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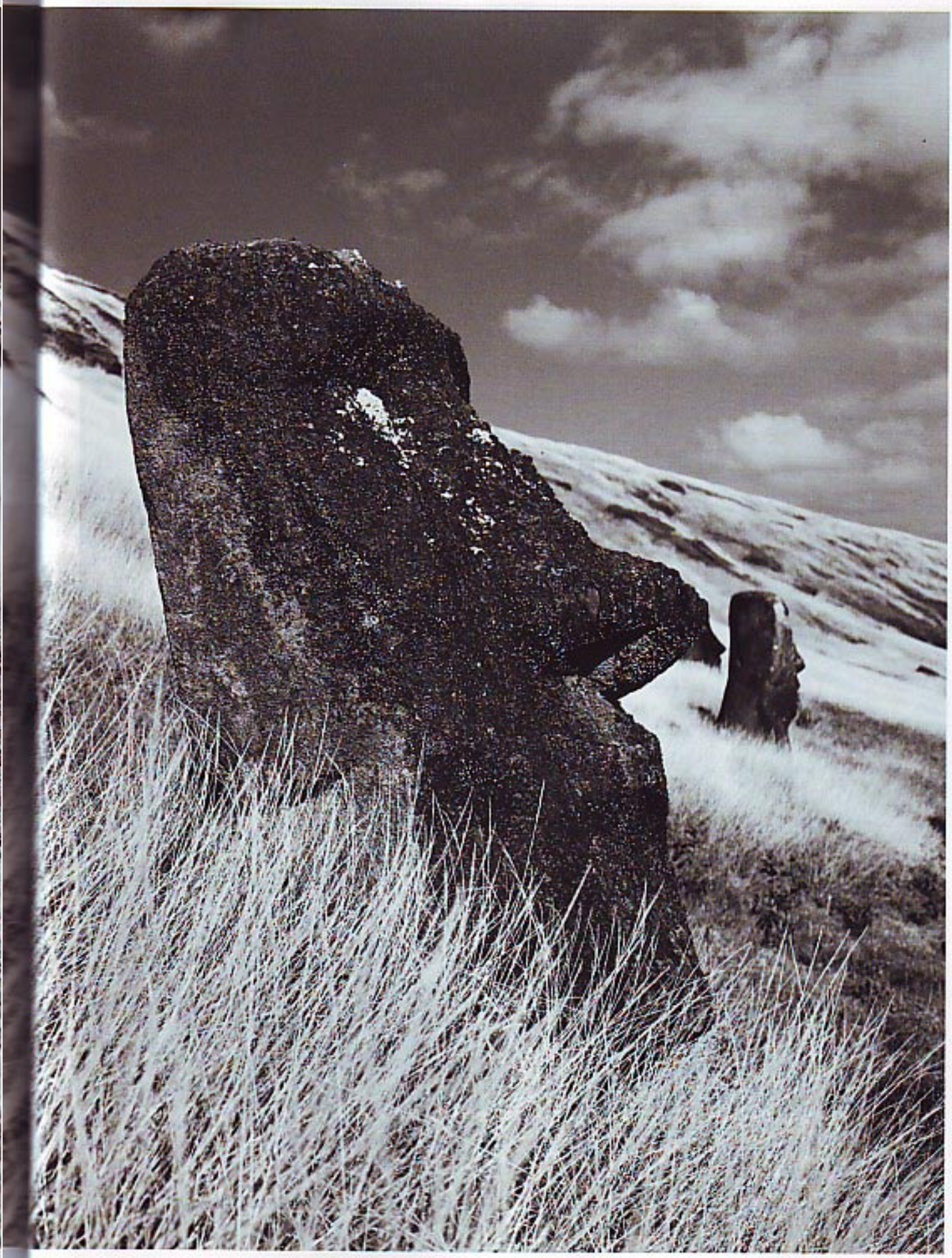
AN ISLAND CALLED EASTER

WITH ITS WILD, WINDSWEPT TERRAIN AND GIANT STONE STATUES, EASTER ISLAND OFFERS VISITORS A TRULY MONUMENTAL EXPERIENCE—NOT TO MENTION THE CHANCE TO LEARN A FEW RAPA NUI DANCE STEPS

BY JASON STEVENSON
PHOTOGRAPHS BY FRÉDÉRIC LAGRANGE

HEAD SPACE The Rano Raraku quarry is the mother lode of Easter Island's iconic *moai*; hundreds remain in the area, abandoned when the age of statue building came to an end.



FIELD NOTES Clockwise from left: Some of the Rano Raraku statues have sunk up to their chins in the earth; the moai of Ahu Tongariki, a nearby site; the grassy slopes of Rano Raraku. Opposite: A Rapa Nui beauty.

"SO, ARE YOU READY TO DANCE?"

It was more of a challenge than a question, and it came, not surprisingly, from Amanda, our group's most outgoing member. A New Zealander by birth and a Californian by choice, Amanda thrived on any sort of adventure. Standing up from the dinner table, hands on her hips, she looked down at us—myself and four other American journalists, now tanned and relaxed after six days of island life—with an expression that was both teasing and defiant.

