

Ayahuasca at Home: An American Experience

By [Alexander Zaitchik](#) Mar 2013 A subculture of ayahuasca enthusiasts are bringing herbal "trips" to a city near you.



Terpsichore

Until recently, Americans wanting to test the curative and visionary powers of ayahuasca had to venture into the jungles of South America. But over the past decade, the shamans leading the ceremonies have begun to follow the visitors back north to conduct ceremonies in the States. [Ayahuasca has developed into a full-fledged, increasingly trendy subculture](#) in the U.S. On any given weekend, dozens of ceremonies take place across the country. "Drinkers" span a wide social spectrum, from pop stars and film directors – Sting, Tori Amos, and Oliver Stone are known to use it – who fly in their own shamans for lavish monthly ceremonies in West Hollywood, to the 20-something waitresses and teachers I sat with recently in a small Brooklyn yoga studio. "It is fascinating that this new, fairly extensive scene has grown so fast and continues to fly under the radar," says an observer. "It's still growing. I keep waiting for the law-enforcement hammer to come down."

U.S. law classifies any substance containing DMT as Schedule-I, meaning it has the potential to harm and offers no medical benefit. Since almost all the shamans brew at home, they must smuggle the finished concoction into the country, thereby facing the same risk as if they were carrying heroin. A highly regarded shaman who splits his time between running a retreat in Ecuador and conducting ceremonies abroad explained that Latin American security officials understand that ayahuasca is a medicine, not a drug, and rarely flag it. He says they also rely on UPS. "Most law-enforcement agencies have better things to do," he says, "than hinder peaceful users of medicine." In 2010, however, the well-known Colombian shaman Juan Agreda Chindoy was arrested on arrival in Houston when jars of viscous fluid in his luggage tested positive for DMT. The [charges were later dropped](#) – with a diplomatic assist from the Colombian embassy – but Chindoy faced up to 20 years in prison.

For drinkers, the legal risk is negligible: There is not a single instance of an ayahuasca ceremony being raided stateside. The cost of a single nighttime ceremony ranges from \$150 to \$300 per person, with an average sitting consisting of 10 to 12 drinkers. Weekend "packages" easily cost \$1,000 or more, depending on the setting. Of late, something of an ayahuasca star system has developed, with some respected shamans in high demand in certain cities or circles. Some of these new globe-trotting shamans maintain the traditional trappings of the ceremony – chanting, blowing smoke, shaking leaves – while others have reinvented the ceremony as a New Age therapy. Until recently, most shamans operating in the U.S. issued general pre-ceremony warnings that adhered to the so-called Roller Coaster Rule: Those who would not ride a roller coaster (people with heart conditions, pregnant women) should not drink ayahuasca. Lately, the warnings have grown more specific, and the list of disqualifying conditions has grown. An email I received recently from a shaman touring the U.S. barred from participation anyone with a recent history of using or having "antidepressants, anxiety medications, painkillers, or anything similar; heart or liver dysfunction; drug or alcohol abuse." This shaman, who wished not to be identified, has an excellent reputation in Peru and in the U.S. He possesses all the qualities a prospective seeker should look for: He's native to the Amazon, claims to control his brewing process from start to finish, and is conservative when doling out portions to beginners.

The growing number of fly-by-night shamans and outright frauds has made screening essential. Websites like ayahuasca.com, realitysandwich.com, and evolver.net offer easy entry points to the would-be novice interested in locating ceremonies and sharing experiences. Despite its growth, it's unlikely the scene will ever gain the profile or popularity of so-called classic psychedelics, like LSD and mushrooms. Which is probably just as well: Ayahuasca's intensity places a serious limitation on its growth potential. It is the opposite of a party drug, a viscerally intense, multihour journey and ordeal in which, veterans say, "you earn what you learn." In a relatively short amount of time, it can help you identify and address the root causes of physical and psycho-spiritual ailments, but the visions are terrifying as well as sublime — and the confrontation with them is emotionally, spiritually, and physically demanding. The vine of souls, as ayahuasca is known, is not for everyone.