

# IMPRESSIONS OF RAPANUI 2003

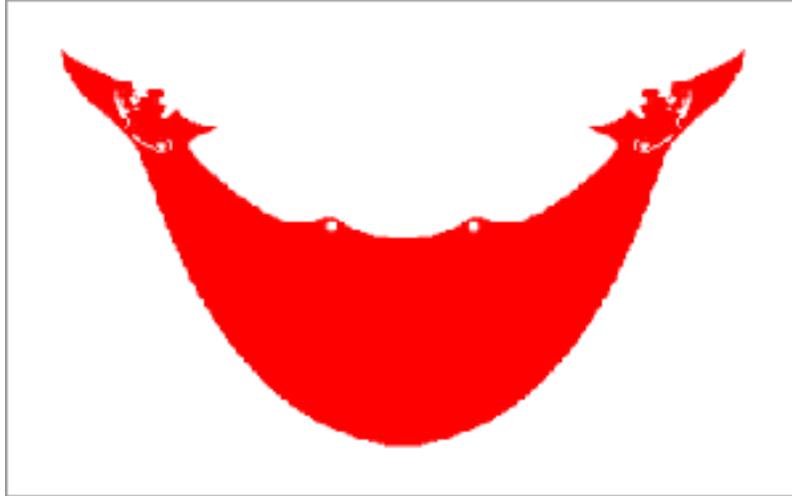


BY  
SERGE KAHILI KING

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## **Introduction**

Easter Island, called Rapanui by the natives today, is at the southeastern end of the Polynesian Triangle, with Hawaii at the top and New Zealand at the southwest. At 171 square kilometers it is a little smaller than Lanai and a bit larger than Niihau in the Hawaiian chain. The population was around 3000 in 2003, and may have been 10,000 at one time. Its location (3700 km from Chile, 2600 km from Mangareva, and 4000 km from Tahiti) makes it one of the most isolated inhabited areas in the world. Its latitude of about 27° south puts it in the Southern Hemisphere outside of the tropics approximately on a line with Johannesburg, South Africa and Brisbane, Australia and its longitude of about 109° West puts it in line with La Paz, Baja California, Mexico in the Western Hemisphere and Hainan Island, China in the Eastern Hemisphere.

Note: the historical background below does not have universal agreement.

At some time in the distant past (dates are very controversial because Polynesians did not keep records of years) the legendary king Hotu Matua left his homeland in the Marquesas and landed with a party of settlers at Anakena Beach on Rapanui's northeast coast. The descendants of those settlers formed twelve tribes divided into two confederations. They brought with them from the Marquesas a form of ancestor worship involving rather small stone statues placed on platforms, but over the years this evolved into a system of rival clans building larger and larger statues and eventually degenerated into wars that were disastrous for the population and for the environment. A sect known as the "birdman cult" gradually became the dominant religious and social expression before the society fell apart.

In 1722 a Dutch sea captain landed on Rapanui on Easter Sunday and gave it the name of Easter Island. Later, sailors coming from the west who were familiar with a small island 650 km south of Tahiti called "Rapa," applied the name "Rapa Nui" (Big Rapa) to Easter Island. Apparently, the original native name was *Te Pito Te Kainga* (Navel of Mother Earth), but the islanders adopted and still use the name Rapanui. By 1804 European, South American, and American ships began to kidnap islanders as slaves, but the worst blow came in 1862 when over 2000 inhabitants, including the king and many keepers of the culture, were abducted as slaves and taken to Peru. The few survivors who were returned brought back diseases that decimated the population further. Of the estimated population of 6000 that existed in 1862, only 111 remained by 1877. In 1888 the island was annexed by Chile and has been part of that country ever since.

Tourism is the primary source of income today. Some fruits and vegetables are grown on the island for local use. Although 90% of the island is rolling, rocky grassland, reforestation projects planting mostly eucalyptus have brought trees back to 5% of the land surface.

The official flag is that of Chile, but a Rapanui flag exists (see above) that features a chest plate called "Reimiro" that was worn by kings of old. I have read in several places that this flag is not allowed to be flown on the island, but in fact I saw it displayed openly in several places. While on the island I heard that there is a budding independence movement.

The photo pages linked to the sections below will each feature a map of the island.

### **Hanga Roa**

To celebrate my 65th birthday I decided I wanted to fulfill a longtime dream of going to Easter Island. My wife, Gloria, took on the difficult task of arranging it. After a great deal of internet research we settled on a tour package offered by LAN, the national airline of Chile, through its tour office in, of all places, Salt Lake City, Utah. The package provided a circle tour from Honolulu, to Tahiti, to Easter Island, to mainland Chile, to Peru, to Los Angeles, and back to Honolulu, with the privilege of spending as much time as we wanted at any stop.

On Monday, February 1st, we boarded a Hawaiian Airlines flight and landed in Papeete, Tahiti around midnight. The most memorable thing about the five and a half hour flight was the tiny little cheese sandwich that was handed to us without a wrapper for our main meal. A taxi met us at the airport and took us to our modest, but comfortable, hotel. The next day we walked into town, but since it was Sunday almost everything was closed. Near midnight we were picked up and taken to the airport to catch the overnight LAN flight to Easter Island.

In spite of all my traveling it was still a thrill to catch my first glimpse of the famous Easter Island just before we landed on the morning of February 3rd. That first impression was of a fairly

barren landscape with lots of volcanic cones all over it. After we rolled down the very long runway (built with US funds under the Reagan administration as an emergency landing site for the space shuttle) we stopped in front of a tiny airport. At the edge of the runway a crowd of Rapanui islanders were waiting for a rowdy, fun-loving, people-loving group of Maoris from New Zealand who were visiting for the annual Tapati Festival.

The immigration process was a bit slow because all the passport info had to be copied down by hand, but we finally made it through. We were met by representatives of Rapa Nui Tours, a German-Chilean company. Our tour guide, Victor Ika, was fluent in English and half a dozen other languages and seemed to be in his mid-twenties. Our driver, Pedro, was very friendly, but spoke little English. Both were Rapanui natives. Fortunately, both Gloria and I speak some Spanish, which we used a lot on the whole trip.

