

MAGICAL MYSTIC TOUR

Burnt out, reeling from a break-up and exhausted from the party lifestyle of her social column, *JESSICA BRINTON* was in desperate need of a new therapy. Intrigued by whispers on the grapevine about the healing powers of hallucinogenic Amazonian rituals, she embarks on a journey of self-discovery with an unlikely shaman

Photographs by *LUIS RIDAO*.
Styled by *LINHLI*

If I could control the trembling in my legs I would, but I'm so sick, so hot and feverish, with spasms shooting down my arms and this terrible aching head, that I just cannot.

The shaman whistles low and soft in the darkness, and it's as though a small mountain bird has parked itself somewhere near the ceiling. Then she starts shaking her rattle, and at once the room is full of a thousand cicadas. These are *icaros*, shaman songs, used to move energy around the room.

A flicker or two of rational thought: what am I doing here? How did I end up in this room in this town in Spain with a shaman? And, oh God, those rattles are the last thing my head needs.

But it's half an hour since I ingested a hallucinogenic cactus called San Pedro, prepared for me by a shaman promising to heal me of my woes, and I've got at least another four hours to go.





SPIRIT WORLD

*Jessica Brinton wears silk dress,
£525; Liza Bruce Sandals
(worn throughout), her own*

I had been suffering from ordinary, common-or-garden urban thirtysomething burn-out. You know the kind: tired and lost. I had bowed out of a social diary I had written for a national newspaper for three years. I had been where it was at, when it was at it, every night for over 1,000 days and it had been a ride – what a ride – but it was time to get off. I was wondering about how to get back – to the life I'd led before all the friends, the invitations on the mantelpiece, the 'me' before the column – but I didn't know if I would ever find my way there. Where was 'back' anyway? While I had been sipping Skinny Bitches, my social landscape had transformed. There were babies everywhere. I was trying to remember why I didn't have one.

There was another part to the story. This was a few weeks after the end of an exhausting love affair. It had been a forever love I'd watched crash and burn in slow-motion, too tired to stop it; and recently, that winning recipe: betrayal followed by fate's most below-the-belt blow, an absence I couldn't even bring myself to think about. I had never been the kind of person to eat cheesecake after a break-up, so I was smoking, drinking good vodka, sleeping, sometimes, but never dreaming, and waking up at 5am to check Facebook.

'Do yoga,' said everyone. The peace of mind never seemed to stick around for long, although I had a nice collection of stretchy leggings and cami-tops. 'Detox.' But the problem was my head. 'Meditate.' I couldn't stand still long enough to boil a kettle for tea. What I needed was a new idea.

In the previous few months, apocryphal stories had been emerging on the grapevine from the Amazon, Ibiza and – strangely – Devon, of gatherings for shamanic healing ceremonies, sometimes using ayahuasca, a hallucinogen prepared from the banisteriopsis vine, or San Pedro, a psychoactive cactus. Friends of friends were returning from shamanic odysseys speaking of meeting their own souls, talking to angels, and making intense new connections with nature: life-changing experiences.

These weren't just travellers' tales and this wasn't hedonism. The sort of people disappearing on these adventures – fashion designers, ad executives, PR gurus, businesswomen from New York to London – were busy ladies with big plans and glamorous wardrobes. And they seemed to have only good things to say: enigmatic whispers of 'journeys back to the self' and 'emotional detoxes'. Some were talking about giving up therapy.

'It's the chance to stand outside yourself and look in – except in one or two nights, not a year, and not sitting on a sofa, but in a room with a shaman,' said a guy I met at the launch of a new magazine. 'You should do it. It's a perfect moment.'

I was intrigued. As it happened, I did have a therapist who had sat and listened to me for 50 minutes a week for 18 months. A special lady, she had taught me a lot about navigating life's plan. It had started to feel gruelling and slow, but I was getting bored of me, which meant my therapist was definitely getting bored of me.

One day, fate dealt me a hand. I met Katie, a fortysomething art director, who told me about a shaman she had worked with called, of all the exotic names a shaman could be called, Anna Hunt. Katie had gone to Hunt because she was unhappy in her job, but after a single weekend workshop, her life had improved beyond recognition. 'San Pedro showed me that my burn-out was intimately related to how unfulfilled I felt, despite my success. It made me think about health differently. It made me think about everything differently.'

