

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE...  
...TO GIVE UP  
YOUR JOB  
TO BECOME A  
SHAMAN

UNHAPPY AND BURNT OUT, ANNA HUNT TOOK A SABBATICAL IN SOUTH AMERICA. AFTER MEETING AND FALLING FOR A PERUVIAN MEDICINE MAN, SHE DECIDED TO ABANDON HER OLD LIFE AND TRAIN WITH HIM



Anna Hunt, the 'Shaman in stilettos'

I am lying on a lawn in Machu Picchu, in Peru. It is twilight and the Unesco World Heritage Site is closed. I am alone with Maximo Morales. Maximo, an archeologist who has somehow secured us the run of the ruins, is a successful businessman in his forties, speaks six languages, and is one of the best-looking men I have ever met – tall and long-legged, with thick dark hair framing chiselled features and eyes the colour of caramel. He is also a shaman, a medicine man who can heal pain with his bare hands, see into the future and commune with the natural world. Allegedly,

We have just drunk medicine prepared from san pedro, a hallucinogenic cactus that supposedly holds the keys to heaven. So far, though, I've had no glimpses of utopia – just horrible tummy cramps. It's been the same story for a year. "I'm going to extract the pain in your tummy," Maximo says, kneeling beside me. I'm consumed with cynicism, and I'm also annoyed with myself for drinking his strange cactus. But as the shaman puts his gorgeously full lips to my belly, I'm reduced to a self-conscious emotional cocktail. I endeavour to harness a modicum of cool by focusing on my surroundings: the clouds streaming across the muted sky, the wisps of mist spiralling up from the valley below.

One month earlier, my life looked very different. A 29-year-old Cambridge grad turned celebrity interviewer for one of the highest-selling nationals in the country, my urban lifestyle was defined by partying, gossip and shopping. But underneath the successful veneer, all was not well. Stress and urban ennui had resulted in burnout, and I was unfulfilled, unhappy and ill. Despite repeated trips to my GP,

nothing could shift my chronic tummy cramps, and in the end he told me what I already knew: "You need some time out."

I'd kicked off my three-month sabbatical with a trek around Peru. My travelling companion, a good friend and native of Peru, claimed a shaman could cure my burnout. I greeted her proposition with cynical disdain, an image of a man in a loincloth, living alone in a yurt, flashing into my mind. But eventually I agreed to spend four days with him after she flew back to London.

Maximo has finished the extraction. Gingerly I stand up. To my amazement my tummy is calm and pain free. My experience defies logic: how can pain just disappear? But as I follow Maximo through the moonlit ruins, I realise that I've touched on a world that – and a medicine man who – is utterly compelling.

Four days become two weeks. Each day, Maximo introduces me to a new shamanic technique – from herbal tinctures to rattling ceremonies – and for the first time in months I feel healthy and energetic.

Two weeks become three months as I find myself drawn deeper into his strange and seductive world. We visit an indigenous community in the snow-covered high Andes, followed by a tribe in the humid depths of the Amazon rainforest, to study their shamanic traditions. We trek to secret archeological sites, where Maximo explains his country's history, setting the healing traditions in context. We see jaguars, giant otters, tarantulas the size of my hand and bottle-green hummingbirds.

The shaman is the most intriguing man I've ever met. He's an outrageous flirt, too. Although there is no physical expression to our relationship – yet – I'm starting to fall in love. My ardour increases when he says that he's chosen me as his student.



I LEARN HOW TO MOVE ENERGY INTO AND THROUGH MY BODY – A FEAT THAT CULMINATES IN A SINGLE EVENING OF TANTRIC BLISS

"Every shaman teaches a single apprentice," he says. It is a tradition that has continued in strict secrecy, uninterrupted, for 40,000 years.

Like everyone else, though, I need to earn a living and, at the end of my sabbatical, I return to London. I think about Maximo every day, but I talk myself round with palliatives rooted in common sense, and throw myself into work. For a year, I fight an internal battle between my heart and my head. Until, one evening, I realise I have no fight left.

I call Maximo and we agree that I will return to Peru to study with him for six months with a view to writing a book – the only way I feel I can responsibly take more time out – and, I'm hoping, embark on a passionate affair.

Cue an intense period of working like a dog and cutting all financial fat from my life, ditching suppers out and all impulse buys. I feel isolated from my friends and family, whose fears at the risk I'm taking reflect my own. But I know that if I don't follow my instinct – my heart – I'll always regret it.

I arrive to discover that there's another apprentice: a middle-aged woman from Arizona called Maureen. Even worse, I barely see Maximo for the first two months of my stay. I'm devastated. I feel like a naive fool who's given up her life on a whim. When I press Maximo about his elusiveness, he tells me he's tied up with tax problems – something that seems far too pedestrian for a man I have placed on such a pedestal. When I mention Maureen, he simply tells me to ignore her. Crushed, for a while I flounder, caught between a yearning to give up and go home with my tail between my legs and a determination to make the apprenticeship work.

I'm saved by my friendship with Ken, a sixtysomething Scottish aristocrat who happens to be my neighbour. My respect for Maximo and my trust in him have taken a battering, but Ken's straight-talking common sense restores my self-belief, and I set about learning the shamanic arts for myself. I interview every shaman I can find – 35 in all. I read every shamanic tome I can lay my hands on. And, finally, I head to the jungle alone, to study with Don Inocencio,

a supremely powerful shaman in his eighties, who started learning the shamanic arts aged just 11.

Living in a simple wooden hut, with no electricity, running water or creature comforts, I harness all my courage to drink ayahuasca, the "vine of the soul", a potent hallucinogen. I discover an inner peace and strength I never knew I had. I also discover the extent of my own shamanic talent.

I return to discover Maureen has left, defeated by Maximo's games. By contrast, my tenacity has won his respect. My studies resume in earnest. Shamans work on the principle that everything with form consists of energy, and if you can move energy as shamans do, you can alter life itself.

I learn to see and move energy using my bare hands. This enables me to relieve clients of physical pain. I learn how to prepare the cactus that lets me shift clients' more deep-seated emotional malaise. And I learn how to move energy into and through my body – a feat that culminates in a single evening of Tantric bliss with Maximo, my beautiful shaman, my teacher, my lover. I haven't forgotten the games, but I have rediscovered what I love about him, and I have come to a place of peace, and power. No longer infatuated, I see him as a human being with the same weaknesses as the rest of us.

I return to London without a clue of how to employ what I've learnt, but I can't afford to extend my stay. A year later, I run a workshop for a group of professional actors and dancers, and that leads to me designing my first retreat. Today, I have an international portfolio of clients and I use shamanism to help overworked, underfulfilled professionals – just like the old me.

Every year I visit Maximo to continue my studies, but London is my home and where I can best satisfy my aspirations, both spiritual and material. This is being the Shaman in Stilettos. ●