



Ayahuasca tourism in the Amazon region

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A - Study Design; **B** - Data collection;
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Abstract:	The aim of this study is to present the phenomenon of Ayahuasca tourism among Europeans travelling to the Amazon region and to introduce the reader to basic information about the little-known tradition of Ayahuasca consumption in our area, as well as the rituals and ceremonies that accompany it. The work presents introductory information on Ayahuasca and information on the decoction itself, i.e. the origin of the name, the ingredients, as well as the mode of action and history. It also discusses its treatment in the health dimension i.e. as an aid to the treatment of diseases of the body and spirit. It is also about the assumptions and objectives of the research. The results of a questionnaire survey of people for whom Ayahuasca was their main destination in the Amazon regions are analysed.			
Keywords:	tourism, Ayahuasca, trips			

Introduction

In the first half of the 19th century, 'tourism' was already understood as all travel to places of interest, but also movement for scientific purposes or for pleasure [Warszyńska, Jackowski 1978]. According to W. Hunziker [1951], tourism is: "a set of relations and phenomena that result from the travel and stay of visitors, insofar as settlement and the undertaking of gainful activity do not follow in this connection".

"Tourism - in the broad sense of the word is: the totality of phenomena of spatial mobility, associated with a voluntary, temporary change of the place of stay, rhythm and living environment and coming into personal contact with the visited environment (natural, cultural or social)". [Przeclawski 1996].

According to the Council of the League of Nations, the word tourist is used to describe any person travelling for 24 hours or more, in a country that is not their country of permanent residence [www.mfiles.pl(...) 2018].

In the Compendium of Knowledge on Tourism, the authors suggest understanding the term "tourist" as a person leaving his/her place of permanent residence for a limited period of time, assuming that the decision to travel is voluntary and that he/she is free to choose the destination, pursuing recreational, cognitive, health, entertainment, etc. goals during the trip, representing a demand which is covered by funds from other places [Golemski 2009].

Ayahuasca is an entheogenic plant decoction sanctified and used by the indigenous peoples of the Amazon. Different tribes and cultures use different terms for the Ayahuasca concoction. Luis Eduardo Luna has identified 42 names for the same drink. Examples of these are: caapi, huasca, yagé, natema, pindé, mihi, kahi, bejco de oro [Labate, Araújo 2009].

The most common of the names - ayawasca - comes from the Ketchua language still used today by Indians in the western Amazon and the Andes. 'Aya' means 'soul, spirit, dead', 'huasca' is 'liana, vine, vine'. We can translate the combination of these two words

as 'soul vine' or 'spirit vine' [www.mfiles.pl(...) 2018]. Ayahuasca tea can actually be created from a wide range of plants. It is a bitter decoction prepared by boiling the ingredients for hours. The most popular composition is a combination of Banisteriopsis Caapi vines and the leaves of the Psycotria Viridis shrub. Both plants are found in the Amazon rainforest.

The 'divine decoction' has a predisposition to hyperactivate the brain in its entirety, which stores and modifies emotional memory, sometimes leading to the retrieval of distant, sometimes forgotten memories. This hyperactivation allows to revisit issues that have already been assessed from a completely new perspective. This happens by affecting the amygdala body of the brain, which is the storehouse of emotional memories, especially those that are traumatic and significant to our lives. Ayahuasca also has a strong effect on the insular lobe, which is, so to speak, the bridge that connects our emotionality to our decision-making capacity. This is what makes us take a fresh look at a situation, often a dramatic one, and analyse it once again. For example, if someone has been involved in a tragic car accident in the past, and in the aftermath suffered a psychological trauma manifesting itself in the fear of travelling by car, he or she has the chance to manage his or her trauma [www.mfiles.pl(...) 2018].

Indigenous people use Ayahuasca for a variety of purposes - religious, medicinal and as a means of creating visions, which are important in preventing evil spirits and jungle 'beast' attacks, as well as in planning hunts. It is inferred that before the European colonisation of New World forest lands, magical decoction was widely used for witchcraft, religious rituals, healing and contact with supernatural forces [Dobkin de Rios 1972]. The traditional Indian Ayahuasca ceremony is conducted by a shaman, or curandero. In Spanish, the word curandero literally means 'healer'. He is a person connected to nature and the plant spirits through which he heals the body and soul of the sick person. Depending on the needs, he takes his patient for a period of days, weeks or months to his place of residence. During this period, the shaman - through conversation, cleansing and a special diet - prepares the sick person to receive the decoction and performs rituals. Based on the above definition, Ayahuasca, due to the fact that it is a psychoactive substance and also contains illegal substances in its composition, is defined as a drug in most countries.

