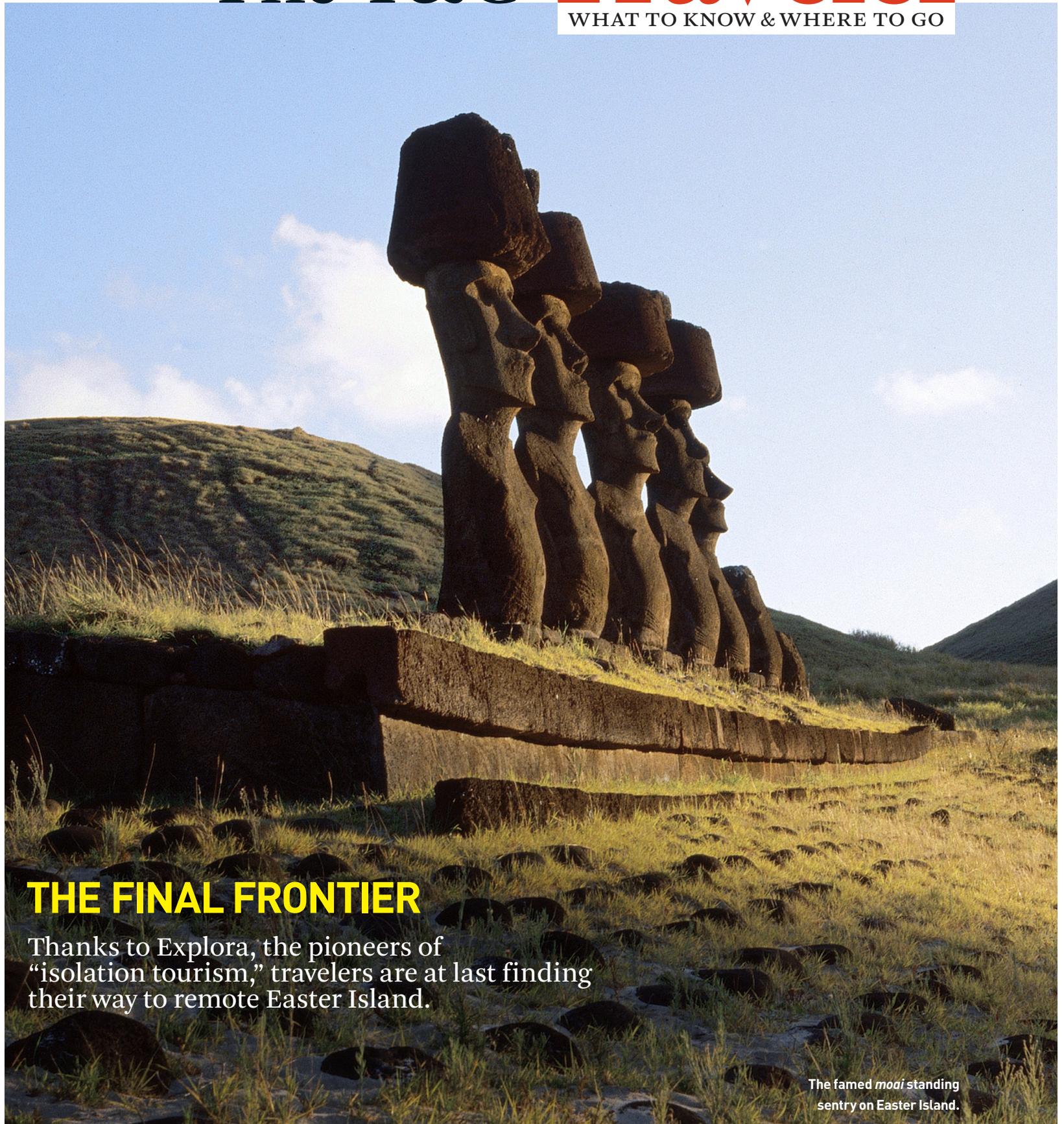


The T&C Traveler

WHAT TO KNOW & WHERE TO GO



THE FINAL FRONTIER

Thanks to Explora, the pioneers of “isolation tourism,” travelers are at last finding their way to remote Easter Island.

