

# SHAMANS OF THE SACRED VALLEY

VENTURING DEEP INTO THE HEART OF PERU CAN SOMETIMES TAKE YOU DEEP INTO YOUR OWN HEART, AS ONE TRAVELLER DISCOVERED WHEN SHE TOOK PART IN A SHAMANIC HEALING CEREMONY.

BY KATE HENNESSEY



Main pic: Pisac's Incan citadel looks down the magnificent Sacred Valley. Opposite, clockwise from top; Diego Palma and the ceremonial smoke of *palo santo*; Etnikas' master shamans perform an offering to Pachamama (Mother Earth) in the Sacred Valley; a local sells natural dyes at Pisac's Sunday market.

Most tourists who visit Peru's Sacred Valley will whip around its famed capital, Cusco, then beeline it for iconic Incan ruin, Machu Picchu. Both are wondrous sights and tourists looking for photographs and souvenirs will return home satisfied. But for seekers rather than sightseers, the Sacred Valley also offers *ayahuasca*: a potent, hallucinogenic, shamanic healing medicine.

My experience begins a month before Peru while visiting a friend in California. At a dinner party I mention I'm interested in shamanic healing. A guest says he's just returned from an ayahuasca retreat in Iquitos in Peru's Amazon jungle. Humid and buggy, Iquitos is the centre of Peru's "psychedelic tourism"; but he warns me that Iquitos is intense. "Go to the Sacred Valley. It's gentler there." He gives me the name of a Peruvian shaman, Diego Palma, based in Pisac (45 minutes from Cusco), specialising in group ayahuasca ceremonies. When I email Diego he replies: "This experience will transcend your role as a journalist. You will understand better afterwards."

Travelling through Peru, the spectre of ayahuasca shadows me, deepening the usual introspection travel provokes. I start reading a book called *Ayahuasca in My Blood* but abandon it, unnerved by how profoundly ayahuasca transformed the life of author Peter Gorman. "I've visited countless worlds and spent time, often awestruck, with unimaginable entities." By the time I reach Cusco I'm fascinated and terrified by what I've learnt about the "medicine".

Shamanic healing still flourishes in Peru, a country where shamans are intermediaries between the human and the spirit worlds. This spirit world is vivid and very real. The belief that a mountain, a river or a stone has sentient energy is common, as are regular offerings to the earth mother spirit, *pachamama*. To deepen their connection with the spirit world, many shamans use hallucinogens to divine the source of illnesses or seek answers to people's problems.

Ayahuasca is a brew made from Amazonian plants, primarily the *Banisteriopsis caapi* vine and the *Psychotria viridis* plant. The plant chemicals combine to make the psychoactive, or hallucinogenic, compound dimethyltryptamine (DMT) active. Drinkers are given a cup of the bitter-tasting brew by a shaman, who also drinks, at a night-time ceremony. To the sound of *icaros* (medicine songs) and a *shapaka* (leaf rattle), participants enter a lengthy internal meditation, usually experiencing intense visions.

Physical effects like vomiting and diarrhoea are welcomed as part of the medicine's work to expel parasites or negative energies. The shaman can assist in the physical or spiritual realm but usually ayahuasca drinkers undergo



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a very personal spiritual journey, unlike any other. Ayahuasca is legal in Peru and has been used for thousands of years. I'll drink it in four days' time. But first, I have Cusco to explore.

## ROAMING CUSCO'S RUINS

The Incans believed the capital of their empire, Cusco, was "the navel of the world". At an altitude of 3600 metres, however, altitude sickness is common. The natural Andean remedy is the remarkably effective coca leaf tea, also a digestive aid. Armed with a wad of leaves to chew, I hike to the tiny hillside Incan ruin of Salapunco (Temple of the Moon)