Friends of friends were returning from shamanic odysseys speaking of meeting their own souls and talking to angels

Katie introduced me to Hunt. She and I spoke on the telephone. A 36-year-old Cambridge graduate and former celebrity journalist for a national newspaper, Hunt had found shamanism on a what-am-I-doing-with-my-life sabbatical to Peru. The jungle had turned out to be a wilder and more eventful place than the world of A-listers. Over the years of working with her teacher – the former head of archaeology at Machu Picchu – she had learned to 'move energy around the body', with or without 'the plant', as a way of promoting physical, mental and emotional health in her clients – the same 'energy' that makes every piece of matter in the universe. Hunt had found her calling. 'It isn't that a person decides to be a shaman and then it's a *fait accompli*,' Hunt said down the line. 'I was so cynical at first, but it's a path.'

A path to what? 'To realising that the world is more intricate and mysterious than our culture allows us to see, and that everyone I know could benefit from these techniques.'

Next she told me 'the plants are the shaman's ultimate teacher', and that out of ayahuasca and San Pedro, the cactus was the less overwhelming of the two experiences, and that a ceremony could

be 'slotted into a long weekend'. I had just the long weekend – the weekend of the Royal Wedding. I booked a flight to Spain, where the cactus is decriminalised (taking ayahuasca legally would mean travelling to South America).

'Some of my most positive moments and greatest influences have been the result of partaking in sacred brews,' said my old friend Bruce Parry when I told him what

I was going to do. He asked whether Hunt was 'a good shaman'. Then he said: 'Open yourself to the plant so it can teach you what it needs to teach you.'

Hunt picks me up from Almería Airport in a rental car. It's immediately obvious why she has written a book called *The Shaman in Stiletto*. She is wearing boot-cut jeans, a simple top and a pair of stacked espadrilles, and she looks like your brother's lawyer girlfriend. I wonder for a moment if she might be a helper who will lead me to someone wearing robes.

At the hotel, Hunt and I have tea, and she asks me what I am hoping to achieve from being here. I say I'm overwhelmed. I'm full up. I've come to the right place. She explains that the most important concept in shamanism is 'release'. We do a process she calls 'quantum collapsing', which is designed to break down my preconceptions and put me in an open state of mind. 'The mind is a shaman's first enemy,' she says.

We discuss my hopes or 'intentions' for the ceremony, which will last for up to five hours. She says it is only part of a journey over the four days. She'll never leave my side unless I want her to.

Then she says: 'The plant will give you what you need but not necessarily what you want.' What does she mean? That evening, the photographer and I drive through the mountains to a yoga centre in a small town, where we rejoin Hunt, who travelled ahead to prepare the room. The setting is a yoga studio, which she has cleaned of 'bad energy' by spraying it with herbal water. She has lit it with candles and laid out her *mesa*, a piece of cloth with the medicine, a homemade tincture of the cactus (12 per cent of which



ROCKS OF AGES
Jessica wears kaftan, £1,860, Missoni. Anna Hunt wears her own clothes. Clockwise, from below: shaman rattles. Cacti in the hills near Agua Amarga. Jessica on Playa de los Muertos beach wearing silk dress with leather belt, £540, Tibi at My-wardrobe.com. Crystals used for healing. The Almerian coast



Shamanic brews: **THE FACTS**

- Ayahuasca means ‘vine of the dead’ or ‘vine of the souls’ in Quechua Indian. It is traditionally used by shamans in South American tribes, who believe it lets them communicate with spirits.
- Although often mistaken for a plant, ayahuasca is a tea made from boiling the **banisteriopsis vine** with chacruna, a jungle plant that contains DMT (a hallucinogen similar to LSD).
- Well-known figures who have tried ayahuasca include Bruce Parry, Paul Simon and Sting. The Klaxons reportedly used ayahuasca to get inspiration for their latest album *Surfing the Void*.
- **San Pedro** is a native South American cactus that grows in the Andean foothills. It contains the hallucinogen mescaline, and is ingested as a tea.
- San Pedro, whose indigenous name is **achuma**, is named after Saint Peter because, like the Christian figure, it is said to ‘hold the keys to heaven’.
- It is legal to own the San Pedro cactus in the UK. Its extraction **mescaline** is categorised as Class A.

