



Machu Picchu is sacred for shamans, above left, with Anna



# 'I Fell In Love With A Shaman In The Peruvian Jungle'



Burned out from her urban lifestyle, **ANNA HUNT** went to South America in search of healing. She could never have imagined how she would find it

I'M SITTING IN A SMALL, filthy restaurant 24 hours into a two-week trek around the north of Peru. The trek marks the start of a three-month sabbatical from my glamorous, fast-paced job as a celebrity interviewer on a newspaper. I love my job and my metropolitan life, which is defined by an affection for stilettos, Sauvignon Blanc and partying. But for the past year I've been battling IBS, which my GP says is a by-product of chronic stress. I've tried diets, pills, meditation and yoga to no avail. And so, here I am. Unwell, exhausted and a bit lost.

marie claire  
FIRST PERSON

My Peruvian friend Gabby – a psychologist and, I thought, a sensible person – looks at me. 'You're burned out,' she says. 'You need to see a shaman.' A shaman, she explains, is a doctor who administers plant medicines, and uses reiki, acupuncture and other tools to cure physical and emotional problems. She recommends a man called Maximo Morales. 'He is utterly gorgeous. He speaks six languages, he's a professor of archaeology and he's one of the most successful businessmen in Cusco. You'll love each other,' she says. I'm imagining a primitive guy living alone in a yurt, wearing a loincloth and I'm intrigued – but cynical. The following day, however, we run into Maximo and

I'm blown away by his sophistication and charm. I immediately change my travel plans to include a stay at his retreat in the Sacred Valley. Flash forward a fortnight and we're alone in the ancient jungle city of Machu Picchu at dusk. At the centre of the city is a lawn. I'm lying on it. And Maximo has his gorgeously full lips pressed against my navel. He's performing an extraction, a strange shamanic ritual. We've drunk medicine, prepared from the San Pedro cactus, and my tummy is cramping horribly. Unbelievably, when I stand up just a few minutes later, my tummy is pain-free. My head's in a complete spin. My heart too. I postpone my planned trek into the jungle in favour of spending more time with Maximo. He's the most intriguing man I've ever met. And after a month I feel healthy and energetic for the first time in ages. I've eaten guinea pig, catfish and avocados the size of *{continued}*

small melons. I've hung out with an indigenous tribe from the supremely inaccessible High Andes and seen bottle-green hummingbirds, two jaguars, and spiders the size of my hand. Although there's no physical expression to our relationship – yet – I'm completely caught up in the shaman. I'm falling in love. My ardour only increases when he announces that I'm destined to become his apprentice, to master the healing arts passed down from shaman to shaman in strict secrecy for 40,000 years.

**“At the centre of Macchu Picchu is a lawn. I'm lying on it. And Maximo has his lips pressed against my navel”**

Like everyone else, though, I need to earn a living, and I return to London and throw myself back into my life. I think about Maximo – and his pronouncement about my destiny – every day. But I talk myself round with common sense – I'm 29, I'm not a teenager. I have to be responsible. After 12 long months, though, I realise it's useless. I call Maximo and



Anna in Peru, where she trained to be a shaman



A despacho, or offering to Mother Earth, contains seeds, confetti, coca leaves and other natural ingredients



'Witches' read fortunes and perform energy cleansing rituals

we agree that I'll return to Peru for six months to study with him with a view to writing a book. He'll be in it but not photographed – he says he doesn't want to be famous. My unspoken hope is that we'll also embark on a passionate affair. I work like a dog to earn enough to go.

But I arrive to discover there's another 'apprentice', a woman from Arizona called Maureen. I barely see Maximo for two months and I'm devastated. I begin to wonder whether he uses the apprentice line with every woman he runs into – and how many are naive enough to believe him. I feel like a fool and for a while I flounder, crushed. But slowly I sort out my feelings. I decide it's up to me to make the apprenticeship work. I interview every shaman I can find, read every shamanic tome I can lay my hands on. And finally I head into the jungle – alone – to study with 'the grandfather', the most powerful shaman of all. Living in a simple hut with no electricity, running water or functioning toilets, I drink *ayahuasca*, a hallucinogen, and discover an incomparable inner peace and a strength I never knew I possessed.

I return to discover Maureen has returned to the States and my tenacity, by comparison, has won me Maximo's respect. Finally he recognises me as his equal. This transformation in our relationship culminates in an evening of passionate tantric delight. In a single night, I feel an intimacy with him that



A mesa – a shaman's tool kit – is used to ward off bad energy

exceeds anything I've known before. This special bond – a combination of lust, deep love and trust – can't be contained within the confines of a day-to-day relationship. We live on separate continents, after all. But it is an experience I'll always remember. One year later, I'm still a journalist but I also work as a shaman, blending the ancient healing arts of Peru with the sophistication of London life. I have a portfolio of clients who are over-worked, under-fulfilled professionals. Just like I used to be. ■ The Shaman In Stilettos by Anna Hunt (£8.99, Michael Joseph) is out on 7 June. For more information about Anna's work, visit [annahunt.com](http://annahunt.com).