


SEI STONE

For two long pandemic years, Easter Island (known as Rapa Nui to its residents) kept its borders closed, limiting food supplies and cutting off tourism revenue. But as **Mark Johanson** learns, the islanders have emerged with greater appreciation for their community and culture—and created even more compelling reasons to visit. **Photographs by Rose Marie Cromwell**



A full-page photograph of six Moai statues standing in a row on a grassy hill. The statues are dark, weathered stone figures with large heads and small bodies. They are positioned against a backdrop of a vast, cloudy sky. The clouds are thick and layered, with some light breaking through near the horizon, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The foreground is a lush green field with some yellow wildflowers. The overall mood is serene and majestic.

Carved *moai* stand guard
at Ahu Tongariki, on the
Chilean island of Rapa Nui.

I SAW THE *MOAI* for the first time at sunset, lording over the coast of Easter Island, or Rapa Nui, like giant warriors armored in gold. At an average 13 feet tall and weighing as much as 14 tons, these remarkable figures, set against the backdrop of the Pacific Ocean, looked more human-like as I walked closer. One was wide-eyed; another stern. Their neighbor up the hill appeared winsome.

There are nearly 1,000 *moai* (which means “statues” in the Rapanui language) on this Chilean territory. They are thought to have been hewn between the 12th and 17th centuries, after Polynesians voyaged to the middle of the earth’s largest ocean in search of new lands, came upon a fertile, unpopulated island, and settled there. During the 18th and 19th centuries, production of the *moai* stopped as the islanders faced enslavement by Peruvian raiders, escalating civil unrest, and disease. By the early 2000s, the *moai* had created a \$120 million travel industry—more than 150,000 visitors from around the world were going to see them each year.

And then, in March 2020, everything stopped. Fearing the island’s only hospital (with just three ventilators) was ill-equipped for the pandemic, the island’s mayor, Pedro Edmunds Paoa, asked LATAM Airlines to cancel all flights into Mataverí International Airport, the world’s most remote commercial airfield. This effectively cut the island off from the rest of the world in a way it hadn’t been since the late 1960s, when the first propeller planes crossed the South Pacific from Santiago. At the time, 72 percent of the island’s 7,750 residents worked directly in tourism. In an instant, not only were there no visitors but there was little in the way of supplies.

What happened next? Paoa called for the entire population to follow *tapu*, a traditional Polynesian concept of applying restrictions to a place or thing (the concept is believed to be the origin of the word *taboo*). Restaurants, hotels, and meeting halls closed. The local government also encouraged islanders to practice the principle of *umanga*, or solidarity, freely sharing labor and even food or goods with neighbors without expecting anything in return. Citizens took old clothes to a donation center, helped one another plant crops, and took turns visiting the elderly. For 28 months, residents reinvigorated the traditions that had, up until that point, been rapidly fading from their lives.

Then, after nearly 2½ years of complete isolation, the territory lifted its self-imposed restrictions. A few months later, my flight was one of the first to return to Rapa Nui.

MY FIRST STOP was Nayara Hangaroa, a verdant 18-acre resort on the southwestern tip of the island, which is just 14 miles from end to end. Speaking to the receptionist there, I felt a sense of excitement about the new era of visitors, and I was thrilled to be a part of it. Staffers greeted me with a garland of fragrant frangipani, offered me a pisco sour, then ushered me out to an airy villa overlooking the coastline.



▲ Pink hibiscus, which flourishes on the island.



▼ Performers re-enact the carving of *moai* at Te Moana restaurant, in Hanga Roa.





◀ Anakena Beach, on Rapa Nui's northern coast.

▲ The lounge at Nayara Hangaroa, with its views of the Pacific Ocean.

▼ Tuna ceviche at Te Moana.



I had traveled to Rapa Nui twice before the pandemic, but this time felt different. There was an abundance of newly planted flowering trees thanks to a COVID-era beautification project, but the entire island was blossoming in subtler ways, too. Artists had been commissioned to carve intricate wooden street signs to hang between the palms and bougainvillea in Hanga Roa, the island's capital and only town. With the help of government-supported work programs, unemployed scuba guides had collected 10 tons of trash on the coastal seabed, while hiking guides removed another 10 tons from the shore.