To learn more about shamans, visit www.annahunt.com. Anna Hunt’s book ‘The Shaman in Stilettos’ is out next year (www.shamaninstiletos.com).



is the main psychoactive compound, mescaline), her crystals, her rattles, different cleansing waters, some sticks made from sacred jungle wood she uses to 'clear auras', and a black panther tooth given to her by her teacher.

I find a spot on the floor. I'm petrified. This is not the first time I have taken hallucinogens, but in my teens and twenties it was always with friends and we were listening to Primal Scream. Hunt is a stranger, and there isn't any music. She puts on her tracksuit bottoms, does some meditation exercises to make me ready, blows out all the candles, and pours the sacred liquid into a glass for us both to drink. It tastes brackish, like drinking a tree. We lie down with blankets on our respective mattresses. I wish I didn't feel so self-conscious. All I can think is: 'What's going to happen? What if nothing happens?'

She whistles in the darkness and begins to shake her rattle. Twenty minutes later, something starts to happen. No wondrous visions, just a vague headache and feverish limbs. Soon my body temperature is zooming up and down. I am sweating and freezing, and can't get comfortable. My joints are aching. My teeth are chattering. I feel ghastly. If my friends could see me now...

Matters proceed like this for an hour and I find that I can't stop talking. 'I've got so much to ask you!' I say to Hunt, trying to sound light-hearted. In fact, I'm sick with worry. My mind leaps from one triviality to the next. Would it be sunny for my sister's birthday? In the photoshoot earlier, should I have worn the Dolce & Gabbana, not the Missoni? Did I turn the iron off?

'Your mind does not seem to want to let go,' says Hunt when I ask her for the third time who she thinks Pippa Middleton will end up marrying.

I don't know what she means by letting go. I think about how I might go about pretending to let go. Meanwhile, my stomach is letting go. It has started to make the most embarrassing noises. Every time my tummy gurgles, Hunt says through the darkness: 'Good' or 'Excellent. You're releasing!' She says she can 'see' lights all over my body. On Friday, she had 'read' the plant, a ritual for finding out what she needs to do to help her client. 'I saw your brain with light releasing from the side and I saw your heart,' she says. 'Now I have this image of concrete – and under it, a green and blue river. Green is the heart chakra, blue is the throat chakra. It is time to express yourself from your heart again.' She tells me that if the concrete can be broken, what I will find underneath is 'treasure'.

I like the sound of treasure, but the concrete is still in situ because what is coming out – all the silly chat – is not treasure. 'Let go,' suggests Hunt. I can't. I wonder who I might blame, and would give anything to have a Blakean vision. 'The plant gives you what you need, not what you want.' Well, this is not what I want. I want to be interesting. I want to be profound. What I want is to go to the pub. I would, except that I am too tired. And suddenly I feel weak, and ugly, and old, and average. If only someone had a fag.

My luck is in. Hunt has brought some along. They are organic and chemical-free, and they are to be smoked 'consciously' as a tool for clearing my emotions. 'Breathe it in,' she says. 'For shamans, the earth is sacred, so tobacco is a plant too and has healing properties.' Slowly I puff on the cigarette. I don't want it to end.

When it does, a picture of my free-spirited ex appears in my mind, followed by an image of myself right here on this floor, taut and furious. It dawns on me that the enemy I am fighting isn't my

ex or my job, it's me. Rigid me with fixed ideas, unable to leave the old world behind. Ouch. For some reason, this revelation sends my legs spasming into the air ('You are creating a lot of space with your body for energy to release,' says Hunt). Then she starts moving a piece of quartz crystal around my chest and back.

The energy in the room is rising – even I know this. And because I am embarrassed and because I want to be in control, I begin to tell Hunt one of my most trusted dinner-party anecdotes, a story from when I was 11 that always gets a laugh. I am halfway through when something odd happens. Out of the blue, from somewhere very deep inside, I start to sob, and not like Elizabeth Taylor in *National Velvet*.