As soon as our bags were in the van we were whisked off in short order to our lodgings, the Hotel Otai in "downtown" Hanga Roa, the only town on the island. It was more like a motel than a hotel, but there was a nice pool, the Rapanui staff were quite friendly (in fact, all the Rapanui people we met were very friendly), there were lots of flowers and lush greenery, and there was an acerola cherry tree on the grounds full of ripe fruit. On the downside, there was no air-conditioning, but I was able to borrow a fan from an unoccupied room and it helped. Also, there was no television, no available internet service, a minimalist continental breakfast, and our room was on a direct acoustical ley line with the festival loudspeakers about half a mile away.

After a refreshing shower we lunched at a small, shack-like, open-air cafe next to the hotel. As a matter of fact, nearly every single restaurant in town was a small, shack-like, open-air cafe, except that some were more shack-like than others. For our first meal on Rapanui I had a "churrasco," which was sorta kinda like a

cheesburger deluxe with sliced beef, and Gloria had a fishburger. We wandered around town a bit, poking around the tiny souvenir shops and the tiny supermarket (sorry about the repetitive adjective, but most things were just darned tiny). We bought a lot of bottled water for the room and the tours. Although Rapanui water is supposed to be safe to drink, it's recommended that visitors don't try it because of the high mineral content that does strange things to the visiting digestive system.

Other features of the town included a small park, the only school, a couple of craft centers, and a church.

Every evening but two we had dinner at *Le Pecheur*, the closest thing to a gourmet restaurant on the island, operated by a friendly Frenchman and his Rapanui wife. Located right at the "port" of Hanga Roa with open views of the sun setting in the ocean, it had an interesting decor composed of odds and ends picked up by the owners on their travels, real tablecloths and real napkins, and even candles. Dinner delights included Uruguayan steak forestiere, rape-rape (slipper lobster), Spanish paella, and fresh salmon. The fresh mahimahi looked and tasted a lot like swordfish, but the excellent pisco sours and Chilean wines made up for that.

[Hanga Roa Photos](#)

## **Orongo**

Rapa Nui Tours picked us up at 3:30 on the first afternoon for a tour shared with two other couples. We drove southwest of town and up a hill to stop at the lip of Rano Kau, a volcanic crater 1500 meters in diameter which is filled with a 65-meter deep lake 300 meters below the top of the crater.

Language note: *rano* is Rapanui for "lagoon," which is normally a seawater basin enclosed by coral reefs or rocks. Since there are no coral reefs or seawater lagoons around Rapanui, the

word has been applied to crater lakes. The word clearly comes from another type of environment, but it is not related to Tahitian or Hawaiian. On the other hand, *kau* means "to swim" in Rapanui and it is related to the word 'au in Hawaiian with the same meaning. Victor told us that in former times swimmers trained in the crater lake.

From here we had broad views of the whole island and the rich vegetation that grew in the crater around the lake. In addition to fruit trees there were also supposed to be unique medicinal herbs.

A short distance away from the crater edge we came to the former ceremonial village of Orongo, a word related to the Hawaiian "Lono." However, the god worshipped here was Makemake, represented by a phallic symbol arranged like a face. The village sits high on the edge of the crater, overlooking the ocean and three islets. The fifty-three huts follow a pattern used by nobles on other parts of the island—an oval foundation not more than two or three meters at its widest point with rock walls and a tiny (oops!) rectangular entrance hole. Inside are one or two rooms, and here the roofs are made of sod, whereas elsewhere they are made of thatch. Legend has it that the house design is boat-shaped because when the first chief, Hotu Matua, arrived on the island his wife was pregnant and he upturned his canoe so she would have shelter. However, since Rapanui cosmology symbolizes the sky as male and the earth as female, and since the culture is rife with sexual symbolism, the house shape might also represent the female aspect of the cosmos.

Orongo was the center of the "birdman" cult, involving religious, social and political aspects of Rapanui life. At least some researchers believe that this cult co-existed with the ancestral religion of the great statues, and that it became pre-eminent when the ancestral system broke down (more on that later). Essentially,

the birdman cult—or religion—focused on a very special ceremony that took place during the annual nesting of terns (*manutara* in Rapanui) on Motu Nui ("Big Islet"), the farthest of the three islets off the shores of Rano Kau. Men representing the various clan chiefs would train in the crater and then set off for Motu Nui on reed rafts before the arrival of the terns and wait in a cave. Then they would climb onto the rock and try to snatch a freshly-laid egg. The first man to swim back to the main island, climb the cliff, and hand an intact egg to his clan chief would be highly honored.

Most of the honor, though, would go to the clan chief, who would be named *Tangata Manu* (Bird Man) for the coming year. He would live in near isolation for the whole year, and his clan would receive special privileges. According to Victor these privileges were usually abused, which led to lots of fighting between the clans. When I asked Victor about the movie, "Rapa Nui," he snorted in disgust. "Just a Hollywood production," he scoffed. What bothered him most were the scenes where the man who brought the egg smashed it against the forehead of the chief. "The egg was a symbol of life and power," said Victor. "It would never have been desecrated like that."

An unexplained oddity is that the *Tangata Manu* was symbolized by a drawing, petroglyph or sculpture of a naked human being with the head of a frigate bird, even though the egg came from a tern. Also, mixed in with the figures of *Tangata Manu* forms carved in abundance on the rocks around Orongo, are naked human figures with tern heads. I've read that some people think that terns replaced the frigates because the latter disappeared, but in reality the terns have stopped coming and frigate birds are still around (I saw some). Based on bird behavior, what I think is that the frigate bird was used as a symbol for the Bird Man because frigate birds normally take their food from other birds, rather than hunt their own (the Hawaiian word for frigates, *iwa*, means

"thief"), and one of the privileges of the Bird Man was to take food from other clans. I also think the *manutara* or tern-headed figures on the rocks represent the swimmers, and not the *Tangata Manu*. Petroglyphs are normally carved as magical symbols to bring luck, not as historical records.