Nayara Hangaroa was another good thing to come out of the pandemic. Formerly the Hangaroa Eco Village & Spa, it became a Nayara resort after the island closed in 2020. The new owners have refreshed the rooms and added a well-marked walking route on the property; the roster of guest experiences includes visits with local artists and musicians.

I learned that the design of my villa—a circular volcanic-stone structure topped with a thick carpet of grass—was inspired by Orongo village, one of the island's most important archaeological sites. The next day, I set off on the 15-minute drive to the site, which sits along the lip of the Rano Kau volcanic crater. From the late 17th to mid 19th centuries, Orongo was home to the Tangata Manu, the “birdman” competition. As part of the annual rite, men would climb down the volcano's 1,000-foot cliffs and swim into the sea to a nearby islet, racing to be the first to return to the village with an egg of a migratory bird, the sooty tern. The winning competitor's clan leader would then rule the island for the year to come.

Today, Orongo is well preserved, filled with round houses with stone walls and grass roofs to keep the inside cool—just like my villa. At the edge of the village, I saw half-man, half-bird petroglyphs etched into the basalt cliff that told the story of this ritual.

RAPA NUI IS ONE OF the most isolated places in the world. Its nearest populated neighbor, the British territory of Pitcairn Island, is about 1,200 miles to the west (and is home to a mere 50 people). From Rapa Nui, you have to travel almost 2,200 miles east to hit mainland Chile. Perhaps that's why locals prefer to view the sea not as something that separates people but rather as a highway that connects them.

I awoke early on my third morning at Nayara with the promise of a hike up the Ma'unga Terevaka volcano, Rapa Nui's highest point at 1,673 feet. Terevaka is one of the three volcanoes that gave this island its triangular shape when they erupted more than 100,000 years ago. It was on this peak, it is said, that Rapanui elders taught their children how to read the night skies, a necessary skill for maritime navigation.

From the windy summit, the Pacific Ocean was visible in all directions. The water, cobalt blue and sun-glinted,

seemed to merge into the low clouds. Standing there next to my guide, Alberto “Tiko” Te Ara-Hiva Rapu Alarcon, I felt as if I could see the curvature of the earth.

“You had to be a survivor to come here and make a living in such an isolated place,” said the tattooed Alarcon, who moonlights as a Polynesian dancer. “When you look at an empty horizon,” he added, “it can make you feel incredibly alone.”

While the base of this long-dormant volcano has the island’s richest soil, farmland gave way to development when residents pivoted from agriculture to tourism in the late 1990s. So I was surprised when Alarcon and I hiked down Terevaka into newly planted fields of pineapples, bananas, sweet potatoes, and taro. On the way back to Nayara, we saw dozens of family gardens. On Hanga Roa’s main street, Atamu Tekena, I counted a half-dozen vendors selling produce.

When I had last visited the island, in 2017, vegetable deliveries from mainland Chile had been irregular, and a local supply barely existed. Now, after 2½ years of near self-sufficiency, islanders were eating from their own gardens, some 1,300 of which were planted during the pandemic.

“My mom used to have a beautiful vegetable garden here,” Olga Elisa Icka Pacarati told me when I passed her harvesting a row of radishes in front of her house in Hanga Roa. “Then she got sick, and we never gardened again—until April 2020.” Pacarati received free training and support from a government program called PROEMPLO to farm her small plot. Because the mayor had revived the principle of *umanga*, she, along with other new gardeners, donates 40 percent of her produce to a charitable food program. Some of the rest ends up on the tables of nearby restaurants, which can now tout locally sourced meals.

At Te Moai Sunset restaurant that evening, I tried sashimi-like *tiradito*, raw mahi-mahi in a peppery coulis of local mangoes. Another day I went to Te Moana, which served a cucumber and tuna ceviche in a conch shell alongside fried taro and a spongy baked pudding, called *po’e*, that was made with coconuts and bananas.