At that moment, I would pay a fortune for some pan pipes or drumming – anything but lying there, listening to my own pathetic whimpering echo around the room. This is not elegant or stylish. This is not me at sunset in Missoni. This is me prostrate on the floor of a yoga studio in a one-horse town somewhere in southern Spain, anonymous and buried in misery.

'Don't hold on,' whispers Hunt, appearing at my right ear just as it is starting to throb. 'There's pain here, and crying is letting it go.' I hardly have a choice, I think. After a few minutes though, the crying stops of its own accord and I lie there, completely drained.

The room is calmer now. Another vision of my ex appears in my head, but it's a new version. Not the fictitious person of my angry, jealous fantasies, but the real one. All I feel is giant puffs of love.

It's midnight and we're three-and-a-half hours in. Hunt blows out a candle to 'close this part of the ceremony', and we leave the room to stake out the kitchen and eat some soup and bread. The world of the kitchen is hilariously wobbly. Hunt is no longer a shaman but my giggly co-conspirator. After we have almost collapsed over how cold the fish soup is, she tells me that recently I have let my brain dominate my heart and spirit. 'You have burn-out,' she says. 'Burn-out is when your heart has given up and left. Your heart doesn't leave because it's betraying you, it wants to direct you to what's best for you.'

Hunt suggests that the next part of the ceremony should take the form of 'a rest'. My mind has other plans. I need some air.

Outside is full of surprises, not least that the large cactus in the garden turns out not to be a cactus, but an amiable, shy, twentysomething cactus-shaped man. We don't say anything, but I nod and set about making a nest of blankets for myself on the empty street. Except it is by no means empty. Opposite, a Toyota LandCruiser Prado snores gently. The wind is rustling the leaves of a juniper tree. At the end of the street, the mountains are like a group of students arriving at a party. 'Such fun,' I think. Sitting there among my friends, the car, the cactus, the mountains, the tree, the wind and the pavement, I don't feel alone at all. Then I apologise to the tree in advance and chuck my guts out on its feet. It feels wonderful.

From nowhere, Hunt appears and blows Florida water on my face to clean the energy around me. 'That was an energetic purge of all the anxiety you've been carrying around for months,' she says. 'Do you feel better?' And yes, I think I do.

She lies down again, and I wander from room to room trying to find somewhere to be comfortable; in vain. My old friend insomnia is back, nowhere is my home, and everything is overwhelmingly sad. Hunt emerges from the darkness onto the sofa beside me. 'This is the plant working,' she says. 'This sadness is another release.'

When I wake the next morning, the

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The shaman gives me a quartz crystal to hold on my temple, which I secretly wish was a Nurofen Plus I could swallow

NATURAL FORCE

*On Playa de los Muertos beach. Silk
dress with leather belt, £540, Tibi at
My-wardrobe.com. See Stockists for details*





'MAGICAL MYSTIC TOUR' CONTINUED FROM PAGE 124

yoga centre owners are rushing around with mops. A tank in the bathroom has overflowed and the floor is a swimming pool. Outside, it's raining torrentially. I've a screaming headache and blurry vision.

'There was a lot of emotional toxicity released last night,' says Hunt, 'a lot of sadness and confusion, body fatigue, malaise, anxiety.'

I ask her about the vision of my ex. 'One of your intentions was to close that cycle,' she says. 'You were infatuated. The plant showed your ex to you as he is – the good and the bad. You're taking your power back.' She gives me a quartz crystal to hold on my temple, which I secretly wish was a Nurofen Plus I could swallow. 'Pain isn't bad,' she says. 'It's a symptom, and that's where wisdom lies.'

I remembered the whispers on the grapevine; the claims about 'hallucinogenic drugs realigning the neural pathways'. Is that what was happening inside my splitting skull? Twenty years of scientific research into hallucinogens ended in the late 1960s when psychedelic substances were criminalised in the West. But new studies, such as at the Beckley Foundation and Imperial College London, are looking at the benefits of the controlled use of organic hallucinogens on mental health – from obsessive-compulsive disorder to depression. Maybe this was more than just a ritualised placebo effect.

Hunt says she wants to do a second ceremony to 'close the cycle'. 'Yes,' I say. I am thinking about the promised treasure.