Another very interesting thing about Rapa Nui petroglyphs is that they are the most sophisticated rock carvings in the whole Pacific, with curves and forms and details and sheer beauty unlike anywhere else.

[Orongo Photos](#)

### **Vinapu**

On the southwest coast of Easter island, very close to the eastern end of the runway, lies an extremely interesting archeological artifact in the ruins of Vinapu. Near the edge of the sea, on a rocky outcropping, are the remains of an *ahu*, a long stone platform used for the religion of ancestor worship, and as a base for mounting the large *moai* , or statues, for which Easter Island is so reknowned.

The word *moai* can refer to any statue of any size in any material, but in this report, as is usual in Rapa Nui, it only refers to the stone ones. As all the *ahu* are similar, I'll give a brief description of their general features here.

*Ahu* in general consist of a raised platform of unmortared stones, two to four meters wide and of varying lengths, depending on how many statues it is intended to hold. In front of the platform, facing inland, is a sloping area made of rounded stones set partly into the ground. This is several meters wide and as long or longer than the platform. In the later days of ancestor worship the bones of departed chiefs were buried here. Larger *ahu* have raised areas extending beyond the ends of the platform where in the oldest times the cremated remains of ancestral chiefs were buried. This

practice apparently ended when trees became scarce. The back of the platform almost always faces the sea and is usually vertical.

Vinapu is an unrestored *ahu*, meaning that all the statues which formerly stood proudly on top of the platform still lie overturned, broken and scattered from the clan wars that nearly decimated the population before the New World Europeans arrived to finish the job. It was both sad and strange to encounter these toppled monoliths of greenish, fairly soft lava rock lying mostly face down where they were pulled over by enemy clansmen.

Our guide Victor was very clear that the history of Rapanui has been grossly misrepresented. Instead of a war between the "Long Ears" and the "Short Ears," which is the common story, he said that the wars were mainly between the different clans, of which there were twelve, divided into two confederations. One confederation was called *Hanau E'epa* ("Born Robust") and the other was called *Hanau Momoko* ("Born Lizardlike," i.e. slender). Each confederation was composed of both chiefs and commoners. Apparently, sometimes the confederations fought each other, but more often different clans fought each other regardless of confederation affiliation. As is the case everywhere, including Hawaii, attempts to simplify the inner workings of a society are always way off base. Interestingly, Pedro, our driver, was a robust type, and Victor, who also had a lizard tattooed on his arm, was slender.

Each *ahu* was set up by a particular clan to represent the power of its ancestors. As rivalries grew the statues got bigger and fighting increased. The very worst thing one clan could do to another was to destroy its *mana* by destroying its statues, especially the eyes. By the beginning of the nineteenth century all but one of the eyes of the *moai* had been hacked to bits and nearly all the *moai* on the various *ahu* had been cast down.

At the back of Vinapu *ahu*, on the seaward side, there was a very small, weatherworn *moai* about two meters high sitting by itself, partly buried in the ground. Victor said that all of the oldest *moai* were small like this. As their features were eroded and as the culture changed they were removed from the *ahu* and replaced with newer and larger ones.

The most impressive aspect of Vinapu, however, is the back wall. It is made of closely fitted stone blocks in an earthquake-resistant style that looks exactly like the pre-Inca walls that I have seen in Cuzco, Peru, and very similar to remnants of the Menehune Ditch on Kauai and parts of the Great Wall at Pu'u Honua on the Big Island. Victor took out a compass and brought it near the wall to show how parts of it were magnetic. This is not as unusual as it sounds, because lots of lava contains iron particles and I have demonstrated the same phenomena with granite sarcophagi in Egypt.

[Vinapu Photos](#)

### **Huri A Urenga**

We hired a Rapanui woman taxi driver, Rosita, to take us to see a *moai* that wasn't on our tour, called Huri a Urenga on my map. Her taxi was an older car of indeterminate make and she arrived with two sons and a friend. After some discussion she made one of her sons get out so Gloria and I would have room to sit. Rosita handled the dirt roads very well, but we had a hard time finding the statue because she didn't recognize the name I gave her. After checking with the hotel clerk she drove us to a different statue on the other side of the island. Finally, she listened to my directions enough to get us to the general area and I pointed it out as we almost drove past. "Oh," said Rosita, "you should have told me you wanted to see the statue with four hands." It turned out that none of the locals were familiar with the name on the map.

This restored *moai* was unusual in that it was well inland and isolated, sitting on top of a hill. Another unusual feature is that it has four hands carved on its belly, instead of the usual two, and no one knows why. What is known is that it is considered to be the most important astronomical marker on the island, with as many as eleven markers related to equinoxes and solstices. The *ahu* and *moai* were built in perfect alignment to face the rising sun over the peak of Maunga Puakatiki on the eastern peninsula of Poike at the winter solstice.

This alignment of *ahu* and *moai* to equinoxes and solstices (mostly the winter solstice) is found all over the island. Obviously these alignments were extremely important, but why?

People maintain difficult customs and traditions because of practicality, economics, politics or religion, and sometimes out of mere habit. The more difficult the custom, though, the less likely it is that it will survive out of habit, and aligning *ahu* and *moai* is very difficult. Political customs change like the wind, and economic customs change with the economy. Religious customs can last a very long time without any apparent purpose, but they usually begin for a practical reason, according to the beliefs of the culture. Practical customs will survive as long as they serve a practical purpose, although if they become religious customs they may outlast their practicality.

Here's my theory. Knowledge of the equinoxes and solstices serves a practical purpose only to farmers and sailors. For farmers in the tropics precision in these matters is not vital. But for farmers outside of the tropics, and for ocean-going sailors everywhere, they are. In their early days of settlement the people of Rapanui were sailors above all else. Much later, however, they became mostly farmers and their sailing knowledge was forgotten. And yet, during the period of *moai* -building, they went to a great deal of trouble to keep accurate alignments. I believe it was because the *moai*

represented their ancestors, and their ancestors were sailors. Since Rapanui lies a bit outside of the tropics (about 29 degrees south latitude) the equinoxes and the solstices may also have been important because of the winter swells from the Antarctic.

