

FEATURE : CHILE

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TRIP OF A LIFETIME

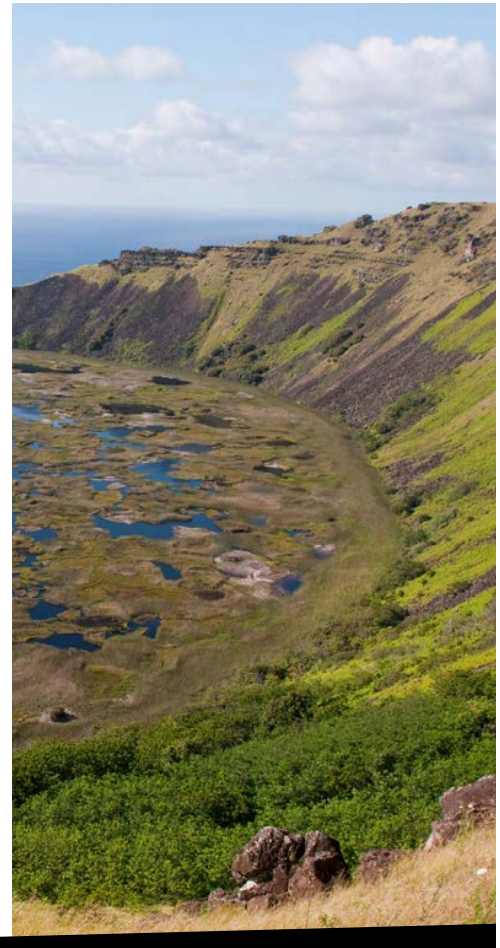
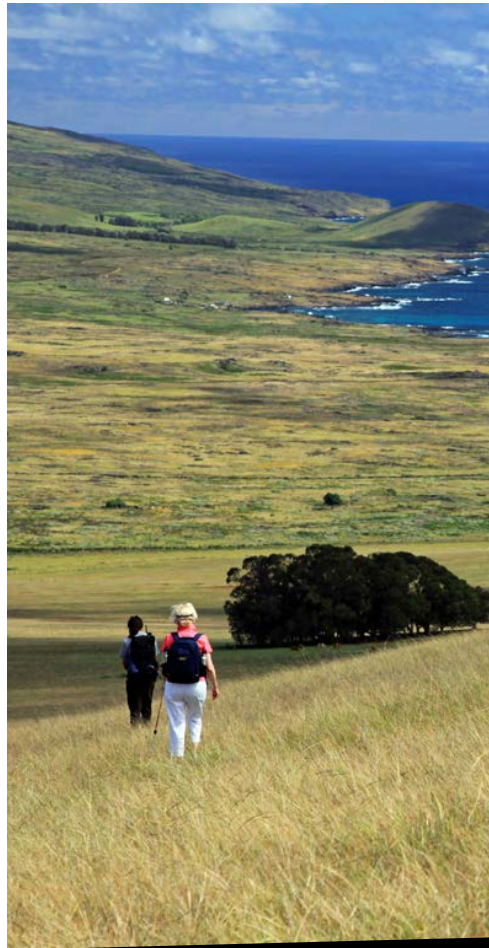
BY SONIA GRAUPERA

Atacama Desert, Chile





This Page, Moai facing inland at Ahu Tongariki, Easter Island
Opposite, from left, Explora Rapa Nui exterior; Hiking the ancient volcano on Easter Island; Rano Kau an extinct volcano that forms the Southwestern headland of Easter Island



There is one place in the world that when I left, back in 2009, I had tears in my eyes, because I knew it would be difficult to go back, and because I had the best time of my life during my stay. The place is **Easter Island**, located 2,300 miles from the coast, a 5 hours flight from **Santiago de Chile**, in the middle of the vast ocean.

I have been lucky enough to go back recently and repeat my whole experience, even with the same hotel, *Explora Rapa Nui*.

The island is a tiny triangle some 14 miles long on its base and about 7 miles wide, really easy to go around and visit all the interesting sites. Its permanent population is around 7,000, about half of whom are of Polynesian descent speaking *Rapa Nui* and *Spanish*.

The monolithic statues of *Rapa Nui* (Easter Island) called “moai” are unique, beautiful works of art. Tall figures carved out of volcanic rock between the 11th and 14th centuries by Polynesian settlers, they have long, unsmiling faces, elegant, hawk-like noses and brooding brows. They are really impressive for their height, weight and their mysterious gaze. There are around 800 moais in Easter Island and the big question continues to be how they were transported into their final positions as they weight around 80tn each. Another ongoing mystery is what their purpose was: were they shrines, conduits to heaven or ...? Many such proposed theories can be read in the books sold as souvenirs on the island.

Hanga Roa is a no rush, quiet, small capital with some hostels and boutique hotels around. The most important activity to undertake in this city is to visit the Anthropological museum, shop in the craft markets where you can find local handicraft and souvenirs, or visit

one of the local dance shows with beautiful dresses and eat in any tiny bar a tuna empanada, savoury as you have never tasted before!