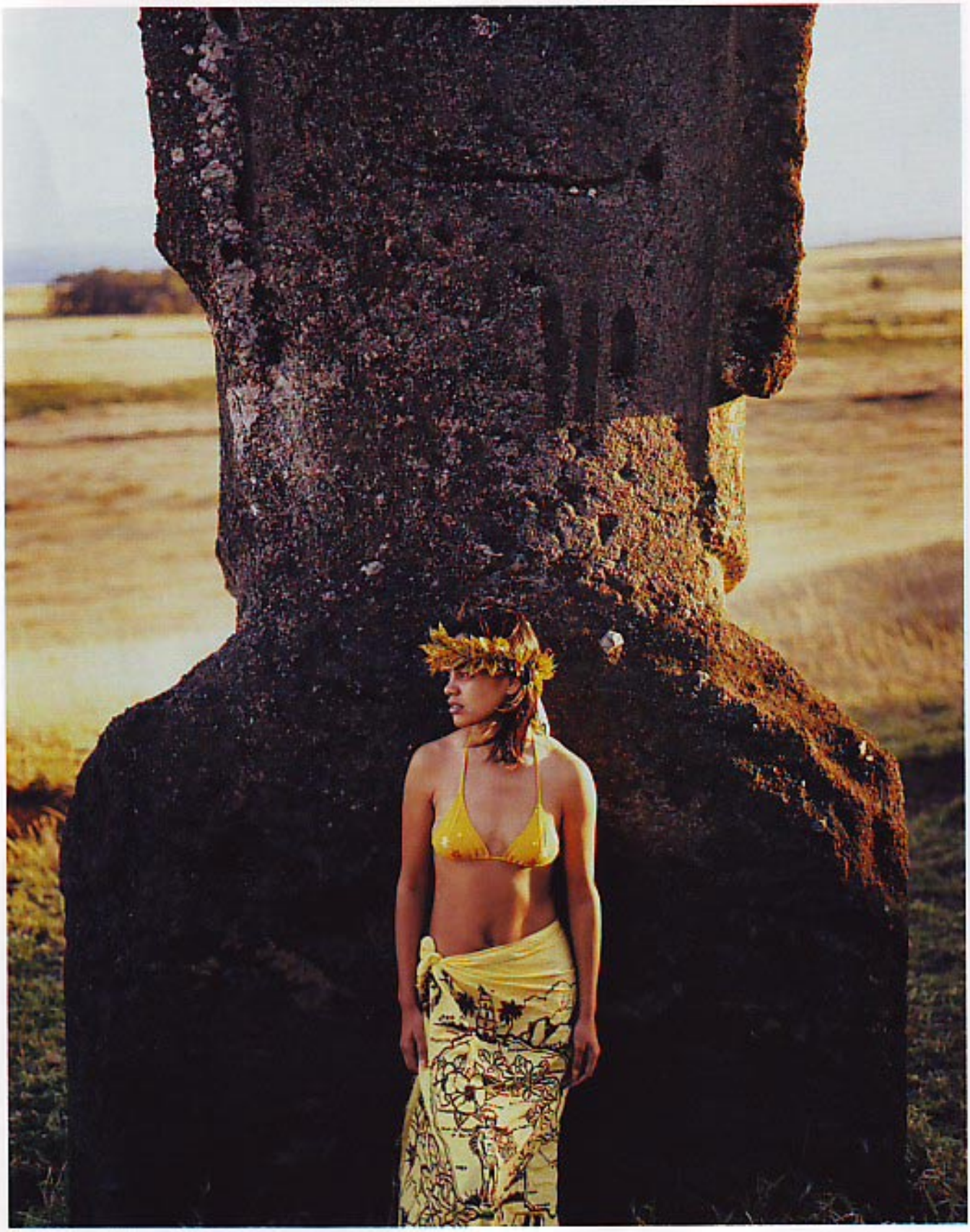
"Well, are we going or not?"

Perhaps the wine tonight contained a little extra kick, or the chocolate truffles for dessert imparted some of their exoticism, because we all complied. Besides, tomorrow we would be flying home, so this was our last chance to sample the local nightlife. Active days of hiking, biking, and swimming in the ocean—not to mention lavish dinners of fresh-caught swordfish and tuna washed down with a parade of Chilean wines—had sapped our energy for carousing on previous evenings. Twisting on a dance floor crowded with village kids had, until tonight at least, been a less tempting diversion than relaxing on the patio of our guesthouse, or slipping into the hot tub. Dancing, after all, wasn't the reason we had come all the way to Easter Island.

