



Forget I'm a  
Celebrity Get Me  
Out of Here –  
photographer and

film maker *Gbislaine Heger* experienced the real deal when she spent eight days and nights alone in the Peruvian jungle, under the influence of the mind-altering shamanic plant ayahuasca

**A**fter four years studying at the Fine Arts School in Geneva, at the age of 25, I was excited about the prospect of earning money doing something I truly enjoyed, yet also filled with fear about facing a world I knew could be tough.

I was lost, and felt I needed to challenge myself to find out what I really wanted. I had already travelled alone a few times, and each journey had acted like a mirror to my fears. This time though, I wanted something more – an experience that would really push the boundaries of my comfort zone.

I had heard of a place in Peru where they took a plant-drug called ayahuasca that's said to reveal your intimate secrets – ones not even *you* know about. The drug is taken under the protection of experienced shamans, who are called curanderos.

It took me one year to save enough money for the trip, during which I met a few people who had been there and assured me it was a reputable place. And so, in November 2007, I arrived in Tarapoto and stayed for four weeks.

### Jungle juice

The place was wonderful. I had never been to South America before and didn't speak Spanish, but could understand a little. It felt warm and humid, and I discovered many



The Amazon  
in Peru



# Into the Jungle

vegetables I had not eaten before. At the beginning of the stay we started by drinking plants mixtures that cleanse the body. These weren't drugs, but were used to work on cleansing our physical and emotional aspects. One of them required me to drink three litres of water alongside it, and then vomit it all back up! I knew this would be part of the

experience but, once faced with having to do it, my thoughts

turned to aversion and I wished I had chosen a nice quiet mediation camp instead. However, the experience only lasted a few hours and was definitely worth it for the benefits, which included my body and soul feeling much more connected.

Finally, I was ready to take my first session of

ayahuasca. It was night time. About 30 people were sitting in a circle in a maloca – an open house with a roof made of straw. I felt scared and excited. The shamans sat down quietly and prepared the ceremony. They extinguished the lights, and one by one invited us to venture closer to them and drink the magic potion.

The shamans started singing icaros, the local shamanic songs sung during the ceremony to harness people to reality; due to the plant's effects, people can supposedly get 'lost' in another world. Wherever the plant takes us, the shamans help us stay in this world. I waited for the effect to happen and did not know what to expect, I only knew I would have visions. But they did not come. I felt my body move slowly back and forth to the rhythms of the icaros, but was getting angry about not having any visions. One of the shamans eventually came over and spat some sacred liquid on me and, at that moment, I felt as if a ball was being formed in my lower back – and came out of me like a fire! I then



A bustling street in Tarapoto



The roots of the ayahuasca plant



A view of the Amazon in Peru



The Tarapoto area where Ghislaine stayed



The tambo where Ghislaine resided alone for eight days

concentrated on what was going on physically, rather than expecting visions. It felt like the ayahuasca was moving around, but just in the same spot in my lower back, as if it were working on something specific. I could sense it was connected to an old memory, but didn't know what exactly. It didn't matter though, because I knew it wouldn't be anything I'd be able to understand on a rational level.

### Vision quest for inner answers

We all went to bed at 4am, but some of us were up early to trek into the jungle, where I would have the most amazing experience of my life. Walking for about an hour on small paths, crossing rivers, with our bags on our backs, we reached our goal of a group of tambos - small huts, where we would each stay, alone, for eight days and nights. Doing this is known as a vision quest. We were not to meet anyone during that time, nor use any

soap or toothpaste. The aim was to go back to our natural senses and open our chakras. Only one person from the organisation visited us in the morning and evening to bring a plant mixture to drink.

The hut was completely open. Under the roof was a sort of bed and hammock. I decided from the outset not to be scared of the tarantulas, snakes or whatever animals could arrive, otherwise it would have been impossible to stay there.

On the first night, a huge storm broke out. The sound woke me up, but I felt surprisingly safe. It was the first time I had ever really been connected with nature, hearing it so loudly and deeply. My intuition told me that whatever happened, nature would always care for me the right way.

I slept a lot during the first four days, and had powerful dreams. And, finally, the visions came to me! I received my inner messages via dreams about family members,

my father in particular. These were incredibly vivid, as if I was going much deeper into my unconscious mind than usual. Everything I remembered seemed to be a message.

During this time, I meditated a lot, and let go of my self-control. On the last day, I took a picture of myself, which I thought would capture the image of a miserable person who'd not showered for a week, but the photo revealed the most peaceful look I have ever had on my face (see intro).

### A jolt back to society

I went home feeling in complete harmony with my body and soul. Christmas was close, and I could feel the stress of the people around me, getting nervous about buying loads of gifts, but never merged into the chaos myself

Sadly, my grandfather died 10 days after my return; however, I was able to visit him and be with my family. It was then that I cried: not only was I mourning the loss of a dear person, but I was also losing the marvellous state I had experienced in the jungle; I could feel myself coming back to our 'reality'. I still knew nothing about shamans but understood one thing: I had found a place inside myself that I loved, and promised myself I would find a way back there again one day. Little did I know this was only the beginning of my journey.

● Ghislaine next travelled to Siberia and Mongolia. Read about her adventure in the February issue of *Soul&Spirit*.

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