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## East of the sun, west to Easter Island

Anne Z. Cooke  
Special to The Denver Post

HANGA ROA, Easter Island -- The horses, ragtag and thin, get a hug and a thumbs up. But the Big Heads, their lips pursed, their eyes empty, earn little more than a bored shrug from Teko, 14, and Nicolas, 12. The two boys, Teko's grubby toes gripping the stirrups and Nicolas' ragged pants flapping, are "guiding" us on a half-day horseback ride to Ahu Akivi, on the grassy slopes of Easter Island.

The ahu, a restored stone ceremonial platform supporting seven massive stone heads, or moai, stands alone on a wind-swept knoll facing the setting sun, deep in the South Pacific Ocean.



With more than 900 moai scattered all about the island, locally known as Rapa Nui, the boys aren't impressed. But the horses? Now, that's a different story. Unkempt and half-wild, they're ready to run.

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What better way for two kids to spend an afternoon than to earn a few pesos leading tourists on horseback to the neighborhood ruins? Besides Ahu Akivi, there are other, more distant ahus, strange petroglyphs, the foundations of boat-shaped houses and other puzzling evidence of Rapa Nui's mysterious past.

Except for the heads, carved with primitive stone tools and ranging in height from 6 to 35 feet (the longest, a recumbent head, half-finished and never raised, is 60 feet), there would be few tourists and scant scholarly interest in this 64-square-mile island or its first settlers, thought to have been Polynesians from the Marquesas who arrived in about 400 A.D.

Because of them, much of Rapa Nui is now a World Heritage Site, designated in 1995. With regular airline service from Chile, 10,000 tourists make the trip annually. It won't be long before the horses are corralled and curry-combed, Teko graduates to official guiding, and the volcanic slopes of Rapa Nui National Park, where we wandered at will, will be restricted to designated trails.

In fact, the island's first world-class resort, to be built on a hill above the ocean, isn't long in coming, according to Patero Edmunds, mayor of Hanga Roa, Rapa Nui's only town. Says Edmunds, who earned a degree in economics from UCLA (the University of California at Los Angeles) and has been talking to several luxury hotel chains, "We've always attracted a better class of visitor."

Meanwhile, Easter Island remains as solitary as ever, the world's most remote inhabited island. The closest neighbor is forbidding Pitcairn Island, 1,175 miles west. Thirty miles of roads are drivable, but there are no traffic lights, no restaurants, shops, roadside stands or facilities outside Hanga Roa. If global affairs have been worrying you of late, this is the perfect refuge. Not that Rapa Nui, governed and subsidized by Chile, which calls it "Isla de Pascua," is paradise found. Though the economy, what there is of it, depends on tourism, many residents resist change. Others demand independence. People with connections live well; the rest make do.

But these are local issues, transparent to outsiders. Instead, visitors find sunny days, palms and eucalyptus forests (the native forests were decimated centuries ago), and a moderate, sub-tropical climate with occasional misty showers. For lack of a better comparison, it has the dreamy feel of Hawaii in the 1930s.

We spent four days here, not long enough, but

adequate to see the best-known sites. We also saved a morning for exploring Hanga Roa and an afternoon for Anakena Beach. A perfect 10, Anakena's fine white sand, barely rippling waves and a gradually sloping underwater bottom rival anything in Tahiti.

Though Rapa Nui is small -- 15 miles long by 7 miles wide -- you need wheels to get around. You can rent a car in Hanga Roa or join one of many guided tours offered by several local outfitters. We did both. Our tour -- like most of them -- began at Orongo, a restored ceremonial village near the summit of the crater of Rano Kau volcano. A small cabin and a gate mark the official national park entrance, where you pay a \$10-per-person fee (make sure you pay it to an official ranger) and start up a well-trod trail. The 30-minute stroll passes the stone foundations of an ancient village before reaching the volcano's crater, half filled with water.

Stop for photos, then continue up and around the crater's edge, passing a series of cramped stone rooms with window-sized doors, built in the 18th and 19th centuries as part of the Birdman cult ceremonies.

The cliff-edge view to the ocean below and several offshore rocks is so arresting that if our guide, Elena Araki, hadn't pointed out the petroglyphs cut in the rocks, we would never have noticed them. Look carefully for designs cut in flat stones propped up on edge.

From Orongo, we drove to the Ahu Tahai site, near Hanga Roa, where archeologist William Mulloy restored some moai in 1967.

"The ahu here date from three different periods, from the 8th to the 12th centuries," explained Araki, pointing out differences in carving and the tight fit of the ahu's terraced walls. Near the remains of a fallen moai, a plaque affixed to a rock and dedicated to Mulloy bears a double-edged tribute: "By restoring the past he also changed its future."

The island's most impressive sites are farther afield, on the northeast shore. The first, Ahu Tongariki, on a floodplain above a bay, is the island's largest ahu, with a long row of 15 restored moai. In 1960, a tidal wave swept onshore, tossing the multi-ton moai around like corks. In the early 1990s, Japanese archeologists moved them back into place.

