

A photograph of a tropical beach with palm trees and Moai statues in the background. The scene is set on a sandy beach with several tall palm trees in the foreground. In the middle ground, a row of five Moai statues stands on a low stone wall. The ocean is visible in the background under a blue sky with light clouds.

Mysterious Island

The Philately of Easter Island

by Steve Pendleton

Easter Island is one of the most remote inhabited places on earth. It is also full of mystery, evidenced by the huge statues that stand upon its shores. I suspect that more books have been written about it than just about any other island, save perhaps Pitcairn Island. However, its philately is still much under-investigated. Perhaps this is because there is very little material known from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Much of that has probably disappeared into collections and government files in Chile, which annexed the island in 1888.

There are a number of stamps and some postal history (although it is rather elusive) to tempt the searcher from more recent times. Chile has issued more than fifty stamps with island themes, and there are a few others from around the world to add to the mix.

The Island

The first time you see it, Easter Island is rather disappointing, especially if you've either flown for hours or taken five days on a cruise to get there. (It is far out in the Pacific.) Just to give you an idea of how isolated it is: mainland Chile is several thousand miles east, Pitcairn Island is 1,200 miles to the west, and to the south you don't hit any land until you reach the Antarctic.

It is scarcely what I would call a typical tropical isle. It's more sub-tropical, but man hasn't been kind to it. Triangular in shape, Easter has extinct volcanoes at each corner, with some other craters added. You can see most of it at one time, because there's little vegetation other than grass. There's an occasional clump of eucalyptus trees, but the original native trees are extinct on the island. They were cut down long ago.

About the greenest part of the island is Hanga Roa, on the west coast. This bucolic village of about 3,000 inhabitants is the metropolis (actually the only town) of Easter Island. Many of the people are *Rapa Nui* — descendants of the Polynesian settlers of long ago. Others are Chilean, who tend to refer to it as Isla de Pascua.

And, of course, there are the statues. These massive carvings are *moai*. The religious shrines that hold some of them are called *ahau*. Most are found along the coastline.

The coast itself is very rugged, with only one or two small indentations to serve as shelters for watercraft. There's only one beach of any consequence, at Anakena Bay. No rivers flow, and the land is mostly, as you might expect, covered with volcanic soil and rock. At least the volcanoes seem to be inactive.

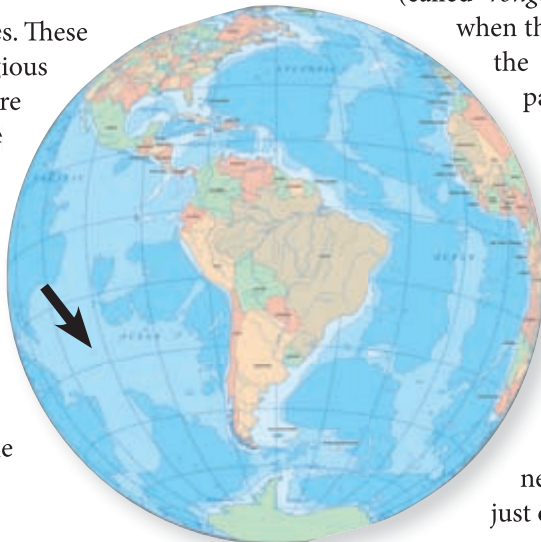


Early History

Scientists today believe that the Rapa Nui people are of Polynesian descent and came originally from islands to the west, possibly the Marquesas. One past theory claimed that the inhabitants were descendants of the people of the fabulous lost continent of Lemuria; another that they came from South America. No matter how intriguing the latter possibility may seem, there's no proof of any such contact.

Whatever their first homeland, it is known that people lived on Easter Island for hundreds of years, formed tribes, and developed some unique aspects of life — such as the moai and a systems of written symbols carved on wood (called *rongorongo* boards). However, by 1722, when the island was discovered by the Dutch, the days of power and glory were long past; the moai were pulled over and the population much reduced by warfare and the ongoing degradation of the environment.

