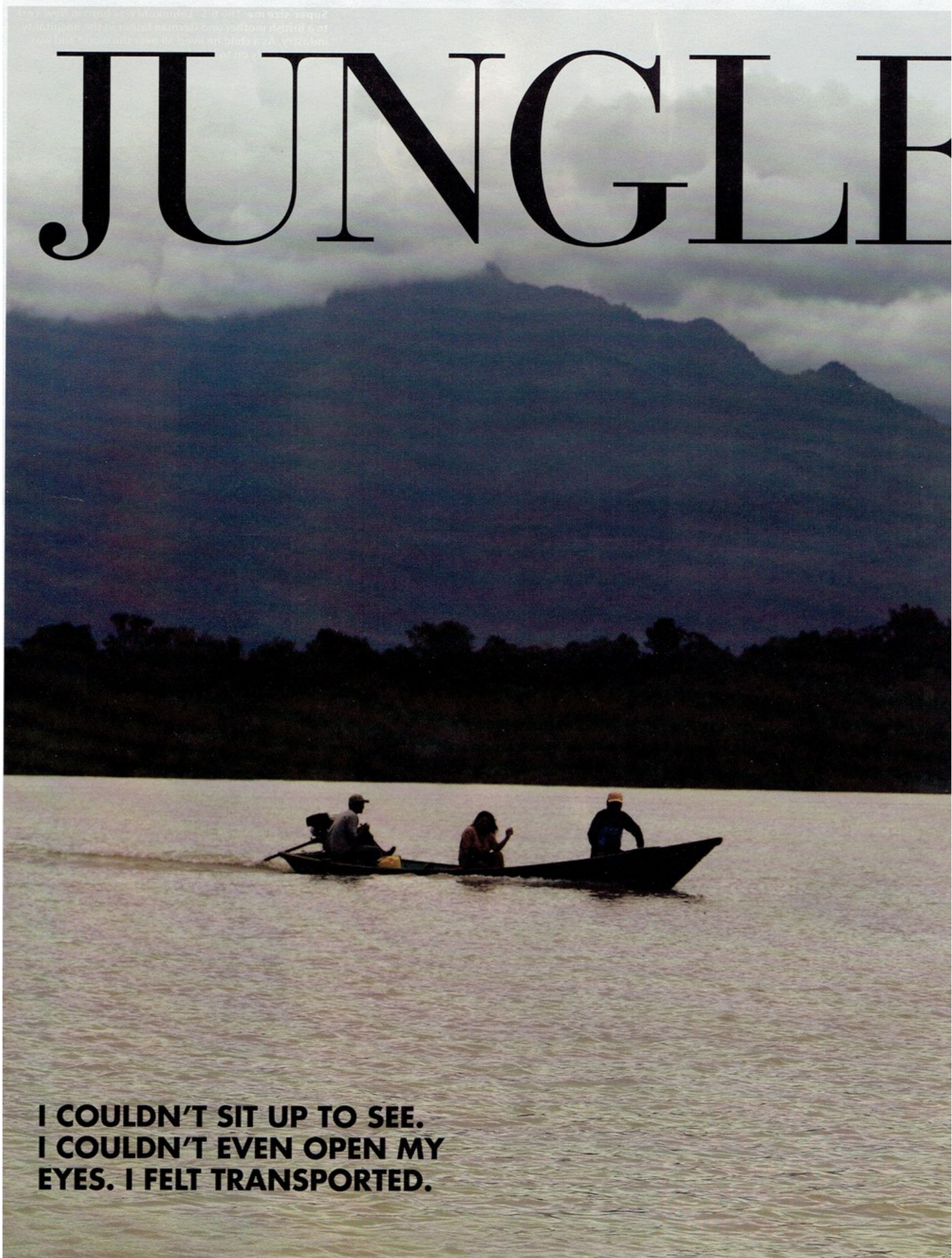


JUNGLE



**I COULDN'T SIT UP TO SEE.
I COULDN'T EVEN OPEN MY
EYES. I FELT TRANSPORTED.**

DREAMS

OCEAN DRIVE SENT WRITER **TRISTRAM KORTEN** DEEP INTO PERU TO EXPERIENCE AN ANCIENT HALLUCINOGENIC RITUAL. COULD THIS KIND OF ECOTOURISM SAVE THE AMAZON RAINFOREST?

PHOTOS BY ROBERT CURRAN

East of the Andes Mountains in Peru, on the banks of the Ucayali River in the Amazon rainforest, I sat one night in a spell-like trance. The moon was bright and nearly full above the jungle's limber palms and sturdy bamboo woods. Its blue light filtered through the bamboo slats of an otherwise dark hut, banding the shaman in front of me as he sat cross-legged on a woven mat. The shaman rocked back and forth, chanting a mesmerizingly simple cadence. I stared until I lost focus. The body wilted and lights flitted across my mind. I shut my eyes and let myself fall backwards. Suddenly the crooning stopped. I heard a convulsive hum (a new kind of chant? I thought), followed by a splash as liquid hit one of the plastic buckets laid out in front of each of us.

The shaman was puking.

I couldn't sit up to see, though. I couldn't even open my eyes. The shaman croaked and leaped in the mud outside, leaves rustled in the wind, and I was paralyzed.

"How do you feel?" whispered Julio Nieves, my guide through the jungle. The answer was that I felt transported. I just couldn't say so.

Julio, an athletic 34-year-old from Lima, with a brush cut and an abrupt, loud laugh, had brought me here. He had partnered with two tribes in the Peruvian Amazon to allow travelers such as myself to experience among the natives, eat their food, fish with them, learn about the jungle plants from their expansive store of knowledge, and, if willing, experience an *ayahuasca* ceremony, the spiritual/medicinal ritual that involves consuming a powerful hallucinogen brewed from jungle plants.

To get here we endured thunderous rainstorms, trekked through ankle-deep mud, hopped over brightly striped venomous snakes, ducked palm-sized spiders bristling with hair. We had walked with Inca-toting shotguns through a jungle thick with danger, not least from our low man, so that I could sit in this dark hut and sip this bitter tea. And this not because I'm a fan of getting high or athletic vomiting.

