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The Mystery of Easter Island

Imagine arriving on a small island in the Pacific Ocean about halfway between the island of Tahiti and the west coast of South America to find giant rock statues of human-like figures greeting you along the coastline. This is what Dutch sea captain Jacob Roggeveen found when he arrived there in 1722 on Easter Sunday. This is why he called the 64 square mile island Easter Island. This remote island is still inhabited by a small group of people known as the Rapanui. Easter Island is called the most remote inhabited island in the world. It is about 1,300 miles from the nearest island and about 2,200 miles from Chile.

The giant statues of Easter Island are called moai and each moai is placed upon a large flat base or altar called ahu. There are nearly 900 of these statues on the island. Archaeologists continue to investigate when the first inhabitants of the island settled there. There is a wide range of dates given for the first settlers on Easter Island, between 400 to 1200 C.E. or even later.

The oral history of the Rapanui people includes the arrival of a Polynesian king and his family. They spread across the island and formed 8 family groups, each with its own territory. At some later point a new group made up of just men settled on the island. The islanders did not create any moai until several hundred years later. Archaeologists believe the last moai was constructed around 1650.

We do know that the Rapanui



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people continued to erect new moai over a long period of time, hundreds of years. The smallest moai is about 6 feet in height but most moai are between 18 and 23 feet tall. The Rapanui kept making larger moai and the tallest standing moai is a giant 32 feet. An unfinished moai that is still in the Easter Island stone quarry is a whopping 64 feet long. Most of the moai are positioned so they face away from the ocean.

The moai are supposed to represent ancestors; they were not worshipped as gods. The style of moai changed over time but always depicted the torso of a man; they are just a few female moai. Some moai look like heads; the heads are part of large statues that have been buried by soil erosion over the centuries. Just like at Stonehenge or the Pyramids, how the early people moved the large stones remains a mystery.



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Multiple Choice Questions

Circle the correct answer.

1. Where is Easter Island located?
 - a. Atlantic Ocean
 - b. Pacific Ocean
 - c. Indian Ocean
 - d. Southern Ocean

2. What is the closest continent to Easter Island?
 - a. North America
 - b. South America
 - c. Asia
 - d. Australia

3. The native people of Easter Island are the
 - a. Arapaho
 - b. Iroquois
 - c. Apache
 - d. Rapanui

4. How tall are most of the moai statues?
 - a. 6 feet
 - b. 8 feet
 - c. 12 feet
 - d. Taller than 12 feet

5. Moai represent
 - a. Ancestors
 - b. Gods
 - c. Both a. and b. above
 - d. None of the above

6. Most moai statues are
 - a. Heads
 - b. Torsos
 - c. Full bodies
 - d. Sitting



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Short Answer Questions

1. Locate Easter Island, the Hawaiian Islands, Tahiti and Chile on a map of the world.
2. Do some research on the Internet and locate pictures of moai. Write a descriptive essay about moai.
3. Why is Easter Island called the most remote inhabited island in the world?
4. What is oral history? If you don't know the answer, look it up.
5. The oral history of the Rapanui people includes the arrival of a Polynesian king and his family. Where is Polynesia? If you don't know, look up the answer.
6. Draw your own moai.
7. Do some research and explain where Stonehenge is and what we know about its purpose.



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Answer Key

Multiple Choice

1. b.
2. b.
3. d.
4. d.
5. a.
6. c.

Short Answer

1. Individual response
2. Individual response
3. It is about 1,300 miles from the nearest island and about 2,200 miles from Chile.
4. Oral history is a historical account of a people that is told from one generation to the next without ever being written down.
5. Polynesia includes scattered islands of the central and southern Pacific Ocean roughly between New Zealand, Hawaii, and Easter Island.
6. Individual response
7. Individual response