But my favorite meals were at my second hotel, Explora Rapa Nui, a luxurious 30-room property in the island’s interior. On the day I arrived, I ate a fresh green salad followed by sweet-potato gnocchi; the next, a lamb loin drizzled in sour pineapple chutney and served over mashed taro. Fresh-caught tuna, mahi-mahi, and swordfish featured prominently on the three-course menus—often raw, in ceviches, carpaccios, or tartares.

“Before the pandemic, more than half of the products we used came from the mainland,” chef Marco Guzmán told me. “Now we’re trying to cook with a hundred percent local produce, because there are more possibilities to work with island suppliers.”

BETWEEN MEALS, I went with Explora’s guides to visit the highlights of Rapa Nui National Park, which covers much of the island, including the *moai*. In early



▼ An Explora guide on the way to the now-extinct Poike Volcano, one of three that formed Rapa Nui.

▲ Pianist Mahani Teave performs at the Rapa Nui School of Music & the Arts.





▲ Island-grown bananas at a Hanga Roa market.

▲ Te Moana's outdoor dining area.



2018, the Chilean government handed full management and conservation of the park over to the Ma'u Henua Indigenous Community, an organization formed in 2016 amid demands by residents for more sovereignty over ancestral lands. Since then, the Ma'u Henua have upped the price of the 10-day entrance pass from \$60 to \$80 for foreigners to incentivize travelers to stay a full week, instead of the three-day average. The organization also mandated accredited local guides or hosts for all visitors who enter archaeological sites to ensure that no harm comes to the ruins.

For me, visiting the national park with a guide was a game-changer. At Anakena, the island's main beach, I learned the legend of chief Hotu Matu'a, who is said to have arrived—perhaps as long ago as A.D. 300—after leading a daring voyage across an estimated 2,300 miles of open ocean. (In 2021, the island revived a holiday commemorating this event.) The nearby Rano Raraku volcanic crater, which I visited afterward with Explora guide Esteban Manu Reva, was used by those first Rapanui people as the main quarry and workshop for carving the giant figures. But only some of the almost 1,000 *moai* created ever made it to their stone platforms, or ahus. Nearly 400 remained as works in progress, and some 92 fell in transit. (Today, visitors can still see many of them lying abandoned where they fell.) At least a dozen more were taken from the island by academic “explorers” and are exhibited in museums, mainly in the U.S. and Europe.

How these gargantuan *moai*, each the weight of at least a couple of bull elephants, were placed on their ahus is a mystery. Oral traditions among the Rapanui say the *moai* “walked” to their plinths; a prevailing theory among scientists is that they were pulled upright with ropes. I tracked nine of the fallen statues on a trail out toward Ahu Tongariki, a stone platform almost 700 feet long on the island's eastern coast. Fifteen *moai* stand on it, looking inland with their backs to the ocean.

Remarkably, the *moai* that stand on Rapa Nui today were all toppled during interclan warfare by the end of the 19th century, which, along with disease and slave raids, decimated the population. Government efforts in the second half of the 20th century had the sacred carvings reinstalled, but stories about the bloodshed have become part of the cultural history.

“Rapa Nui has been used many times as an example of a place that self-destructed,” said classical pianist Mahani Teave. I met her at Toki Rapa Nui, an organization that teaches young people the importance of cultural and environmental responsibility. “So I think we should try, if possible, to make it an island that is a hundred percent self-sustainable,” she said.

Teave developed an ear for music at age nine when a retired violinist brought the first piano to the island. She was eight months into lessons when the musician moved back to mainland Chile, taking the piano with her. Entranced with the instrument, Teave left Rapa Nui too, first training in the southern Chilean city of Valdivia, then in the U.S. and Europe. Thirteen years ago, she

Rest Easy on Rapa Nui

WHERE TO STAY

Explora Rapa Nui

A stay at this lodge, which has just 30 rooms, includes explorations with bilingual guides (who undergo months of training), island-sourced cuisine, and evening drinks at the Explorer's Bar. *Doubles from \$1,070 per person, all-inclusive, three-night minimum.*

Nayara Hangaroa

Volcanic stone and cypress logs define the look of this 75-room resort. Guests can explore the surrounding island on hikes, mountain bikes, and ATVs, or relax at the Manavai Spa. *Doubles from \$773.*

WHERE TO EAT

Te Moai Sunset

In Hanga Roa, try an international take on local ingredients, from beef tenderloin with jasmine rice to ceviche with avocado, cucumber, and onion. *Entrées \$13–\$30.*

Te Moana

At this oceanside spot in Hanga Roa, seafood is the focus: grilled octopus, tuna *tataki*, and lobster in parsley butter. *Entrées \$18–\$28.*

WHAT TO DO

Mana

A gallery in Hanga Roa that shows contemporary and traditional pieces, from paintings to basalt statues.

