

Rapa Nui, Easter Island, Chile

By Dr. Brian Eckert

Any thoughts of potential problems engendered by government customs requirements, paperwork and lists of all our dental equipment and supplies, were quickly dispelled by the warm welcome we received as we exited the small airport in Rapa Nui, on the outskirts of Hanga Roa, the one and only town on Easter Island. We were embraced and welcomed with leis of tropical flowers and the greeting “iorana” by several local people of various ages, most of whom we got to know over the succeeding 2 weeks. We met Gina, our island host and caretaker and 2 young Chilean dentists, Rodrigo and Sebastian, who had taken holiday time from their working lives to join our volunteer work. We loaded up the trucks and were provided with a short tour of the town along the shore and our first glimpses of the famous “moai” statues on our way to our accommodations, only 15 minutes from the airport on the “far-side of town”. We picked up some groceries and a bit of rest from the jet-lag later in the afternoon and in the evening we put on heavy sweaters and walked to Tahai to watch the evening fall over the Pacific ocean and the potent Moai statues all facing inland towards their lands and families. Along with a scattering of other people we watched as dogs barked and chased horses across the green shore and heard some of the first stories from Gina about the island’s history and mythologies.

On the next day, a Sunday, we spent several hours at the hospital, which was to be our central work-site, unpacking our equipment and supplies, finding sufficient electrical connectors, setting up our “operatories” and generally transforming a large conference room into a 6 operatory dental clinic complete with supply depot and sterilization centre. Having often done the same under varied circumstances in other parts of the world made this somewhat daunting sounding task, into an exercise in cooperation and efficiency. We were fortunate to have access to several extra dental units and portable chairs left by Chilean dental students, which allowed more of us to work at the same time. Our island hosts completed our day with a wonderful family barbeque (curanto) including a small band (ukuleles, guitar, drums) and dancing (2 young sisters). We learned that this was not unusual as every year one of the extended families would host a BBQ for 2- 3,000 people! (Island population in total being 9-10 thousand).

Our first morning working was the usual adventure in establishing a patient flow of screening, medical information, ensuring our dental machinery was working and getting the work done. Gina and some other islander volunteers asked essential medical information, one of our dentists did an initial screening and then the patient was picked up by one of the open dentists. We even had access to radiographs for certain situations, through the hospital dental clinic. Although there were 3 government salaried dentists working at the hospital, their systems were not conducive to comprehensive dental care.

In the course of 9,5 working days we saw a combined total of 631 patients – many for a couple of treatment sessions. One of the Chilean dentists, a periodontist, quickly found he was booked solidly for the 2 weeks as there is no hygiene program

on Rapa Nui. We saw all ages of people, but mostly from teens to 60's and we tried to complete everyone's necessary work if possible. Some people hadn't been able to secure a dental appointment in over 3 years. Needless to say, they were grateful for our efforts and on top of parting hugs and "maururu" (thanks in Rapa Nui language) they would often return to gift us with shell necklaces or small carved moai, or trays with fruit or juices. We were overwhelmed by their generosity towards us. One elderly lady with dementia was accompanied not only by her family but by the very faithful dog who refused to leave her side and sat under the dental chair during her treatment. In spite of the language differences, Spanish, Rapa Nui and English, communication was good and everyone made themselves understood by gestures if not direct communication. We did everything, from minor and major restorations in amalgam and resin, to extractions, some selected root canal treatments and consults about more complicated treatments, such as orthodontics or prosthetics. During our evenings off and weekends we had little rest as our grateful hosts proudly showed us the beauty of the island, volcanic water lakes, steep rocky cliffs, old caves as well as the other moai sites on the island. We even made a foray to Anakena, the one sandy beach on the northeastern side of the island. Most impressive was the quarry on the mountain side where the moai statues were cut from the rock before being transported to their final positions. The two weeks flew by and we felt that we were parting from family members by the end of it all. We were very fortunate on this trip to have some young dentists accompanying us and "learning the ropes" of CDRI volunteer work. We were grateful to our island hosts and all the local volunteers and Chileans who contributed to the success of this wonderful experience.