

Some 3,500 kilometers off the coast of Chile, Easter Island is one of the most remote among the world's inhabited islands. It lies in the Pacific Ocean, at the southeastern tip of the Polynesian triangle. Easter Island is so named because the Dutch explorer Jacob Roggeveen encountered it on Easter Sunday in 1722. There are thousands of residents, mostly descendants of the Rapa Nui aboriginal people. It is famous for its unique statues called *moai*, enormous stone monuments created by early Rapa Nui inhabitants around 300 CE. There are 887 moai still in existence, and experts continue to be mystified by their craftsmanship and scale. This Chilean territory was largely declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1995.

Polynesian settlers reached this island between 700 and 1100 CE. Archaeological evidence suggests that a thriving, industrial culture prevailed for many centuries. But by the 18th century, the population had been decimated from around 15,000 to less than 3,000. The causes were deforestation and exhausting of the area's natural resources, attributed to the introduction of the Polynesian rat. Then in the 1860s, the Peruvian slave trade and European diseases dealt the indigenous population its final blows. By 1877, there were only 111 surviving inhabitants of Easter Island.

Much of Easter Island lies within Rapa Nui National Park. It includes fresh water lake, extinct volcanoes, a rugged coastline, and indigenous plant and animal species, but the park's main attractions are its moai. These stone structures vary from two to 20 meters high and considered the living faces of deified ancestors. Also highly impressive, *ahus* are the ceremonial shrines built for the moai to stand on and for worship. Ahu Tongariki is distinguished as the island's largest ahu. It is one kilometer from Rano Raraku, a volcanic crater that was the quarry from which almost all of the stone used to make the moai was mined. The incredible stone carvings are a testament to how much Chile has to offer anyone lucky enough to wash up on its shores.