What had drawn us here lay in darkness beyond the glow of the patio's torches. Out there, arrayed around the island's coast, were hundreds of stone giants. Known as *moai*, they stood up to six meters tall and weighed an average of 12 tons, many with long faces, empty eye sockets, and expressions that can only be described as stoic. Carved and raised by the islanders hundreds of years ago for reasons no longer remembered—the best guess is that they were memorials to ancestors—the moai, mysterious and eternal, are very much the icon of an island that seems to dwell as much in the imagination as it does in reality.

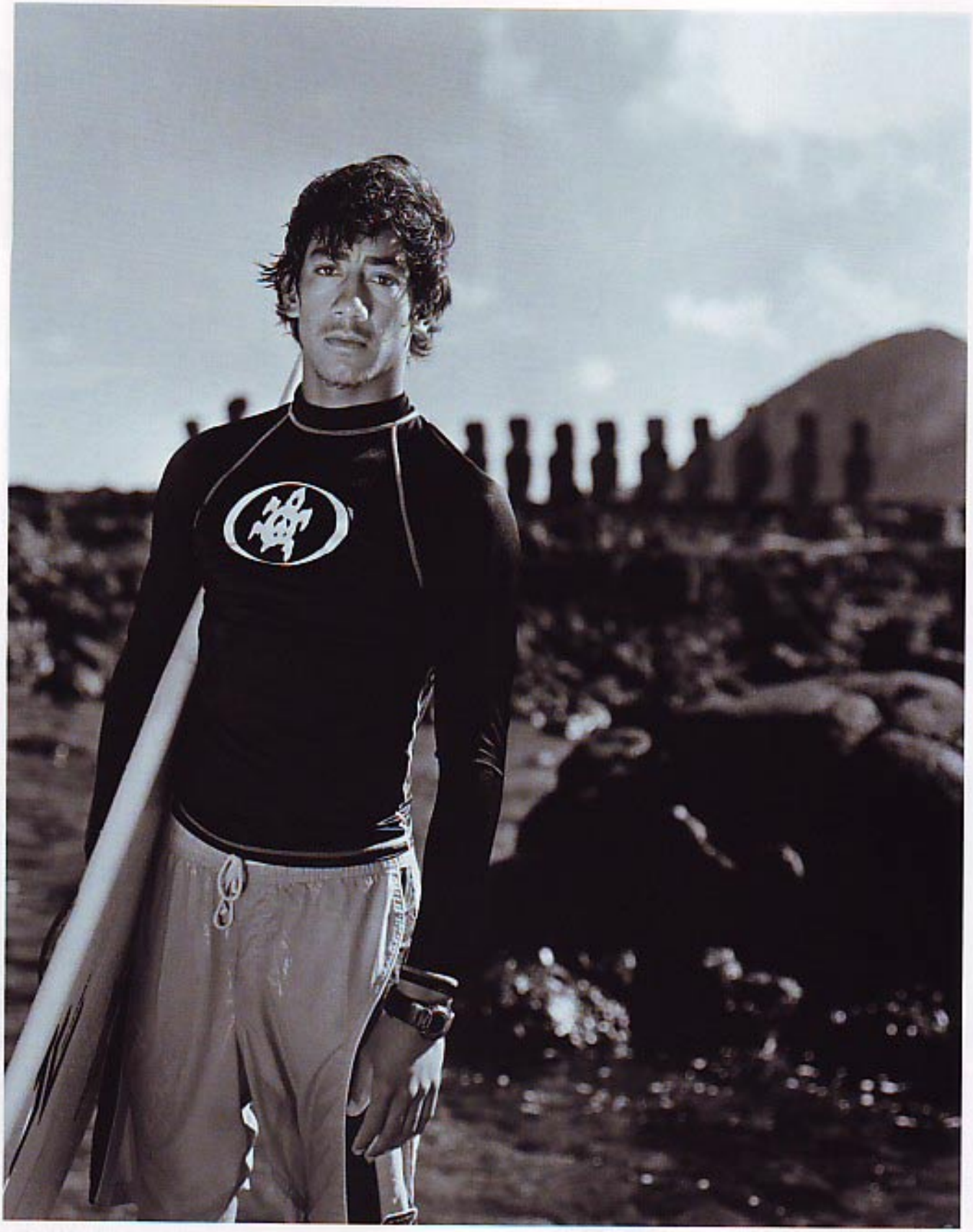
"You mean the place with the statues?" colleagues would ask after I told them I was going to Easter Island. "Where exactly is it?" was invariably their second question. And that's when I would look for a map. Rapa Nui, as the natives call their island, is tiny, just a quarter the size of Singapore. The easternmost outpost of Polynesia, it was settled by migrants from the Marquesas, who crossed the vast South Pacific in large catamarans stocked with crops and chickens and dogs. They would call their new home *Te pito o te henua*, or the "the navel of the world," so isolated it must have seemed. More than 2,000 kilometers separate it from the nearest inhabited landfall, Pitcairn Island; Chile, which annexed Easter in the late 19th century, is 3,600 kilometers to the east.

