

Moai of Rapa Nui

Backs Against the Sea

Built: 1100–1600 CE, Rapa Nui, Chile

How these multi-ton guardians of a forgotten world came to their resting places remains a mystery to this day.

After a five-hour flight from Santiago, Rapa Nui slowly emerges on the horizon. The island lies nearly 2,200 miles (3,540 kilometers) west of the Chilean mainland, in the heart of the South Pacific. In complete isolation, one of the most fascinating civilizations in human history left behind a world-famous legacy: the massive stone *moai* sculptures, which have stood watch over the island for centuries.

Although named Easter Island by the Dutch, the island's Indigenous inhabitants call their land Rapa Nui, a name also given to their people and language. Their ancestors, Polynesian navigators, settled on Rapa Nui between 500 and 900 CE. Over the centuries, various tribes emerged, inhabiting different parts of the island and crafting the legendary *moai* from volcanic stone.

Positioned mostly with their backs to the sea, the statues—believed to be ancestral chiefs—were symbolic of the power of an individual tribe, and were the physical embodiments of divine spirit. In Rapa Nui beliefs, the *moai* channel *mana*, the spiritual energy of their forebears, and stand as intermediaries on the threshold between the visible and invisible worlds. Each statue was carefully placed on an *ahu*, a ceremonial platform where sacred rituals were performed.

By the 19th century, many of the *moai* lay toppled, whether due to inter-tribal warfare or more natural phenomena like earthquakes. The brutal practices of slave traders and imported diseases also took their toll on the Rapa Nui and their culture. In the 20th century, many of the sacred stone figures were re-erected and restored. To their surprise, researchers discovered that the statues were not just heads. The figures had full stone bodies buried underground and were much larger than previously thought, with an average height of 13 feet (4 meters). How these massive statues were transported to their locations remains uncertain. Some theories suggest they were moved using wooden logs, while others propose that they were rocked into position from side to side using ropes.

Today, UNESCO safeguards Rapa Nui. Excavation efforts are ongoing, and new sculptures are still being found. As for the *moai*, they continue to stoically bear witness to it all.