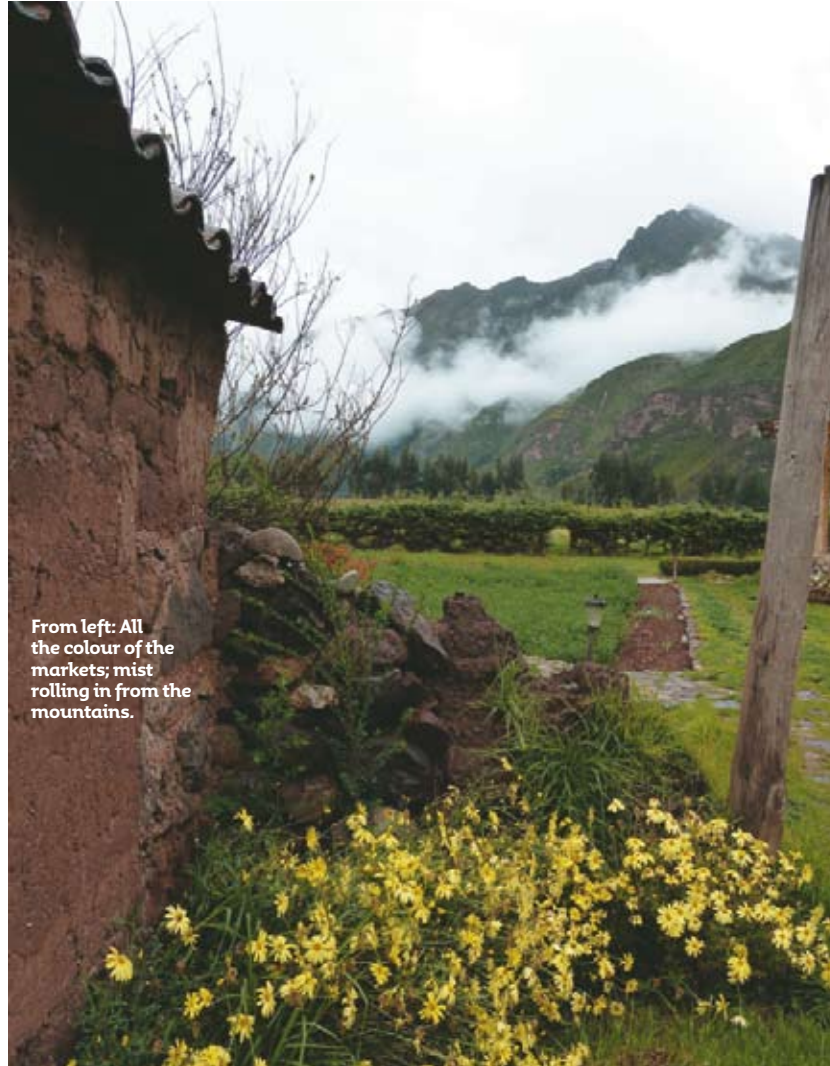


and squeeze through the temple's slim rock entrance. In the carved-out space within, light slices through an opening above to illuminate a crude stone altar. I shiver, realising the Incan rituals here were lit by moonlight alone.

A man enters the cave and introduces himself as Omar, a Cusqueño (Cusco local). Leaping onto the altar, he commands: "*Mira la energia!*" Watch the energy. He joins his fingertips then slowly drags them apart. Incredibly, the energy is visible as yellow trails of light show between his fingers. "*Hay energia fuerte aca,*" Omar says. *There's very strong energy here.* It's a beautiful lesson in the →



From left: All the colour of the markets; mist rolling in from the mountains.



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Andean outlook, a place where children are born into a natural world they believe is as conscious of them as they are of it. Omar runs a goods importation business, is forthright and practical, and wears neat blue jeans. He's no hippie on the fringes. Yet for the next two hours he guides me to places where he insists the *energia* is strong and distinct.

Never far from my thoughts is ayahuasca. Abstaining from meat, alcohol, coffee, sugar and sex is recommended before the ceremony to clear your mind, purify your body and encourage stronger visions. But the day I'm due to go to Pisac I arise feeling anxious. Did I research ayahuasca enough? Will the visions scare me? Will I lose control of my body? See things I don't want to see? It's said ayahuasca gives you what you need, not what you want, and I'm worried about my fate.

Walking Cusco's cobbled streets, I visit the Shaman Shop and marvel at weavings by the Shipobo tribe, featuring labyrinth patterns inspired by their visions. Nearly every holistic practice is offered in Cusco, including yoga, reiki, feng shui and Sufi spinning. "The Inca Empire is being reborn!" bellows the headline of an offbeat local paper. In its pages, yet another healing centre declares: "A new wave of energy is reaching our planet, triggering a perceptive shift and making us more aware on many levels." Head spinning, I decide to visit Etnikas, a "healer hub" that connects travellers with high-quality shamans.

