

Ayahuasca Tourism in South America

Written for *Anthropology of Tourism*, University of Maryland at College Park

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Within the last fifteen years
or so, a grass-roots
ayahuasca tourism industry
has sprung up,
with outposts
all over Amazonia.

Outsider's attraction to ayahuasca

What brings people from all over the world to South America, simply to use ayahuasca? Perhaps it is the sense that it provides an extremely novel, exotic experience. It might be part of spiritual pursuit, or the manifestation of an avid interest in indigenous cultures, shamanism or healing. Perhaps what has led to the popularity of ayahuasca are the many books written about it. The earliest reference to an outsider's use of ayahuasca (an experience marked mostly by vomiting) was in Richard Spruce's book of 1908, *Notes of a Botanist on the Amazon and Andes*, published fifty years after the fact (Stafford 1992:334). The popularity of LSD in the 1960s increased public awareness of such substances, and there was a generally higher demand for information. In 1963, for the first time, one book was to come along that was wholly about ayahuasca, William Burroughs' and Allen Ginsberg's *The Yage Letters*. It was a popular book, certainly a classic in world drug literature. Although criticized by anthropologists as misleading, the book has drawn continuing attention to this psychedelic drink (Stafford 1992:337). Other books that attract attention to ayahuasca include Manuel Cordova-Rios & Bruce Lamb's *Wizard of the Upper Amazon*, Wade Davis' *One River*, and Luis Eduardo Luna & Pablo Amaringo's *Ayahuasca Visions: The Religious Iconography of a Peruvian Shaman*.

The most influential books of the last decade and a half are likely those of Terence McKenna, author of such works as *Food of the Gods*, *The Archaic Revival*, and *True Hallucinations*. Perhaps the most popular of McKenna's books, *True Hallucinations* is a wild, exciting retelling of his apparently true journeys through Amazonia in the early 1970s, with all the requisite drugs, shamans, shysters, and oddball characters. Many internet accounts of ayahuasca experiences frequently mention McKenna as an

inspiration for their physical and mental journeys. The extent to which ayahuasca has entered public consciousness might be reflected in recent popular culture references. In a recent *Rolling Stone* interview, popular singer-songwriter Sting speaks of his experience with ayahuasca, what the interviewer calls dead man's root. Of the drug, Sting says: *...it's not a frivolous pursuit... there's a certain amount of dread attached to taking it—you have a hallucinogenic trip that deals with death and your mortality. So it's quite an ordeal. It's not something you're going to score and have a great time on* (Dunn 1998:26).

Another well-known musician to speak of their ayahuasca experience is Paul Simon. His account has been touched on in interviews and in the song *Spirit Voices: Spirit Voices is really based on event (sic) that happened to me on a trip into the Amazon. We went to see a bruho (sic) in a shack in a jungle... first he sang. He sang (sic) for a long time, chanted... these beautiful melodies... and then they made up this brew called iawasca (sic)... which we drank and they said the anaconda will appear to you... and you will see that in a vision... but no anaconda appeared* (Simon, 1991).

There also exist many internet sites devoted to psychedelic substances, featuring experiences, cultural histories, traveling opportunities and "recipes." Among the most popular and genuinely informative are The Lycaenum at www.lycaenum.org and Entheogen Dot at www.entheogen.com.

As a member of various private, psychedelic-related email lists, I have an inside view to the many beliefs often shared by people who use such substances. I have found that a commonly-held attitude toward psychedelic substances is one of reverence and awe mixed with outright fear. Many feel that these are not drugs to be trifled with; that casual use is at best pointless, and at its worse, physically and mentally dangerous. Those who maintain this position might feel more than a little uncomfortable removing ayahuasca and using it outside of its original context. Proper respect for ayahuasca's history and cultural milieu is the

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principal objective. Our culture has no all-encompassing model for controlling and ritualizing psychoactive drugs beyond alcohol, so those who wish to use ayahuasca often seek out what they imagine to be a proper set and setting, in this case Amazonia.

Ayahuasca is often presented as a quintessentially South American experience. It is possible that many who travel long distances to use it are not aware that the experience is currently possible all over the world. Many plants growing across the globe have chemical concentrations nearly identical (or much higher) to what would be found in *B. caapi* and *P. viridis*. These plants are not particularly difficult to purchase through specialty botanical suppliers. It seems apparent that issues of access to ayahuasca-like drugs are not what is really driving people to South America.