Outside the city, the obvious must in Easter Island is to visit the different sites where more moais can be found, the first one being the *Rano Raraku*, a quarry on a volcanic crater that contains one of the island’s crater lakes. Then visit the stunning *Ahu Tongariki*, the 15 standing moais. Not far away you find the *Anakena* beach, where you can swim in the warm, calm and turquoise waters, with white coral sand and palm trees, set in the foreground of the two *Ahus* and their *Moai*, a unique landscape you can not miss. To me this was the perfect ending after five hours of trekking!

Hike to the most amazing landscape of the island: to the top of *Rano Kau*, an extinct volcano in the island’s south-western corner. This is the site of *Orongo*, the ceremonial village where the so-called *Birdman* cult replaced the moai at the end of the 17th century. *Hoa Hakananai’a*, the basalt moai that stands in the London’s British Museum, was removed from here in 1868.

There are several ways to visit the sites: the popular one being to choose any local agency that picks you up in the morning and drives you to the sites. Another possibility is to rent a car or a motorbike and go around the island to discover the different sites on your own. The third option is my choice: with the best local guides -real *Rapa Nui* guys, sharing their family experiences and stories while hiking to the sites. When I say “hiking” I mean a truly challenging way to discover the island, which can last 4 hours or the whole day.

The lodge with 30 rooms is set back from the coast; the most memorable aspects of a stay here are the all-inclusive activities. Different treks, bike rides, tours and boating expeditions are on offer, led by expert guides for a half-day or full-day in small groups. Meals

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This Page, Granite towers of Torres del Paine. **Opposite,** Local women adopt face paint and headdresses for Tapati Rapa Nui festival, which literally means "Rapa Nui week". This festival was born in 1968 with the goal of promoting the Rapanui culture.





This Page, Explora Patagonia exterior with fantastic view
Opposite, clockwise from top left, Camping in Torres del Paine national park, Patagonia; Guanaco in Torres del Paine National Park; Singular Patagonia restaurant El Asador; Unique marble caves, north of Patagonia; Explora Patagonia suite with a view.



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First row, Colonial-era church of San Pedro; Valle de la Luna, Atacama desert; Store traditional products; Explora Atacama Tulum room; Singular Patagonia van **Second row**, Church of Socaire, Atacama desert; Volcano in the desert of Atacama, Shop at Explora Atacama **Third row**, San Pedro de Atacama village; Explora Atacama exterior.



are also amazing; *Chef Matías Pizarro* delights explorers by using local ingredients in his cuisines. Chilean wines & best scotches are also available in this all-included concept.

While planning the trip to Chile, in addition to the Easter Islands, do add the other two spectacular areas as well, the *Atacama Desert* and the *Patagonia* region. I started in the south, where the unique National Park *Torres del Paine* is located, driving for hours from the airport *Punta Arenas*, along breath-taking landscapes. My hotel here was *The Singular Puerto Borjes*, a former meatpacking and refrigeration plant, from which Chilean lamb was shipped all over the world in the early 20th century. 57 guest rooms were added in a historically appropriate style, keeping its industrial aspect and the equipment, offering a museum as well.

The rooms are all spectacular, offering a 6 meters wide glass wall compelling a magical view of the sea and peaks. The hotel offers a variety of all including excursions and the possibility to enjoy two speedboats to visit the nearby glaciers. The must-do is the four hours trek to reach the bottom of the *Torres del Paine*, these three granite monoliths that can be seen from far away (and in every postcard of Patagonia), revealing their full magnitude and façades after this mountainous trail.

From Southern Chile I flew to *Santiago*, the capital of Chile. In *Santiago* choose from either the new *Renaissance Marriott* or the *W Santiago*. *W Santiago*'s Japanese restaurant, *Osaka*, is apparently a favourite among the locals.

A 2 hour 30 minute flight to the tiny *Calama* airport and a further one hour drive brings us to *Explora Atacama*. All shadows of yellow welcome the traveller, as it's the driest place on Earth; NASA had chosen it as a research analogue for Mars, testing techniques for

how to detect life in a seemingly sterile environment. In addition to the terrain, stargazing here is just as unique, perhaps the best in the world. *Explora* has the largest private observatory in the country, making it a preferred choice to stay. The local guides lead the explorers (aka the guests) to remote hiking trails and landscapes. Choose among one of the 40 explorations offered in the lodge: I went for the 3 hour horseback ride to the moon valley and to the *Chaxa Lagoons* with its unique turquoise colours and its pink flamingos. The most popular excursion from *San Pedro* is to the *El Tatio* geysers, it starts at 4am and you get to enjoy the 80 geysers when the sun rises.

The hotel is currently being fully refurbished after a fire destroyed the public areas and will reopen next January. The 52 guest rooms are designed to take full advantage of the silence and privacy, housed in a single story building around a beautiful courtyard. Food, like in the other *Explora* lodges, is designed to enable explorers to feel light, agile and healthy, always accompanied with superb Chilean wine. This is a journey of a lifetime. ✨

- *Easter Island* (chile.travellen/where-to-go/easter-island)
- *Explora Rapa Nui* (explora.com)
- *Anthropological museum* (museorapanui.cl)
- *The Singular Puerto Borjes* (thesingular.com)
- *Renaissance Marriott* (marriott.com/hotels/travel/sclbr-renaissance-santiago-hotel)
- *W Santiago* (wsantiagohotel.com)