

BY DAWN

IT WILL

ALL BE

OVER...

He's survived war zones, armed sieges and terrorist attacks, but nothing could prepare *Mark Franchetti* for his night on ayahuasca, the trendy Amazonian hallucinogen also known as the "rope of death"



The scene takes place in the remotest location I have ever visited, deep in the Amazon rainforest in Brazil, in the village that took me 22 hours by plane and four full days by river boat to reach. It is night-time and the full moon is out. Seated under the open sky in a large circle around a bonfire are shamans, some 30 members of the tribe and a handful of westerners. The shamans look strikingly mystical in the moonlight, wearing elaborate feathered headdresses, their faces painted in coloured patterns and lines. In unison, they recite powerfully hypnotic chants that have not changed in centuries.

Women, also dressed in traditional clothes, repeat each line, creating high-pitched sounds that reverberate perfectly around the circle. We are outdoors, but the effect is that of a mesmerising echo chamber. Everything about the scene, the setting and the moment feels exceptional.

Less than 30 minutes have passed since we all drank ayahuasca, a brew made from plants found in the Upper Amazon that the tribes have been taking since time immemorial. To them, it is a unique plant medicine and a cornerstone of their culture; to most governments in the West, it is an illegal drug. What's beyond dispute is that the "rope of death", as ayahuasca is also known, is one of the world's most powerful natural hallucinogenic substances.

This is my second ceremony, as they refer to ayahuasca-taking rituals. I'm nervous but, having taken it twice two days earlier in a ceremony that lasted eight hours, I tell myself that I know — vaguely at least — what's coming.

"No matter how terrifying it gets," a friend who is a consummate ayahuasca veteran tells me, "never forget that by dawn it will be over. Tell yourself that, regardless of how hellish it may become, you won't die for real."

But when it hits me, the force of the brew is infinitely more powerful than the first time I took it. With terror I realise that my whole being is at the mercy of this immeasurable might that is inside me. I want to cry out for help, but know at once that I'm alone as never before. Nothing can be done, it's too late. I crawl and roll in the dirt, desperately wrestling with my subconscious beside a row of banana trees that have suddenly taken on a deeply menacing air.

I'm 49, and through my job as a foreign correspondent I have covered wars and probably had more life experiences than many people. But what took place that night in the jungle was by far the hardest ➤➤➤

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
YURI KOZYREV



NATURAL MYSTICS During the ayahuasca ceremony, women from the Huni Kuin tribe sing *icaros*, ancient incantations to beckon the spirits of the jungle



TRANCE OF A LIFETIME Centre: the tribespeople believe the visions connect them with nature. Above: one of Mark's friends tunes into the ritual's hypnotic effects

thing I have experienced. It was also the most profound.

If this is the first time you've heard of ayahuasca, it will not be the last. If you don't yet know someone who has tried it, it's only a matter of time before you will.

In the 16th century, Christian missionaries from Spain and Portugal who first encountered the people using the drug described it as the work of the devil. The wider West has known of its existence for decades, but it is only in the past few years that it has begun to spread like wildfire. In an age of holistic healing, mindfulness and spiritual wellbeing, ayahuasca is becoming increasingly trendy.

People drink it at underground ceremonies in London, New York and Ibiza. It's said to be hugely popular among the geeks and tech execs of Silicon Valley, and many Hollywood stars have tried it.

"The drug of choice for the age of kale" is how The New Yorker described ayahuasca last year in a lengthy piece that introduced the banned substance to the American mainstream. It quoted experts claiming the drug "is everywhere in San Francisco... where it is like having a cup of coffee", and estimated that on any given night there are 100 ayahuasca ceremonies taking place in Manhattan.

If you are imagining that these rituals are the preserve of long-haired new-age hippies, think again — ayahuasca is increasingly popular among driven high-flyers. They are as likely to take it to solve a complex business problem as to address a personal issue.

Shamans from the Amazon have started travelling regularly to the West to hold ceremonies, "on a mission to spread the message and the knowledge of the medicine", as one told me. They do so at considerable risk of falling foul of the law, and some have been arrested on drugs

charges. The active ingredient in ayahuasca is classified as a Schedule I drug internationally and is illegal in the UK and most countries. A cottage industry of "ayahuasca tourism" sees burgeoning numbers of foreigners travelling to the Amazon to try the substance, often returning with tales of frightening but life-changing experiences.