[Huri A Urenga Photos](#)

### **South Coast Sites**

Hanga Te'e Bay off the South Coast road is the location of Vaihu, another unrestored *ahu* with *moai* as well as topknots (*pukao*) tumbled about. The reddish topknots, by the way, were a late development and represented a hair style where a man's hair was wound into a knot on the top of the head and dyed with red ochre. I have seen old paintings of New Zealand Maori with such topknots, though not dyed. I have also seen photos of South American indians with topknots dyed red, and photos of statues from the Mapuche Indians of Chile that have large stone statues with what looks like topknots on their heads.

At Vaihu some of the topknots are intricately carved. Another feature here and at some other sites is a stone circle called a *paina* which was used for the ceremonies performed at the *ahu*. In Hawaiian *paina* means "to raise, lift up, increase." Perhaps the Rapanui ceremony had to do with raising the topknots to the top of the statue heads.

Further south along the coast is the important site of Akahanga where the royal chiefs often resided, with four platforms, twelve *moai*, eight topknots, and the remains of quite a few "boathouse" foundations and firepits (*umu pae*).

Food was mostly cooked (and sometimes still is) in a special kind of firepit that was like a half underground oven. An *umu* in Hawaii is a hole in the ground with a fire at the bottom and layers of banana and ti leaves, fire-heated stones, meat and vegetables, all covered with dirt (burlap protects the food today). The Rapanui

version is very similar except that the fire is in the pit and the rest is above ground, all surrounded by a rock wall. The top of a Rapanui firepit is always made with five stones, whether it's used for cooking or just an ordinary fire. Victor showed us an *umu* that looked like it was made with only four nicely carved stones, and pointed out a small fifth stone wedged in one corner. No one knows why anymore, but it is still done. It is worth noting that the ancient Rapanui people had chickens, but no pigs. Maybe they ate them all before they could reproduce, or maybe the pigs just ate too much themselves and were competitors for food.

The first high chief, or king, Hotu Matua, is supposed to be buried near Akahanga.

The easternmost *ahu* on the south coast is the massive complex of Tongariki, with fifteen *moai* now standing thanks to a restoration in 1997 with the help of a crane donated by a Japanese company. The restoration effort was massive, too, since the whole area had been swept by a tidal wave in 1960. The axis of the platform is aligned with the rising of the summer solstice sun, and there are many petroglyphs nearby.

On a hill in front of the *ahu* is one of the smaller *moai* that was moved by modern reserchers to demonstrate a theory of how the ancients might have done it. It is also the only complete *moai* to have left the country and returned (to and from Japan) with the permission of the people.

The question of how the *moai* were moved is especially intriguing. A whole lot of theories have been proposed, from rolling the statues on logs, to sliding them over mashed sweet potatoes. Because of a legend that says the statues "walked" to the *ahu*, one group of researchers moved one small statue a short distance by wrapping it with ropes and tugging it on alternate sides, like we sometimes do with tall and narrow pieces of

furniture. What makes all these theories untenable is that a great many of the *moai* were much larger than the ones used for experiments, and, most importantly, Rapanui is not flat. The majority of the terrain is hilly, bumpy and full of rocks and depressions, not suitable to the methods proposed.

Even my favorite theory, that the *moai* were rafted to the sites, has holes in it. When I looked at the uneven terrain and the flat summer ocean and the canoe ramps next to the majority of sites that were right next to the water, and when I considered that re-usable rafts would use less wood than sleds and rollers, it seemed practical. But, the ocean isn't always flat, some *ahu* are inland, and some *moai* seem to have fallen on land while on their way to a coastal destination. Ah well, it's still as good as any of the other theories. Then I got to wondering about the legend of walking. I have enough experience with languages to know that many words have multiple meanings, and that translation are often faulty. The word for "to walk" in Rapanui is *ha'ere*, but it also refers simply to movement.

[South Coast Photos](#)

### **North Coast Sites**

Northwest of the "hump" at the center of the island is *Ahu Te Pito Kura*, location of the biggest *moai* ever mounted on a platform, now ignominiously lying face down in the dirt. Called *Moai Paro*, it stood ten meters high and weighed 85 tons.

Next to the platform is a circle of rocks surrounding a stone sphere made of whitish basalt about half a meter in diameter. The stone is sometimes called *Te Pito Henua* ("Navel of the World") and legend says it was brought to the island by Hotu Matua. This could be true, since the Rapanui people had a lot of magical stones that they used for fishing, navigation, dreaming, and many other things. This particular stone used to sit on the platform itself. The four stones around it were added later. Now it is the center of a

tourist cult that believes it has healing *mana*. While we were there lots of tourists came and knelt in front of it, touching their foreheads to the stone, in order to receive its magical powers. Victor's compass demonstrated that it is quite magnetic.

Further west is the lovely, palm-fringed beach of Anakena, one of only two natural beaches on the island, and the legendary landing place of Hotu Matua. Gloria and I swam here because the waves were gentle and the water was comfortable. And because the day was very hot.

Just inland of the beach is *Ahu Nau Nau*, with five very nicely made *moai*, four of them complete with topknots, that were restored between 1978 and 1980. You almost feel sorry for them, however, because they face the slope of an uninteresting hill and never get to see the beauty behind them. Because of the quality of the workmanship and the presence of petroglyphs on the *moai* and the platform itself it is believed that these are among the last *moai* to have been mounted on their platform before the wars of destruction.