From the arrival of the Dutch until the twentieth century, Easter Island was at the mercy of outsiders. Early explorers brought diseases, and eventually slavers from Peru decimated the native population. By 1888, the year that Chile finally annexed the island, there was little left — just over 100 Rapa Nui were still alive.



Two Chilean stamps (Scott 1361) show island tourism. Vignette shows moai of Ahau Akivi.



Booklet pane shows island carvings. Also found in other colors and denominations.

About the only known mail dealing with Easter Island at this time came from visitors, and was probably mailed from Chile or some other country after the visit. One person who is known to have had a large correspondence about the island is an American, George Cooke. In 1886 Cooke was a surgeon aboard the USS *Mohican*, a steam sloop. In December of that year the *Mohican* visited Easter for a month, and Cooke wrote up detailed reports on the island. He also maintained a voluminous correspondence with his wife. Luckily, the envelopes have survived. A February 1887 cover is known from Caldera, Chile, and another was mailed from Arica, Chile, in April. While the letters haven't been recorded, we can assume Cooke had some interesting things to say about Easter Island in them.

Other than visitor reports, about the only mail known is correspondence from various Chilean ships. By the time of the annexation, much of the island had come under the control of large land companies who used it for raising sheep. Prior to 1932, however, no postal facilities are known to exist on Easter Island, although one of the companies did sign a contract agreeing to assist in communications. At that time there were only one or two supply ships visiting the island a year, and communications were very difficult.

Sometime during that period, at least one Chilean stamp is known to have been overprinted with the words "Rapa Nui." However, this is believed by most experts to have been a bogus issue. A 1910 cover has survived that bears an "Isla de Pascua" marking in pen over a Chilean stamp. This cover was carried by the yawl *Pandora* from Easter Island and was finally mailed at New Island, in the Falklands. That cover, at least, survived. In 1916 the yacht *Carnegie*, under command of



Typical statue, on slopes near the stone quarry where they were made.

Captain Ault made a brief visit. According to the captain, mail was left on the island to be delivered. None of the letters was ever seen again.

After a period during which the only real authority on the island was held by the ranch managers, the Chilean Navy took over administration. Beginning in 1932, mail from the island received a variety of markings from mail sent through the military. Among these are circular markings reading "Marina de Chile Subdelegation Maritima Isla de Pascua" and "Jefatura Militar Armada de Chile Isla de Pascua," as well as oval markings reading "Republica de Chile Subdelegation Maritima Isla de Pascua Armada Nacional," "Apostadero Naval Seccion Isla de Pascua Valparaiso," and "Subdelegation Maritimo Republica de Chile Isla de Pascua." Finally, the most common pre-post marking is a circular "Isla de Pascua Chile" with a star in the middle. All of these markings are extremely rare.

The Chilean Navy did not operate an actual post office on the island. However, postal officials on mainland Chile were becoming more aware of the philatelic potential of their remote possession, and in 1938 a six-stamp set was proposed to honor the fiftieth anniversary of the island's annexation. This set was never actually issued, but a set of artist's drawings is known. In



Three examples of pictorial island cancels.

stamps (Scott B1–B2), which served the same purpose.

Through the end of the 1940s, Easter Island continued to be extremely remote in terms of postal affairs. Mail was carried either by the very few existing vessels, or by the rare Chilean supply ships. On January 19, 1951, however, all that began to change. A Chilean Catalina flying boat nicknamed *Manu Tara* made a nineteen-hour flight from La Serena to the island. Since there was no landing strip there, the plane had to land in the rough waters off Hanga Roa. A few commemorative covers are known. In 2001 Chile issued a four-stamp block, one of which (Scott 1358b) shows the plane over an island map.

Just a few months later, on March 14, 1951, another flight landed on Easter. This one was the “First Experimental Air Mail Australia-Chile.” The plane was the *Frigate Bird*, commanded by the famous Australian pilot P.G. Taylor. In April of that same year, it made a return visit. There are a number of covers that bear the flights’ cachets. However, only a few received the star and circle “Isla de Pascua” cachet.

The Postal Period

On November 17, 1953, the island officially opened its first civilian post office. It is in a modest building on a tree-shaded avenue in Hanga Roa. At one time it boasted a hitching post for horses at the entrance (many islanders maintain horses for riding), but when I was there last in 2003, it had been removed. A few covers have been reported with earlier dates than November 17, possibly canceled by favor.