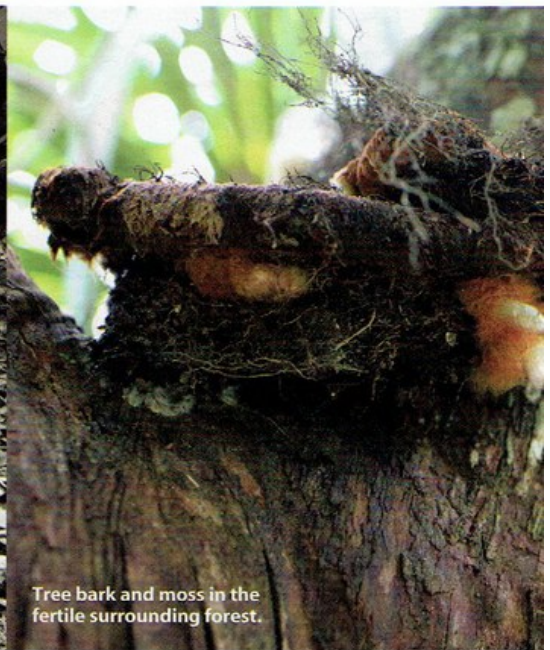
Ayahuasca, also known as the "vine of the soul," is no recreational drug. Its adherents believe it links man's mind to the spirit realm. At two Christian sects in Brazil drink the tea to get closer to God. Indians throughout the Amazon take it as a rite of passage—a way to communicate with the world of plants and animals surrounding them—and a strong medicine that can heal the soul itself.

Indians I talked to spoke of meeting dead relatives after the *ayahuasca*, or seeing serpents and beautiful spirits. The most powerful shamans were said to be able to turn into jaguars under its influence. A Peruvian friend in Miami warned me how important it was to have the shaman present, because your soul leaves your body and needs to be guided back. Perhaps because of this association with profundity, there's a little demand here or in Europe. This is not something you take Saturday

PERU



Cesar, the Shipibo peoples' *ayahuasquero*—their guide and healer—gives a tour of the garden behind the village.



Tree bark and moss in the fertile surrounding forest.

nt before a party.

But since the 1990s its reputation has quietly spread, thanks largely to a philosopher named Terrence McKenna who extolled the virtues of the vine and other native plants as aiding the evolution of consciousness. In 2003, the musician Sting recounted in his autobiography, *Broken Music*, a transformative experience taking *ayahuasca* in the Amazon and the issues of mortality it forced him confront.

As a result, a small but growing subset of the ecotour trade started offering authentic *ayahuasca* experiences under the tutelage of shamans. Julio's operation, cato.com, only three years old, is one.

TRIBES TAKE IT AS STRONG MEDICINE THAT CAN HEAL THE SOUL ITSELF.

Ecotourism, where visitors traditionally stay in lodges built on reservations, has helped preserve huge tracts of land in the Amazon. It's the fastest-growing segment of Peru's tourist economy, the country's third-largest industry. The *ayahuasca* adventure is a natural, if extreme, extension. In principal, it supports indigenous tribes for shar-

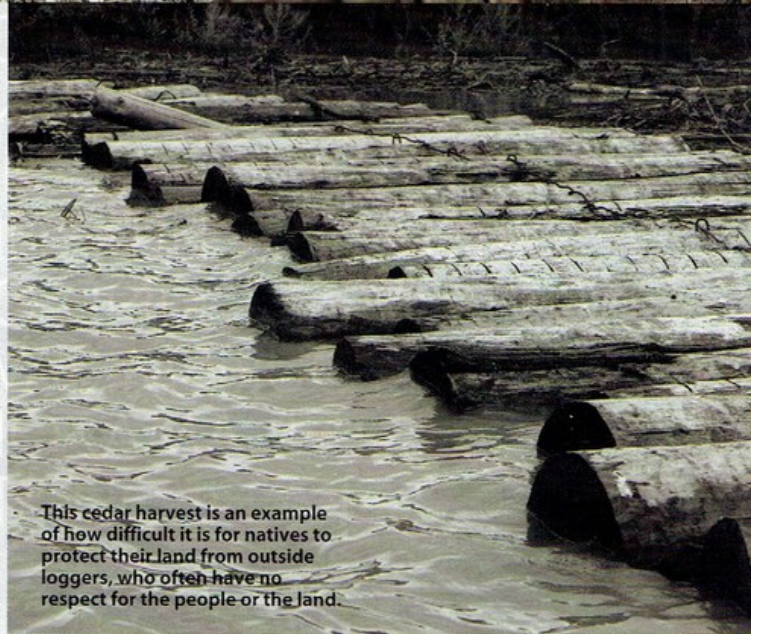
their culture, providing an alternative to money offered by loggers and helping ease off deforestation.

At least that was the conceit I wanted to explore—could getting a bunch of foreigners stoned save the rainforest?

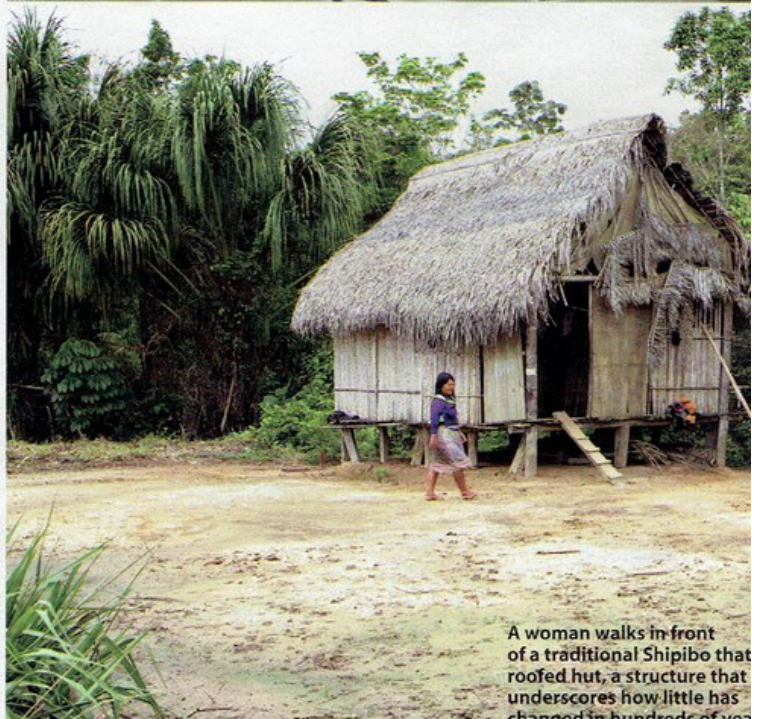
■ Lying east from Lima, we crossed the craggy gray feldspar peaks of the Andes Mountains, until the land abruptly leveled off into a vast, green expanse. Our destination was the dusty frontier town of Pucallpa on the banks of the Ucayali River, a major tributary of the Amazon. The plane touched down on a runway of hard tarmac in an otherwise spare airport battling against the jungle for its very existence. The buildings were dog-eared from wind and rain, thick foliage spilled over the perimeter fence and an abandoned passenger plane sat degenerating in the