Much of what draws 50,000 visitors a year to Easter Island is its

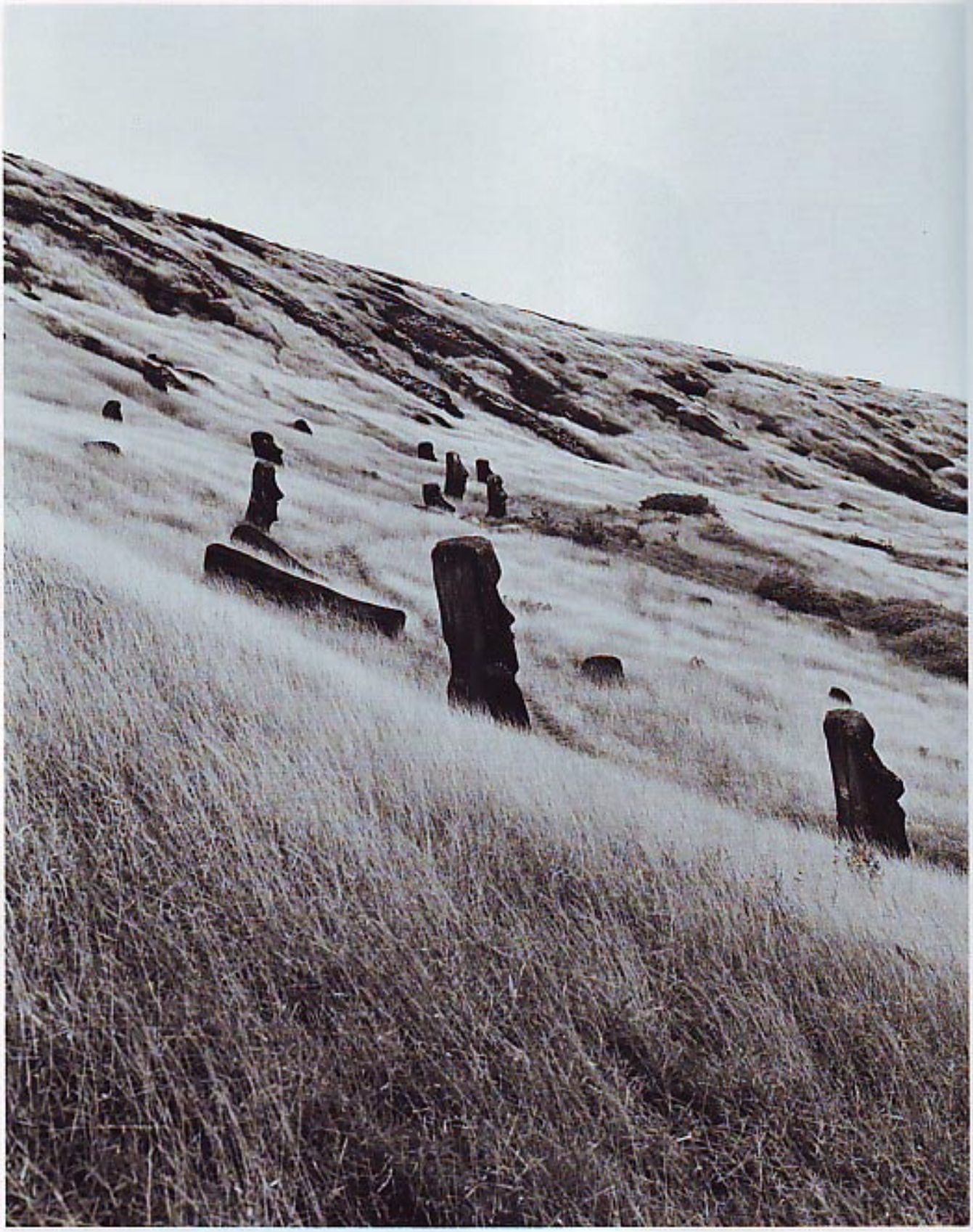


EASTER ISLAND'S ORIGINAL SETTLERS CROSSED THE **VAST** SOUTH PACIFIC IN LARGE CATAMARANS. THEY **WOULD** CALL THEIR ISOLATED NEW HOME *TE PITO O TE HENUA*, OR THE "THE NAVEL OF THE WORLD"