The brew also attracts drug and alcohol addicts seeking help. There are calls to legalise the substance, which is undergoing clinical trials in America, as some doctors believe it could be used to treat cancer and Parkinson's disease. Controversy about ayahuasca's misuse is also growing. There have been reports of charlatan shamans seeking to cash in on its popularity, administering it without proper training and preying on the vulnerable. Women have complained of being molested during ceremonies, and self-appointed shamans have been accused of spiking ayahuasca with other substances.

A nadir was reached in 2015, when Unais Gomes, 26, a Cambridge graduate from St John's Wood, was stabbed to death during a ceremony at an ayahuasca retreat in Peru. In what must count as the most catastrophic ayahuasca "trip" to date, the Briton was killed by his Canadian friend Joshua Stevens, 29, who claimed he was acting in self-defence after Gomes, his state of mind horribly altered and disturbed by the hallucinogen, attacked him in a frenzy.

I am not especially looking forward to trying ayahuasca; I've heard too many horror stories of "bad trips"

Such incidents, however, are rare, as violence is not normally associated with ayahuasca. Deaths are also highly uncommon, though people on antidepressants and those suffering from a heart condition or high blood pressure are thought to be at serious risk if they take it. More concerning is that there is little help on how best to handle and process the deep psychological and emotional impact the powerful brew can have.

Ayahuasca is most commonly made from *Banisteriopsis caapi* vines and chacruna leaves, two Amazon plants that shamans pick, macerate and boil together for hours into a thick, dark-brown sludge. The leaves contain dimethyltryptamine, or DMT, a potent psychedelic compound. The locals start drinking the brew from as young as five and take it regularly throughout their lives, profoundly believing that it helps local shamans treat physical and mental ailments by connecting them with Mother Nature.

The shamans say the plant medicine acts as a conduit, beckoning the spirits of the jungle and allowing the drinker to access important messages from their ancestors and nature itself.

When DMT flushes the brain, it is said to facilitate direct contact with the subconscious. It provokes powerful visual and sonic hallucinations, and plunges you into an altered state of consciousness. Ayahuasca, they say, makes the user confront their demons, issues and traumas.

"If all the G8 leaders tried it, the next day we'd have a completely different world," someone who has drunk it dozens of times told me. Others have described it as "surgery without a scalpel" and 10 years of psychotherapy and meditation crammed into one session.

Drinkers of ayahuasca describe connecting and interacting with a powerful

source of female energy they refer to as the Madre. The energy is often coloured green and can also appear in different shapes — a giant snake, for instance. To some, she is Mother Nature, to others a religious figure or simply a higher being. During a ceremony, she can be gentle and soothing, a source of pure love — or merciless, unforgiving and terrifying. Her power is overwhelming.

If this is starting to sound like some new-age nonsense spouted by tree-hugging spiritualists who have taken too many drugs, I'm with you. That's exactly what I thought when I first heard of the Madre — so bear with me.

More study is needed, but scientists believe ayahuasca has a powerful effect on the default mode network, a group of regions in the brain associated with memory, introspection and envisioning the future. When overactive, the default mode network is linked with depression and anxiety. Brain scans seem to show that ayahuasca causes a significant decrease in activity in this part of the brain — which helps to explain why some users feel more at peace with themselves after taking it.

The brew also causes hyperactivity in the neocortex, the area of the brain associated with reason and decision-making, and the amygdala, where memories are thought to be stored, especially the most traumatic and significant ones. Users often recall early memories they'd long forgotten. Ayahuasca is thought to enable the brain to re-evaluate memories — many people describe gaining new perspectives on deeply rooted patterns of behaviour after taking it.

"Ayahuasca affects what we see and what we imagine, apparently modifying the activity of various regions of the brain, such as the primary visual cortex," says Draulio de Araujo, a professor of neuroimaging at

the Brain Institute in Natal, Brazil. Since 2014, he has been studying the effects of ayahuasca on a group of 80 people, half of whom suffer from severe depression.

"It changes the way our thoughts flow, ultimately leading to a state of consciousness different from the one we experience when we are awake. The default mode network is temporarily relieved of its duties. The change in the brain is similar to the one that results from years of meditation, but in the space of a few hours."

I have known vaguely about ayahuasca for years, but learnt more about it recently from a friend, a wealthy entrepreneur who has taken the drug more than 100 times since first trying it two years ago. He is one of the most unique and inspiring characters I have ever met, so when he described it as "probably the most powerful thing in the world", he had me intrigued.

My friend has developed close relations with the Huni Kuin, a tribe of about 10,000 people who live deep in the Amazon rainforest and have practised ayahuasca rituals for centuries. He has become especially friendly with Ninawa and Txana, the tribe's two leading shamans.

