

EASTER ISLAND RESIDENTS VOTE AGAINST THE RETURN OF TOURISTS IN JANUARY



The inhabitants of Easter Island are against the return of tourists scheduled for January. Immediately after the outbreak of the Corona pandemic, the island sealed itself off from the rest of the world. Now 67 percent of the Rapa Nui, the indigenous people, voted in a referendum not to change this situation for the time being.

The reason is the fear of bringing the virus to the island. Only eight cases of corona have been reported there, the last in September of last year. **No one has died from the infection.** 73.1% of the population is vaccinated.

This no to the reopening of the island illustrates also how much the population rejects the overflow of tourists from the past. However, the result of the vote is not binding and the final decision will rest with the Chilean health authorities.

The fact that there is no inhabited spot in the whole world that is further away from the rest of civilization, which for a long time made the island a kind of natural isolation ward, did not help the inhabitants in the end. European explorers brought in influenza and syphilis in the 18th century, which killed a large part of the population. Smallpox was added in the 19th century. And in the early 20th century, leprosy spread. By then, the number of inhabitants had dwindled from about three thousand at the time of the first European visitors to barely more than a hundred. Something like that leaves its mark.

Today, just under ten thousand people live on Easter Island, most of them have moved there since the construction of an airport in the 1980s. The main source of income is tourism. And so the real question behind the referendum was how to envision the future. Once before, the future on Easter Island had already been thoroughly spoiled, when all thought and action concentrated on the creation of the moais, enigmatic stone colossi up to twenty meters high.

This was accompanied by unparalleled overexploitation of nature. Ten million palm trees were felled. Paradise was transformed into a steppe. Poor agricultural and fishing yields caused famine. No island, James Cook noted in his logbook, offered fewer refreshments and amenities.

Henceforth, not receiving visitors would not necessarily have to lead back to that very situation. **Agriculture today, it is said, is mature enough to feed a few thousand people.** So would it be worth an experiment to live away from the rest of the world again? Then Easter Island could become something like a colony in the vastness of space. Visited only now and then: by researchers in space suits.

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