



"*Iorana!*" says Tuhi, our guide, as she hops out of her truck to greet us. From beneath the seats of her four-wheel drive poke bushels of fresh eucalyptus branches.

"It smells better than car interior," she says as we drive to the edge of Easter Island's main village, Hanga Roa. Here, with the Pacific on one side and green fields on the other, stands Ahu Ko Te Riku, one of the more than 900 giant moai statues that dot the island. Our first encounter with a stone giant is daunting. Towering six metres high, he looks defiant and proud.

"This is the only one with eyes," says Tuhi, referring to the white coral and obsidian stone set into the statue's eye sockets.

Once, all the moai had eyes but they probably lost them when they were toppled or destroyed during the island's bloody civil war, believed to have occurred during the 17th or 18th century. It had been thought they were designed with empty eye sockets until a fragment of an eye was discovered in 1979 by archaeologist and first native governor Sergio Rapu Haoa. It is now on display at the museum, an apt metaphor for a culture struggling to awaken from the darkness of its turbulent history.

Rapa Nui, or Easter Island, is twice the size of Hong Kong Island – but it is home to few people. Tuhi is one of only 2,500 natives, who make up roughly half the population, and, along with Rapa Nui, the local language, she speaks English, Spanish and French. Like many locals, she is a Christian. Before Chile won control of Easter Island from Peru, in 1888, Catholic missionaries suc-

ceeded in converting the few islanders who had survived centuries of conflict and disease.

There are a few basics to understand when venturing out on a moai tour. One cardinal rule is don't touch. This may seem obvious but, in 2008, a Finnish tourist was caught and fined US\$17,000 for chipping an earlobe off one of the moai.

You should also know the statues were designed to stand on top of raised platforms called *ahu* and some wear crowns made from red volcanic stone called *pukao*. These are believed to have been status symbols.

In Ahu Akivi, a group of seven moai stand together on a hill, staring towards the sea. This is an anomaly, we are told, because the statues were meant to be arranged looking inwards on the population as benevolent ancestral spirits. As we approach, the seven brooding heads spring into view like giant chess pieces.

Their task may have been to guard the island from incoming dangers – such as the influx of tourists that has overtaken Easter Island in recent years. Last summer, a group of protesting locals succeeded in shutting down the island's only airport, Mataveri, bringing flights to a halt for three days. Last year alone, 70,000 tourists visited the island, a fivefold increase from a decade ago.

Silhouetted against the sea and sky, the moai of Ahu Akivi seem to stand as testament to the primal forces that have shaped this forlorn corner of the South Pacific. In the middle of nowhere (the nearest habitable island – Pitcairn – is 2,200 kilometres away), Easter Island was cut off from



the outside world for centuries, until Dutch explorer Jacob Roggeveen led the first expedition of Europeans ashore on Easter Sunday, 1722. Rather than encounter a tropical paradise, he found a civilisation on the brink of extinction.

Jared Diamond, in his book *Collapse*, has documented the environmental devastation and internecine conflict the islanders wrought upon themselves, but outside influence proved to be just as fatal. The population was almost

The magnificent moai statues and the Easter Island inhabitants they have been protecting for centuries are finding their roles reversed in the face of modern tourism, writes **David Kootnikoff**.

Crowd control



Clockwise from main picture: a row of moai in Ahu Akivi; volcanic crater Rano Raraku; Anakena beach.



As if to dispel the gloom, Tuhi suggests a visit to her uncle's house. A winding dirt path leads towards a copse of eucalyptus trees, within which there is a pastel-pink-coloured hut. On its balcony stands Francois, a former aircraft mechanic from Brittany, France, who greets us with a warm handshake. Inside, bleached horse skulls hang from the walls. Francois picks one up and begins knocking it against his hip, banging out a rhythm while Tuhi joins in, singing a local folk song. In the 1970s, Francois came to the island to work and ended up staying, earning a little money by cleaning the shore of rubbish washed up from as far away as New Zealand.

Is there anything he misses from home?
"Champagne," he says, "by the crate."

Rano Raraku is the volcanic crater at the heart of Rapa Nui. Once the quarry from which the stone for most of the island's statues came, it is now part outdoor museum, part national park. Moai in various stages of completion cover the area, some tumble-tossed as though they were shot out from the erupting volcano. It's not hard to mistake an abandoned, partially sculpted moai for a simple slab of volcanic basalt.

Rano Raraku contains one of the most important finds made by Norwegian anthropologist Thor Heyerdahl in the 50s. Heyerdahl has been associated with Rapa Nui since he first sailed his Kon-Tiki raft here, from Peru, in 1947. His discovery is a statue of a kneeling man, believed to be one-of-a-kind because it not only has a beard but also legs and feet. Most moai are represented from the waist

up – legs were believed to keep people rooted to the Earth and were considered to be sacrilegious additions.

Anakena beach, in the north, is where King Hotu Matua is believed to have set foot in the eighth century on his way from Polynesia. Legend has it he was the island's first settler and built his palace here. Eight moai surround us amid palm trees as my foot sinks into white sand, a contrast to the black rocks of the rest of the island's shoreline. It was here that the first moai eye was found.

Easter Island has plenty to offer – horseback riding, scuba diving, snorkelling, delicious seafood and local dance performances – but it's the moai that keep the visitors coming. When asked whether she'd support more restoration work, Tuhi is ambivalent. The cost to restore one statue is estimated to be US\$500,000 and she thinks the money would be better spent on projects that directly benefit the islanders.

As we prepare to say our farewells, Tuhi reminds us that the islanders' word for goodbye is the same as that for hello. "*Iorana!*" she says.

wiped out by smallpox, syphilis and forced relocations, all of which followed in the wake of the Europeans. The islanders began to fear the interlopers to such a degree that when their ships were spotted on the horizon, they would hide in caves.

Tuhi takes us to one. It's a damp and cramped space with two window-like holes that open from a cliff, about 15 metres above the shore.

Getting there: Cathay Pacific (www.cathaypacific.com) flies from Hong Kong to Los Angeles, in the United States, from where Chilean carrier LAN (www.lan.com) flies to Santiago (via Lima, Peru). From Santiago, LAN flies to Easter Island five times a week.