One of the more unusual sites, and probably the most famous one in terms of how familiar it is to people around the world, is *Ahu Aviki*, composed of seven *moai* aligned with their backs to the rising sun of the equinox (or facing the setting sun of the equinox, whichever you prefer). They are unusual because they are inland, like the *moai* of Huri a Urenga, and not at the edge of the ocean like nearly all the other *ahu*. Most people writing about them say that they are facing the sea, but that is not accurate. They actually face an area of land that is quite a fair distance from the sea, considering the size of the island. Since all the *moai* represented protective ancestors, they are no doubt guarding the land, and not yearning for their homeland. Because they are seven they are associated with the seven first explorers, but this seems to be a late

development, especially when you learn that six of those seven returned home rather than stay and settle.

The Tahai complex consists of three *ahu*, one of which has five *moai* standing, one of which has a single and relatively small *moai*, and one of which has an impressive *moai* complete with topknot as well as eyes! In this area there are also lots of boat houses, stone circles, *umu*, *manavai* (stone enclosures for growing food plants), canoe ramps, and other interesting stuff.

[North Coast Photos](#)

### **Quarries**

Nearly all *moai* are carved from a soft type of greenish lava called "tuff," while the topknots are made of a somewhat harder, reddish type of lava called "scoria." A few small and early *moai* were carved from very hard vesicular lava (the kind with small holes in it), and the topknots were not made until later times. They were not attached to the head, but quarried and carved separately from the *moai* and put on just before or just after mounting on the *ahu*.

The topknots, or *pukao*, were quarried in a secondary crater called Puna Pau, not far from the town of Hanga Roa. Today, finished and unfinished ones are lying all over. A few in the crater have large numbers on them, put there by a German priest, Sebastian Englert, who counted every remnant of the *moai* period that he could find (around 900 pieces), and spent thirty-four years (1934 to 1968) on Rapanui studying the language and collecting legends, stories and knowledge about the old times from the elders and their children. Today he is credited with saving the Rapanui culture and providing a vital resource for the young Rapanui population that wants to connect to its roots.

The main quarry for the Moai is Rano Raraku, an awesome place that takes your breath away. As you climb the long slope leading to the quarry you come across massive heads sticking up

out of the ground. These are roughly finished *moai* , partly buried so the sculptor can add finishing touches required by the "buyer," like reshaping the nose a bit to more resemble a particular ancestor, or adding some details to the ears or the back. First and foremost, however, the *moai* were phallic symbols, intended to draw masculine power down from the skies, combine it with the *mana* of the ancestor, and project it through the eyes to nourish the clan and protect it from its enemies. Victor told a story of how the *moai* came to have the unique shape of head and neck as related to the body. He said that the chief of the sculptors went to a wise man (curiously, these are called *Maori* in the Rapanui language) and asked how to make the neck. The wise man said, "The answer is right in front of you." The clan chief left, disgusted with the response. Then one day soon after he was relieving himself and happened to glance at his own penis. Laughing, he knew he understood and used the pattern he saw right in front of him for the statues.

According to Victor, the upper slopes of the crater are the equivalent of a big showroom. Only one clan did all the sculpting, and the chiefs of the other clans came here to negotiate payment for the work through barter. When the clan wars interrupted trade, the sculptors went on strike.

If you are observant you notice that none of these statues has eye sockets. That's because the eye sockets were one of the last things carved, just before the *moai* was put up on the platform. And this also means that the sculpting clan had to be involved in every step of the process, from quarrying and carving to transport, finishing and mounting.

On the way to the quarry there is an anomaly sitting at a bend in the trail. This is a large, realistic figure in a kneeling position that is unlike any other sculpture on the island. It's another one of

the puzzling mysteries here, since there is no legend or knowledge associated with it.

The quarry itself is amazing. Partly finished statues of all sizes are still attached to the native rock in every imaginable direction. The sculptors certainly knew how to take advantage of every bit of usable material. Among the unfinished pieces is the largest *moai* ever made. It would have been 21 meters (70 feet) high and the estimated weight would have been 300 tons. In the quarry it looks like it's almost ready to be detached. Maybe the sculptors thought long and hard about what it would take to get this monster down to the coast and set on an *ahu*, and they just gave up.

Inside the crater is a lake or lagoon, with more "showroom" *moai* on the slopes around it. This body of water is the site of reed raft racing during the Tapati Festival.

[Quarry Photos](#)

## **Caves**

There are many lava tube caves on Rapanui, both above and below sea level. Some were used for rituals, some for growing food, some for hiding from warriors or slavers, and some for storing precious objects so the missionaries wouldn't destroy them. We were fortunate to be able to visit four of the seven most well known caves.

*Ana* means "cave" in both Rapanui and Hawaiian. The first one we visited was in a hill above Akahanga. Victor didn't give us its name, but it could be *Ana O Te Moai*, meaning "Cave of the Statues." This was a rather small ritual cave where the wise ones, *maori*, told stories and the shamans, *ivi atua*, literally "bone spirits," did magic, which included the ability to speak to the spirits of weather, animals, stones and ancestors. Magical items often consisted of stones, smooth and/or rounded ones by preference, which were inscribed with symbols to bring fishing

luck, prophetic dreams, and so on. Skulls of ancestors were also used, with symbols painted or inscribed on them, and were kept in caves, placed on *ahu* at the base of the *moai*, or buried between uses.

Near Ahu Akivi was *Ana Te Pahu* ("Cave of Rooms"), one of the largest. A 2009 expedition claimed that this complex totalled six kilometers (almost 4 miles) in length. *Pahu* in Hawaiian is mainly a drum or a container; in Rapanui it refers to a jar that is struck with a stick, or to a chamber in a cave. First we walked down into a fairly large chamber and Victor pointed out the path to a whole series of rooms extending underground for a long way. Some commoners lived here, but it was also used as a hiding place. Another part of the cave with a collapsed roof was used as a *mataveru*, an underground garden still filled with bananas and other edible plants.

A visit to the third cave was suggested by our taxi driver, Rosita. This was *Ana Kakenga*, the Cave of Two Windows. To get there we took a dusty, bumpy road along the coast east of Hanga Roa and finally stopped in a rocky, uneven field that sloped gently toward a cliff above the ocean. Rosita led us to a shallow depression in the ground and pointed to a small, black hole. "There it is," she said.