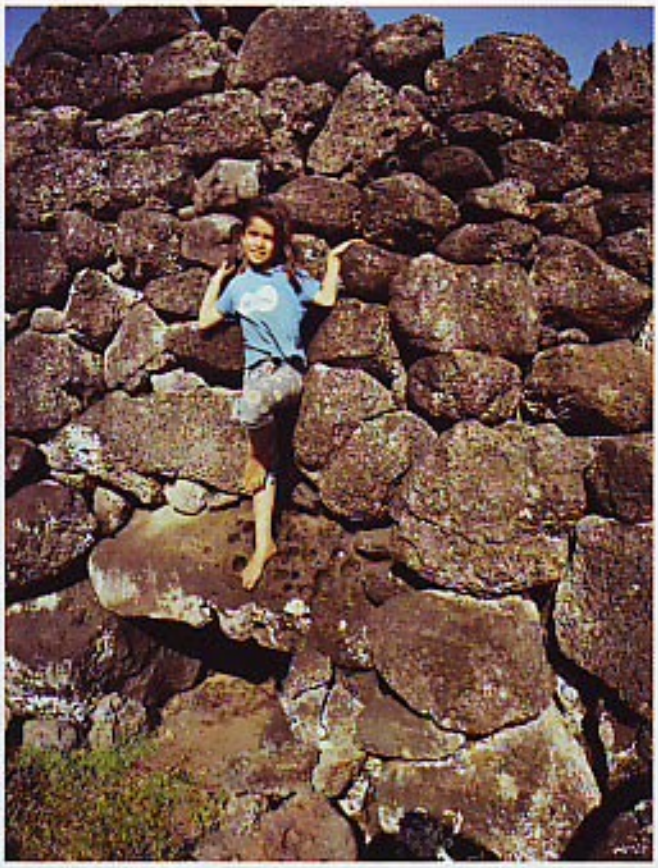
I INCHED TO THE END OF ONE TUNNEL, MY EYES BLINKING **AT THE** SUDDEN SUNLIGHT. WAVES CRASHED INTO THE **CLIFFS** BELOW AS THE OCEAN STRETCHED OUT **TOWARD** THE HORIZON IN A MONTAGE OF BLUE WATER



WAITING FOR THE TIDE A local surfer at Ahu Tongariki, with Rano Raraku rising in the background. Opposite: A view to the crater of Rano Kau, an extinct volcano on the island's southwestern tip.



HALF AN HOUR LATER WE STOOD AT THE BASE OF **RANO RARAKU** AND LOOKED UP TO SEE OUR FIRST MOAI. SOME **WERE LYING** FACE DOWN OR FLAT ON THEIR BACKS, **OTHERS** LOOKED LIKE DOMINOES ABOUT TO TOPPLE



LIVING WITH HISTORY Clockwise from left: Easter Island is home to thousands of semi-wild horses, many of which have been saddle trained; the crater lake at Rano Kau; playing among the ruins. Opposite: Moai at Rano Raraku.

very remoteness: the mystique of the frontier. Even my five-hour flight from the Chilean capital of Santiago felt a little like stepping off the edge. (Twice weekly flights also reach the island from Tahiti, making it accessible from that side of the Pacific as well.) By the end of 2007, however, our host, the Chilean outfitter Explora, plans to open the island's first luxury resort, a 30-room, eco-friendly operation on the island's southern shores. Whether that manages to put Easter Island on the circuit for high-end travelers remains to be seen, but in the meantime, we had no complaints about Casas Rapa Nui, the Explora guesthouse where we were staying. With nine spacious rooms on the outskirts of Hanga Roa, the island's only settlement, Casas opened two years ago as a temporary place to accommodate guests while the resort was being prepared. I found it simple yet stylish, with plush down comforters and wood-and-rattan furnishings. Better still, the bartender was a virtuoso when it came to pisco sours, a Chilean cocktail blending brandy, lime, and egg whites. By the end of our trip, we had all declared the drink to be a national treasure.

"TODAY, WE GO TO THE FACTORY."

Breakfast over, we were gathered in the lobby of the guesthouse as Tito, one of our Rapa Nui guides, made this unexpected announcement. It was our first full day on the island, and we all clutched daypacks filled with water bottles, digital cameras, and sunscreen in anticipation of the ancient marvels that lay ahead. But a factory?

Tito smiled, enjoying our puzzled looks. If there were need for a word like "macho" in the Rapa Nui language, "Tito" would suffice. From his wraparound sunglasses, which he was never without, to his mane of wavy hair and elaborately tattooed hands, Tito radiated island cool. Then he unfurled a laminated map and pointed to a ring of rock not far from the southeast coast. The "factory," he explained, was Rano Raraku, the crater of an extinct volcano where the island's moai were quarried and carved before being moved to ceremonial platforms along the coast. A van from the lodge would drive us half the way, and we would walk the remainder, approaching the volcano at the same pace as the carvers who had made the statues, and over the same ground that the completed moai had traveled.

On the drive to the drop-off point, I was struck by the unremarkable appearance of Easter Island's interior. Cut off from sight of the ocean or the weathered volcanoes that anchor each of the island's three corners, the scenery resembled a (*Continued on page 130*)

But Boedhihartono says that Akel's people are poor and will be embarrassed because they can't feed us. And he reckons they're getting bored with us.

On the walk back down to Rampasasa, I ask Boedhihartono whether Margaretha and her clan might somehow be descended from the folk who once inhabited Liang Bua. "Well, they're short people," he says, a touch too enigmatically.

THE BAY AT LABUANBAJO, ON THE FAR western corner of Flores, is one of the most beautiful in Indonesia, a teal basin dotted with islands and rocky outcroppings. Local businessmen have built a number of small hotels and guesthouses along the town's main drag. They cater largely to tourists who use Labuanbajo as a jumping-off point for boat trips to Komodo National Park, a cluster of arid islands just to the west that are home to the Komodo dragon —the world's largest lizard—as well as superb scuba diving.