They had invited him to travel to their village to attend an ayahuasca festival — use of the substance for spiritual and religious purposes is legal in Brazil — at which shamans from several remote villages would come together to hold a dozen ceremonies over a fortnight. Men, women and children would drink together, joined by a small group of foreigners. My friend asked me to join him.

"It's impossible to explain ayahuasca in words. To understand what I'm talking about, you must try it," he said. "You'll be in its birthplace, in the purest place and with the best people in the world to try it. It's the ultimate environment to drink it for the first time. You'd be mad not to."

I have smoked dope and taken ecstasy and cocaine, but I am not into drugs. I hardly drink alcohol, swim five times a week and generally lead a healthy life. I've always been too scared to try acid or any other hallucinogen. I am not attracted to the idea of tripping and I like to think I'm in control. I've always been grounded and sensible. Like anyone, I have my issues and insecurities, but no traumas that need healing.

As we set off for the Amazon, I am not especially looking forward to trying ayahuasca; I've heard too many horror stories of "bad trips". Oh, and then there's the violent vomiting that the brew typically brings on — or purging, as it's more evocatively referred to among aficionados. I want to get it over and done with, but I'm not expecting what follows.

After four flights in nearly 24 hours, we reach Tarauaca, a small, sleepy town surrounded by hundreds of miles of rainforest. From Tarauaca, we set off under a scorching sun in narrow, rickety boats on a brown river that winds and twists its way for what seems like for ever. We travel 10 hours a day for four days, deeper and deeper into the jungle, sleeping at night in hammocks on the boats.

When we finally reach the Huni Kuin village of Novo Futuro, we are met by a large group of shamans in feathered headgear who greet us by dancing and singing alongside the village elders, women and children. They lead us to the hamlet of small huts on stilts, built out of wood and straw. Its centrepiece is the *maloca*, a long hut used for ayahuasca ceremonies and other gatherings.

A group of about 30 foreigners who had taken part in an ayahuasca "healing" ceremony — considered one of the toughest — the previous night are huddled together to discuss their ordeal. They →

look emotionally exhausted and some break down in tears when it's their turn to talk. It fills me with foreboding.

A few hours later, after dark, I take my place in the circle around the bonfire with the shamans, other tribe members, a few foreigners and four of my friends, including the entrepreneur. "Have a good journey, my friend," he tells me, giving me an indigenous amulet to wear around my neck.

The chief shaman, Ninawa, welcomes everyone and opens the ceremony, his silhouette lit by the moon. In silence, people queue to take the "medicine" one by one. When my turn comes, I stand before the shamans and whisper "*Primeira vez*", "first time" in Portuguese. Ninawa nods and hands me a shot of ayahuasca — the smaller dose for the uninitiated — after blowing on it as a form of prayer. I thank him, take a deep breath, knock it back and think, that's it — there's no turning back.

I had been warned of the brew's revolting taste: a thick and bitter tar-like mixture of fermented wood. After the last person has returned to the circle, Ninawa asks us to sit in total silence for 20 minutes. My anticipation mounts as I wait for this ticking time bomb to go off inside me.

The bony village dog is warming itself beside the fire and I watch as its body becomes elongated and starts moving like a wave. I know my "journey" has begun. Ninawa and the other shamans start to chant *icaros*, ancient chants that commune with the spirits of the jungle. Combined with the ayahuasca, their hypnotic effect is immediate and intensely powerful.

The shamans and their chants create what the indigenous tribes refer to as the "space", an invisible energy that rings the ceremony. Every tremor and vibration triggers a new vision, a kaleidoscope of ever-changing colours and geometric forms. I briefly open my eyes and see the moonlit sky traced by lines and shapes, like a structural formula.

At once, I am overcome by nausea. "Try to keep it down a bit longer," says my friend when I retch, but I barely have the time to waddle towards a row of banana trees



MEDICINE, MAN The drug's power made Mark confront his volatile personality

I see my face and the ground turn into the fanged muzzles of wild animals roaring

before heaving up a dark brown liquid. I try to rejoin the circle, but I'm pinned to the ground by unimaginably violent vomiting.

On a purely physical level, the body is said to be purging itself of toxins found in red meat, wine, sugar, coffee, salt and other foods that the shamans recommend you abstain from for two weeks before a ceremony. Spiritually, they believe the medicine releases pent-up negative energy.

If that is the case, I have far more to get off my chest than I imagined, for the shrieking, deep-throat vomiting is so brutal that my vocal cords fail me and I lose my voice for a fortnight. My jaws and temples feel as if they are about to shatter and several times I see my own face and the ground turn into the fanged muzzles of wild animals roaring at one another. Not far from me, two foreigners, on their knees, sob uncontrollably.