This is the only Chilean post office known to have operated on Easter Island, although for a brief period there was another postal address on the island — APO 09877. This was an American camp built on the side of Mt. Orongo above Mataverí Airport and which served as a satellite tracking station from 1967 to 1971. The station had its own cancellation device; however, due to opposition by some Chileans, the base commander could not actually use it on mail. As a favor he finally did cancel two covers. This must be one of the rarest APO markings. (Thanks to the late Dr. Gale Raymond, legendary island aficionado, for this tale.)

From 1953 until the opening of the Mataverí Airport in 1967, mail continued to be carried by supply ship or visiting vessel. The opening of the airport, which can handle large jets and is, in fact, the longest one in Chile, finally gave the island relatively quick communications with the rest of the world. LAN-Chile Airlines has instituted regular service Santiago-Easter-Tahiti/return, with worldwide connections available.

Since the post office has been open, a large number of cancels, some quite picturesque, have been adopted. At least



Four stamps and a souvenir sheet note the centenary of the annexation of Easter Island by Chile (Scott 791–794).

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Four stamps (Scott 1321–1324) show artifacts and dancers.



A 1987 commemorative cover for a flight of the *Concorde* from Tahiti to Easter Island.



Ahau Tongariki. Background is the eastern end of the island.

cancels, some quite picturesque, have been adopted. At least a dozen types have been recorded. The first one was a simple “Isla de Pascua Chile” circular device. Several cancels in the 1970s through the 1990s were rectangular and involved at least one, and in several cases, two moai. One design also included an example of the rongorongo board hieroglyphics. There’s even a cancel showing the famous “birdman” symbol.

In addition to the cancels, there are also various cachets found on mail. There are some from the Direction General de Aeronautica, Aeropuerto Mataaveri, Air Force detachments, and a number of pictorial ones used at the post office. Several of these feature moai as well. One rather unusual one probably was donated by a European philatelist. It reads (in German) “Osterinsel” and “Rapa Nui.” It features the unique neck ornament shape that has become the symbol of Rapa Nui nationalists.

There are also at least seven (as of 2005) First Day cancels with Easter Island subjects known from issues of the Chilean Post Office.

Stamps

Easter Island (at least as has been established so far) is not known to have had its own stamp issues. However since 1940 Chile has more than made up for that, issuing more than fifty stamps on the island topic. Some of these are a bit obscure, as you have to study the design to catch the connection. Scott 1239, for example, was issued to honor the Capuchin order of monks. In the background are some moai set on a sacred altar. Scott 1254 is supposed to represent the Year of the Ocean; however, the 500-peso value has a moai carving as part of the bottom of the stamp’s design. Other relevant stamps are hidden in sheets of differently designed stamps. For example, Scott 873f is a stamp in the Chilean National Parks set; it shows an Easter Island tern. Scott 674f is the same story; on a sheet of fifteen, one stamp shows a moai.



A 1999 *Concorde* cover records stops made at airports around South America, including Easter Island.

There have been a number of sets and souvenir sheets featuring island customs, the statues, carvings, dress, history, and geography. In 1967 Scott 345a, 347, and RA2 all showed a moai. The design of another 1967 issue, Scott 349, doesn't have anything to do with Easter Island (it depicts Robinson Crusoe, the fictional character based on the real castaway on a Chilean Island, Alexander Selkirk), but it was privately overprinted "Isla de Pascua." This stamp was made for travelers from the Lindblad Tourist Organization, who made the first tourist flight to the island.

In 1970 two stamps (Scott 383 and C298) showed Capt. Policarpo Toro and an island map. These celebrate the eightieth anniversary of the island's annexation. Other large maps are shown on Scott 1286 and 1351a-b, as well as on souvenir sheets Scott 1361c and 1398.

A 1988 set of four with souvenir sheet (Scott 791-794a) marked the 100th anniversary of the takeover. No less than eight stamps made up a sheet (Scott 1010) issued in 1992 for flora and fauna found in the waters around the island. Another four-stamp set issued in 2000 (Scott 1321-1324) shows carvings and dancing by the indigenous people.