"It's the new hotspot of healing here," nods Etnikas' manager, Mandy Kalitsis. "People

believe the energy centre is moving from the Himalayas to the Andes, so the Sacred Valley is like the new Tibet." Ninety per cent of Etnikas' shamans are from Q'eros, an Andean town known for its strong mystics. Not all shamans are created equal, Mandy warns. "Cusco has its share of charlatans. When something is popular you get unqualified people ruining the reputation of others. But you can't just give people mind-altering drugs with no responsibility." So how does she feel about tourists approaching Peru's plant medicines recreationally? "It's unfortunate. *Ayahuasca* with a good shaman is incredible, enlightening and often life-changing. Recreationally, you miss all that."

Downstairs I peruse Etnikas' shop, nibbling on an Amazonian *sacha inchi* nut packed with all three omega acids. Etnikas sells many jungle medicines, all with a long list of medicinal properties. I'm reminded of a friend's comment about her recent Amazon trip. "Every plant is either poisonous or a remedy for something poisonous!"

### HEALING IN PISAC

That evening, I cram into a *collectivo* (shared taxi) heading along the steep mountain road to Pisac. My destination is Paz y Luz (Peace and Light) Healing Centre on the banks of the Rio Urubamba. Pisac is visited mainly for its Incan citadel and Sunday market, both set among magnificent, sacred mountains known as *apus*: the most powerful Andean nature spirits. Pisac's other major drawcard is its blossoming

healing scene, less commercial than Cusco's and self-monitored by the fact that everyone here knows everyone. Avoiding a puddle as big as a baby pool, our *collectivo* veers right and comes close to tumbling us into the river, which is full and moving fast, sinuous in the darkness. It's a relief to see cheerful Paz y Luz caretaker Julian, from the UK, one of several foreign healers now based in Pisac. Julian wisely advises me to focus on my *ayahuasca* "intention"; to clarify why I am drinking.

Morning at Paz y Luz is breathtaking. The mist-enshrouded mountains press in intimately, maize sways in the breeze and Pisac's glorious citadel looms above the property. After breakfast I begin my fast — stomachs must be empty for *ayahuasca* — and visit the citadel. The Incans travelled around ceremonially "testing" different *apus* until they found the perfect mountain to build on, my cab driver says. "So here is full of good spirits and energy," he concludes proudly.

The panoramic views from the citadel along the Sacred Valley rock the ruins themselves. At a crevice in a rocky overhang I leave an offering to the *apu* of raisins and coca leaves. In the Andes, offerings to pachamama are not tokenistic; they are part of the principle of *ayni*, meaning reciprocity or give and take. Andeans are aware that what they take from Pachamama, they must return. For myself, I hope the offering will shake my feeling that the mountains are too close, trapping me with my unsettled thoughts. It doesn't but that afternoon I meet Paz y Luz's second resident

Kate Hennessy and supplied



From top: Pure alpaca wool rugs and blankets at Pisac's Sunday market; The Aymara people occupied the Andes long before the Incans. An Aymara lady at the markets with her niño (child).



### WHEN TO GO

**Dry season (Jul–Sept)** makes hiking and visiting ruins easier but accommodation and *ayahuasca* ceremonies will be busy. **Wet season (Dec–Mar)** means few tourists and bargain rates but check that your shaman is in town and roads are open. Australians don't need visas.

shaman, Javier, who helps explain my disquiet.

"Pisac is a powerful place. The energies of the Amazon flow to the Sacred Valley through the river. Then the energies of the glaciers come down and they all mingle here." After finishing his shamanic training in Quito, Swiss-born Javier built a house and a diamond-shaped ayahuasca temple and began amassing a year-round clientele. All ayahuasca ceremonies are different, he explains. "Diego lifts you up and what happens from there, happens. Whereas I take you down first." He pauses, perhaps knowing how ominous this sounds. "Ayahuasca is not entertainment, it's a place to heal and expand. People come for guidance but ayahuasca is not a crystal ball. Instead of saying 'What's my path?' I suggest people ask 'How can I release things preventing me from stepping into my future?'"