In a reaction I foolishly read as strength of character, a voice inside me starts taunting the force behind the purge. "Is that all you have? F*** you! C'mon, give me more, give it to me!" it shouts. The backlash against my presumptuousness will follow two days later.

Finally, the purging abates, allowing me to regain my place in the circle, where the shamans' chanting has reached a crescendo. Visions and messages come and go, sounds turn three-dimensional. Everything feels connected. I think I see my mother, who recently passed away — a heartbreakingly emotional time. I think of my family, confirmation in my mind that my children and long-standing partner are the true meaning of life, my only anchor.

Four hours into the ceremony, the chants cease, Ninawa offers participants a second helping and I join the queue again. The shamans and the village women sing until dawn, accompanied by shakers, drums and a guitar. Like others in the circle, I cry several times for no apparent reason, overwhelmed by raw emotion.

It is daylight by the time the ceremony ends, amid much hugging. I return to the village, where we will stay for another four days, and I resolve never to try ayahuasca again. It has been an interesting experience, but one that only confirmed what I have long thought of as life's main priorities.

"So you haven't understood a f***** thing," says my friend, the ayahuasca veteran, when I share my thoughts. After talking to Yuri, another friend and a first-timer like me, I realise how superficial my experience was. He tells me he had gone into the ceremony wanting to re-examine

some of his life's key moments. From the instant the drug had kicked in, he had seen the Madre. She had given him a whole new perspective on some of his past. While I had been forced to leave the circle many times, Yuri had been so focused he had not moved an inch — at one point I had to check he was still breathing.

The next day, I realise I have to try ayahuasca again. I speak to Txana, who first drank the brew aged five and studied for 15 years to become a shaman. He is only 32, but as with Ninawa, who is 36, there is something about him that transcends age — an inner peace that emanates a visceral wisdom. Wearing a full head of coloured feathers, his face painted in bright-red patterns, he sits by the largest and most beautiful tree I have ever seen, a giant samauma, thought to be thousands of years old.

"My parents and family always took ayahuasca," says Txana. "They said that the medicine could help you see things. It can help you dream of the future and see all the important things in the world. When I drink the medicine and the force arrives, it can be scary. You feel you are connecting with the forces of nature, the leopards, the sun, thunderstorms, the wind. The medicine is like our father, it teaches and guides us."

I ask him if he ever feels anger. He pauses, then breaks into a large grin. "No, never. I don't know what anger is." The comment strikes me, but I will only come to fully understand it after my second ceremony.

Until five years ago, Txana had never been beyond the rainforest. He has travelled the world since, accepting invitations from abroad to spread knowledge of ayahuasca. "The clash of cultures doesn't affect me. The thing that scares me most is traffic, being hit by a car," he says.

I tell Txana that I have decided to drink again tonight. I ask him if I should go into the ceremony with an intention, a clear issue I wish to address. He fixes me with his gaze. "You are a brave man with a kind heart," he says unexpectedly. "Go in with an intention." He hands me a large eagle feather and says: "Take this with you to use as your sword." I leave confused, but determined to follow his advice. Later, I hear other guests talk of battling one's ego during a ceremony, and shredding it to pieces with an imaginary sword.

There is no doubting my intention. I think I'm generally a good, honest person, but I have one truly reprehensible problem: a violent temper. I have never hurt someone close to me, but more than once I have come close to it, enough to scare them and myself. It doesn't happen often, but it is far beyond anger-management treatment. The tale of the pleasant fellow who loses it and turns up to the office with a machinegun — that could be me. It's not funny. I do ➤➤➤

not know the origins of this most toxic trait, but I would like to shed it.

That evening, Ninawa tells the gathering that this will be a healing ceremony — the tougher kind. I'm nervous, even more so when he hands me a dose twice as large as the ones I drank in my first ceremony. I take my place in the circle and silence falls as the last in the queue drinks. We sit and wait for the force to come. Twenty minutes in, as the chanting of the *icaros* begins, I feel horribly nauseous. I quickly break from the circle and make for the banana trees to purge. I am vexed — I'm going to spend too much of the ceremony vomiting; it's pointless, I think. I'll miss out on a profound experience.

And then, the force hits me.

If you have ever been very unwell — too high — after taking any drug, then you know the feeling. Take that and multiply it a hundred times. Push it to the greatest extreme you can imagine. My heart and mind are racing; I am vomiting and squirming on the ground, getting up and stumbling again. There is panic and fear and a sense of absolute helplessness. I am truly desperate for it to stop and cannot imagine ever making it through. The chanting becomes unbearably intense. The force only increases. It is as if I am connecting with nature, as Txana put it, but a furious nature that unleashes all its power against me. It crushes me and slams me into the ground a thousand times. I feel annihilated. I am stripped of all willpower, even the power to surrender.