We had grave doubts about going into that hole. Nevertheless, Rosita led the way, followed by her friend with a handycam equipped with a light, and we stumbled after. We actually had to crawl in some spots, but we soon came to a place where we could stand. A short branch to the right led to roundish hole in the cliff face between two and three meters high that looked out over a small inlet and the ocean beyond. A slightly longer left branch led down and out to a similar window. Rosita said that the women used to come here to hide from the slavers.

On the way back to town we stopped to pick wild guavas, which Rosita said were US\$5 a basket at the market. It was interesting in a scary sort of way to watch her peel a guava with a knife while driving on that rough and curvy road.

The last cave we visited was *Ana Kai Tangata*, just west of Hanga Roa, and situated at the end of a beautiful little bay. We followed a rocky trail down to the entrance, and it was obvious that high tide would fill the floor. On the ceiling were the remains of what was once an elaborate frieze of paintings related to the birdman cult, and on a small boulder on the floor to one side was another birdman painting, either purely modern or a restored version of an older one. Due to vandalism and erosion only a few paintings are left.

The name of the cave has led to speculation that some sort of ritual cannibalism was practiced here by the *Manu Tangata* (Bird Man) as part of an initiation ceremony, because *Ana Kai Tangata* could be translated as "Man-Eating Cave." However, *kai* can also refer to string figures (though it is usually doubled as *kai-kai*) and in that case the Bird Man might have been taught sacred knowledge through such means. In Hawaiian, *kai* would be 'ai, a word meaning "to eat or consume" and also "to rule." This relationship between ruling and eating is a curious aspect of Polynesian culture. In Hawaii a ruling chief was said to "consume" his subjects, perhaps in the sense of deriving power from them. Of course, this increases speculation about ancient ritual cannibalism throughout Polynesia. The relationship in Rapanui between eating or consuming and string figures might possibly come from the fact that string figures were used for magic, and not just for telling stories.

[Cave Photos](#)

## Museums

A short distance east of the center of town, just inland from the Tahai complex, is the privately-owned Padre Sebastian Englert Museum. It is small, but extremely informative, with many display cases, statuary, and illustrated panels. It's all in Spanish, but we were able to borrow an English guidebook that came in very handy for words I didn't know.

One of the main features was a case that held the only nearly intact eye of a *moai* ever found. It was brought to light during excavations at the Anakena beach site. The eye itself is made of coral (coral exists underwater around the island, even though no reefs have formed) and the pupil is usually made of obsidian, *mata* (with an accent on the last letter), but in this case it was made of red scoria. Until this was found some researchers didn't believe that the *moai* really had inset eyes like all the legends said. I suspect these "researchers" had never come to Rapa Nui, because I found broken bits of coral and obsidian around most of the *ahu* we visited, and not around any other areas even twenty meters away. By the way, there is no known word for obsidian in Hawaiian, but there is a word, *maka* (with an accent on both vowels) that the dictionary defines as "a type of stone," and which is probably obsidian.

Another special feature at this museum was a statue of a female *moai* (the breasts were a giveaway, and the shape of the head was different). These are very rare; I think only four have been found. Some legends I read did say that there were very powerful queens from time to time, just like in Hawaii.

Right outside one of the museum windows was the *moai* that Thor Hyerdahl and his crew moved. It's pretty small (about 3-4 meters high) compared to many of the others that were transported and mounted on platforms by the Rapanui people in former times.

In Santiago, Chile, the Natural History Museum is supposed to have a good collection of Rapanui artifacts, but it was closed during our visit and the Pre-Columbian Museum didn't have anything from Rapanui. Fortunately, we did find a private museum in the coastal resort town of Viña del Mar called "Museo Fonck" which had three rooms devoted to Rapanui. There we found lots of obsidian spear points and other weapons, finely-carved power sticks and paddles, magical stones, a wooden chest plate called *reimiro* ("wooden lei") that is the symbol of modern Rapanui, fishhooks and tools, and a large tapa cape. The attractive guide who showed us around thought the topknot on the *moai* was a crown, but otherwise she was a good source of information.

[Museum Photos](#)

### **The Tapati Festival**

The Tapati Festival is an annual celebration of Rapanui culture that takes place in the summer (by southern hemisphere reckoning) around the end of January and the beginning of February. We had a hard time finding out the exact dates before we got there, so we missed three days at the beginning and two days at the end, including, unfortunately, the parade.

The festival is structured as a series of contests between two groups that represent two candidates for Queen of the Festival, somewhat like the confederations of old. The winning individuals or groups of each event are given points and at the end of the festival the candidate whose group has accumulated the most points is declared queen. This year the candidates were Emilia Hei Pakarati—young, pretty, and sexy—and Gina Pakarati Patay, a little older, poised, and graceful.

Most of the events took place at Hanga Vere Vere, a field on the coast between Hanga Roa port and the Tahai complex, within easy walking (and hearing) distance of our hotel.

The first event we attended was a gastronomical contest where different families in traditional costumes prepared their specialties and displayed them in thatch-roofed booths where the judges could sample them. In the same area there were thatch restaurants serving free food, such as shish kebobs and pineapple/chicken empanadas. At the eastern end of the field was a large stage decorated with huge figures and scenes from the culture. The decorations are changed annually, and this year's design featured the "founding father" of Rapanui culture, Hotu Matua, in the center; his sister, Queen Avareipua, on the right; and an elderly woman Maori (wise woman) on the left holding a giant string figure known in Hawaii as "three eyes." The model for the Maori woman, we learned, was the grandmother of our hotel clerk. The "orchestra" area was reserved for VIPs who got chairs, occasionally tables, and refreshments. Behind that were log benches for the plebians, like tourists and most of the locals who weren't performing.

