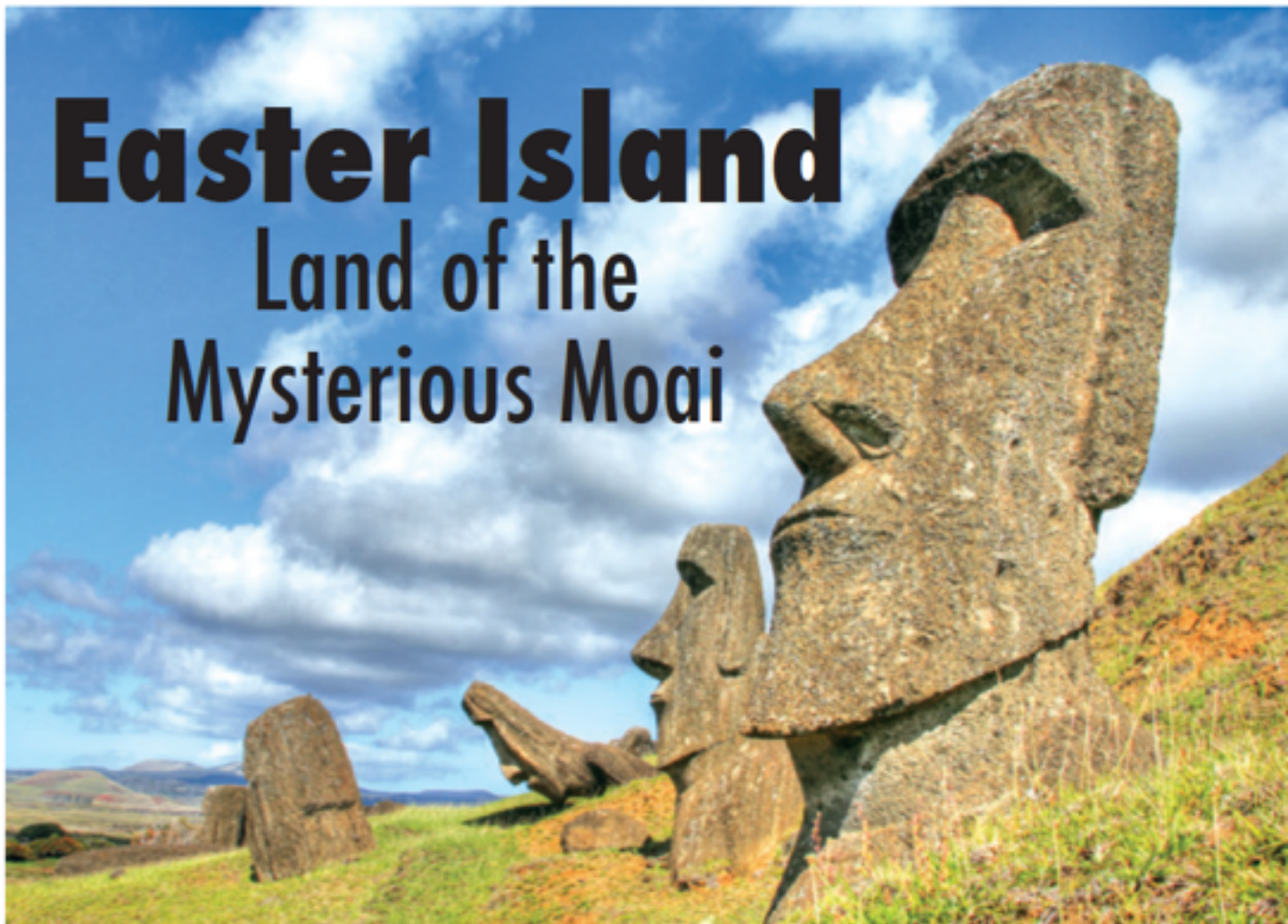


Easter Island

Land of the Mysterious Moai



Buried bodies



by Donna Judd

Photos © Donna Judd

Known as, “the most isolated inhabited place on earth,” Easter Island is a tiny dot in the vast South Pacific, 2,300 miles west of Chile. The volcanic island is also the world’s only home to the mysterious moai; nearly 1,000 massive statues carved before 1700 AD. (There are also originals at the Louvre and the British Museum.) Easter Island is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and a fascinating place to photograph. The island is delightfully manageable, only 69 square miles with one airport, one town, and a lifetime of great clouds and sea views.

Rapa Nui, as the natives call Easter Island, was “discovered” on Easter Sunday in 1722 by a Dutch sea captain. However, it was first settled by Polynesian explorers believed to have arrived by canoe between 400-700 AD. During my visit, the only flights available anywhere in the world to this tiny, remote rock were from Santiago on LAN, Chile’s national airline.

