

A LOOK BACK

FOR THOSE OF US WHO LIVED and worked on Rapa Nui in “earlier days”, the changes that have occurred on our beloved island are really amazing. It wasn’t all that long ago that there was no telephone service to mainland Chile, no TV, and a varying flight schedule that seemed to have no relation to the Real World. Mail was a sometime-thing; just buying a stamp in order to send a letter could take weeks as it depended upon whether or not the incoming LAN Chile flight had remembered to bring stamps.

There were few vehicles on the island then, so we did a lot of walking. When we did get our hands on a vehicle, its condition varied from OK to scary. When a car broke down, finding a spare part was unlikely; just filling the tank with gas was a project. We had to drive down a slippery-when-wet road to Vinapu to where the gas pump was located. Its operating hours varied widely and we’d crawl downhill to the pump, hoping it was open and we could fill up before we ran out of fuel.

Looking back to some earlier issues of the *Journal*, we found a few gems that not only brought back memories (some good, some bad) but illustrate how far and how fast things on Rapa Nui have changed.

From the Winter 88/89 and the Spring of 1989 issues of *Rapa Nui Journal*, the “What’s New in Hanga Roa” feature reveals what seems like a time-warp:

“The long-awaited paving of Hanga Roa’s streets is finally underway. Cement rain gutters are being constructed along one side of Te Pito Te Henua street, beginning at the church.” [*The paving and rain gutters made a huge difference; formerly, the street turned into a river of mud flowing downhill and into the sea at the caleta*].

“The façade of the church is now complete with the addition of decorative elements added to the porch structure. These are bas relief designs based on ancient petroglyph motifs such as birdman, etc.” [*Upgrades to the church were instigated by Father David Reddy, who paid for them by sponsoring bingo games.*]

“The long-awaited supply ship – due in December – finally arrived in February. Shortages on the island were critical; everything from butane to bottled drinks, liquor, flour, and powdered milk were in short supply. Christmas presents, automobiles, and 60 tons of dynamite were included in the late shipment. Newspapers in Chile printed stories saying there were “no scarcities” on the island but several restaurants and bakeries simply closed for lack of supplies, and store shelves contained only a few odd items. Blame was officially placed on tourism because LAN Chile increased the number of flights from twice to three times a week; however, this

ignores the fact that practically all LAN Chile passengers were en route to Tahiti and very few disembarked on Rapa Nui. The shipping firm protested that in the past year it has carried more than six thousand cubic meters of merchandise to the island [*this of course includes vehicles, cement, building supplies, etc.*].”

“The supply ship which has a capacity of 2,000 tons brought only 1,000 on this trip. Left behind were several private cars, a government vehicle, a new fire truck and a new ambulance.” [*Late arriving supply ships were common in earlier days and occasionally didn’t arrive at all, for various reasons, including one that sank on its way to the island.*]

“Harbor improvements at Hanga Piko continue; dredging is on-going and preformed cement rip-rap will be placed at the entrance to Hanga Piko’s harbor in order to break up the dangerous wave surges.” [*This was a waste of effort; wave surges are still with us.*]

“A notice in *La Depeche* (Tahiti) in September 1988 states that a Club Med is being considered for Rapa Nui. Citing an announcement made in Santiago, *La Depeche* deplores the idea as being risky for both the archaeological sites and the environment.” [*Whew!*]

“The Semana de Rapa Nui (Tapati) festival finally got underway, a week late. By that time, tourists who had arrived for this event had left the island.” [*Compare that with the Tapati festival today, which has become big business. Hordes of visitors flock to the island for the now-two week festival, and home-grown events and shows have been replaced with professional extravagances. The differences are amazing as are the numbers of tourists who fly over to party-hearty.*]

And, in the Spring of 1988, we noted that some islanders had planted pineapples and “...this season the harvest was spectacular and some speculate that next year it may be possible to export some ... to mainland Chile.” [*Rapa Nui pineapples proved to be delicious and have to be tasted to be believed!*]

Ah, those were the days!



Te Pito te Henua street with Church at upper left, 1982. Photo by William Hyder