

UNDER THE SPELL OF STATUES

CECILY MABASA is enthralled by mysterious Easter Island



I have always wanted to see all the wonders of the world, and Isla de Pascua, more popularly known as the mysterious Easter Island, is one of them. The island, with its stony-faced inhabitants, has intrigued me for a long time. It took us 25 hours just to get to Santiago, Chile alone, which is where our journey to Easter Island actually began. As our plane left Santiago at twilight, flying westward towards the sunset, I felt like we were going over the farthest edge of the earth, over a thousand miles of an empty Pacific Ocean.

Once the plane lands, there's nothing else to do but relax in the remoteness of the place. I felt the isolation immediately. However, after a good's night rest in our lodge, I was filled with much anticipation. The locals call the island Rapa Nui, which is about the size of an island in the Maldives; but its isolation from other isles make it appear much bigger. There aren't any other islands in sight – just Rapa Nui and the ocean.

There are many controversial theories surrounding the origins of the inhabitants of Easter Island. The mystery behind these magnificent stone statues – called Moai -- has not been properly solved. Even today, no one knows for sure why and how the Polynesians, believed to be the island's first settlers, built these. Archaeologists and anthropologists have long debated this, but it remains an enigma. What remains of its oral history is hopelessly garbled.

Photographed by Cecily Mabasa



Getting There

Cecily traveled with the luxury adventure group Sea to Summit Explorations (www.seatosummitadv.net; ces@seatosummitadv.net +63917 8687971)

When to go:

Avoid May, the island's wettest month

Travel Tip:

Keep an open mind and an adventurous spirit.

Meanwhile, the sole reason for my trip was to satisfy my childhood curiosity. I went just to appreciate these stone faces; most are over 30 feet high and they weigh as much as 20 tons. My first encounter with the island's gigantic statues was in the quarries of the Rano Raraku volcano, one of the two locations where the Moai are not built along the coastline.

There were about 300 Moai in different states of completion. It then became clear to me why the theories extended to UFOs and superhuman races; one just cannot fathom the idea of constructing these stone heads so long ago, without any modern equipment.

From afar, I noticed several things: One, the statues at Rano Raraku were left standing while a few Moais along the coastline lay face up. Two, aside from the directions they face and the fact that some have hats, these statues don't have much difference from each other. Up close, everything is overwhelming and nothing blocks you from the structures, so you can actually touch the granite. I never imagined these would be so big. The pictures you see don't do justice to their overwhelming size.

However, the most remarkable thing about them is not their vast size – although I must admit to a perpetual soreness on my nape area from craning my neck to stare in wonder. Nothing in history and travel books prepared me for the realization that these stone structures are powerful representations of a lost civilization and culture.

Since it's a small island, three days is enough for a visit. After that, there's nothing else to do but walk, walk, and walk again among the Moais. Easter Island has a city, but with such a small population, there's not much entertainment or shopping. Most of the residents' livelihood is tourism. Our lodge was the only luxury accommodation on the island even if it really ended up being just a place to sleep. It doesn't even matter where you sleep at the end of the day, because you'll end each day exhausted for exploring. Not even a luxury lodge eclipses the statues.

Despite traveling to so many other wonders of the world, it's the first time I felt like I was in a surreal world.

On my last day, as I was contemplating across the standing Moais of Ahu Akivi, a tourist shook his head as he stared in wonder at the ruins surrounding us. He asked me, "What do you think? Any theories?"

Funnily enough, after days of learning all the theories and historical facts that shroud the island, I still had no theory of my own. I thought of the Moai just as a visual candy that continues to awe me. It's monumental and iconic -- the biggest open-air

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Island
ask you:

museum in the world. I left Easter Island with questions than answers, but that doesn't

I wasn't satisfied. Go and explore Easter for yourself. And afterwards, let me what's your theory? ■

