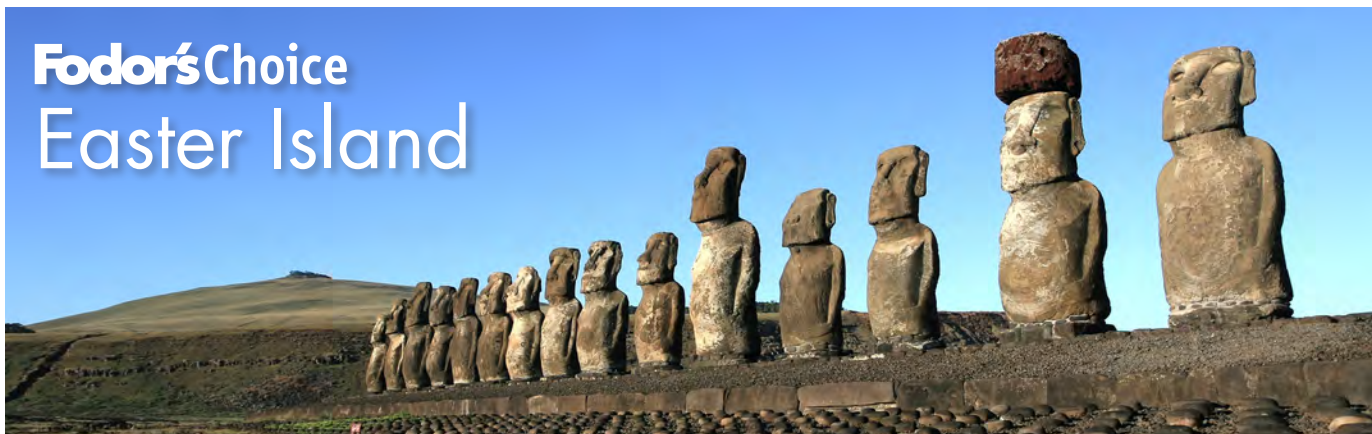


# Fodor's Choice Easter Island



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Easter Island (Rapa Nui) is famous for its *moai*, those sad-eyed, minimalist stone figures that have puzzled outsiders since the first Europeans arrived almost three centuries ago. Of course you'll spend part of your visit with these giants, but you can also hike rolling hills, dive in crystal-clear cobalt-blue waters, and shop for stone and driftwood carvings.

## NEED TO KNOW

**When to go:** The South American summer (Dec.–Mar.) is the best time to visit. The first two weeks of February see Tapati Rapa Nui, a two-week celebration with music and dancing.

**Money matters:** The currency is Chilean pesos, but U.S. dollars and euros are widely accepted. Some hotels add a 10% surcharge if you pay with a credit card. Some restaurants add a 10% service charge that you aren't required to pay; check your tab.

**Transportation:** Radio taxis have yellow signs on their roofs; locals also freelance as cabbies and are cheaper than radio taxis. There are two local (no international) car-rental companies. Rent a 4WD vehicle, and reserve a few days in advance.

The earliest inhabitants made their way here around 1,500 years ago, probably from Polynesia. Local legend says it was King Hotu Matu'a and his extended family, and that they landed on a north-shore beach. It would have been no small feat to reach the world's most isolated island—1,850 miles (2,985 kilometers) from its nearest populated neighbor and 2,295 miles (3,700 kilometers) off the Chilean coast. Is it any wonder that it was originally named Te Pito o Te Henua (Navel of the World)?

The inhabitants cleared vast forests for cultivation and fished the surrounding waters for tuna and swordfish. They created *rongo-rongo*, a beautiful script and the only written language in all of Polynesia. But their most renowned achievement was the hundreds of moai, believed to have been the crowning glory of family shrines. They stand on an *ahu* (stone platform), beneath which ancestors were buried and transmitted their *mana* (power) to the living family chief—which perhaps explains why most moai look inland rather than out to sea.

## EXPLORING

Two or three days is enough to take in the windswept island's highlights; with four or more you can work in some snorkeling or diving. There are organized tours and private guides. You can also rent a four-wheel-drive vehicle and head out on your own. The truly adventurous can explore on horseback or by mountain bike.

It's nearly impossible to get lost. The island is just 22 km (14 mi) from end to end and has only three roads that fan out from the sole town, Hanga Roa.

About 5,000 people make its tangle of streets—only two of them paved—their home. Few live outside town because the bulk of the island forms the Rapa Nui National Park or is state owned.

Hanga Roa is also home to most of the hotels; all the tour operators and car-rental companies; banks and other amenities; trailheads for several hikes; two crafts markets; and the Iglesia Hanga Roa, a church with magnificent ocean views. A short walk along the coast north of town are the picturesque cemetery, the Tahai moai, and the island's small but informative anthropology museum.

The coastal road running south of Hanga Roa has the most archaeological sites, including Ahu Vaihu, with its eight fallen moai; Ahu Akahanga, the burial site of the island's first ruler; Ahu Hanga Tetenga's large, unfinished moai; and Ahu Tongariki's 15 standing moai.

But the jackpot is at Rano Raraku quarry, which has roughly 400 figures and is where the moai were improbably carved out of the hillside. At Playa Ankena, the beach thought to be the landing site of the first settlers, swaying palms stand next to extraordinarily well-preserved moai.

A visit to the west of the island has really only one objective—to see the stone houses and petroglyphs of the wonderful and mysterious Orongo ceremonial village, the center of the island's birdman cult. On the way, you'll also see the water-filled crater of the now-extinct Rano Kau volcano.

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