The term drug tourism refers to a phenomenon in which a tourist's experience involves the fully conscious consumption and use of drugs that are illegal in the place he or she is visiting or in the country of origin" [Uriely, Belhassen 2005].

Trips during which tourists consume Ayahuasca are therefore ones that - according to the above definition - classify as drug tourism. Ayahuasca is generally recognised as a drug in, for example, Europe or the United States, and is illegal, prohibited by law. In indigenous Yagé cultural circles - on the contrary - it is a medicine and a gift of nature, not a degrading drug. Ayahuasca tourism refers to the phenomenon of travel where the purpose or one of the tourist's experiences is to participate in a ceremony or to consume Ayahuasca on their own.

The term refers to travel in general for this purpose, not just to South America. Due to the worldwide popularisation of Ayahuasca - as well as more liberal drug laws in some countries - its properties can be experienced elsewhere. Centres that specialise in organising so-called workshops, where Ayahuasca is administered Ayahuasca and Rapeé, among others, can also be found in Europe (e.g. Czech Republic). Tourists most often travel to the Amazon to taste the decoction of the "divine plant". Such an experience at the 'source' during a traditional ceremony performed by Curanderos seems more authentic. This phenomenon has its advantages and disadvantages, because, due to tourist demand, the number of self-proclaimed shamans has increased, as well as people who are simply engaged in selling the drink in plastic bottles at markets, etc.

Material and method

The aim is to analyse the phenomenon of ayahuasca tourism among Europeans travelling to the Amazon region. The specific objectives of the study were to:

1. To identify the reasons and intentions for which Europeans seek experiences of this kind.
2. To determine the level of factual knowledge prior to the consumption of Ayahuasca.
3. To determine which country is the most popular among tourists.
4. To determine whether Ayahuasca was the main purpose of the trip.
5. To determine how the people concerned most often found out about the centres/places they visited.
- 6 To estimate the duration of stay in the centres, as well as the average expenditure incurred by European tourists.
7. To determine whether this way of spending time met the tourists' expectations, and whether it could be the reason for another trip to the Amazon.

The survey was conducted in April and May 2018. A total of 108 people of different genders, ages, religions, education and occupation were surveyed. The survey was targeted at Europeans, and this was a prerequisite for completing the survey. Respondents were members of thematic groups on social media an online forum.

The research on the practice of ayahuasca tourism by Europeans was conducted by means of a survey questionnaire analysis. The survey sheet consisted of 14 closed questions. The purpose of the first five questions was to characterise the respondent, while the remaining nine questions were used to identify the most frequently visited country, motive for the trip, preparation, costs incurred by the tourist, etc.

Results

Women in the study made up 42.6% of the respondents and men 57.4%. The age structure varied, but an overwhelming number indicated their age as 27-39 years, accounting for 57.4% of respondents. The proportion of respondents in the 40-50 and 18-26 age groups is comparable. It amounts to 22.2% and 16.7% respectively. The vast majority of respondents - 65.7% described their educational level as higher. The next most common answer was secondary education with a proportion of 21.3%. The smallest group of respondents were those with a PhD and primary education.

Respondents were asked to indicate whether Ayahuasca consumption was the main reason for their trip to the Amazon region. There was a slight advantage with a score of 55.6% to 44.4% for those for whom this was not the main purpose of their trip (Figure 1).

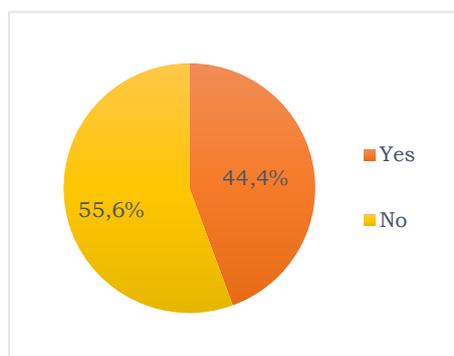


Figure 1. Distribution of respondents by whether, Ayahuasca was the main reason for travel.

