

Mysterious Rapa Nui – UNESCO World Heritage

Rapa Nui, the indigenous name of Easter Island, bears witness to a unique cultural phenomenon. A society of Polynesian origin that settled there about A.D. 300 established a powerful, imaginative and original tradition of monumental sculpture and architecture, free from any external influence. From the 10th to the 16th century this society built shrines and erected enormous stone figures known as moai, which created an unrivalled cultural landscape that continues to fascinate people.

The iconic “heads” of Easter Island are recognized the world over, but few people know where this small island is, nor what amazing human culture flourished on this spot of land southeast of the Polynesian Triangle amidst the vast Pacific Ocean surrounding it. It is one of the most remote inhabited islands in the world and was annexed by Chile in 1883.

Discovered on Easter Sunday 1722 by Dutch explorers, visitors were amazed by hundreds of huge stone sculptures erected on ceremonial platforms (ahus) all around the island.

Today, scientists agree it was the manifestation of a religious belief of worshipping ancestors.

A growing population, deforestation and soil erosion led to the total destruction of the ecosystem, resulting in food shortages and finally in tribal wars. Belief in the power of the moais was undermined and at one point they were all thrown from their platforms. 1838 was the final year in which any outside visitor recorded seeing an upright moai. Many were broken, and all have suffered from being exposed to the elements. The forty or so moai that we now see standing back on top of their platforms have been restored by archaeologists from 1955 onwards.

No restoration had been necessary in the quarry at the slope of the volcano Ranu Raraku where all moai figures were carved from volcanic rock. There we still can find hundreds of figures in different stages of completion or partially buried in sediment.

In order to protect and preserve this unique cultural heritage the island became a National Park and was recognized a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1995.

During an extensive visit on the island I took the opportunity to create a photographic documentation of this fascinating moai culture. In order to get expressive black and white photographs I decided to use a digital camera converted into an infrared sensitive DSLR.

Thus, cloudy skies, grasslands scattered with volcanic rock and the moai figures appear in vivid contrast and vibrating grain giving the pictures their characteristic beauty.