an exhibition at the Espace Louis Vuitton, the seventh-floor gallery space above the brand's flagship store





Above: the lake-filled crater of Rano Kao. Right: Explora Posada de Mike Rapa by night. Below: a local on horseback.

on the Champs-Élysées, based on the island's archaeology. And this year another show, *Silent Writings*, inspired by 26 hieroglyphic "talking boards" in the lost language of Rongorongo that were found on the island, but have never before been seen outside the Vatican Museum to which they belong, is running at the Espace all summer.

Here on Easter Island, however, the first moai I came across was lying face down by a path near a part of the island they call Hanga Te Tenga. It was transfixing nonetheless, however worn away its lichen-encrusted features; and far bigger than I expected, perhaps twice the length of a man, for though many are just a couple of metres high, the largest measures a lofty 21.6m. I reached for my camera. Our guide laughed. "If you're getting crazy with the pictures here, wait till we get into the crater," he said, gesturing towards the volcano to which we were headed.

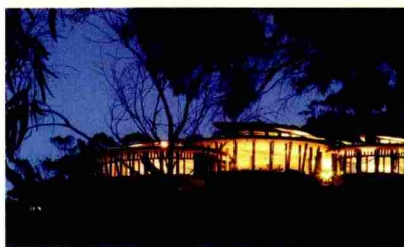
He was right. For perhaps the most surprising thing about the moai is their sheer number. The first you see on the "moai route", a 7km trek that takes you to the top of Rano Raraku, one of the island's

three extinct volcanos, are recumbent, sometimes broken, but as you approach the slopes – and enter the lake-filled crater, they are suddenly everywhere, some upright, others angled like broken teeth, even supine, with only the wild horses that roam the island for company. Most conform to type: pendulous ears, hollow eyes, long wide-nostrilled noses, perhaps the suggestion of arms, hands and nipples worked into the torso. But there is also a moai here with a European-style three-masted sailing ship

Moai are suddenly everywhere, some upright, others angled like broken teeth, with only the wild horses for company.

anchored by a turtle engraved on his torso, and another unusual kneeling figure, with a rounded head and clearly defined feet. Each moai is remarkable, but collectively they are more striking still; especially when you reach the very top of the path, and there, in the distance on the seashore, the 15 statues known as Ahu Tongariki are suddenly in view. Perhaps the most famous group of them all, each figure is between five and eight metres high, one apparently wearing a hat of the reddish stone tuff, though this is believed to symbolise a top-knot.

There are moai all over Easter Island. On the coast just outside the island's only significant settlement, Hanga Roa, stands Ahu Tahai, one of the few that has retained its stylised eyes (coral whites, obsidian pupils; the most intact example is in the island's little museum). Another row of seven figures, four with top-knots, stands on the beach at Anakena, one of only two sand coves on the island, where

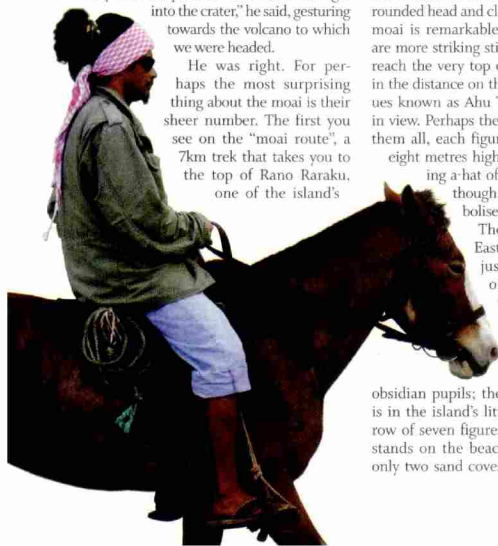


evolutionary biologist and writer Jared Diamond has written: "By 1864 all [the moai] had been pulled down by the islanders themselves." And this was how they remained until the Norwegian explorer Thor Heyerdahl came here in 1955 and oversaw the restoration of the statues on

Anakena beach. Even the 15 ancient figures at Ahu Tongariki have stood there only since 1995, after Japan's Tadano Corporation had paid for their reconstruction.

Other corporate interventions during the past century have been less welcome. The thistles that grow all over the island, for example, are a legacy of Easter Island's period as a sheep farm run by the Scottish company Williamson Balfour, which leased the island for almost 40 years till 1953, organising the landscape into a series of fields divided by dry-stone walls made from volcanic rock, and forcing the people to live in its one town.

