

A BRAZILIAN AYAHUASCA INTENSIVE AT WASIWASKA (HOUSE OF THE VINE) RESEARCH CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF PSYCHOINTEGRATOR PLANTS, VISIONARY ART AND CONSCIOUSNESS

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Having successfully completed two month-long ayahuasca intensives at Wasiwaska (www.wasiwaska.org), Luis Eduardo Luna's facility in Brazil, I recommend the experience to anyone with a serious interest in this traditional Amazonian medicine. My partner and I had initially experienced Luna's version of the ayahuasca ceremony at the Psychointegrator Plants Seminar in Manaus in July 2000, and attended the first Wasiwaska intensive in October 2001.

The Wasiwaska experience is designed for small groups, and the first group consisted of six people, four of them American, one Canadian, and one Irishman. Our ayahuasca experiences were profound and deeply satisfying. There were sixteen ayahuasca sessions during the first intensive, a schedule that meant taking ayahuasca every other day, with an occasional two-day break that then meant taking the potion several days in succession, something none of us had ever experienced before.

Our accommodations were comfortable, in a facility that defies adequate description. Originally laid out by Tapani Hietalahti, a Finnish shaman/architect, Wasiwaska encourages the brain to shift to the intuitive side. There are no right angles, stairs twist and meander, the floor levels change whimsically in unexpected places. The kitchen and dining area are built around a traditional Finnish "Dragonhearth" that seems to have a life of its own when a fire is present. A porch with large tree-like

stone columns gives a feeling of the forest to a location where outdoor hammocks let participants enjoy the soft tropical night air while still enveloped in the ayahuasca dream.

Located on the outskirts of the small fishing village of Sambaqui on the Island of Florianopolis, Wasiwaska overlooks the bay that lies between the island and the Brazilian mainland. From the house, one hears the sound of waves lapping the beach that is a short walk away, as well as the sounds of the surrounding neighborhood — an occasional chorus of dogs, the motors of the small boats used by fishermen and those who cultivate mussels and oysters, and the cries of birds. During the





day, the air is filled with an enormous variety of colorful butterflies, and dragonflies cruise above the trees in search of mosquitoes.

During the October intensive, we took several excursions that added color and variety to the experience. We took a boat cruise around the island and visited historical sites; we took an overnight trip to a nearby hot springs resort on the mainland; we visited an ecological preserve on Campeche Island where there are petroglyphs dated at 4,000-5,000 years old. Of particular interest to our group was the fact that the petroglyphs depicted geometric patterns very similar to those one often sees on ayahuasca. Lectures by anthropologists at the University of Florianopolis (which has a particularly strong Department of Anthropology) enriched our experience as well.

Of course, the real reason one comes to Wasiwaska is for the ayahuasca. My partner and I had come in search of healing, and to learn more about this ancient plant medicine. Luna has filled the house with ayahuasca-related art, and has an outstanding collection of written material as well. When one is not immersed in the ayahuasca experience (or recovering from it) there is ample time for reading and discussion.

The Wasiwaska protocol includes adherence to a special diet, as well as sexual abstinence. The dietary prohibitions are salt, sugar, alcohol, and strongly flavored seasonings. During both of our visits, excellent kitchen staff at the facility made adherence to the diet a very delicious experience. They served a wonderful variety of fruits and vegetables. Fish, very fresh local seafood, and chicken were the protein sources. Coffee was not prohibited,

which may have been one reason it was so easy to maintain a schedule that included much less sleep than one would normally get.

On the nights we would partake of ayahuasca, meals would end with a light lunch, served about two p.m. in the Brazilian tradition. We would typically drink ayahuasca about eight or nine p.m. The journey would then last until perhaps four or five a.m., with participants retiring to their rooms as the effects diminished. One normally comes out of an ayahuasca session feeling light and empty, and also very hungry. As a result, the kitchen staff was instructed to prepare a large pot of soup on ayahuasca nights, something that was very much appreciated by all members of the group. As one rarely sleeps immediately after a session, waiting for breakfast was sometimes difficult until the soup was made a regular part of the ritual.

Luna's ayahuasca ritual is uniquely his own, and allows each participant a great deal of freedom in the journey. Prior experience with the potion is a prerequisite for the intensives, ensuring that no one in the group is surprised or alarmed by the effects of the brew. As the ritual begins, Luna brings out a beautifully crafted woolen rope that symbolizes the ceremonial circle. As it is passed to each participant, their

intent for the session is stated and a knot is tied in the rope. Luna asks each participant how much ayahuasca they wish to take in the session. It is always possible to ask for a “booster” later in the session if one wishes. When all have done this, Luna ties the ends of the rope together. The next day, in the “sharing” part of the ritual, each participant describes his experience and unties one knot. The “sharings” are recorded, for archival purposes.

After the brew has been poured, each participant holds his or her portion. (Earlier, everyone has prepared a mat for the journey, bringing a pillow, blanket, or whatever else is needed. Containers are issued for possible purging.) There is a moment of silence, for each participant to review her intent, then “Salud!” and the ayahuasca is drunk. Then, participants may go outside or sit quietly on their chosen mats until the music begins. Typically, Luna will sing a few songs that he learned when he was undergoing his ayahuasca apprenticeship, then he chooses from among his large collection of CDs to guide the journey. Each journey is different, with Luna choosing the music as he is inspired by the collective energy of the group. At any time, if anyone is having particular difficulty that requires intervention, Luna is available for assistance. He does not claim to be a shaman, but says “I know a few tricks.” In the ayahuasca sessions I have experienced with Luna, no one has had a difficulty that he was unable to mitigate.

Luna’s potion is quite strong; after much experimentation, I arrived at an effective dose that was about half of what I was taking earlier in the program. His protocol, with the individual selecting the dose, is effective for those who are sensitive, while also serving the needs of “hardheads.” Every effort has been made to deal with the necessities of the brew — bathroom facilities are ample; people who wish to be outdoors during the experience find comfortable accommodation in hammocks close enough to the ritual area to have access to the music. The music itself is highly varied — everything from ambient jungle noises to classical finds its way to the CD player at some time during the inten-

sive. Everyone leaves the intensive either having purchased new music (CDs are relatively inexpensive in Brazil, due to favorable exchange rates) or with lists of music to purchase once home. In my own experience, I was exposed to types of music that I would have found difficult in the past, but for which I now have an appreciation.

Why do people come to Wasiwaska to drink a mysterious potion (which some find less than appetizing) many times in close succession? Many come for healing; others come to gain clarity on personal issues with which they are having difficulty. Some come to enhance creativity, others simply to explore previously uncharted territory.

Luna also encourages the participation of serious researchers, and the April 2002 intensive included a participant who brought a research project. Physicians, psychiatrists, and psychologists are attracted to the program to deepen their healing practices, and occasionally, in search of their own healing. And judging from Wasiwaska’s guest book, all leave having found what they were seeking. Wasiwaska is ayahuasca without shamans, without dogma, without a “guided tour” of transpersonal space. It is an experience that lets the individual set the goal and navigate his or her way toward that goal, in a totally supported and gentle and healing environment. ■



The view from Wasiwaska on the island of Florianopolis, across the water to the mainland of Brazil