Pucallpa is the staging point for those carving a life from the jungle. Its smoggy streets are lined with concrete-block shacks under tin roofs, from which vendors sell everything needed to survive, even flourish, in the wild: machetes, rolls of plastic sheeting, sacks of rice, pots, shotguns, rubber boots. It resembles a pioneer town in our Wild West, or the ramshackle supply towns of the 1840s California gold rush. True to form, a kind of outlaw ambience pervades. The mayor of Pucallpa had fled following the murder of a local journalist who had been investigating the mayor's ties to *narcotraficantes*.

We stayed overnight in a hotel as our group coalesced. In addition to Julio and myself, Miami photographer Robert Curran joined us, as did an expatriate American



This cedar harvest is an example of how difficult it is for natives to protect their land from outside loggers, who often have no respect for the people or the land.



A woman walks in front of a traditional Shipibo thatched-roof hut, a structure that underscores how little has changed in hundreds of years.

Native men, with buckets read
await the almost unavoidable
sickness that follows the
ingestion of the *ayahuasca*.



amed Scott, who explained how he had become so fed up with the confining zoning laws of the U.S. he moved to Mexico. Thin and sharp-featured with an acerbic wit, Scott had a passion that frequently took him off our itinerary. Every stop we made, he immediately set out to find a cow pasture so he could hunt for the psilocybin ("magic") mushrooms that sprout in the manure. We were also joined by a 46-year-old Shipibo Indian named Cesar, a short, broad-chested man with a fleshy, lined face perpetually creased by an enigmatic smile. Although he was introduced as a shaman, I quickly found that word unsatisfying even though it is commonly used,

CESAR REACHED INTO A CLOTH BAG AND UNWRAPPED AN ANTIQUUE-LOOKING, SINGLE-LOAD SHOTGUN.

uevo. There were no docks. Lining the muddy banks were rows of long, narrow boats nicknamed "peke-peke" after the sound their jury-rigged engines make. They were the river's workhorses, hauling bananas downriver and supplies upriver, with messengers along on both routes.

Fortunately, Julio had procured an aluminum-hulled boat with a Yamaha outboard, cutting our travel time in half. Even then we faced a six-hour journey. As we pushed off, Cesar took point, sitting cross-legged on the bow. When Pucallpa faded

even in Peru. It's an import from Europe with Russian roots. In the tongue of the Shipibo, Cesar is known as an *onaya*, or healer, in Spanish *curandero*, or simply *ayahuasquero*.

The next day, we assembled on the banks of the Ucayali. We were going to take a boat upriver, which on this side of the hemisphere meant traveling south, until we reached the Shipibo village of Puerto

from sight, Cesar reached into a cloth bag and unwrapped an antique-looking single-load shotgun. Julio smiled reassuringly. "You never know," he shrugged, "keep away any possible threat." Apparently pirates stalk the Ucayali. Other dangers also lurk beneath its muddy brown waters, which at points could be a half-mile across. Errant half-submerged tree trunks loosed from the loggers' barges could puncture our boat's hull.

But on this day the only danger we faced was from an angry sky. About an hour into our trip the clouds overhead cracked open. The rain lashed us from the top side, circumventing the overhead tarp. I crawled under my rain poncho. For the next five hours of deluge I squirmed under the plastic, like some mutant amoeba, to get comfortable.

It's called the rainforest for a reason.

The Amazon rainforest is almost incomprehensibly vast. It sprawls for 1.2 billion acres, 2.8 million square miles, across nine South American countries. It represents 54 percent of the planet's rainforests, and is also the most biodiverse region on the planet. Its jungles are literally packed with life: 2.5 million insect species, hundreds of thousands of plant species, 2,000 species of fish, 1,700 species of mammals and 300 reptiles. Some tribes in the interior have had no contact with the modern world.

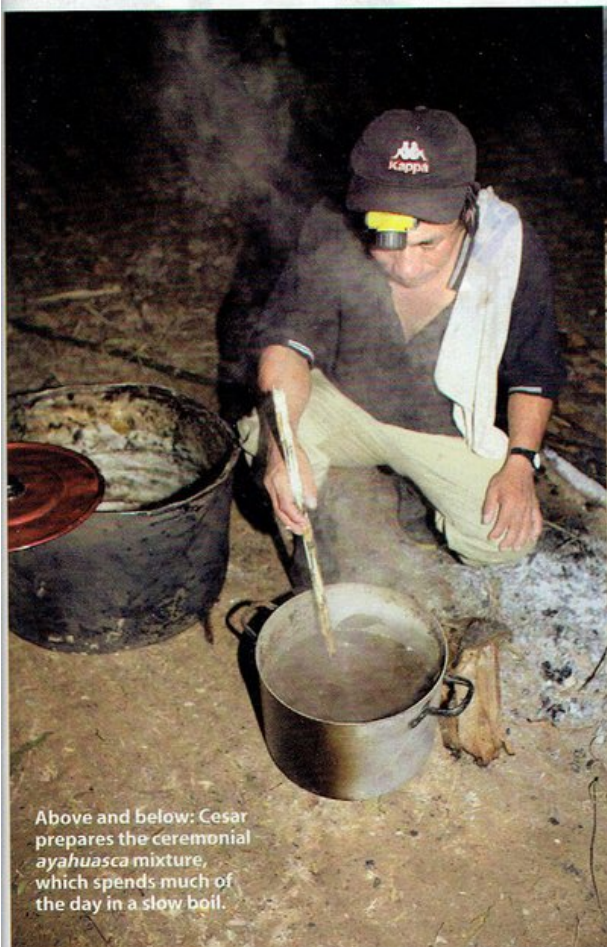
Flying into Pucallpa, the enormity of this wilderness was yanked from abstraction. As we descended, the dense green canopy drowned my field of vision, stretched endlessly towards the horizon in every direction.