That evening, back in the yoga room, I feel different this time, more relaxed. The process begins again, and like before, I fight it. 'What are you afraid of? Why can't you let go?' she says. And perhaps it's pride, perhaps it's the plant – it's probably both – but this time I do. It's a small mechanical movement inside, a tiny decision I barely know I'm making, but my mind finally lets go.

I have visions of my life streaming backwards. I see George who I kissed when I was 16. I see my first bicycle. I see a dog I met in Paris once. I see Dorset under snow. I see the guy who sold me bagels every morning in New York. I see my sister and her kids. I realise all these images streaming past are pieces of a person, and that person is me. The next thing I know, it's morning and my headache has gone.

Since I've got back, this is what has happened: I've called George; I've accepted that I'm stubborn and difficult, verging on impossible; I've made small but significant decisions about my life; I've realised I could speak to no one for a week without feeling lonely; I've listened to Magic radio; I've seen my friend Sasha who said: 'You're just so... you'; I've walked across two parks, slowly, instead of taking the bus; I haven't smoked a Marlboro Light; I've made up with my mum; I've slept a lot and dreamed a lot; I've looked people in the eye; I've experienced 17 instances of pure joy; I've decided to finish therapy; I've called Bruce; I haven't been lonely at all.

'The plant isn't a curative, it's an awakening,' Bruce said. 'The real work happens now. You have the insight and a new understanding of who you are. Now, the question is, "Are you brave enough to change?"' Why, of course. □



'RAW POWER' CONTINUED FROM PAGE 138

as kale and spinach, and cutting back on dairy and protein.

Kordas came to the diet via an oncologist friend in the US, but 'as there had never been any cancer on either side of my family, I had started looking for other possible reasons'. She cut out alcohol, meat, caffeine and most fruits, while increasing her intake of raw foods, green tea and berries. 'Once you cut out that stuff, 10 years fall off your face. I was having radiation therapy and was exhausted, yet people kept saying, "You look amazing!"'

A year later, after a course of radiation, she is cancer-free but continuing a course of Tamoxifen. She is less strict now, but breakfast is still a dose of super-greens and berries thrown into the blender. The alkaline gurus agree that if you do nothing else, you should switch to an alkaline breakfast, since most conventional choices, like eggs and orange juice, are highly acidic. 'Instead of toast and honey, switch to avocado and alfalfa. It goes against the grain, but for most people that makes the biggest difference,' says Edwards.

So should we all be cutting back on acidic foods? The majority of physicians believe that the filter organs in our body, such as the kidneys, do a perfectly good job of regulating our acidity, and whether we drink beer or vinegar, our blood level will be back to a normal 7.35 almost immediately, though Edwards argues that the excess acids are sequestered away from the blood 'and are dumped into fatty tissue, while eroding body tissue elsewhere'.

As yet, there is no medical backing for the diet. British Dietetic Association spokesperson Tanya Haffner says that although there's growing support from academic research, particularly regarding osteoporosis, the jury is still out. 'Where you have people following a more alkaline diet, you see better bone health, but that is not to say it's the alkalinity causing the improvement. It could be other factors in vegetables that are having the positive effect.'

Haffner says the danger is that some forms of the diet advocate removing whole food groups like meat and dairy. 'There could be a risk of calcium or iron deficiency, and you could be missing out on protein. Quite frankly, it's too challenging. You'd need to be very knowledgeable to end up with a nutrient intake that's balanced. Parts of what they are advocating are great, but, as a package, it's quite dangerous.' She is also concerned that the founders of the diet are peddling their own brand supplements.

Whether the diet is based on fact or fiction, few nutritionists would dispute that there are benefits to boosting our vegetable intake while limiting sugar, alcohol and processed foods. But whether this is just the start of a new and health-focused way of eating or, like the Atkins, cabbage-soup and every other health-enhancing diet before, this too will have its moment before fading quietly away, only time will tell. □

Gareth Edwards at the Hale Clinic, London W1 (020 7223 8865; www.food-for-life.co.uk). Raw and Juicy's alkaline programmes cost £350 a week and run for up to seven weeks (020 8670 0445; www.raw-and-juicy.com).