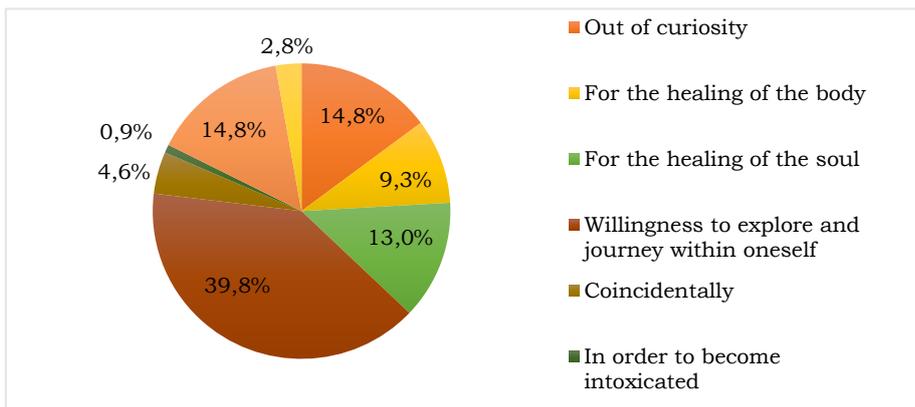


Figure 2. Distribution of respondents by their reason for attending the ceremony.

An overwhelming majority (41.7%) of people identified Peru as the country they had been to during the ceremony. This is followed by Bolivia (19%), Colombia (13%), Brazil (12%), Ecuador (9.3%) and Venezuela with 1.9%. Another country was ticked by 4.6% of respondents (Figure 3).

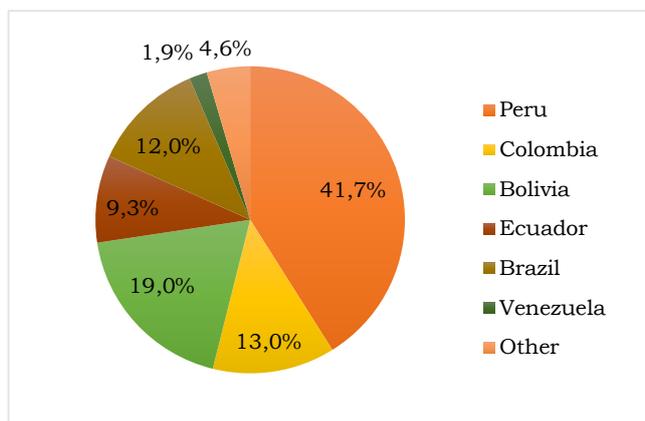


Figure 3. Distribution of respondents by country visited.

Figure 4 illustrates the responses to the question on sources of information about places to attend the ceremony. It shows that it was the Internet (discussion forums, websites) with a score of 41.7% that most often provided the information sought. Already locally in the country visited, it was obtained by 29.6% of people. The next most common sources were friends (18.5%), information obtained by chance (8.3%) and a public announcement with a result of only 1.9% (Figure 4).

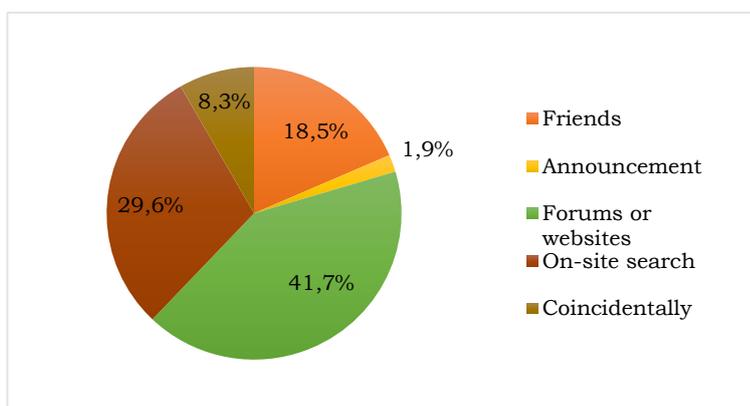


Figure 4. Breakdown of respondents by how they found out about the location of their ceremony.

As many as 58.3% of the respondents described their level of knowledge about Ayahuasca prior to the ceremony as high. The answer - medium was chosen by 30.6%, low by 6.5% and 4.6% described themselves as having no information in this area (Figure 5).

