

# TRADITIONAL MEDICINE, ARTS, AND CULTURE IN THE PERUVIAN AMAZON



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Lamas, Peru is a small town in the Peruvian Amazon that has been coined “Pueblo de colores, tierra del cacao,” or, “village of colors, land of the chocolate.” It is the capital of folklore in the region—a place rich in history and full of people who proudly uphold and share their traditions. I arrived in Lamas the first week of June and was immediately drawn to the vibrant town full of street art, an abundance of small plazas and parks, and great food. For a few months I immersed myself in the life of a Lamista.

In conjunction with the Runa

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Foundation, I worked with the small community of Huapo to create a medicinal plant handbook and an intervention plan that detailed how to help families obtain medicinal plants and use them in daily life. Huapo is a 30-minute drive from Lamas, and is home to about 20 families that subsist primarily on farming. A community health assessment found that information about medicinal plants is being lost, and young people are not necessarily interested in maintaining this knowledge.

My goal was to help combat this problem. I found that people in the Amazon understand how to use plants and when to use drugs; there is a fluid balance and we have a lot to learn from that. I gathered information from multiple sources and created a guide that resembles a cookbook, with a list of plants and how they grow at the beginning, followed by a section of remedies organized by illness. I then created an intervention plan in English and Spanish that included where to get each plant, a workshop guide,



a handbook dissemination guide, and a full budget. This implementation manual was used by fall interns to start bringing medicinal plants back into the homes of community members.

Although traditional medicine was my main focus,

I did much more than that. I lived at the headquarters of a coffee and chocolate cooperative, where they have dorm rooms for farmers that have to travel from far away to bring their crop to a central factory and attend meetings and workshops. My local advisor, Leslie, ran workshops here on gender and women’s empowerment. I helped her out with some, just to be an extra set of hands, but it ended up being one of the most impactful parts of my summer. It opened my eyes to the importance of



teaching concepts like gender, sex, and basic women’s rights to both men and women. These are things that I have always been exposed to, but seeing adults absorb this information for the first time was incredibly powerful.

I also painted.

Inspired by the colorful street art that decorates Lamas, I decided I wanted to paint a mural. After a quick meeting with local government officials, I had a wall! Over the course of the summer I cleaned and primed the wall, sketched, painted, varnished and completed a giant mural of three pineapples. The owner of the co-op where I was living heard about my mural, and asked me to paint coffee plants in the sitting room of his coffee shop. I love that I got to leave a part of me behind in Lamas.

I was also able to enjoy living in an environment completely different from Carolina. Life moves slowly in the jungle heat, and at first that was hard for me. By the end of the summer I had embraced it fully, and I have tried to bring some of this mindset back to school. My time in Lamas happened to fall over the 20-day festival called ‘La Patrona,’ a huge fiesta to commemorate a battle over

the ownership of the town that happened in 1212, and to honor



La Patrona de la Santa Cruz de los Motilones de Lamas. Each neighborhood sets up a tent with food and drinks, and on certain days everyone runs and dances through the streets, visiting each tent. People from all around Peru come to watch. It is an amazing spectacle, and by the end I was running up and down the hills, sweating like crazy, with all the people I had come to know. Opening myself up to these people and these experiences allowed me to gain so much more than public health knowledge, and I know that this will help me with whatever I decide to do next.

So thank you, Mr. Burch, for this experience that taught me the importance of different kinds of healthcare, about what things are needed (or not needed) to be happy and successful, about being patient, and that empty time is not wasted time. I learned the value of celebrating culture and sharing joy, and how lucky I am to have the education and opportunities that I have.

