

Spirit Journey

CITY's fashion director goes on a shamanic exploration in Peru

By Julie Ragolia / Photography by Vincent Skeltis

If one word could explain the Peruvian jungle — it's surrender. Surrender your body and your mind. Surrender your love and your defenses. Surrender all judgment; she is bigger than you. My first night there was spent in a three-foot high and three-foot wide felt tent, half-naked,

seated on the jungle earth, breathing in smoke in complete darkness. My first instinct was that I was going to die. I needed to flee. Each gasp for air seemed harder than the next. Surrender. I took a deep breath and accepted the experience, whatever might happen next. Sometime later the door to the tent was opened. I was cleansed. I was still breathing. I was ready for the journey ahead.

This trip began for me as research. I am a fashion editor who finds most of my inspiration for stories in the art world. I had developed a curiosity about shamanism after reading an is-it-real-or-is-it-fiction introduction to Joseph Beuys' works, as well as in getting to know certain contemporary artists such as Matthew Stone, Terence Koh, and AA Bronson — all of whom have explored shamanic experiences in their artwork, in one way or another. I thought that if something was speaking to my interest from the art world, something equally relevant would soon be visible in the fashion world. I wanted to be ahead of my assumption; I wanted to create that visibility myself. So I gathered a photographer, my Wellies, some rugged and light clothes, and set forth to Onanyan Shobo, a wonderful place nestled in the Amazon, a stretch of time on dirt road away from electricity, phones, Internet, and any other Western convention of which I readily let go of once I entered its graces.

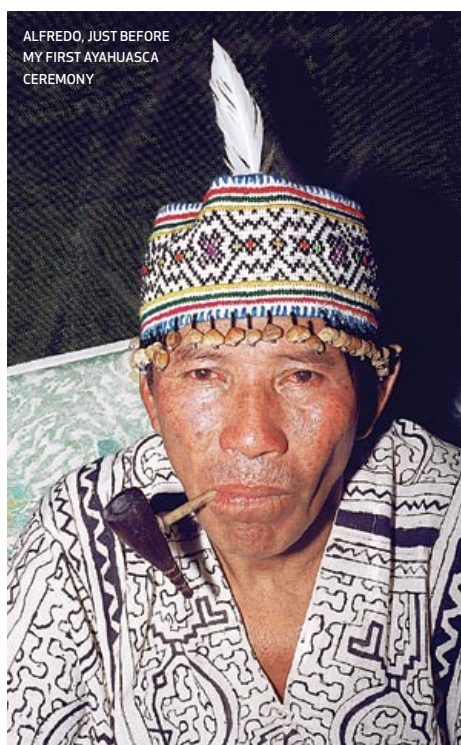
I slept well that first night, acceptance still seeping from all ends as I lay beneath the stars. I felt the comforting sensation of being watched. Perhaps it was in anticipation of things to come, but the presence of spirit seemed everywhere

around me. And before I could analyze the thought any further, the rooster was crowing to signal morning.

If another word could explain the Peruvian jungle, it's patience. I set out at 6 a.m. to assist my shamans as they prepared ayahuasca, a sacred tea brewed from the bark of the ayahuasca plant that, by drinking in ceremony later that night, would enable us to enter the spirit world. It is a five-hour process in which you basically watch a pot boil. It is said that you can get a sense of what to expect from the brew by watching the way the bubbles form. And, so, as I ran off to attend to various distractions, while my shamans sat patiently in the sun, waiting.

Now would be a good time to introduce my shamans, as these two men will forever play a significant role in my life as a result of this experience. Alfredo and Mariano are the patriarchs of the Garcia Ramirez family, of the Shipibo-Conibo, a 35,000-member tribe who reside along the upper reaches of the Amazon, for whom ancient ritual and plants are a way of life, and who graciously opened up their grounds to teach me the ways of nature and spiritual union. They wake with the sun, sleep with the dusk and laugh more than anyone I've ever met. One time in council with Alfredo (always a challenge to my Spanish), he said it was his goal that I return to New York happier than I've ever been, and that I remain as such. If I can uphold even one tenth of the joy and charm that he took to everything, then his goal and mine will have been accomplished many times over.

