

# AYAHUASCA TOURISM: A CAUTIONARY TALE

*R. Stuart*

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**W**esterners discontent with their Judeo-Christian heritage have long sought alternative spiritual traditions. In the 1950s, the Beats dabbled in Zen. In the 1960s, the hippies flocked to Hindu swamis. In the 1970s, the Reverend Moon and other cult leaders swayed large followings. In the 1980s, the New Agers embraced Tibetan lamas. In the 1990s, shamanism came into vogue. Perhaps within a few years, the avant-garde of the United States will undergo a mass conversion to Islam in order to assimilate this estranged manifestation of the Other. But at the present time, many North Americans and Europeans are still seeking enlightenment through exploring shamanism, some traveling to South America to find the wisdom, and the brews, of other traditions.

Ayahuasca tourists are often bewildered by the fact that almost every shaman claims to be the only person in all of Amazonia who knows how to properly brew the magic potion. So the question foremost in many peoples' minds is, “How do I find a good ayahuasquero?”

In November 2001, I observed ayahuasca tourism while visiting Ucayali, Peru as part of a cactus identification research project supported by a grant from Bob Wallace to MAPS (an article about this project will appear in the next issue of *Entheogen Review*). In Peru, the drug war is in full force. Television shows portray marijuana as a killer weed — although hemp leaf patches adorn the clothing of many adolescents. Cocaine traffickers regularly close off the only road connecting Lima to several outlying provinces for weeks — no doubt abetted by corrupt politicians and military officials. In contrast to US drug policy, however, Peruvians regard ayahuasca as an herbal tonic rather than an illegal drug. Although a few years ago the American ayahuasquero Alan Shoemaker was imprisoned in Peru for distributing ayahuasca, this appears to be an isolated incident.

## **A Religion and an Industry**

Ayahuasca is popular among the indigenous people and among many mestizos. Pentecostal, Adventist, and (to a lesser extent) Catholic missionaries have gained many converts in the indigenous communities. While these Christians publicly disavow shamanism, I met some who still privately consume ayahuasca and continued other native religious practices.

Overall, ayahuasca is a valued part of Peruvian spiritual and economic life. The government tourist agencies sponsor ayahuasca festivals, the brew and the raw materials for its manufacture are openly sold in markets, and even Peru's current president Alejandro Toledo participated in an ayahuasca ceremony.

Ayahuasca tourism is popular elsewhere in South America as well. Some tourists visit Brazilian ayahuasca churches such as the Santo Daime. Others go on the more expensive American-led retreats. While the four-star ayahuasca resorts may feel overly contrived, any tour led by Peter Gorman is almost certainly going to be interesting.

For the past decade, many ayahuasca tourists in Peru have flocked to Iquitos. Another popular location, although it lacks a hotel, is the Shipibo town of San Francisco, which can be reached by a taxi ride from Yarina. In fact, the enormous sign at the entrance of San Francisco proclaims that the town is the "Centro Ceremonial del Ayahuasca." There are at least a couple of ayahuasqueros in almost every Shipibo family. Many of these practitioners are willing to host services both for other Peruvians and also for foreign visitors.

### **A Medical Caution**

Most shamans are unfamiliar with Western pharmaceuticals, so it is the tourist's responsibility to be aware that ayahuasca can have adverse interactions with various prescription medicines, particularly some medications used to treat AIDS, depression and psychiatric disorders. For instance, one AIDS patient died during a ceremony in Bolivia, although he was sufficiently healthy to dance at the beginning of the service.

### **About The Ceremony**

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mercialized ayahuasca ceremony would probably be shallower than a ritual conducted solely for the benefit of the shaman's relatives and community. In a commercialized ceremony, one could observe the ritual procedures and enjoy listening to the chanting of icaros. Probably the dose of ayahuasca would be mild, as the shaman would usually rather err on the side of caution, preferring to give too little rather than too much. Given the linguistic barriers and cultural misunderstandings that are likely to confound communication even in the ordinary state of consciousness, it is only prudent for the shaman to take reasonable precautions to prevent problems with foreigners.

### **The Ayahuasqueros**

I had the opportunity to spend time getting to know several ayahuasqueros who perform ceremonies for tourists. "B" is an elderly shaman in Yarina, a town near the city of Pucallpa. I lived in the ceremonial hut in his back yard for a week, observing the nightly ayahuasca ceremonies that attract up to a couple dozen visitors. I became familiar with B's leadership style because his son, the director of the family religious practice, was giving workshops in the United States. I discovered that B is a frequent liar, a shoplifter, and that he soon asks

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for money or gifts at every opportunity.

Two other ayahuasqueros were visiting B's group for a two-week training. One was a sweet and wonderful guy, but his partner always hustled me for spare change.

I also met B's nephew, an enterprising shaman who earns a couple hundred dollars per month catering to tourists while his neighbors can not even afford a thirty cent taxi ride. He charges thirty dollars to give ayahuasca to a tourist, while the going rate for a Peruvian is about two dollars.

I met several other ayahuasqueros during my travels, some of whom seemed to be fair, and some who did not. In the town of San Francisco, I met "E," who was widely regarded as an honorable man. At night I heard icaros being sung in the darkness of his home while he held private services for his family. I believe he charged about ten dollars to give ayahuasca to a tourist. I also met and learned the life history of "A," whose invitations for rituals I declined after he swindled me on the price of a tobacco pipe.

I share these stories to point out that it is a tricky endeavor to travel to a third world country and ask a total stranger for a spiritual experience.

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While many shamans undoubtedly come to their profession to help others, be aware that ayahuasca tourism is a thriving business in Peru, and that you will likely be treated as just that – a tourist.

Of course, my personal observations and encounters will be different than those of any other person travelling to Peru. But I would advise prospective tourists to weigh their own motivations to determine if it is worth making a long trip to another continent. If one is interested in learning about many different aspects of another society, and is willing to navigate Peru's unpolished infrastructure, then it might be interesting to also try ayahuasca while on vacation.

If one were specifically interested only in experiencing ayahuasca, it would be more cost-effective to home-brew a batch with ingredients ordered from an ethnobotanical supplier. With the help of an experienced friend as a sitter, one could have an intense entheogenic experience in the safety and comfort of home or in an isolated natural setting. This do-it-yourself approach could potentially be far more enlightening than what one might experience after traveling all the way to South America. ■



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*The Three Powers*  
Detail