I contend that most who go are seeking novel experiences, perhaps something of a religious or mystical nature, something perceived as lacking in one's own life or culture. Anthropologist Marlene Dobkin de Rios emphasizes "the empty self of the post-World War II period, a self which is soothed and made cohesive by becoming filled up by consuming food, consumer products, and experiences" (1994:16). Active interests in non-Western indigenous traditions be they informal or academic probably bring a great many tourists to the Amazon. I have not been able to find any studies on such things, so much of what I say is personal conjecture and informed opinion. Dobkin de Rios says that drug tourists "...see the Noble Savage in the visage of the urban poor carpenter, tradesman, or day laborer. They see exotic people of color untouched by civilization, who are close to nature... drug tourists perceive the natives as timeless and ahistoric" (1994:17). Others may be seeking a healing experience. In many authentic milieus, ayahuasca is a purgative, a substance taken to cleanse and heal the body and mind. Shamans, sometimes called *ayahuasqueros* or *curanderos*, use ayahuasca to pronounce diagnosis of those that come to them. They tend to be general practitioners, fighting witches' curses and bad luck, treating physical ailments and mental problems, perhaps offering advice on interpersonal issues (Dobkin de Rios 1992:81-84). Perhaps there are ayahuasca tourists seeking non-allopathic treatments unavailable in their homeland.

The ayahuasca experience itself can sound quite attractive. The visionary art of Pablo Amaringo, featured in the aforementioned book

Ayahuasca Visions: The Religious Iconography of a Peruvian Shaman, is quite astonishing. The paintings are filled to the brim with extremely colorful images of shamans, magical beings, telepathic information embodied as objects, UFOs, spirits, imaginary jungle creatures, and large anacondas, among other icons. Visually, the world as it is represented in Amaringo's paintings is almost beyond the capacity to imagine. I for one do not believe that bizarre ayahuasca experiences can be fully comprehended by those without similar (i.e. psychedelic) experiences; to know what it is like to enter a psychedelic vision, it is necessary to dive head first into the sea of mind that psychedelics open up. I have read many accounts of first-time psychedelic experiences, and invariably, no matter how well-read the person was on the subject, all their preconceived notions were thrown out of the window and shattered in light of the actual experience; it is not like anything, but a world of experience in and of itself. The accounts of ayahuasca experiences are so attractive primarily because they are so well-written, but they never come close to how it feels to be living the experience, to be there in one's own head, seeing one-hundred aliens come off a UFO, only to telepathically announce that we are all one, and that death is only an illusion. To read of such outlandish, fantastic experiences is simply a wholly different universe than being there for oneself. Such accounts have been part of the allure of ayahuasca for decades. With the growing popularity of computers and the subsequent information explosion, they are reaching a wider audience, attracting more people to South America.

Advertising Ayahuasca Tourism

Advertising ayahuasca tourism is achieved through a number of media, primarily periodicals and the Internet. Most internet sites are devoted to a single group, offering tours either through Amazonia, or the use of a compound for ayahuasca sessions. Adverts for ayahuasca tourism can be found in periodicals such as *Magical Blend* and *Shaman's Drum*, perhaps elsewhere. Such groups concentrate much of their efforts in the villages, rainforests and jungles of Peru, Columbia, Bolivia and Brazil. Some tour groups venture into the wilderness to visit encampments of indigenous groups, experiencing ayahuasca in a supposedly authentic setting. Others visit *mestizo* shamans (more accurately, healers known as *ayahuasqueros*) or operate out of compounds

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organized around ayahuasca tour groups.

There are those that criticize such endeavors, particularly ones that involve outsiders interacting with unenculturated indigenous groups. Jonathan Ott believes "ayahuasca tourism can only disrupt the evanescent remnant of preliterate religiosity struggling to make a place for itself in the modern world, while attracting the wrong kind of attention to ayahuasca" (1994:12). When asked his opinions on the industry, Terence McKenna stated, perhaps a bit ironically since he is to a great extent responsible for ayahuasca's modern popularity, "I am against exploiting shamans or removing them from their cultural context or exporting Westerners into their cultural areas. The best course is to obtain the plants and the techniques and judiciously adapt them to one's own needs" (1998).

Who are the ayahuasca tourists, and why do they come?

Of all the topics this article covers, this was the most difficult section, for very few people are willing to speak up about their South American drug adventures. Those that organize the tours are also reticent when it comes to talking about their customers, for in doing so they must deal with tricky issues concerning their former clients' privacy. For a great deal of this section I am indebted to Kim Kristensen for supplying me with a very small survey he put together in early 1998. His survey included two trip leaders and ten clients he networked with through them. As Kristensen is quick to point out, "this is not a large sample" (1998:10).