Except that it isn't endless. It is shrinking as a result of years of man's effort. Scientists estimate that about 17 percent of the rainforest has already been destroyed from logging and cattle farming, most of that only in the last 50 years.

But it's not just nostalgia for plant and animal life that motivates conservationists; the rainforest plays an important role regulating our environment. "A huge, global, climate-stabilizing machine," explains Daniel Nepstad, senior scientist at Woods Hole Research Center, based in Woods Hole Massachusetts. "Ba



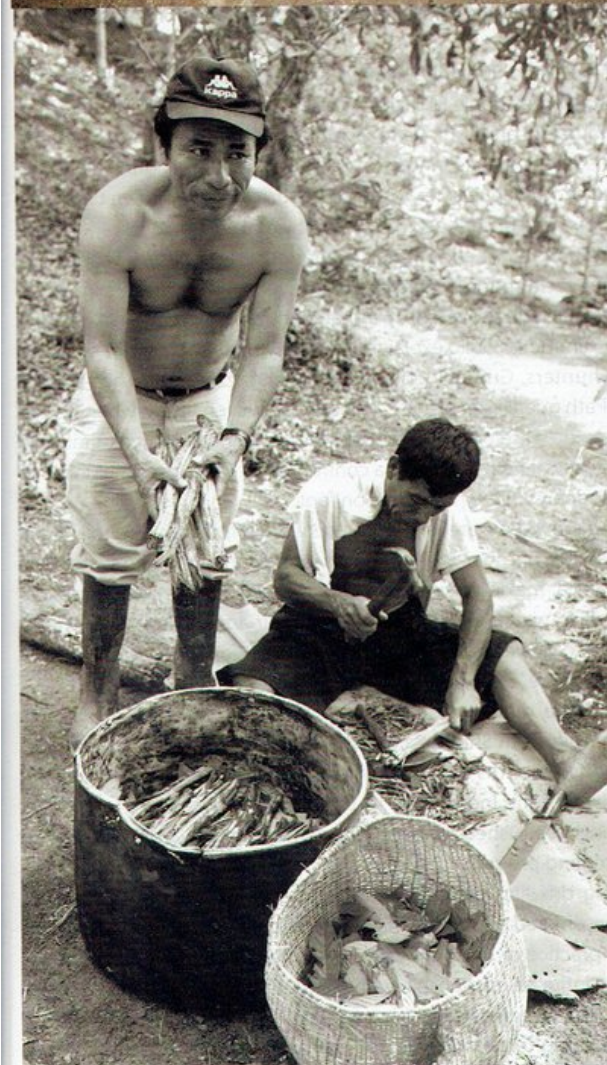
Writer Tristram Korten thumbs an ayahuasca vine, one of several hundred thousand species of plants growing in the Amazon rainforest, and one of numerous used in spiritual rituals.



Above and below: Cesar prepares the ceremonial ayahuasca mixture, which spends much of the day in a slow boil.



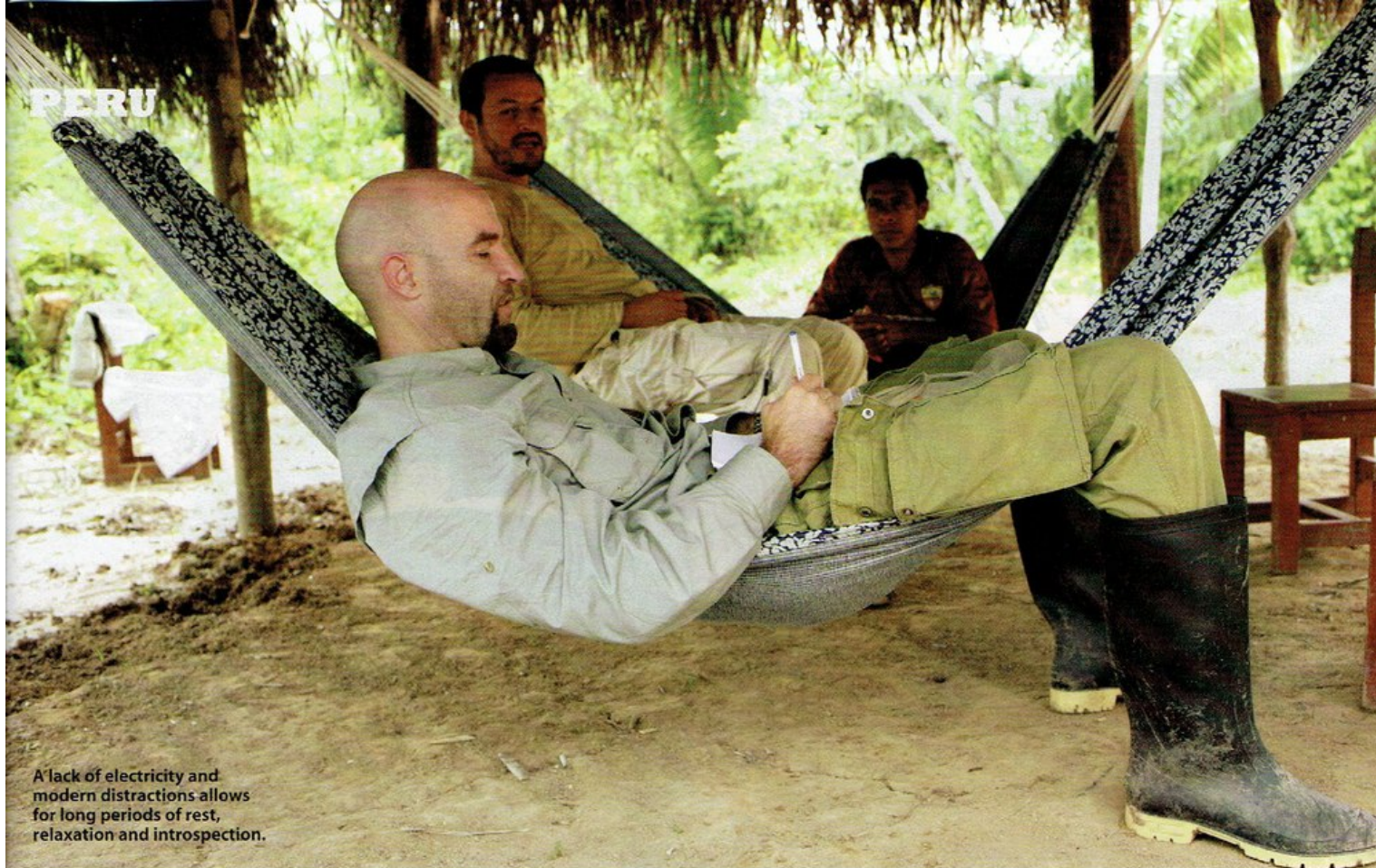
Scott, an American expatriate who lives in Mexico, lends a hand with ayahuasca preparations.



