Hello, I'm Lyn Jarvis, Contributing Editor for Across the Fence and today we will explore the most remote inhabited island in all the world…known as Rapi Nui to those who live here, but to the rest of us, Easter Island, discovered by Dutch explorers on Easter Day, 1722. Famous for its 887 stone heads called Moai…it's located 2,300 miles off the western coast of Chile, in the South Pacific and it took us more than 30 hours of travel time to get here.

At the small airport we were welcomed by Contanza Yaeger and presented a flower necklace made from bougainvillea blooms. Getting here was an exciting accomplishment for everyone. We stayed at Hotel Manutara, just across the street from the airport … but not to worry about the noise, there's only one flight a day in and out of Easter Island.

In the Rapi Nui language we were welcomed by 74 year old Mahatua.

“My name is Mahatua and welcome to Rapa Nui. I hope you enjoy your stay here and have good memories to carry home.”

And with that greeting, we were off to explore Hanga Roa, the only town on Rapi Nui, a 15 minute walk from our hotel. A territory of Chile, the 5,000 people on the island, however, govern themselves with elections every 4 years and this is their Parliament Building. It's located on Avenue Atamu Tekena, the main street in Hanga Roa, along with gift shops, small hotels, restaurants, and the island's only supermarket. It's best to buy local like these sweet potatoes, as produce not grown here has to be flown in and is more expensive. You can't go wrong with fresh fish, like these pumas, caught in some of the world's most pollution free waters.

Soccer is big here and nearly 24 hours a day, local teams are either practicing or competing in matches to determine who will play on the national team. This is their church which a mix of Catholicism and ancient religious beliefs which celebrates the importance of home and family. Flowers like nasturtiums and impatiens grow wild along the road and I was comfortable here with a tranquility similar to when growing up in southern Vermont.

I think you can tell what a place is like by getting to know their dogs. In some towns they are afraid and slink away, but here they want to show off… and get their chins rubbed. I think this says a lot for the people that live in Hunga Roa.
After all that exploring, a good meal was in order and it didn't take long to decide on the Kaimana Inn, whose specialty is Rapa Nui lobster...large or the miniature rapa-rapa.

We chose the large one and were invited into the kitchen...where Chef Theresa began the preparation. And with a lot of butter, into the frying pan it went. And in a matter of minutes our elegant first meal on Easter Island was ready. And for you lobster fans, I wish you were here to enjoy this along with me.

If you are not sure where Easter Island is located, let me explain with the Polynesian Triangle. At the top is Hawaii, to the left New Zealand, and on the right is Easter Island with Tahiti in the center. Recent radiocarbon tests show that Rapi Nui's first people came from small islands near Tahiti and they called their discovery the "Belly Button of the Earth." Aku Aku Guide Elena Araki explains.

Guide: Around 300AD approximately the date. The seven explorers obviously sent out by the king so they can seek for new land. Remember that the Polynesians were great navigators they followed the stars that followed the racing sun the color of the ocean or a bird flying will be telling them that they are close to a piece of land. That's actually the evidence they looked for in the middle of the ocean they arrived here probably by accident. Once they arrive to your and saw the creator of the volcano has water because it's accumulation of rainwater that there's plenty of vegetation and nobody has ever been your. Then the seven men managed to go back to Polynesia and then the king sent his family to come and settle here. This is the landing place of the king that's why it to us this place is very special and very sacred to us. It's the home of the King HoTuaTua.

Not far from the beach are the remains of an ancient village where some of the Rapa Nui's first people lived. And if you can guess what this is you should have been an archeologist. What do you think? Here's a clue...yes chickens came with them and were an important food supply. What you saw is where the chicken's got their drinking water. And this is their stone coop with a small door to deter predators that hunt after dark.

For several hundred years this small island, of just 150 square miles, with its mild climate and plentiful food and water supplies flourished and was home to more than 10,000 people. Then one day about the year 1,100, archeologists say a stone statue appeared on a ridge that led to an obsession that nearly wiped them out. For almost 600 years these enormous stone heads called Moai...their carving, moving, and putting them in place consumed the population. The Moai were carved out of easily worked solidified volcano ash found at the extinct volcano called Rono Ranaku.

While many teams worked on different statues at the same time, a single Moai took 5 or 6 men up to a year to complete. Only a quarter of the statues were put in place, while nearly half remain in the volcano quarry. Most archeologists believe that the Moais, that can weigh up to 82 tons were placed on logs...and some 200 men with ropes and crow bars would push and drag them to their final destinations.

An ahu, which is a raised platform standing several feet above the ground, gives the Moai a more godly appearance. Some say these statues indeed do pay homage to their deities who watched over them, while others say they represent the deceased kings or chiefs from one of the 9 tribes on the island. I expect it's some of both. But whatever the reason...here is their greatest achievement...Ahu Tongariki with 15 Moai. It's located downhill from Rano Raraku making it easier to move the stones. The tall one in the center weighs 86 tons, the heaviest ever erected on the island. Life was good and the people danced.
Then came their demise. Prodigious quantities of timber were needed as the competition between tribes for more and larger statues became all consuming. Without precious trees, they were trapped on their now arid island, unable to escape the consequences of their self-inflicted environmental collapse. Mania wiped out sensibility, and a society that had prospered for more than a 1,000 years fell along with their magnificent stone heads that were knocked down as a civil war erupted between tribes as they battled for precious food and shelter. Less than 2000 people survived and were reduced to living in caves on starvation diets. Around 1760 significant social and cultural changes took place following the end of the Moai era. The tribes came together at Orango to carve out a solution to end their civil war in what has come to be known as the Birdman Competition. Aku Aku guide Samuel Atan Tuki explains.

And with that ingenuous plan, stabilization returned to Rapa Nui and their civilization slowly recovered. Until another, even worse, event occurred in 1862. Rapa Nui business man Tito Paoa explains.

The few survivors, in desperation, decided to annex with Chile on Sept 9. 1888 and these monuments commemorate that event. And now, more than 120 years later, you have seen what a fascinating and friendly place the island is today.

Lyn Jarvis: And no visit to Easter Island would be complete without a stop at the market were local artisans have beautiful examples of what their historic and mysterious island has to offer.

As you have seen it's so remote and different from the rest of the world, it's difficult to find just the right reminder of my visit…let's look around together.
Lyn Jarvis: What a fascinating and amazing place and I must thank the staff and guides from Aku Aku Travel for taking care of all our needs. We couldn't have done it without their help. The story of Easter Island is unique in all the world, but has left some lasting lessons. Because of an obsession for statue building they destroyed the land bringing about starvation and war. With ingenuity, however, they found a way to return to a stability that lasted a 1000 years. Then came the outsiders with disease and slave trade and by 1887, their civilization was gone. There story is one of epic human achievement mixed with some terrible mistakes along the way...pretty much the story of human history, isn't it. I'm Lyn Jarvis on Easter Island, Rapa Nui to the locals, and the Belly Button of the Earth to the ancients. Thank you for watching.