The next event we went to started at 10 pm (as did all the evening events). The show began with a Rapanui band playing local music, and some young dancers in costume. Rapanui music and dance are a unique blend of different instruments, styles, and traditions, due to the near annihilation of the race and the borrowing from other cultures in order to recreate their own. For instance, "traditional" instruments include the *ukurere*, based on the word "ukulele," but really a Tahitian instrument with six strings and a flat body with no soundbox that sounds like a banjo; guitars, of course; bongo and conga drums from Central America; and, believe it or not, a small piano accordeon that was introduced by European sailors (there is hardly anything more strange than seeing a bare-footed, grass-skirted, bare-chested adult man playing an accordeon). The "traditional" dances borrow a lot from Tahiti, but also include gestures from Hawaii, couple dancing from Samoa, derivations of sea chantys from the sailors, and—here we go again—the tango from Chile (if there's anything more strange

than the accordionist, it's a man and a woman in Polynesian native dress doing the tango!). And "traditional" costumes borrow a lot from Tahiti and Aotearoa (New Zealand).

After the first show came the string figure contest. Since I'm going to cover string figures in a different section I'll pass over that right now.

Following the string figure contest was the body-painting contest, or *Takona* (no Hawaiian equivalent). For this contest the contestants came on stage in their body paint and did skits, then explained in Rapanui what the paint ingredients were and the meaning of each of the symbols on each part of the body. First was a young teenage boy in a breechclout, painted in gray with white symbols on his body. He brought out a whole kit of natural paints and called for a couple of volunteers. A man and a boy jumped on stage and the contestant painted various symbols on them in red and yellow ochre to demonstrate the process. He then said, "*Maruru*" (thank you in Rapanui) and the man left, but the boy stayed, as if unsure what to do. The contestant said "*Maruru*" a couple of more times without effect, then carefully and clearly said, "*Muchas gracias!*" and the boy finally left. Although the kid looked Rapanui he obviously wasn't.

The next contestant was a man who came on stage carrying a large, freshly-caught tuna over his shoulder, accompanied by two boys carrying smaller fish and a big eel. After him came a woman who was totally nude except for red ochre and a g-string (she must have had some symbols, but I don't remember), and another woman also nude with a g-string, painted all in gray with white symbols all over her body. When it came time to explain them she simply took a provocative stance and said, "*Komari!*" (vulva) and the locals all laughed. We left about 12:30 am when the storytelling started (and lasted till 4 or 5 am, like most nights).

On another night we watched a contest between the two queen candidates which was supposed to demonstrate their skill at making traditional clothing, but which might just as well have been called the "Who Can Make The Skimpiest Costume" contest. Each queen had to model a costume that she had made out of shells, then banana bark, then feathers, then paper bark. Emilia won for skimpiness without a problem (her smallest outfit was a crotch cup made of shells), but Gina outdid her in elegance (her cape of feathers was a marvel).

Following that was a dance contest with separate troupes of children, adolescents and adults representing each candidate and numbering from 50 to over a hundred each. The children's group representing Emilia featured a highly talented five-year-old who led the whole dance sequence with skill and aplomb. Emilia's adult group was overtly sexual as well as very talented and featured several women running around and between the other dancers while mock riding and whipping several men. There was also a rousing sea chanty sequence and a hootchy-kootchy bit. Her segment ended with Emilia herself stripped down to a string bikini and actually riding a strong young man who stamped and snorted like a horse for a very long time. Gina's whole group was more sedate and more subtly sexual, though not quite as skilled. We left at 1 am, feeling worn out, while the singing went on and on.

The last evening event we attended (with hotel towels to cushion the logs) was a traditional song contest between the two groups, with about fifty singers on each side. The rules for this one were that each group got to sing three songs in turn. Only traditional Rapanui songs could be sung—no songs about Rapanui from anywhere else. The first team to use a foreign song, to repeat a song, or to use a song sung by the other team, would lose. If no one lost, the judges would rule on the winner according to costume, language ability, and enthusiasm. The contest ended around 5 am, but we don't know who won.

We also attended the finals of the rock sculpting contest at Hanga Pito, a small bay west of town. The judges were having a hard time choosing between a larger-than-life sculpture in red scoria of a man in traditional dress, and a smaller-than-life sculpture in gray tuff of a swimmer with a raft holding an egg, exquisitely done. The larger carving finally won.

On our last full day Rosita picked us up with another visitor and we drove out to a steep, grassy cone roughly in the middle of the island, called Maunga Pi'u, site of the exciting sports contest called Haka Pe'i. Although the word pe'i is related to the Hawaiian word *peki*, meaning "to move along step by step," on Rapanui it refers to a dangerously fast (up to 50 mph) sledding sport in which the contestants speed down a 45 degree hill for 120 meters (close to 400 feet) if they make it. Furthermore, they wear nothing but bodypaint and a very brief breechclout, and the sled consists of two banana stalks tied together.

We got there early enough to get good spots on the grass at the base of the hill, but even with my 20x binoculars I could barely make out what the people on top of the hill were doing. Finally, after a few hundred more people had arrived by taxi, private car, truck and horseback the contest began.

Each contestant had to lie on his back on the stalks, which were so heavy that it took four or five men to get the sleds started, and a horse to drag them off the field. An ambulance waited at the bottom. Rosita told us that there had been some bad accidents in the past. I could believe it, because this was not just a grassy slope; it was a slope of lava rocks and dirt with grass growing on it. With my binocs I watched the first man come down, looking scared but determined as he held on tightly to the sled by the ropes. He made it safely, as did the second one. The third one, though, was a truly heroic sledder. He came down the slope with his legs held high as

if to say, "Who needs to hold on?" and, in addition to sliding farther than anyone else, he rose up on his feet and actually surfed the last few yards! A frequent visitor to Rapanui whom I spoke to later said he had never heard of anyone doing that before. The hero was not only good, he was young and handsome and I think his name was Claudio Romero.

The next two fell hard before getting halfway down, tumbling among the rocks without serious injury, but the third made it okay. It was amusing to watch the female tourists running to get pictures taken with the contestants. After it was over we shared a fresh watermelon with some friends of Rosita.