ly it cools things off by evaporating a lot of water." Trees burned to clear land reverse that. It dawned on me as we motored upriver that a lot of responsibility, perhaps an unfair one given how the developed world had already cleared its wild places, rested with these Indians about to meet.

We're almost there." Julio tapped me on my shoulder and I roused myself from my poncho. The rain had stopped and dusk was descending. We seemed to be heading straight for the grassy bank. Only when we drew close could I see the canal. Nestled among the bushes was a big, official-looking wooden sign that read, "Prohibido el Ingreso."

As we traversed the canal a placid lake appeared. Its untouched banks were lush with grass and what looked like banana trees. On the far side, at the top of a steep embankment, I could see a cluster of people had gathered. This was the village of Puerto Nuevo, a community of about 50 farmers had told us that the Shipibo there to greet us had probably only seen white people three or four times before. This was evident as we unloaded our gear and clambered up the muddy cliff. Young men with matted hair, barefoot in T-shirts and shorts, stood holding infants with faces pocked by insect bites. Old women in cloth skirts decorated with the Shipibo's traditional geometric lines stood smiling and less greeting. Young, solid-looking men, shirtless in shorts, their naked feet thick with mud, helped carry bags. And they all stared in mute fascination. As we marched through the flat clearing in the center of the village ducks, scrawny gray chickens and runty piglets scrambled underfoot. Enc



A lack of electricity and modern distractions allows for long periods of rest, relaxation and introspection.

central area were bamboo huts with thatched roofs. I passed a knot of children and bent over to smile at one toddler, a girl no more than four years old. She stared wide-eyed, then burst into a terrified wail, prompting a wizened old lady to scoop her up.

That night in a communal cooking hut, the women set out ceramic bowls of boiled fish, plantains and a tea made from fragrant lemongrass called *yerba luisa*. By 6:30 p.m. it was dark, and shortly afterwards most families went to sleep. There was no electricity in the village, hence no radios, televisions or computers to keep them up. As I made my way back to our hut, set amid mango, cashew and guava trees, I glanced overhead. Stars with no artificial lights to compete against for hundreds of miles seemed to burst from the sky.

This was the farthest I had ever been from conventional civilization. Evidence of the modern world existed—the disconcerting T-shirts with their company logos. The government had built a small nursing station and school. One hut contained a satellite telephone. Still, no roads led here. The only traffic came via the river or jungle footpaths. There was no plumbing. Other than a few shotguns, which all looked ancient, the Shipibo men hunted boar, monkey and birds with bows and five-foot-long arrows. They fished from canoes carved from a single tree trunk using nets and trident-tipped arrows. The women cooked over open wood fires and served food in chipped, handmade pottery. It was clear that by most standards these people hadn't changed their lifestyle in hundreds of years.

By 5:30 the next morning the entire village was bustling. Children minded infant siblings while mothers cooked or washed clothes in front of huts. Men walked by carrying things—stacks of freshly cut palm or bamboo, big plastic jugs. Long-horned steer bellowed from the edges of the village. I ran into the same little girl from the day before and carefully doffed my wide-brimmed canvas hat, smiling as broadly as I could. She squealed in terror, and fled, this time to a younger woman. Later I learned the myth of the *pishtaco*, evil white men who come from

I LEARNED THE MYTH OF THE PISHTACO, EVIL WHITE MEN WHO COME FROM THE FOREST TO STEAL SHIPIBO CHILDREN.

the forest to steal Shipibo children and suck out all their fat. I shrugged at my fat-free breakfast of boiled wild duck, hunted the day before, fresh and *yerba luisa* tea.

But if the Shipibo's traditional lifestyle was impressive, their neighbors, the Ashaninka, were a striking example of living off the grid. Julio had befriended the head of one clan, Grimaldo, and took us to visit him. We marched through the jungle for three hours to get to a clearing by a fast-moving stream, noting all the way what looked like deep channels grooved into the ground: overgrown tire tracks from enormous tractors used by loggers. This was not virgin territory.

Whereas the Shipibo are a communal, gregarious, river-based people, the Ashaninka are solitary, taciturn forest dwellers. They live in family clusters in plank platforms raised on stilts covered by a thatched roof. There are no hammocks; at night they string up hammocks. Julio explained that they pride themselves on being fierce warriors and hunters. Grimaldo himself, a small grizzled man, had fought against the Shining Path guerillas more than a decade ago. Even today, when a dispute with loggers, he wasn't beyond putting red war paint on his face, grabbing his rifle or bow and arrows, and heading for a confrontation. The closest neighbor of Grimaldo's extended family was an hour away on foot.