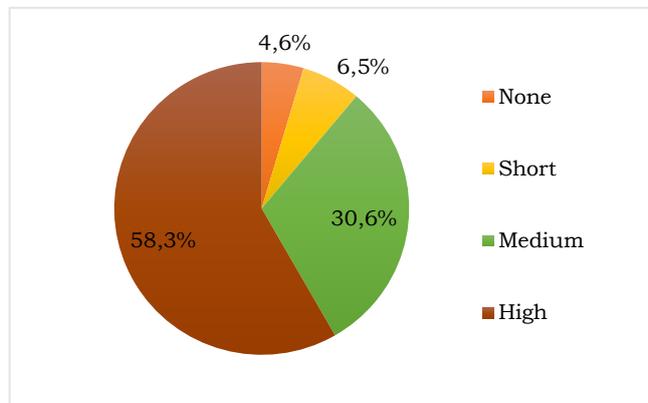


Figure 5. Distribution of respondents by how they rated their level of knowledge about Ayahuasca prior to the ceremony.

The answers to the question defining the length of time respondents spent at the ritual site - shows that the majority of people (33.3%) interviewed spent 3 days at the ceremony site. One day was spent by 26.9%, about a week by 18.5% and more than a week by 21.3% (Figure 6).

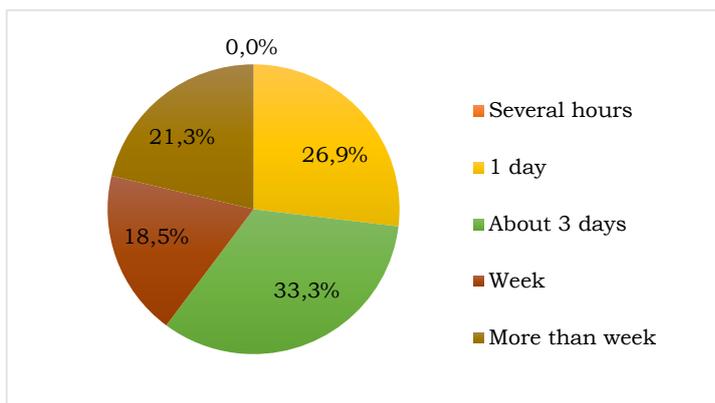


Figure 6. Distribution of respondents by how much time they spent at the ceremony site.

In the next item, respondents were asked to approximate the cost of attending the ceremony. The majority of respondents - 42.6% - spent €200 or more for this purpose. Half as much - around €100 - was spent by 25.9% of those surveyed. Respondents who paid €50 and €20 represented 19.4% and 9.3% respectively. The properties of Ayahuasca were experienced at no cost by 2.8% of respondents (Figure 7).

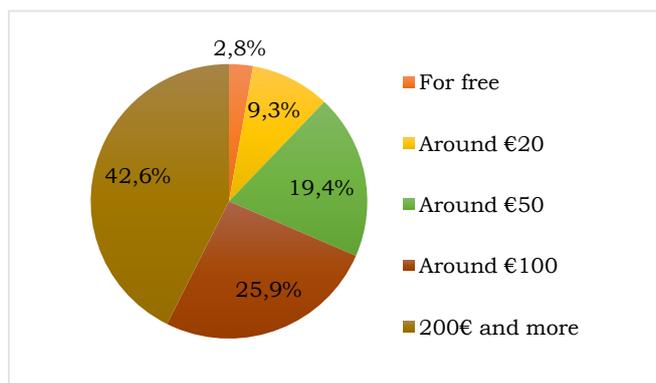


Figure 7. Distribution of respondents by what costs they incurred for the ceremony.

Respondents were asked whether the way they spent their time i.e. taking part in the ceremony was satisfactory to them. Almost all respondents - 92.6% answered in the affirmative, while only 7.4% were dissatisfied (Figure 8).

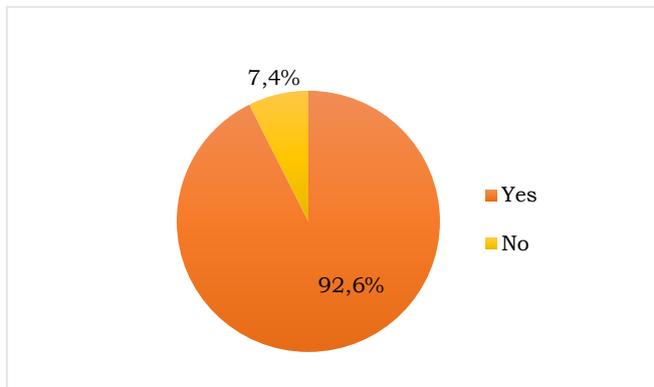


Figure 8. Distribution of respondents according to whether this way of spending time met their expectations.