The history of the island, as the inhabitants are inclined to remind you, is a miserable one. Having been invaded by Peruvian and Spanish slavers, who abducted many of the Rapa Nui people, Easter Island was annexed by Chile in 1888, by which time only 115 islanders survived. To serve on its Council of Elders, one of the island's three layers of government, you have to be directly descended from one of these families. Not that a connection with hated Williamson Balfour necessarily works against you. One of its Elders, Pedro Edmunds Paoa, who stepped down last December after 16 years as mayor, is the grandson of Williamson Balfour's last general manager and is pragmatic about its legacy. The company, he says, felt a "duty" to educate the islanders, "to teach them to farm, plant and harvest and how to cope with what



was to come" when the Chilean navy took over administration of the island. His son, he added, was hoping to go to Cambridge.

Chilean mainlanders now account for about 40 per cent of the island's population, which stands somewhere between 4,000 and 4,900, depending whom you ask. And certainly the Santiago-based hotel and travel company Explora has done much to encourage upscale tourism to the island. Until recently the only options for accommodation were a couple of dozen fairly basic hotels, hostels and *residenciales* in Hanga Roa. But just over a year ago, Explora opened Posada de Mike Rapu, 5.6km out of town overlooking the sea, which in its words "fills the gap for accommodation at the five-star end of the market". It would be pushing it to call it luxurious, and for all its good intentions, it has, to my eye at least, some way to go before it can call itself, as it aspires to become, the "first green hotel in South America". The walls of my room were part exposed concrete; the power comes from oil-powered generators; the housekeeping staff would switch on the air even when I kept turning it off; and the generous supplies of superior toiletries come in little plastic bottles.

But if it's short on the usual trappings of luxury (there aren't even televisions, music systems or minibars), it's a well-run, very comfortable place to stay, with excellent beds and bathrooms (outstanding showers in particular), and as it points out rather sweetly in its literature, "abundant hot water". Run as an all-inclusive, the rate includes all meals as well as cocktails – who knew a pisco sour could be made with avocado or strawberry

Above: petroglyphs in the volcanic rock at Hanga Roa.



juice? – and good Chilean wines, and as many expertly guided treks or bike rides, most between 6km and 14km, as you have the energy for. All this exercise justifies making the most of the simple but delicious food on offer here, mostly grilled local tuna, mahi-mahi or bream or fine Chilean steak, though I also enjoyed the local take on ravioli, which was stuffed with sweet potato (an island staple) and came dressed in an avocado sauce.

Aesthetically, too, the hotel has been thoughtfully and exquisitely designed by the Chilean architect José Cruz Ovalle to recall the megalithic settlement of 53 low-lying stone-and-turf houses at Orongo, standing on the ocean-facing edge of the island's largest and most beautiful volcanic crater,

Rano Kau, a vast circle of rock, more than 1km wide, with a lapis-coloured lake at its centre surrounded by luxuriantly verdant slopes from which rises the scent of wild figs.

There are rocks here carved with intricate petroglyphs, but no moai, for the statue that stood here is the one in London. "Don't you think your country should at least give us some money for it if they are not going to return it?" said our Rapa Nui guide crossly. I was the only Briton in our party; bar a German, the others were French, and she had no opprobrium for them. Louis Vuitton's largesse has not gone unnoticed, even if not everyone is happy with the idea of a moai travelling to Paris. But its absence will be temporary, and as an initiative it is, I think, a noble one. As wonders of the world, the moai

on Easter Island rate highly and reward being seen for real. Yet the subject of tourism is a vexed one for the island. Its economy needs visitors, and the island has much to attract them. But this fragile island has suffered one environmental catastrophe, and the last thing it needs is too much touristic development to upset its delicate infrastructure.

That said, the sight of the moai *in situ* is as captivating and extraordinary as anything I have ever seen. And though I'm not sure I connected with the "cosmic forces" one hears so much about on Easter Island, the night skies here are the most glittering I have ever marvelled at, a wash of brilliance made brighter by an absolute absence of light spill. But if the spiritualism of the place eluded me, there is nevertheless something strange and enchanted about this little land of volcanos and stone men: a preternatural calm, a mysteriousness and a profound sense that this really is a world apart. ♦

EASTER PARADE

Easter Island has a subtropical climate and can be visited year-round (May can be wet). Claire Wrathall travelled as a guest of Louis Vuitton. Explora Posada de Mike Rapu (+562-206 6060; www.explora.com) offers a minimum three-night stay, full board, including guided tours, for \$2,280. British Airways (www.ba.com) with LAN Chile flies to Easter Island from London Heathrow via São Paulo and Santiago, from £1,391. *Ecritures Silencieuses* runs till August 23 at the Espace Louis Vuitton, 101 Ave des Champs Elysées, Paris (www.lvmh.com). A second exhibition, on the moai, will coincide with the display of a newly restored moai statue from Easter Island in the Jardin des Tuileries in spring 2010.

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