This is where our quixotic quest had begun, and it's where we manage to catch up with Wahyu Saptomo, one of the original Liang Bua researchers. He is staying with some colleagues at the Hotel Bajo, a convenient but hardly romantic or luxurious lodging—the rooms have no harbor views, and their bamboo walls do little to soften the *vroom* of motorcycles zipping past every few minutes.

Wahyu is cautiously excited. The headman of Rangko village, on the north coast of Flores, had just visited them, telling of an exciting discovery. Two young men had found a skull in a cave. The headman was no doubt hoping that this was an anthropological find that would rank alongside the Liang Bua dig, and would therefore bring fame and not a little fortune to their small, 700-strong fishing community.

We quiz Wahyu about the possible importance of the discovery, but the discussion breaks down into furtive whispering every few minutes while Wahyu periodically excuses himself to make phone calls. Later he explains that he hadn't been sure whether I, having the odd distinction of being a journalist and a foreigner, could go with them to the village the next day, but his superiors in Jakarta gave him the go ahead with the condition that if it turned out to be a big discovery, I wouldn't write about it until after scientific tests had been completed.

The next morning we take a *bemo* (a sort of minibus taxi) to a neighboring village, and board a boat for the pleasant 30-minute trip along the coast to Rangko. Back on shore, we climb an hour up a steep hill to Goa Intan, or "Diamond Cave," so-called because when the walls are wet the silica reflects like jewels. Scratched into the rock are the words "Wel Com To Gua Intan."

And the discovery? We find shards of earthenware and green-glazed pottery, bones from a large rodent, and, the pièce de résistance, a chunk of a human skull, which had been previously excavated by villagers.

It takes Wahyu all of 30 seconds to burst the headman's bubble. The skull is perhaps 600 years old and not of any evolutionary value. But, being Indonesian and inherently polite, Wahyu promises to discuss the matter with his colleagues and report back. The folks in the village don't offer us lunch.

ON OUR LAST DAY IN FLORES, AN EVEN more intriguing story emerges, again originating from the isolated northern coast. Hearing of our interest in strange creatures, a gentleman named Nico tells us that in his village one night he heard a screeching cry. It "sounded like something out of that dinosaur movie," he says, gnashing his teeth and making claws of his fingers. *Jurassic Park* has apparently made its way to the TV broadcasts of this distant corner of Indonesia.

Nico hadn't seen it himself, but his fellow villagers swore they had spotted a *marengket*, which he describes as a miniature *Tyrannosaurus rex* that climbs trees and eats pigs and goats. Boedhihartono and I must look skeptical, because Nico quickly adds that several years ago a villager had killed one of the creatures, though had neglected to keep the bones.

Imagine, a relict dinosaur living on the north coast of Flores. And I know where it is—a long day's journey in a four-wheel-drive vehicle, then a couple of hours' walk. Not far at all. ⊙

(*Continued from page 121*) barren expanse of English moorland. Here and there horses and cattle grazed on short grasses. Trees were rare, clustered in a few clumps as if huddling for security.

It wasn't always so. Palm forests once covered the island, and it was the trunks of these trees that provided the rollers or sledges—anthropologists still debate the exact method—used to transport the moai from one end of the island to another. As Rapa Nui's clans competed to create ever-larger statues, so the demand for timber grew from one generation to the next, with tragic consequences. It is now generally believed that by the 15th century, the Rapa Nui had deforested the island past the point of recovery, an environmental catastrophe that led to civil war and the ultimate collapse of their civilization.

As planned, we disembarked from the van a few kilometers short of Rano Raraku, which rose like a dark hump to the east. We continued on foot across a scrub-grass terrain dotted with yellow-blossomed wild-flowers and wind-battered bushes. As we walked, Tito and our second guide, a long-haired surfer named Yoyo, told us about the quarry.

"All the moai were made at Rano Raraku because the volcanic stone there is soft. You can carve it with simple tools," Tito said. "The workers, many hundreds, would carve them out of the mountain while making their nose, neck, and ears at the same time."

"It's like they were being born," added Yoyo.

"But how did they move them all around the island?" asked Amanda, hoping for a definitive answer.

"They used *mana*, of course," Tito said, using the Polynesian term for spiritual power. "They floated the moai over the ground to where they needed to go." As he spoke, Tito raised his hands over his head, a gesture suggesting levitation.

"That's the myth, yes, but didn't they use logs or something?" Amanda asked.

Tito stopped and looked back at us. "It's not myth, its history," he said firmly. After a pause, he added, "On Rapa Nui, myth *is* history."

Half an hour later we stood at the base of Rano Raraku and looked up to see our first moai. Some were lying face down or flat on their backs, others looked like dominoes about to topple. As we got

closer I could see that the statues were in remarkably good condition, their foreheads, brows, and sharp noses still well defined. Many had sunk into the ground, but even so they towered five to six meters above us. Posing next to one leaning moai for a photo, I barely came up to its chin. It must have weighed 10 tons.

