The Pacific Islands

The Pacific Island region covers more than 300,000 square miles of land—of which New Zealand and the island of New Guinea make up approximately nine-tenths—and millions of square miles of ocean. It is a mixture of independent states, associated states, integral parts of non-Pacific Island countries, and dependent states.

The island is famous for its gigantic stone statues, of which there are more than 600, and for the ruins of giant stone platforms (ahu). Archaeological surveys were carried out in 1886, 1914, and 1934; archaeological excavations were initiated in 1955. The excavations revealed that three distinct cultural periods are identifiable on the island.
The early period is characterized by *ahu* in three areas (Tahai, Vinapu, and Anakena). These are stone platforms and are carbon-dated to about **700–850 CE**. The excavations in Anakena have revealed that a variety of other statues were also carved in the early period.

They differ from the well-known later statues by their rounded heads and stubby bodies. Even more statues of this time resemble those of *pre-Inca monuments* in South America.

The classic *moai* statues were constructed in the **middle period**.
Some of the slim statues have huge red, cylindrical **pukao** (topknots) placed on top of their heads. Most middle-period statues range from about **10 to 20 feet** tall, but the largest known stood on top of an **ahu** and was about **32 feet** tall! It consisted of a **single block** weighing about **82 tons** (164,000 lbs) and had a **pukao** of about **11 tons**.

The largest statue still standing partly buried in the deep silt below the quarries is about **37 feet** (11 metres) tall, and the largest unfinished one with its back attached to the rock is about **68 feet** (21 metres) tall. Traditions, supported by archaeology, suggest that the images represented important personalities who were deified after death. From one to a dozen completed statues would stand in a row on a single **ahu**, always facing inland.

![Easter Island moai with pukao. Easter Island statues with red topknots. © modestlife/Fotolia.](image-url1)

![Easter Island moai. The tallest standing Easter Island stone statue (about 37 feet [12 metres] high) after being excavated by Thor Heyerdahl (top right, leaning against statue); it was subsequently partially buried again. Courtesy of Thor Heyerdahl; photograph, Walter Leonardi.](image-url2)
Statues of the middle period were all quarried from the special yellow-gray tuff found in the crater walls of the volcano Rano Raraku. Inside and outside the crater bowl numerous unfinished statues and thousands of crude stone picks are scattered about, bearing witness to a sudden interruption of the sculptors’ work. Each statue had its front and sides completed before the back was detached from the bedrock.

The third, or late-period, Easter Islanders dwelt in boat-shaped pole-and-thatch houses or in caves. This period was marked by internal wars, general destruction, and cultural decadence. The mataa, or obsidian spear point, which was mass-produced, is the characteristic artifact of this period. Wood carving and small crude stone figurines replaced monumental art.

Eyes and topknots were added only after the monument was erected. In 1978 it was determined that the eyes were created with white coral with a dark stone disk for the pupil. In 2009 British archaeologists discovered that the topknots, which look like giant red hats, originated at a separate quarry hidden in Puna Pau, another ancient volcano.

Easter Island was added to UNESCO’s World Heritage List in 1995.

A close up of the moai at Ahu Tahai, restored with coral eyes by the American archaeologist William Mullo. Photo Bjarte Sorensen.