The famed *moai* standing sentry on Easter Island.

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY EXPLORA

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THE OBVIOUS REASON TO TRAVEL TO EASTER ISLAND, a.k.a. Rapa Nui, is simply that it's one of the most secluded places on Earth. Largely inaccessible, barely inhabited, this tiny chunk of Polynesia, surrounded by three dormant volcanoes, is flung 2,230 miles off the coast of Chile (to which it belongs) and 1,200 miles from the nearest stoplight. It is home to just 4,000 people—and as many horses. No doubt you learned in grammar school about the mysterious *moai*, the hundreds of monolithic stone statues that lie amid the flat grasslands like soldiers left behind, turning the island into an outdoor museum. But you've probably never met anyone who has actually seen them in person: only about 45,000 tourists visit the sixty-square-mile island each year.

Enter **Explora en Rapa Nui**, the third property from Explora, Chilean entrepreneur Pedro Ibáñez's remote-hotel brand. Following in the footsteps of Explora en Patagonia, which introduced the company's "isolation tourism" concept in 1993, and Explora en Atacama, the first luxury resort (opened in 1998) in the bone-dry Atacama Desert, Explora en Rapa Nui's thirty-room retreat brings adventurous travelers to one of the last corners of the planet in unexpected style.

Inspired by Orongo, a ceremonial center—where, until 1853, the ten tribes of Rapa Nui would meet annually to compete in a sort of high-octane obstacle course for supremacy—architect José Cruz Ovalle used volcanic rock and local black pine to construct dramatic conjoined circles; where these spheres overlap, open-air public spaces let visitors soak up the green landscape and star-dappled sky. Flaring out from the core circle like birds' wings are light-filled guest quarters that are neither overdesigned nor luxurious; poured concrete and poles of unfinished pine are employed generously, and orange and pink alpaca throws are the only splash of color. Large bay windows overlook the roaring Pacific in the distance and, occasionally, a wild horse galloping on the flatland outside.

The Explora hotel (which is officially called Posada de Mike Rapu, in honor of one of the owners, a Rapa Nuian free diver) isn't the point of a trip here, of course; it's merely the entryway

into this eerie land. After just a couple of steps on your first guided walk, to the Rano Raraku "quarry" (really a freshwater lake, where the stones for the *moai* are thought to have been harvested), the big questions start to emerge. How did an ancient people move the monumental *moai*—878 of them—around the island? What happened to the civilization, and why are there so few trees?

Explora's guides, all of whom were born and raised on the island, will eagerly debate every theory about these disappearances, from brutal wars between clans to cannibalism. With an intensity and expertise that are hard to find even in well-trod destinations, they'll also relate the countless myths surrounding the *moai* and the *ahu*, the platforms on which the statues once stood. Their enthusiasm helps alleviate the monotony; after all, the excursions are more or less easy hikes to see various *moai*, and within a few days it's hard not to come down with a case of European cathedral syndrome, as in "Do we really have to see another church?"

Explora's signature surprises spice things up too. A half-day walk, for instance, may culminate in a picnic of sevice and tuna sashimi on either of the island's two small sugar-sand beaches. (Ibáñez owns one of Latin America's biggest food enterprises, so importing specialty produce is a breeze.) A coastal trip from Te Peu Ahu, a ceremonial platform, ends with pineapple cocktails in Hanga Roa, Easter Island's lone commercial district. Most of the Explora kitchen staff are from Chile, but island favorites have been woven into the menu: gnocchi made with *kamote*, a local sweet potato, and perfectly cooked *toremo* and *kana kana* (two fish from nearby waters). And though the dining room, furnished with chairs from Indecasa, in Spain, and tables carved from dark Bolivian *paquio* wood, isn't terribly remarkable, its views out to sea, spanning several miles, instill a sense of place: there is nothing, absolutely nothing, between here and there. *Three nights, all inclusive, from \$1,795 a person, double.* 866-750-6699; explora.com.

—KEVIN RAUB

From left: The eye-catching hotel at Explora en Rapa Nui; a view into a guest bathroom.