I lie still on my side in the dirt, a few yards away from the circle, utterly destroyed, broken and defeated. Suddenly, in a flash, everything seems crystal clear.

"I get it. F***, I get it!" my mind screams. "There's your answer. *This* is real power, *This* is pure strength — not you with your pathetic little violence. Who the f*** do you think you are? You are nothing. This force will rip you to shreds. Remember it well, the next time you feel rage. Sear it into your brain."

I recall my thoughts during and after my first ceremony. "You want more? Bring it on!" I had defiantly cried out. There you have it, this is more, you idiot! You think you know what's right, what matters in life — who the hell are you?!

I am still clutching the feather Txana gave me. Profoundly chastened, I think of his description of me as brave and can see clearly that the opposite is true. Yeah, right, I think, recalling his advice to use the feather as a sword. How? With what willpower?

I have melted into the ground. Suddenly, it has become transparent. It opens up and takes on infinite depth. My body evaporates into thin air and blends in with the other elements. There is no "I" left, and in an extraordinarily liberating sensation, I feel at one with nature — I am one of millions of spirits coalesced into a single entity.



SPECIAL BREW Ayahuasca is made by macerating and boiling Amazonian plants into a bitter brown liquid. It typically induces violent vomiting followed by powerful hallucinations

I know that what I am confronting is my ego. The message is overwhelmingly powerful: you, with your opinionated arrogance and bullishness are nothing. Your ego is a dead weight. It is insignificant and a hindrance — free yourself of it.

I thought of people close to me whose egos I have clashed with, of wealthy and seemingly powerful people I have met, and of myself. For the first time, we all suddenly look pitiful, irrelevant, a spit in the ocean.

A couple of hours later, as the force loosens its grip, I crawl back to the circle, emotionally and physically drained but vividly conscious that I have experienced the hardest and yet most humbling and enlightening moments of my life.

"That's great, I'm really happy for you," my entrepreneur friend says when I tell him of my experience. "But the thing with ayahuasca is that in each subsequent ceremony, everything you think you understood so vividly will seem like bullshit, replaced by deeper knowledge and understanding. That's the real danger it poses for people on a path to self-enlightenment: there is no end, no linear path to follow. It's a labyrinth in which you can easily lose yourself for ever."

When we leave two days later — this time by helicopter — the whole village comes out, dancing and singing to greet the bird in the sky and see us off. I hug the shamans, and as we take off, the canopy of the rainforest stretching as far as the eye can see. I am moved to tears.

Seven months on, the experience feels like a distant dream, but the fresh perspective it gave me is unequivocal. For the first few months afterwards, I often felt an overwhelming sense of wellbeing, almost euphoria, at the wonder of being alive. The experience has not killed my rare outbursts of rage. For me, at least, ayahuasca was not a magic wand. But I still look at other people's ego — and my own — with much amusement.

I am not advocating in favour or against the use of ayahuasca. I see how it can be life-transforming, for the better mostly, but also for the worse. To me, it remains a mystery, an immensely powerful one.

A thoughtful foreigner I met in the jungle, who also tried ayahuasca for the first time and then took part in several ceremonies, recently wrote to me. In the jungle, he told me he had lived through a "death" experience the third time he drank the brew. The hellish and terrifying ordeal is considered one of the ultimate moments on ayahuasca. You live through your death, see your body vanish and decompose in the ground, worms feasting on your skull.

After dying, you are reborn, in theory having buried your ego and demons. Most people do not experience it, regardless of how many times they drink the brew. Those who have say the sheer terror of death is as powerful and profound as the liberation and redemption of the rebirth.

"The trip in the Amazon was a life-transforming experience," wrote the foreigner. "Lots of good and not so good. I'm still processing it all. I think this medicine should be handled much more carefully. It's powerful and can definitely make you a better being, but it can just as easily damage you irreversibly if you are not ready and helped by spiritual specialists. I've seen some examples while there. Very sad."

He explained that the night after we left, he had "died" again in a ceremony that was infinitely harder and more frightening than the infernal one he had told me about in the jungle.

"It took me two days and immense courage to get back on my feet again. I never imagined that could ever happen to a human being. It was such an ordeal that I wished my death a thousand times that night.

"The weird thing is that now I feel more alive than I ever did in my entire life. Strange. Very strange..."

Ayahuasca, "the rope of death", thankfully spared me that ordeal — but now I think I know what he means ■