Despite the travel hassles, the mighty moai remain a magnetic draw to tourists from all parts of the world. Why were they built? How were these many ton giants moved without wheels? About 700 AD, natives began to carve large statues out of volcanic rock to honor the spirits of

deceased leaders or powerful men. Most of these moai were carved between 1400 and 1700 AD from cliffs at “The Quarry,” an extinct volcano named Rano Raraku. Moai average about ten feet in height, although the tallest is a towering 32 feet.

Topknots, weighing as much as three tons, were carved from reddish volcanic rocks at another site, and placed on the statue’s heads later. Today, many of the statues are missing their topknots, and the bodies are often buried under hundreds of years of dirt. Although no one knows for sure, the currently favored theory is that moai were moved by using ropes to pull sideways and “walk” them to their final burial sites.

Easter Island’s early violent history included deforestation and ecological degradation; intense internal warfare; cannibalism; diseases brought by the rare ships that stumbled upon the island; and Peruvian slave traders who kidnapped over 1,000 islanders. By 1877, only 111 Rapanui clung precariously to life from what had once been a thriving civilization of 10,000 - 20,000.

Eventually, life on Easter Island improved. In the 1960’s, Chile, having earlier annexed the island, declared it a province and built a small airport. Scheduled services from the Chilean



Dancer with braces

mainland started in 1967 with a monthly flight. But island life really began to change after 1987, when the runway was extended as an emergency landing strip for the NASA Space Shuttle, enabling wide-bodied jets to land. Weekly service soon began.

A geologist who arrived in 1965 via the Chilean navy's annual visit told me, "You can't believe how quiet the island was in those days of no cars or airplanes. There were only about 800 people, and you knew the names of everyone—and their kids, their horse, their dogs." He fell in love with the island, married a local girl, and became a first-hand observer of the rural society's evolution toward a tourist economy.

Today there are troubling undercurrents in paradise, including considerable friction between the approximately 2,800 Rapanui and 3,000 Chileans, who have arrived from the mainland mainly during the last decade. There is a fledgling movement toward independence; competition for jobs in the lucrative tourist trade; conflict between Rapanui ownership of the land and Chile's governing from afar; plus challenges from an inadequate power grid and dwindling water supply. But the casual tourist sees no evidence of any tension in this outwardly-relaxed environment. Easter Island remains delightful, mysterious, and beautiful.

While the main photographic focus is certainly moai, friendly locals, Hanga Roa Cemetery, water sports, sunsets, free-ranging horses, and the classic "waves crashing on rocks" are other great subjects. Photographing the moai is not difficult, although recent requirements do confine you to



Lone Moai



Natives playing



Topknot and friend



Ahu, Moai and Topknots

paths at The Quarry. It is forbidden to walk on the ahu, a ceremonial platform located below some moai. Rapa Nui National Park's 27 sites include a restored ceremonial village, petroglyphs, caves, the topknot quarry, and chicken houses. These are well-maintained, with signs in both Spanish and English.

Early morning provides the best light at popular sites like The Quarry. Here many moai were toppled by warring clans, providing the photographer with a great variety of angled, tilted, prone or supine statues. A few are still imbedded in solid rock, half revealed, although it takes some walking to reach them.



The Quarry

After having been swept inland by a 1960 tsunami, the 15 moai at Tongariki underwent a five-year restoration, including the raising of an 86-ton moai that is the heaviest ever erected on the island. Now the best looking moai

group on the island, Tongariki is best seen in late afternoon, with faces lit by golden light.

During our November trip, we experienced mostly clear skies during daylight hours, with rare short-lasting showers. A circular polarizing filter "popped" the blue skies and fluffy white clouds beautifully. However, weather is variable on this semitropical island, so also be prepared with rain gear.

A tripod is always an advantage in landscape photography. It will be especially useful should you shoot HDR, which might be handy, since you will often be photographing bright sky, darker statues, and even darker eye sockets, shaded by the moai's heavy brow.

Night photography has possibilities, since there is little light pollution, but evening clouds usually blocked our views of any stars. We did try some painting with light at Tahai, a moai site within walking distance of town. The sun sets over the ocean here, with the silhouetted moai standing tall in the foreground, making Tahai a favorite spot for romantic locals and photographers alike.

After sunset, with tripod, cable release, strong flashlight and a taxi set to return an hour later, we experimented with exposures from two to six seconds, manual focus on infinity, a wide-open aperture, and an ISO of 800-1,000. The result was not spectacular, but the attempt was fun.

So ended another photographic journey with a bit of fun, new friends, fresh knowledge, and renewed appreciation for our amazing world. Flying from Los Angeles to Houston to Miami to Santiago to Rapa Nui and back was no joy ride. Fortunately, the opportunity to photograph the moai of Easter Island was well-worth the effort. Thank Heavens! ■



Hanga Roa Cemetary

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