The evening we arrived we ate wild boar and were offered an alcohol called *masato*, made from yuca chewed then spit into a container with water. The saliva ferments the yuca, making a milky, slightly carbonated beverage. A young child came to watch us eat, Julio asked their ages. They were thought maybe eight to 10 years old. Instead two were 12 and one was 1. "A sign of the malnutrition here," Julio noted.

At night, Ashaninka men patrolled with a shotgun, just in case a jaguar emerged from the jungle. Both Shipibo and Ashaninka are constantly wary of loggers, mestizos living for months at a time in the wild who tend not to respect either the land or lives of the Indians. At 10 p.m., already two hours into the night, there was a loud bang. We rushed to investigate. One of the guards had shot an armadillo and was smiling proudly.

The next morning, drizzling and gray, we ate roasted armadillo and plantains. Grimaldo was considered a *shiripiri*, which translates roughly to "tobacco addict." From the Ashaninka practice of using tobacco smoke to heal and protect. In the Shipibo, they have an intimate relationship with plants. Grimaldo showed us how to use the ly wrapped leaves called *quepiyari* containing a poison that could be scraped off the arrow tips when hunting large animals. He also pointed out a plant that

PERU



A "peke-peke"—a long boat jury-rigged with a small motor—hauls bananas and plantains down the Ucayali River.

drug evokes some sort of "telepathic power." He leaned forward after saying that, adding sternly, "And I'm a very skeptical person."

Its powers are indeed legendary. Scott, the expatriate American on our trip, explained that someone very close to him had recommended he take *ayahuasca* as a means of helping him resolve issues in his life. He had spent the previous month in an *ayahuasca* retreat near the city of Iquitos. "I'm hoping it will help with my evolution," he offered.

While many seek answers from *ayahuasca*, in the U.S. it has provoked nothing but questions. Last month, the Supreme Court heard arguments in *Gonzales v. O Centro Espirita Beneficiente Uniao Do Vegetal*, the Brazilian church that uses *ayahuasca* (referred to in court papers by its Portuguese name, *hoasca*) as part of its Christian ceremony. In 1999 U.S. customs agents seized several bottles of the tea from members of a branch of the church in New Mexico, declaring it an illegal Schedule I psychotropic substance. The church sued, saying its rights under the Religious Freedom Restoration Act had been infringed upon. Two lower courts agreed with the church, essentially saying the government had not proved its assertion that allowing the roughly 130 congregants to use the tea during ceremonies would pose a great danger to the public. The judges are scheduled to rule in June 2006.

The unlikely spectacle of Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Antonin Scalia pondering the merits of hallucinating in the name of God is only the most recent example of *ayahuasca*'s creeping exposure. In addition to Sting's mention in *Broken Music*, the writer Paul Theroux's 2005 novel, *Blinding Light*, opens with an *ayahuasca* ceremony in Ecuador. *Indecision*, Benjamin Kunkel's debut novel, which was lavishly praised by reviewers this year, uses a similar native hallucinogenic tea, San Pedro cactus, to provide the climactic epiphany for its protagonist.

In Peru there is no controversy. The vine is revered. "The *ayahuasca* is part of our ancestral Amazon culture, [so the tourists'] practice isn't illegal in this context," Javier Pedraza, with Peru's Office of Tourism and Foreign Trade, explained in an e-mail. "The tourists are free to do it."

And tourists, it seems, hardly need the encouragement.

At 3 a.m. Robert Curran, the photographer, stumbled into our hut wild-eyed. He spoke in an awed whisper. "Bro, you have no idea...."

Robert underwent his *ayahuasca* ceremony earlier than the one originally scheduled due to his travel plans. I had quietly hoped to observe how it affected him, but he stayed up too late for me. So he was right, I had no idea. As I watched him claw his way to bed, though, I thought, I'll know soon enough.

In the morning, Robert described floating through a three-dimensional universe of vibrant colors. He saw snakes chasing their tails and a little man in a

booth who seemed to be in charge of the light show. The lights pulsed a rhythm to the *icaros* being chanted. "The overwhelming feeling I had was that I was very connected to the universe, and very connected to the earth," he recalled. "Not that I was controlling it, or that it was controlling me. Just that I was a very small part of the cosmos."

The next day I joined Cesar and two other *ayahuasqueros*, both named Carlos, as they prepared the brew in the garden. Wielding a long machete blade worn black from use, Cesar hacked off sections of the vine, then passed them over to a fire braced between two palm-tree trunks. The elder Carlos then plucked the other ingredients needed; *chacrana* leaves, a samplin leaf called *toé*, and some coca leaves. Carlos took the cut vines and mashed

IN PERU THERE IS NO CONTROVERSY. "THE AYAHUASCA IS PART OF OUR ANCESTRAL AMAZON CULTURE."

with a hammer on an anvil, then put the ingredients in a large kettle filled with water. The mixture would boil for a day, until it was reduced to a thick, viscous fluid. To prepare, I fasted from lunch on. In the evening, an old Shuar woman named Doña Juana stewed five different plant leaves in boiling water, then gave me an ayahuasca steam bath. At 10 p.m., Julio took me to the ceremonial hut.

There are many cautionary tales about charlatan *ayahuasqueros* who put on a show for gullible tourists with diluted or sham brew. "Don't believe the sham who's all dressed up in feathers," warned ethnobotanist Duke. "Chances are a real shaman will be wearing shorts and a Gap T-shirt."

As I entered the ceremonial hut, it was obvious Cesar and the two Carloses were not putting on a show for anybody. The hut was empty except for a kerosene lantern on the floor. Cesar was dressed in his regular clothes, wearing a jacket to ward off the nighttime chill. In front of him was a plastic water bottle filled with a brown liquid. I sat facing them. Plastic buckets were unceremoniously distributed. Vomiting is one of the tea's side effects.

In somber tones, each of the men recited a brief introduction in which they explained how long they had been working with *ayahuasca*. Then Cesar began blowing with short rhythmic breaths into the bottle. He picked up a plastic bucket and filled about a third of it with the liquid. He drank, refilled the glass, and passed it to the other *ayahuasqueros*. When they were done, he brusquely pushed me forward.