In the last question, only 7.3% would not choose to travel again to consume Ayahuasca. Those declaring a renewed desire or allowing for the possibility of doing so in the future represent comparably large groups - 46.8% and 45.9% of respondents, respectively (Figure 9).

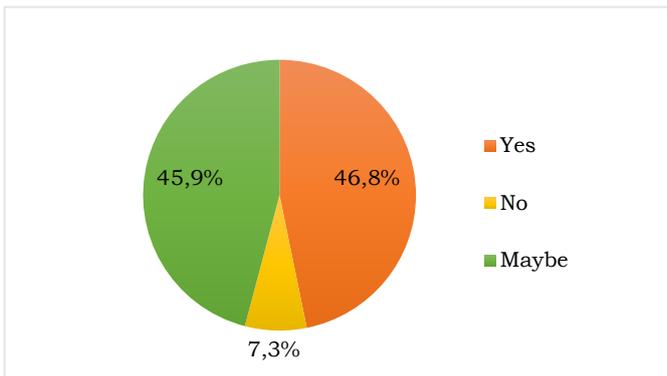


Figure 9. Distribution of respondents by whether they would choose to travel again for this purpose.

Discussion

Ayahuasca has been continuously attracting crowds of tourists from all over the world to the Amazon region for several years, where there has been an increase in the number of centres offering stays combined with ceremonies during which the 'divine concoction' is taken. The main task was to investigate the phenomenon of 'ayahuasca tourism' among Europeans who had visited the Amazon region in the past and used the services of the centres there.

Electronic survey questionnaires were used to conduct the study, which were posted on thematic social media groups and an online forum. In fact, it is not possible to conclusively refute or confirm the hypothesis that Ayahuasca was the main destination of the people surveyed. A difference of 11.2% is not significant with a proportion of 108 questionnaires, but a few more people state that Ayahuasca was a concomitant point of travel.

The most popular destination among the respondents was Peru. This is most likely due to the widest tourist offer for stays combined with Ayahuasca use. On the Internet, one can find a multitude of proposals from individuals, centres or travel agencies that organise 'retreats', 'therapies' or 'workshops' combined with multi-day excursions to Cuzco or Machu Picchu. Almost all those who took part in the survey were satisfied with this way

of spending their time, and almost half expressed a desire to travel again for this very purpose, which may forecast an ever-growing interest and development in this branch of tourism.

Ayahuasca tourism has both advantages and disadvantages. The positive aspects include, first and foremost, alternative possibilities - for us Europeans - to treat illnesses of the body and spirit, to learn about the culture and traditions of a particular tribe or region, or even to increase awareness and discover one's true inner self. Another positive side of this phenomenon is that it is usually accompanied by economic growth and an opportunity to earn money for the local population. Tourists spend considerable money not only on participating in the ceremony, but also on accommodation, food, transport, souvenirs, etc., creating a demand for new jobs.

Among the main dangers of this form of tourism are those related to the improper performance of the ceremonies - their taking place under the "protection" of self-styled shamans or the consumption of Ayahuasca on their own. Such situations can worsen a person's mental as well as physical state, but also lead to spiritual dangers, i.e. the influence of evil forces. Another disadvantage of Ayahuasca tourism is the danger of environmental degradation through the process of overexploitation of the plants needed to prepare the decoction. A final significant disadvantage is the likelihood of desecration of the 'drink of the gods' and the rituals associated with it, caused by a lack of respect or improper intentions on the part of visitors towards the indigenous culture.

Conclusion

It is very difficult to make a clear judgment on whether this is a positive phenomenon or negative. In fact, it is impossible, and settlements on the subject are rather meaningless, as they are only the individual opinions of people, each with a different view of the world and life. The subject of Ayahuasca, despite its long history, is still difficult to guess, and research on it is not very widespread, nor is it done very often at all. Obviously, this makes it difficult to gather information about it, but it also leaves a wide, unexplored field for researchers. This does not, however, celebrate the dynamic development of the situation, as it is probably in the interests of the authorities and governments, who are the ones most likely to allocate money to scientific research, not to fathom the knowledge about Ayahuasca, how the brain works under its influence, and its illegality.

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