The most compelling site -- and the biggest

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-- is the quarry from which all the moai came, on the slope of Rano Raraku volcano near Tongariki. The entrance, in a parking lot at the end of a dirt road, leads to the path uphill. Though all of Rapa Nui's volcanic slopes are now covered with grass, broad layers of lava lie just below Rano Raraku's surface, easily uncovered. Judging from the positions of the 300-odd moai still in the quarry, the work stopped abruptly. Some moai lie partly carved with their backs still attached to the rock, some are half-carved but standing upright, or tilted crazily, while others are moved all or part way down the hill, apparently awaiting transport to a final destination.

Why they were made and how they were moved across the island are still mysteries. But the assembly-line production made us wonder if one family, perhaps a single tribe, controlled moai production, carving them on order for the island's other families, and the bigger the better. Perhaps a 35-foot moai was a status symbol rather than sacred object.

Today's status symbols, on view in Hanga Roa, tend toward motorcycles and flower gardens. The town also has an Internet cafe, an archeology museum, various craft and gift shops and an outdoor market where carved souvenirs and vegetables share space on long tables with supplies shipped in from Chile: T-shirts, tennis shoes and tools.

The Big Heads aren't the only attraction here. Besides horseback riding, you can hike, surf in several local coves, fish or scuba dive (Rapa Nui has no reefs, so all diving is in deep water off the island shelf). For its first 1,500 years of human occupation, Rapa Nui remained relatively isolated by miles of water. But when Mataveru Airport opened in 1935, outsiders dribbled in from Santiago, Chile, to the east and Tahiti to the west. Today, two-thirds of the island's 3,400 people are related to original

Rapanuian families and one-third come from around the world.

The islanders still get most supplies the slow way, by sea. Building materials, cars, motorcycles, refrigerators, books and household goods are shipped in by barge. Visitors, of course, make the trip in five-plus hours on LanChile Airlines, the only airline with scheduled service. Though you can rent a jeep and drive to Ahu Akivi, you shouldn't miss the horseback ride. Ocean cliffs and roadside brush gradually give way to broad fields and a panoramic view toward the island's highest point, 1,670-foot Maunga Terevaka in the distance. As the late-afternoon sun dropped into the west, even Teko and Nicolas paused to watch.

#### INCIDENTAL INTELLIGENCE

**GETTING THERE:** LanChile, a partner with American Airlines, operates the only scheduled flights to Easter Island, through Santiago. To check on the Internet, visit [www.lanchile.com](http://www.lanchile.com).

LanChile Vacations, a tour operator, sells land-package trips with or without air fare. The "Discover the Mystery" package ranges from budget to superior hotel stays. Air fare is extra. The package includes five days and four nights in a hotel, daily breakfast, one full-day guided tour with box lunch, two half-day guided tours and airport transfers. Check for prices. For general program and destination information visit [www.lanchilevacations.com](http://www.lanchilevacations.com); to book call (877) 219-0345.

**STAYING THERE:** Numerous guest houses, B&Bs and hotels provide a wide choice of accommodation. Request a list by e-mailing [camararapanuientelchile.net](mailto:camararapanuientelchile.net). The Internet site, [www.chile-hotels.com](http://www.chile-hotels.com), includes a partial list. Hotels we inspected include the bright new 40-room Hotel Taha Tai, a contemporary property with air conditioning, tile floors, gleaming new bathrooms and free Internet connections. The hotel runs a very nice restaurant; contact [riroro.co.net](http://riroro.co.net).

Also the Manavai Hotel, with comfortable, more traditionally furnished rooms. The garden restaurant is charming on a warm evening. Contact [manavaientelchile.net](http://manavaientelchile.net). And the Hotel Hanga Roa Hotel, the island's first, oldest and best-known hotel, located on the ocean and with a pool, is now much in need of renovation. There are some individual cottages. Contact [reshangaroapanamericanahoteles.cl](http://reshangaroapanamericanahoteles.cl).

**TRAVEL TIPS:** Most hotel restaurants are also open

to the public. Fish is a staple choice, served at three meals daily. Hanga Roa has a dozen or so independent restaurants and cafes. We recommend taking at least one guided tour. Even the least-scholarly guides know the sites and point out details you'd otherwise miss.

**WEATHER:** The weather is temperate to hot year around, with occasional showers in all months and cooling offshore breezes. January and February are the hottest months and July and August are the coolest, requiring a sweater or light jacket. Though we were there in May, the wettest month, it rained only once.

**RECOMMENDED GUIDEBOOKS:** Since archeology is synonymous with Easter Island, pre-trip reading yields big benefits. Libraries are full of books about this mystical place, and Internet searches yield pages of background material, some of it reliable.

"The Lonely Planet Guide to Chile & Easter Island," by Wayne Bernhardson, is complete and organized, with detailed descriptions of archeological sites, recommendations on hotels and restaurants and travel tips. "The Insight Guide to Chile," a general presentation, tells the story with photos on glossy paper; read it ahead of time to get a visual feel for the island and the atmosphere.