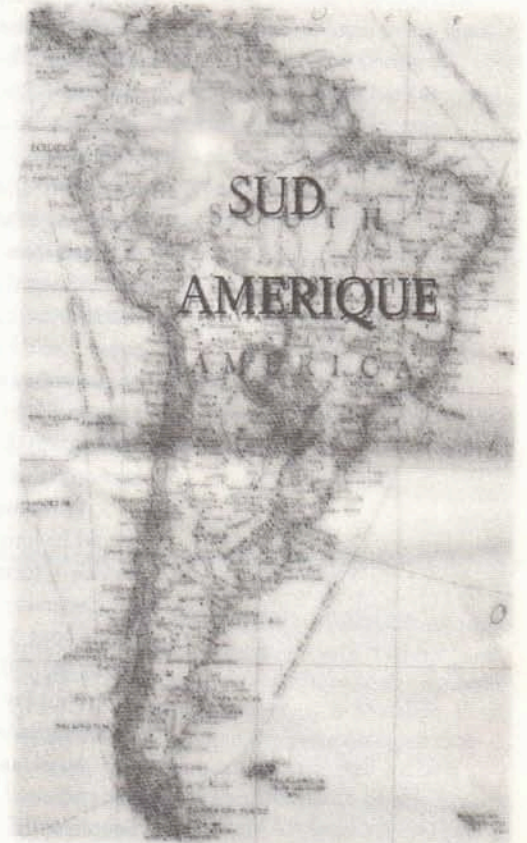
In his survey, Kristensen found that there were four main reasons that people became ayahuasca tourists: self-exploration and spiritual growth, curiosity, physical and emotional healing, and the desire for a vacation to an exotic location (1998:15). As far as education goes, only half of those surveyed held anything beyond a high school diploma, but most were self-educated and well-read. One even aspired to be a full-fledged shaman. Most participants are male, between thirty-one to sixty years of age. Kristensen indicates that half of the group leaders (not just from the survey, for he has taken many trips himself) are female, and they point towards ever-increasing numbers of female participants. One-hundred percent of the interview subjects were white, and while some claim to have Native American ancestry, there were no reports of African-Americans, Hispanics or Asians joining tour groups, either in survey or through anecdotal

data (Kristensen 1998:15-16).

Ayahuasca tourism's possible impact

Many Amazonians revere ayahuasca, believing it to be a sacred plant, imbued with a living spirit that speaks to them when they enter into discourse with the brew. Now that it is marketed to the world, at least to Western Europe and the English-speaking world, ayahuasca is in danger of being profaned. As many South Americans realize its money-making potential, they "come to adopt a New Age vocabulary of shamanic healer/spiritual voyager" (Dobkin de Rios 1994:18). Charlatans with little or no training with ayahuasca may now present themselves as *curanderos* or *brujos*, risking not only the mental health of their customers, but their bodies as well. Westerners find it difficult to fully integrate traditional models of ayahuasca use, often leading to confusion and inaccurate portrayals in the non-mainstream media. Dobkin de Rios indicates that ayahuasca use is linked in a matrix dealing with moral order, with good and evil, with animals and humans, and with health and illness, which has little correspondence or sympathy with the experiences of people in industrial societies (1994:18).

The industry also has an impact on the environment. Not only are the people of South American placing demands on the supply of ayahuasca, but with the influx of tourists, sources could be in danger of complete exhaustion. The UDV now harvests their plants from church-owned plantations, taking away valuable agricultural land. Not all effects are negative. Organized production of ayahuasca plants ensures that jungle resources are not depleted. The presence of tourist's money might serve to encourage environmental awareness and subsequent preservation among those who would otherwise have to cut down forests for sources of income. Ayahuasca tour groups, a relatively new phenomenon, also add to the income of local economies as they travel, buying food and supplies as they move. The compounds that many tour groups stay in, such as the one



owned by Agustín Rivas, insure that the tourists are not out unconsciously trampling plants vital to the jungle's ecosystem. With more tourists and increasing income, these ayahuasca compounds/ecological preserves can purchase ever-increasing amounts of jungle, insuring its preservation whilst simultaneously providing homes for jungle-dwelling indigenous groups. These hubs of activity reduce erosion of trails used by the jungle's original inhabitants, keeping cultural decline and disruption of wildlife in check. With the growth of ecotourism in places like Brazil and Columbia, controlled programs for such endeavors are especially vital. If ayahuasca tourism is to be sustainable, the people in the industry must work with the environment, rather than operating in a one-way, exploitive manner.

Conclusion

An article like this is certainly a very limiting format, and I think a strong graduate paper could be written about the phenomenon of ayahuasca tourism. In these pages I have attempted to touch on as much as I can without leaving anything vital out, which I feel I have accomplished.

Ayahuasca tourism is certainly unique. One would be hard-pressed to find a more evolved and alive form of drug tourism, particularly one with so many apparent benefits (assuming it is carried out correctly). A complete understanding of the industry and its clients is certainly far away, but I certainly hope this article has been educational, even if it can not be comprehensive.

Ayahuasca seems to appeal to people unconcerned with traditional modals of life, people searching for the extraordinary, the remarkable and unusual facets of life. That there even exists a tourist industry to serve this population strikes me as amazing. That this industry is heavily advertised and available to anyone with the financial means to undertake a trip, that it is not a hush-hush experience available only to a select few in the psychedelic drug underground, is perhaps even more astonishing. Perhaps it points to changing value systems in our own society. The popularity of alternative medicine, yoga, tai chi and New Age paradigms is likely part of the same pattern. Perhaps the ayahuasca tourism phenomenon is best understood as part of this culture, a culture that increasingly seeks to know itself and nature better, both as individual entities and interconnected systems. Apparently, many believe they can find this self-realization amongst the jungles and people of South America. •

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