Toki Rapa Nui

Opened in 2012, this school, which is open to the public by appointment, offers lessons in classical and traditional music as well as environmental stewardship. —SAMANTHA FALEWÉE

Souvenirs in
Hanga Roa.



returned with two pianos to open the Rapa Nui School of Music & the Arts. (She has since added 10 more.) Classes are offered in classical instruments (piano, violin, cello) as well as traditional music (ukulele and an ancestral style of singing called *Re o Riu*).

The school is part of the Toki Rapa Nui center, a building designed in the sustainable Earthship architectural style: the flower-shaped structure is made of upcycled garbage, including 2,500 tires, 40,000 cans, 25,000 glass bottles, and 12 tons of recycled plastic. Along with music classes, students can take lessons in traditional carving, cooking, and dancing.

Indigenous iconography is part of the décor at Santa Cruz Catholic church.



EASTER ISLAND (RAPA NUI)

SOUTH PACIFIC OCEAN

ARGENTINA
CHILE

The entrance to Explora Rapa Nui.

At the center, kids are taught in both Spanish and Rapanui, which only 18 percent of islanders under the age of 18 speak. “We’re in serious danger of losing our language when it becomes just a song and dance for visitors,” Teave said. “When we don’t understand what we’re singing—when we don’t understand the stories we’re dancing or where they came from—the culture becomes for them and not for us.”

I saw what she meant later that evening when I went to a recital by Toki teachers at Mana, a gallery dedicated to local artists. Performers swooped onto the stage in flowing white gowns. Teave welcomed the crowd—all island residents—in Rapanui. There were shells dangling around her neck and ferns wrapped into a wreath on top of her head. The concert began with classical compositions by Bach and Brahms, but eventually segued into “Ko Tu’u Koihu e,” an old Rapanui ballad. Vairoa Ika, who cofounded Toki—she also directs environmental efforts on the island—was so inspired she left her seat in the audience and danced on stage.

It felt like the entire island was in attendance, with some even peering through open windows when there wasn’t an inch of space left inside. Sitting in that gallery filled me with so much joy: it struck me that the musicians weren’t putting on a show for outsiders; finally, they were doing it for themselves.

I MET THE GREGARIOUS Mayor Paoa at his palm-shaded office in Hanga Roa on my final day. I wanted to know how he felt about this moment in the island’s history. Was he hopeful?

“How can we reset ourselves for the future?” he mused, handing me a small, sweet banana grown in his backyard. “It starts with instilling a vision among the people who live here that, whatever you do today in your life, and in your society, you will see the results in twenty years.”

Paoa considers the revival of agriculture, principles like *umanga*, and Rapanui culture, bolstered by organizations like Toki, as the first steps in that direction. For travelers, the reset might look like this: fewer flights and longer visits; more varied, higher-quality learning experiences, like astronomy, scuba diving, and hiking. No more flying in for a day or two to take a selfie with a *moai*—at least, that’s the hope.

“I think the pandemic was a kind of lesson for us to stop and think about what we’re doing with our culture, our resources, and our means of sustainability,” he said. “Now we have another chance to organize ourselves, and do it better.”

Paoa likened unchecked tourism to an all-consuming obsession—one that, pre-pandemic, had come to dominate Rapa Nui. He hopes other priorities, from cultural pride to robust agriculture, will shape life on the island. The majestic *moai* will continue to draw visitors, but they are part of a larger, richer story. Whatever the future holds, they will continue their vigil: standing, watching, witnessing what comes next. 🌐