Photographer Robert Curran, who also participated in the *ayahuasca* ceremony, in the middle of a double exposure that perhaps approximates his state of mind at the time.



snakebite antivenin, which he applied recently to a boy bit by a viper. The boy was walking within three days, Grimaldo and several others asserted.

And they also use *ayahuasca*. Julio recounted going through an *ayahuasca* ceremony with Grimaldo, noting that it ended very quickly. "He needs to develop more confidence," Julio confided.

One of the worries about the vanishing rainforest is the loss of plants with as-yet-undiscovered properties. Scientists have been playing catch-up with the Indians for decades, trying to analyze and catalog the active ingredients in their medicine. The bark of the quinine tree was used to treat malaria victims until it was synthetically copied. Hodgkin's disease and leukemia can be treated with the leaves of the rosy periwinkle. Leaves of the *Pilocarpus jaborandi* plant can cure glaucoma. Still, there is much more for scientists to learn, and the fear is that time is running out.

In a swale by a running brook set behind the Shipibo village, Cesar and the *curanderos* of Puerto Nuevo maintain a garden. One day Cesar proudly gave us a plant-by-plant tour. We passed *piri-piri*, a wide-leafed shrub used to salve wounds; *pion colorado*, which relieves aching muscles; *huancahui sacha*, a pointy-leafed plant that eases anxiety and "bad feelings"; and *ishanga*, which produces a lacinate leaf good for stomach aches. Cesar showed us plants and roots that cure poisonous snakebites, heal scar tissue, remove cataracts, and cure ailing kidneys. He showed a coca-leaf bush, from which cocaine is made, although not by the Shipibo. "This plant is not a sin," he told us in Spanish. "This is a teaching plant." The Shipibo use it as an anesthetic.

He also showed us plants with alleged magical properties, some used in love potions, others that help you find lost items by communicating to you in your dreams. One innocuous-looking green stem guards your house while you sleep. He pointed out a tuft of *yerba luisa* and said that if you were lucky you could see it emit a bright light during the summer solstice.

Cesar rounded out the tour by resting his hand on a thick, silver-barked vine encircling a tree. "Oni," he said matter-of-factly—the Shipibo word for *ayahuasca*, the vine of visions. Here was the Shipibo's strongest medicine of all.

It's hard to discuss Shipibo culture and not address *ayahuasca*. The geometric patterns adorning their cloth and pottery, I was told by Cesar, are the lines the *ayahuasceros* see after imbibing the plant that help guide their visions. Much of

their music is *icaros*, songs chanted during the *ayahuasca* ceremony. Typically, *ayahuasceros* blessed everything from hunting trips to boat voyage vine. It was simply the tribe's way of communicating with the plants, animals that hemmed them in.

The psychoactive ingredient in the vine is a family of alkaloids called harmaline and harmine. To fully activate those chemicals, the vine is combined with plants that contain other powerful intoxicants, such as the plant's dimethyltryptamine, or DMT. Taken alone, *chacrana* will produce a human. It needs to be combined with an MAO inhibitor, a chemical that will keep the body's enzymes from breaking down the hallucinogenic *Ayahuasca* conveniently contains MAO inhibitors. It is a rather complex concoction for a primitive people to arrive at.

"The big mystery is how in 25,000 years of human habitation in the Amazon, which is a blink of the eye, they figured out to mix that vine with the other plants, of all the plants in the forest," said Jim Duke, an ethnobotanist retired from the U.S. Department of Agriculture whom, in a bit of synergy of fate, I sat next to on the plane from Miami to Lima.

Duke looked every bit the scientist he is, with wispy white hair, hunched shoulders. He holds a Ph.D in botany, sits on the board of a research center based in the Amazon, and compiled a phytochemical database that the

ONE OF THE WORRIES ABOUT THE VANISHING RAINFOREST IS THE LOSS OF PLANTS WITH AS-YET-UNDISCOVERED PROPERTIES.

maintains. A book fascinated by the Amazon and its people, he wrote with Rodolfo Vasquez titled *Shipibo: A Shipibo Ethnobotanical Dictionary*. In a chapter on *ayahuasca* ceremonies, he warns that *ayahuasqueros* get tourists stoned with other plants, then steal their money. Still, he says he has observed and read so many things about people having parallel vortices of extrasensory experiences after taking the tea that he wouldn't be surp

The tea was excruciatingly bitter, exactly how you'd expect crushed green plants to taste. Then we all waited in silence. Eventually, Cesar emitted a high-pitched keening sound that shifted to a lower register—his *icaros*. The older Carlos soon joined. Cesar stopped to blow into a bundle of cigarettes. He held one out, instructing me to puff on it four times.

What must have been an hour passed, and I didn't feel anything. Cesar sensed this, and beckoned me over for another gulp of tea. Then he blew tobacco smoke onto my head and clasped hands. After a short wait, he had me sit before him while he chanted. And that's when it hit. It was as if the chanting unlocked the effects. I began to feel a warm rush through my body. There was a moment of ecstasy when the moonlight seeping through the hut coupled with the rhythm of the *icaros* became overwhelmingly beautiful. Cesar tranquilly motioned for me to return to my seat. My head swam as I stood up.

A shudder of nausea shook me, but I didn't vomit, even though I could hear Cesar heaving in the dark. I lay back as colors and light swirled inside my mind's eye. I recall clearly one of the first images. Amid a warm pink background, spiraling filaments of light, all bundled together, cascaded down my vision. They provoked a sense of euphoria. I remember thinking, I can choose to believe this is the drug interacting with my optic nerve to create this illusion. Or... I can choose to

believe I am falling into the very center of Love itself. The lights continued falling all around me. I choose Love, I thought. As if that equation allowed me to surrender, I experienced a free-falling sensation.