I felt kinship with these men from the moment I met them. They knew less of my world than I knew of theirs, but when night fell, and it was time for my first ayahuasca ceremony, I knew I was in safe hands. When Alfredo, dressed in traditional caftan and corona, handed me a cup of ayahuasca, I looked



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PATTERNS ARE CREATED FROM VISIONS SEEN DURING AYAHUASCA CEREMONIES. EACH HAS PARTICULAR SIGNIFICANCE, AND COLOR IS WOVEN IN TO RELAY VARIOUS INFORMATION OF THE SHIPIBO PEOPLE AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP TO NATURE AND COMMUNITY (TOP); AYAHUASCA AND OTHER PLANTS ARE BOILED DOWN INTO A TEA, WHICH IS THEN DRUNK IN CEREMONY (BOTTOM)



This process went on for hours. I had no ability to control it or make it stop. I had seen a lot in my life, but never have I experienced anything more intense than this night



him in the eye and swallowed quickly. I went back to my seat and waited for the brew to take effect.

There's another word that can be used to explain the Peruvian jungle — release. It is normal to purge at some point during the ceremony, in order to rid the body of any toxins and/or bad spirits. We sat there in darkness for some time before anything began to happen. Suddenly, it was as if a giant force pushed my body down to the earth. The moment my head touched the ground, I heard Vincent release.

Vincent and I did not like each other very much, but when it came down to a photographer with whom I could imagine sharing such an intense experience, it had to be him. Release. I assumed at the end of this journey we'd never speak again, and I was comfortable seeing that through as the finality of the experience we had shared with each other back at home, and now here, in the Amazon.

Once Vincent was done purging I was able to sit upright again. I smiled, glad to know that he may be releasing some of what he's been holding onto for years and, in that moment, I was glad to have him on this journey with me. The universe has its ways of imparting order, and I was comfortable knowing that things were playing out for each of us exactly as they needed to. I began to yawn, not of exhaustion, but in a manner that stretched my mouth wider than I ever thought possible. I remember my spiritual advisor once saying that she yawns during readings because that's the way the guides enter her. The same was now happening to me.

My first vision was that of a condor, which I later learned was Alfredo's spirit animal. Alfredo and Mariano began to chant Icaros, medicinal songs by which they call the spirits forth. Certain verses gave rise to particular reac-



MARIANO USES A MALLETT TO REMOVE THE BARK FROM AYAHUASCA.

tions in me: Technicolor visions, past memories, white and gold orbs, and purging. A lot of purging. I had repeated ayahuasca visions, which, each time, in syncopation with a particular Icaro verse, cast a pattern over the whole of everything before me (various ayahuasca patterns are visible all throughout the Amazon, as they distinguish the Shipibo people on the basis of ceremonial visions; my vision, however, was unlike any I had seen prior on the Onanyan Shobo grounds). There was something Ayahuasca wanted me to see, and as scared as I often was, I was open to her teachings. At one point Alfredo stood over me, still singing, waving his hands before me to draw whatever needed to come out. He swallowed and spit Agua de Florida (spirit water) over my head. I fell to the earth again.

This process went on for hours. I had no ability to control it or make it stop. Surrender. I had seen a lot in my life, but never have I experienced anything more intense than this night.

The next morning I was eager to discuss my experience with Alfredo and Mariano. They talked about what they saw; I told them of my visions. I was comforted to hear that the silence early on in the ceremony was because the spirits were admiring me. I admitted to them that I was nervous that the intensity of my experience meant that I had bad spirit within. They assured me that it was the exact opposite. My openness was apparent, and Ayahuasca took the opportunity to rid my body and mind of any existing sadness or illness I may have been holding. And, I must say, a month later back in New York, the lightness and clarity I gained on this journey do, legitimately, remain. The week carried on with similar ceremonies. None were as intense as that first one, but rather, they were uplifting and rather peaceful in effect. I have goose

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bumps simply recounting the experience, and in recalling the impact that this journey has had on my life since then. It is said that Ayahuasca will often call you back — and so I look forward to that day when I can return to Onanyan Shobo. Until then, I thank my new friends and family there for all that they have given me.■

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A mis amigos y familia de Onanyan Shobo, muchas gracias por todo. Con amor y afecto, siempre...

PATTERN PHOTOGRAPHED BY DANIA LOJA.