### THE AYAHUASCA SPIRIT

When I arrive at Diego's property at 7pm he is making final preparations in the temple as his wife Milagros offers us coca tea. There are 30 people participating: young, old, singles, couples, talkative, quiet, newcomers and those returning. At 8.45pm Diego enters. Tall and gaunt with a shaved head and deep-brown eyes, he surveys the group calmly as a hush settles over us. "Welcome," he says. "A moment ago you were all talking in separate circles. Now we're together as one family." As he says it, it feels true and my nervousness melts away.

Diego explains the ceremony. About keeping a "noble silence" — "You'll all be

very sensitive to noises, so it's not a talking ceremony." About respecting people's journey: "If someone is crying or laughing, don't console them; let them work through it." About breathing: "Use your breath to invite ayahuasca to work." About vomiting: "We've got childhood memories that vomiting is bad. Let go of those memories now." Finally, about it ending: "You won't be caught in the middle. It will end."

We file into the temple and sit on pillows around the rim, each with our own bucket. Diego kneels at his simple floor altar, lights some *palo santo* (scented ceremonial wood) and blows it around the circle. The wood glows red and above it his eyes gleam. He asks the *apus* for their permission and protection and invites the teacher spirits to guide us. The circle drinks, one at a time. I am fifth. I kneel on the cushion, heart pounding. Diego beams as he passes me the soapstone cup. I take it with both hands and my intention comes to me.

Soon the lights are off. My first visions are faint — reptilian hands, purple and scaly, gesturing me towards a dark staircase. I resist them, feeling fearful. Fractal patterns, billowing shapes and colours I can't describe. I get light-headed and lose track of time and my body. I see religious men at work, a very long time ago. It's not a hallucination — more like a waking dream. The men are in robes, praying, fixing something, or writing. Their backs are turned, unaware I am there. I am insubstantial, a spirit of pure observation.

Suddenly, a boy running. The scene is

drenched in orange, deep yellow, ochre, and red. He has a slim, naked, Aboriginal body and is in the distance with his back to me. He has no face. It's the beginning of time, or the end of time, I don't know which. Again, this is not something I am just seeing. I am *there*. But also I'm not there. In this place, there's nowhere to be. He runs on the edge of a spinning orb that is the world, or the cosmos, and somehow I know he is the essence of forward movement, of time and of life. It's the most direct, pure and spiritual thing I have ever experienced. It's also the most terrifying as the vision is suffused with utter neutrality. There's no love, hate, fear, nothing. Just time, the colours, the orb and the boy. Then he's gone.

All around me, people are vomiting. But the songs! Beautiful! Diego and his helpers perform chants, mantras, *icaros* and folk songs, wistful inhaled rhythms and throat singing. I'm overcome by bliss, a feeling of complete oneness with the circle. Finally, Diego lights a candle and it's over. It's 2am. People look dishevelled, exhausted and happy, except for a woman who can't stop crying. I return to Paz y Luz and through my fatigue I feel lighter. The mountains, the stars and the moon press in around my flesh.

Two days later, I return to Diego's temple and hear about the transformations he's seen. "It's a catharsis in people that goes right to the core. *Ayahuasca* lets you zoom out from reality and dispel things and, once you empty your glass, new things arrive." Like Javier, Diego adapts jungle ceremonies to fit the Western mentality. "There can be a lack of philosophy and lots of competition in the jungle. It's a really wild environment. In the Sacred Valley we transcend that and focus on the process of awakening and transformation." And many are coming — Diego's ceremonies are often full, so he's bought land in Pisac to start a community. "We're going to build a temple for 120 people in the next five years. It's growing."

My feeling of lightness continues, like something has lifted, and I realise my fear of the mountains is gone. I am welcomed by the same *apus* that before had entrapped me. But was it the mountains I had feared, or myself, laid bare by ayahuasca's truths? In *Keepers of the Ancient Wisdom*, Joan Wilcox writes, "To understand the Andean perspective one must first attempt to see through [Andean] eyes and feel with their hearts a nature that is alive and responsive, in which spirit suffuses the physical world, from the highest snow-capped peak to the deepest vine-entangled jungle." Diego's words had come true. I had transcended my role as a journalist in the Sacred Valley and, now, like the Andeans, can see spirit reflected in the physical world: ayahuasca's gift to me. ☺

Kate Hennessy writes about travel, the environment, music and arts, all of which can be found on the road.