[Tapati Festival Photos](#)

### **String Figures**

One of the many reasons I wanted to go to Easter island was to investigate their use of string figures, which they call *Kai-Kai*, since the non-profit Aloha International, of which I am the Executive Director, has a whole project involved with string figure research and education run by Lois and Earl Stokes. I knew that the Easter Islanders had some knowledge of string figures from two paragraphs about them in the Games and Recreation section of *Ethnology of Easter Island*, by Alfred Metraux (Bishop Museum Press) in which the author states that only thirty figures are remembered, and those by very few people, and that hardly anyone understands their purpose and accompanying chants.

I got more excited when I read that there would be string figure contests at the Tapati Festival, and even more excited when I saw that one of the main features of the stage set was an old woman doing a string figure. I had brought a bunch of strings and figures from Hawaii and I naively imagined myself sitting on a rock and amazing the young children and adults with the figures I knew, and then creating good will by giving them all strings to play with. The reality was very different.

My first awakening occurred with Victor, our guide. While on our way to Ahu Aviki in the tour van I pulled out a string and did a simple string trick called *Kohola*, the Humpback Whale. Victor looked mildly amused and I asked him if he knew anyone who could do Rapa Nui string figures. He said that he had won the string figure championship when he was a young boy and that at that time he knew about seventy. He said he still remembered a few, so I handed him a string and he said he couldn't do anything with that because it was too small. I made one larger string out of two and he proceeded to quickly make Four Eyes (a figure with four diamonds) in a beautiful and complicated way that I had never seen before (to be fair, he had never seen it done the simple way I made it, either). At Ahu Aviki he made a more complicated pattern related to a canoe and the site called Akahenga and did the chant for it, which was for protection of the area (I finally learned this one). and then he did some more.

On the day we visited the beach at Anakena I got another awakening. During a break Victor invited me up to a snack booth and introduced me to the woman who ran it. Victor had already told me that knowledge of string figures was mostly kept by the women, and he told me that this woman knew more than he ever did. She jokingly offered to show me some figures for \$50,000, and \$10,000 for each picture I took, and I replied that instead I would share a Hawaiian figure with her. I handed her a long string and she then proceeded to run through an amazing series of figures, most of them blending into each other with smooth expertise. For my part I showed her *Po* (seven diamonds representing the night sky) and transformed it into *Hoku* (a blinking star). This was the best one I had, and fortunately, both she and Victor were impressed.

By now I was beginning to realize that string figures played –and still play— a more important role in Rapanui society than

most people, even respected researchers, realized. This awareness reached full bloom the night of the Tapati String Figure contest. There on stage, one young woman after another, using string loops at least two meters in length, wove fantastic figures and chanted. As part of the contest, they had to explain the figure in Spanish and/or Rapanui before they made it, then make it, and then hold it while they chanted in Rapanui. They were judged on skill, the complexity of the figure, the accuracy of the explanation, and the quality of the chant. At least two things about Rapanui string figures have become very clear since this experience: a) there is a great lack of knowledge about them outside of Rapanui itself, and b) for the people of Rapa Nui they are not just a game.

[String Photos](#)

### **Rongorongo**

An even greater mystery than how the *moai* were moved has to do with the writing called Rongorongo. Because of slavery, disease, theft, rot, and destruction for religious reasons, only 24 examples of this unique form of writing exist in the whole world (unless more are still hidden). Yet, a French missionary in 1864 reported that in every household there were hundreds of tablets and staves with writing on them.

Rongorongo is a word in Rapanui having to do with sharing messages or information. It is related to the Hawaiian word *lono*, which means, in part, "news, report, tidings, remembrance." As a form of writing it consists of ideograms—images representing ideas—somewhat similar in concept to ancient Chinese characters or Egyptian hieroglyphics. The style of writing itself is classified as "bustrofedon." This means that reading begins on the bottom line, reading left to right, and then the text must be turned upside down and the next line up is read left to right, and the process repeated. In the remaining examples of text only about 150 separate characters have been identified in about 2000 combinations, not enough for analytical interpretation. However,

there is still some oral tradition relating to some of the remaining texts, enough to determine that the content mainly concerned religious or philosophical concepts. Another type of writing, called Ta'u, was used for historical events (and finding any information on this is very difficult).

Rongorongo writing was carved mostly on wood, but some small samples exist on stone. The longest texts remaining were carved on a very rare wood called *toromiro*, a reddish hardwood related to mahogany, and therefore Hawaiian *koa* as well, that used to grow on Rapanui. Englert recorded stories about Rongorongo written on a soft wood called *hauhau* (similar to Hawaiian soft wood *hau*, but a different species altogether) and how these tablets were stored in caves, but rotted away. A few examples existed—and may still exist—on stone as well.

There are no original examples of Rongorongo tablets displayed on Rapanui today, not even in the Englert museum, but a few very nicely made replicas can be found in a couple of shops and in the handicraft markets. Most of these were not more than 35 cm (about 15 in) long, but a large one about two meters long and a meter and a half high was located in our hotel lobby. I was fortunate to find a beautiful, hand-made replica about 64 cm (25 in) long at a craft table in the woods where we had lunch at the foot of Rano Rararu crater.

There is a huge amount of controversy regarding the origin as well as the meaning of the Rongorongo glyphs, but they are not quite as unique as most people think. Some of the images, in virtually identical form, can be found in Hawaiian petroglyphs on the Big Island (Hawaii has petroglyphs that appear to be a form of writing, too). Also, according to a friend of mine from New Zealand, the Maori chiefs who signed the Treaty of Waitangi included eight glyphs that match those in the Rongorongo script.

The possibility that the Polynesians once had a widespread form of writing is very real.

However, for a very different idea of Rongorongo, its origin and meaning, visit the intriguing website of Steven Fischer's interpretation, a nice man we met at our hotel and who is a tour leader, author, and recognized expert on Rapanui.

And so, this is the end of my story. It is too brief to do justice to the experience of being on Rapanui, or to the great body knowledge that exists about it, but perhaps I have given you more than you expected, and whetted your appetite for even more than that.

[Rongorongo Photos](#)