Dozens of statues, in various stages of completion, dotted the grassy hillside below the crater. Some were among the largest moai ever made, marooned here, presumably, when the timber ran out. The carvers seemed to have simply dropped their tools and walked away. At the site of one unfinished statue, a giant that would have been 20 meters tall when completed, Tito picked up what looked like a small and ordinary stone.

"This is one of the tools used to carve the moai," he said. "There are many like this around here."

I could see why Tito called it the factory. Hundreds of years ago it must have been the busiest place on the island, with thousands of workers and the constant clamor of hammering. Even abandoned, the moai of Rano Raraku were an awe-inspiring sight, profound works of art that no amount of photographs (let alone Hanga Roa's profusion of tiki-kitsch souvenirs) can prepare you for.

Our afternoon hike a few days later traced the sheer edges of the island's rugged northwestern coast. Many meters below the footpath the ocean waves crashed against the black volcanic rock as if surprised to find something so solid after thousands of kilometers of nothing.

Leading us was another of our Explora guides, a young and athletic Rapa Nui woman named Uri. Each morning she tucked a new and brilliantly colored tropical flower into the folds of her long hair; today she had chosen a blue flower to match her rain slicker. Like many of the islanders, her skin was olive-brown and her hair was straight and black. Her sharply defined features were softened by an easy smile. We all considered her beautiful and competed for her attention. But Uri was also tough and independent, something I learned when I tried to pick up her rucksack. Not only was the pack much heavier than I expected, but she wouldn't let any of us help her with it.

As we hiked south along the cliffs, Uri told us that her ancestors had lived in these parts during the "chaotic years"—the period of inter-clan warfare following the destruction of the forests. By the time a Dutch fleet "discovered" the island on Easter Sunday, 1722, the population had crashed from maybe 15,000 to just a few thousand. By the time of Captain James Cook's visit 50 years later, it was apparent that the Rapa Nui had decided to make war on their ancestors as well, attacking the moai. Virtually all the statues had been knocked down by the mid-19th century.

Uri's forebears had hidden in caves along the coast during the worst of it. "People say that there are still bones in some caves," she said, looking away.

At one point we came across the ruins of what would have been sturdy dwellings or storehouses in their time; all that remained now were blackened foundation stones arrayed in long, narrow ovals. A few brown cows grazed nearby, eyeing us apprehensively. Soon after, we passed a cluster of toppled moai. We stood there solemnly, wondering what events had led to their destruction.

An hour into our trek Uri led us inland and toward a cluster of black rocks. We followed her over the rocks and down into a depression in the ground—the entrance to a cave. After Uri's stories about caves and bones, I wasn't all that keen to follow. But she took flashlights from her pack and handed them to each of us before lowering herself into the hole.

We had arrived at the Cueva de las Dos Ventanas—"Cave of the Two Windows." Despite its narrow opening, the cave turned out to be about five meters across. We followed it in the direction of the ocean, scrabbling over rocks and holding onto the walls for balance, until we came to a fork. On either side, tunnels continued for a few more meters before opening up to the bright blue sky—the two windows promised by the name. I inched to the end of one tunnel, my eyes blinking at the sudden sunlight. Waves crashed into the cliffs 30 meters below as the ocean stretched out toward the horizon.

"Brilliant place to catch the sunset," someone behind me remarked. We all nodded. To me it seemed like a darkened movie theater showing a continuous montage of blue water. The cave was beautiful and eerie at the same time—much like Easter Island itself.

"Did your ancestors ever live here?" I asked Uri.

She shook her head. "No. Not these caves, other ones. But today we don't know where."

For the Rapa Nui, it seems, some things are best left forgotten.

"SO, ARE YOU READY TO DANCE?"

We made our way to Topatangi, Hanga Roa's most popular bar, in the back of a pick-up truck. After a week of van shuttles, walking, and mountain-biking, this new form of transportation proved refreshing. As we accelerated through the village's narrow and bumpy streets, I hung on with one hand and waved to pedestrians with the other. I recognized a surprising number of people—a drummer in the local dance troupe; the woman who had sold me a dazzling necklace of shells; a surfer we had met on the beach. They all

FACT FILE: EASTER ISLAND

GETTING THERE
Chile's **Lan Airlines** (*www.lan.com*) flies twice a week from the Tahitian capital of Papeete (see the Marqueses Fact File page 45 for information on how to get there). Alternatively, you can fly from Santiago.

WHEN TO GO
High season runs from December to March, with the Tapati Rapa Nui festival, the biggest event on the island's cultural calendar, falling in early February.

WHERE TO STAY
Until Explora opens its luxury resort, the island's best place to lodge is **Casas Rapa Nui**, which also has the best food (*56-2/206-6060; www.explora.com; doubles from US$1,230 per person for a minimum three-night stay, including meals and daily excursions*).

waved back. That's Hanga Roa for you.