The most complicated Easter Island stamp issue is the group of booklet stamps released in 1988, 1989, and 1991. There are ten different varieties



"Cinderella" label used on island by METEI expedition in 1965.



Letter sent by ship's surgeon George Cooke from Arica, Chile, with cancel of USS Mohican. Ship and surgeon had visited the island the previous December.



First commercial flight via LAN-Chile from the island to Santiago in 1967.



Postcard from the PENTOTHAL series of advertising cards for an anesthetic was mailed from the island in 1968.



The boys at the South Pole were having a bit of fun, making this ice moai. How it got from Easter Island to the Pole in sixteen days, I don't know.

with major catalogue status, with numbers between Scott 780 and Scott 956. These consist of two different designs, a carved wooden head and a stone depiction of a birdman. These stamps come in different colors, denominations, and overprint types.

A few other nations have released stamps with island motifs as well. The most notable is an issue in the 2003 250th Anniversary of the British Museum set (Scott 2164, SG 2409). This shows one of the prized possessions of the



Intra-island registered cover to a local travel agency.

British Museum in London, the Hoa Hakananai moai. This statue was brought from the sacred village of Orongo at the southwest tip of the island many years ago. I remember visiting the museum in 2004 and feeling a bit of awe observing this huge monument, knowing that I also had been at the site where it had once stood.

Flight Covers

In addition to the *Manu Tara* and Taylor flights, there have been a number of other interesting flights to Easter documented. In 1963 the first transport of mail between Easter Island and Santiago (January 28) carried a limited number of covers. The mail was carried by LAN-Chile. In 1965 another *Manu Tara* seaplane flight, this one called *Manu Tara II*, was the first to carry mail from Chile to Easter then Tahiti, and return. In addition, there was a special pictorial cancel showing a moai used for this flight.

The first commercial flight to the island was commemorated by special covers on April 8, 1967. Two special cancels were used on mail, one to and the other from "Rapa Nui." On board the plane was a group of tourists organized by Lindblad Tourist Company of New York. Things were primitive then; there wasn't much of an airport facility, and the tourists had to camp out in tents. But then, that's what one expects at "the end of the world."

There have been other flights commemorated with special covers. Perhaps the most interesting of these are the *Concorde* items. The faster-than-sound aircraft were never in regular service to the island, but several flights were made as part of tourist charter trips. These trips were either round-the-world or round-South-America tours, and were flown by French airlines. At least four such flights have been recorded between 1987 and 1999. The special covers were produced in fairly limited numbers; for instance, on a 1988 flight, only seventy-four covers were carried.

Ships

Relatively few ships have left cachets noting their visits to Easter Island. In the 1940s the supply vessel *Allipen* had a one-line cachet, and the *Esmerala* (another supply vessel) had ship markings. The French vessel *E.V. Henry* and the tourist ship *Lindblad Explorer* left letters with their markings. The French helicopter carrier *Jeanne d'Arc* noted two visits, in 1969 and 1993, with special cachets.

I visited Easter Island twice, in 2000 and 2003. Both times were on the same ship, the *Deutschland*. This vessel was attuned to passenger desires (like mine) by providing a very nice cachet for mail, which mentioned the stops at the island. I suspect

there are a number of other ship's cachets waiting to be discovered.

Other Aspects

There are many other areas of Easter's philately to investigate. For example, many tourists have sent postcards from Easter Island. Early ones (from about 1910 on) are almost impossible to find, especially from the island.

QSL cards are also quite popular. More than thirty radio contact cards from Easter are known, some of which bear interesting military cachets.

Commercial covers are fairly difficult to find but do exist. These are partially due to the expatriate population of Chilean workers and officials on the island, and also to the increasing amount of tourist mail.

All-in-all, the different aspects of Easter Island philately make it a fascinating — and challenging — collecting area.

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The Author

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A 1951 Taylor Australia-Chile flight cover has the star Isla de Pascua cachet, used pre-post office.

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Commercial cover to Chile, with various island cachets.