I don't know how long I lay there with my eyes closed. Filigreed lines scrolled by. Beautiful looping designs. I felt warm rushes of emotion. Earlier I had tried to clear my mind. I thought about my father who passed away in July. I had heard enough stories about seeing the deceased that I thought it might be worth a try. But I had no control over the images and feelings that consumed me. My child and wife drifted across my vision,

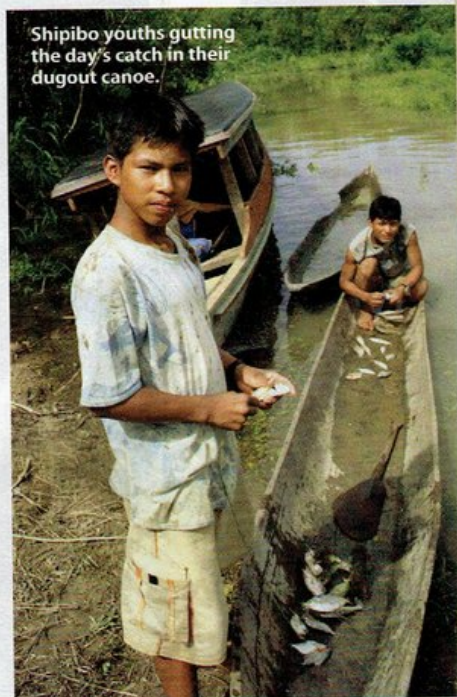
leaving me feeling deeply happy, but I couldn't hold onto them. Then I seemed to enter a different corridor—I sensed a charge. I recall a figure winding towards me from a faraway point. As it grew closer I could see that it was a golden dragon. Its

open-jawed face came into focus, tendrils flowing from its chin and head. In the center of its coiled body was an intense white-hot light. I was terrified. But I couldn't even moan. I felt as if my body was under a heavy weight.

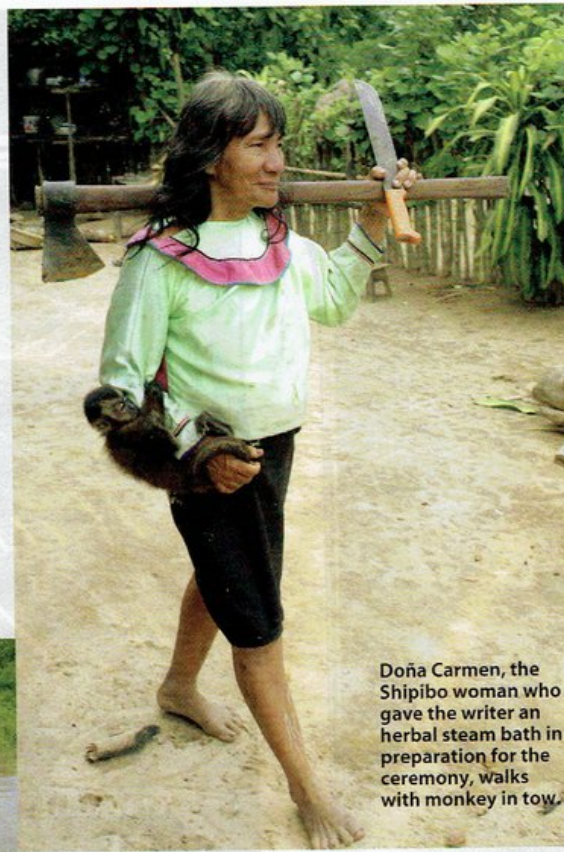
The period of intense hallucinations must have lasted more than an hour. The overall experience lasted about three hours. I didn't vomit until I had become

lucid again and was sitting outside by a campfire that glowed with unprecedented clarity, under a vibrantly white moon, pondering what the hell that dragon meant.

Snakes and dragons are recurring themes in *ayahuasca* iconography and mythology. Some philosophers trace it to a common thread in Eastern religions, like Hinduism, where winding snakes are associated with bodies uncoiling ener-



Shipibo youths gutting the day's catch in their dugout canoe.



Doña Carmen, the Shipibo woman who gave the writer an herbal steam bath in preparation for the ceremony, walks with monkey in tow.

vital, not only from the simple foods I ate as well as the lack of alcohol feine, but also from having disengaged from the demanding world of tion—no newspapers or TV. I felt scrubbed of worry. Cesar said the plane would be with me for days.

As we floated downriver, I fingered a boar's-tooth necklace Cesar had given me for protection. Suddenly the dorsal fin of one of the river's famous water dolphins arched out of the water ahead of us. The sun broke brilliantly through the clouds and glinted off its greenish skin. It was exquisite. I couldn't help but wonder if the lingering effects of the vine heightened my appreciation. Or perhaps the dolphin brought the dolphin to say farewell? I stared at the rippling wake the dolphin left behind, just then remembering to exhale. 🐬

GETTING THERE

Interested in seeing the Amazon and experiencing an *ayahuasca* ceremony? Be careful, the tea mixed with certain medications can be dangerous. For some, it might make sense to consult your doctor first. Make sure to get vaccinations for yellow fever and typhoid, as well as Hepatitis B. And don't forget antibiotics for malaria.

A journey to visit the Shipibo with Julio Nieves is not for wimps. He strives to let his clients experience life with the Shipibo as a Shipibo: eat their food, sleep in a hut they've built for guests (on a foam mat with mosquito netting), and use an outhouse. No showers. Bathing is done with water collected from the river. It is an authentic experience. For more information, go to www.runcato.com. Cost is between \$1,000 and \$1,500.

For other types of *ayahuasca* adventures visit WilderNESS (www.wildernessdrum.com), a kind of clearing house for outfitters. You can also read about Amazon Forays (www.amazonforays.com), where you can travel on a comfortable river boat, dining on all-natural gourmet meals while attending shamans conduct *ayahuasca* ceremonies and interpret dreams. There are also a variety of retreats, a kind of spiritual camp, from providers like El Tigre Journeys (www.biopark.org/pe) and Puma Shamanic Journeys (www.spiritjourney.net) and El Mundo (www.ayahuasca-shamanism.co.uk/index.html).

Bring raingear. It is, after all, a rainforest.

gies and expanding consciousness. Cesar let me the animal v plant itself bloomin me, showing me its

Perhaps because active chemical *ayahuasca* tea mirror the body produces ly in the pineal gland is no hangover (awoke the next morning 10 a.m. feeling a fresh. I hadn't eaten lunch the day before felt full of energy. Although we were supposed to march through the encampment, I could skip breakfast and my fast. I had no with the trek.

That night a vivid dream, I released someone debt they owed.

Two days later the jungle. My b