On the way to the bar we stopped off at the bungalow of a woman who made elaborate flower designs similar to the ones that Uri wore in her hair. The women in our group gushed over the selection and bought several flowers for our night out.

The bar was packed when we arrived. Uri found us a table and the drinks began to flow. On a stage in the corner the house band, adorned in white shirts, jammed with a blend of Polynesian beats and Rapa Nui and Spanish lyrics.

One by one we were pulled onto the dance floor, first by our guides, and then by their friends. Dancing Rapa Nui style, we quickly realized, required matching salsa footwork to the seductive sway of South Seas rhythms. It was easy, fun, and with a little practice we were all experts. By the time we left Topatangi several hours later, it seemed we had met each of the island's 4,000 residents and danced with half of them. Easter's final mystery had been revealed: we now knew how the Rapa Nui had a good time.

A day later we boarded a plane to leave the island. When the engines roared to life and the plane surged down the runway, I leaned forward to look out the window one last time. The plane rose rapidly and banked so that the black rim of Rano Raraku, the factory volcano, slid into view, as well as the small dots of the moai scattered at its base. A few roads twisted between the cone-shaped hills, and stands of trees stuck out from the flat grasslands. Waves crashing against the shore gave the entire island a white, foamy border, and I caught a glimpse of the coast where Cueva de las Dos Ventanas perched above the cliffs. I was surprised at how quickly the island disappeared as endless blue water filled my view. Yet still this tiny place, really just a rocky green speck in the ocean, inspired enough mystery to bewilder the entire world.

"On Rapa Nui, myth *is* history," Tito had said.

I can't argue with that. And I hope it stays that way. ®

BEDARRA

(*Continued from page 105*) many wanderers over the last century. The island takes its name from the Aboriginal word *biagurra*, which translates roughly as "the place of perennial water," and was one of the Family Islands charted by Captain James Cook in 1770. It was not until 1913 that the first European, Captain Henry Allason, settled there, buying Bedarra for the handsome sum of £20 from the Queensland Lands Department. A few years later he sold it to Ivan Menzies, an actor, who wished to found a home for underprivileged English boys, a dream which was never fulfilled. E.J. Banfield, who lived on Dunk Island for more than 20 years, had great affection for the place where "seldom is there any disturbance of the primeval quietude."

These days, Bedarra is sought after by honeymoon couples and sun-baked European jet-setters seeking a peaceful sanctuary. During Wood's time, life on the island was more raucous, thanks to his legendary parties. Tony Cox, Wood's former attorney, would later tell me that every July 1, Wood invited locals "laden with grog" from the mainland to celebrate the date of his arrival on the island. "There were lots of funny stories about how they got back to shore." Whenever Cox's wife came over to help with his garden, Wood, an inveterate ladies man, would always greet her on the beach armed with a glass of champagne and dressed in a sarong.

Wood was known to have had liaisons with Hollywood actresses and local artists, who would frequent Bedarra. He was friends with Sarah Ferguson, the Duchess of York, who twice stayed at the Voyages resort (back when it was owned by Qantas) and who would paddle across on a surf ski to see him; it is even rumored that he had his bathroom made for Princess Diana, who was expected to visit but never did. Wood lived on the island until 1993, when ill health forced him to move to Mission Beach. His property was subdivided and sold. A friend bought his studio and built the villa before both were sold 10 years ago to the owner of Contemporary Hotels, Terry Schwamberg, who had met Wood a year before he died in 2001, at the age of 89.

"We wanted to recreate the studio exactly as Noel described," Schwamberg would tell me later. "He was a passionate fellow with a deep cultured voice, like an actor, who loved his life. On one wall he had a Zen Buddhist proverb painted—"Love where you are, love whom you are with, love what you are doing"—which irritatingly my painters covered over."

Still, the place has retained the essence of those words. After six days of setting our watches to island time—of living according to our whims, and luxuriating in doing so—it felt as though we had been on Bedarra twice that long. It was a genuine tonic for city-weary souls.

Watched over by the resident sea eagle, we reluctantly boarded the water taxi back to the mainland. As the boat chugged out of Doorila Cove, the captain turned to me and said, "Nothing like it. Bedarra. It's paradise, mate." ®

FACT FILE: BEDARRA

GETTING THERE

Qantas (*www.qantas.com*) flies four times a day between Sydney and Cairns. From there, it's a scenic two-hour drive to North Mission Beach (try **Sugarland Car Rentals**, *www.sugarland.com.au*, and budget for about US$80 each way), where water taxis (US$250 return) ply the route to and from Bedarra via Dunk Island three times a day.

BEDARRA ISLAND VILLA & STUDIO

Nightly rates range from about US$455 for the villa to US$290 for the studio and US$621 for exclusive rental of both. June through January high-season rates are substantially higher, but for good reason: local weather can get quite wet during the first few months of the year (*61-2/9331-2881, www.contemporaryhotels.com.au*).