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✦ Wellness Edition

EXPERIENCES

SHAMAN OR SHOWMAN?

At destination spas around the world, a new generation of mystics is dusting off ancient rituals that promise to revive and rejuvenate. **KATE DONNELLY** investigates whether these self-styled gurus are hucksters or true healers.

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Clockwise from top left: The spa pool at Miraval Arizona; the shaman-led *Marry Oneself* ceremony at Rosewood Mayakoba, on Mexico's Riviera Maya; singing bowls at Miraval Arizona.

IN A COOL EVENING last spring at the venerable Miraval Arizona wellness resort in Tucson, I heard a rustling as someone slid an envelope under my door. Inside was a five-page syllabus for something called Spirit Flight, which claimed to be a “life-changing Shamanic ceremony of purification, liberation, and rebirth.”

I raised an eyebrow. These days, it seems like everyone has a personal mystic—and the hospitality industry is taking note. Miami's Faena Hotel offers healing rituals developed by Carlos Gomez, a Mexican shaman, and Big Sur's Post Ranch Inn hosts one-on-one sessions with its longtime



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT: COURTESY OF ROSEWOOD; COURTESY OF MIRAVAL RESORTS (2)



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Meditating poolside
at Rosewood
Mayakoba.

Kindred Spirits

These hotels and resorts offer shamanic healing programs that incorporate ancient traditions.

MIRAVAL ARIZONA, TUCSON

Shaman Tim Frank's 100-minute Spirit Flight (\$475) combines massage and acupuncture with drumming and a spiritual cleanse. Frank's 50-minute Samadi Healing Ceremony (\$300) blends in reflexology and Reiki. miraval.arizona.com; doubles from \$1,078, all-inclusive.

ROSEWOOD MAYAKOBA, CANCÚN, MEXICO

The hotel's personally customized Marry Oneself Journey, led by shaman Fernanda Montiel, is a multiday experience that ends with a commitment ceremony. rosewoodhotels.com; four-night Marry Oneself Journey from \$5,292 per person.

FAENA HOTEL, MIAMI

Tierra Santa Healing House, the hotel spa, offers treatments created by shaman Carlos Gomez. Tree of Life Vibrations (\$400) is a 110-minute hot-stone massage enhanced by sound; the 90-minute Sacred Connection Ritual (\$500) is a four-handed massage. faena.com; doubles from \$495.

POST RANCH INN, BIG SUR, CALIFORNIA

Book a one-hour shaman session (\$315) with resident mystic Jon Rasmussen at this resort overlooking the Pacific coast, then add on a purifying fire ceremony or a drum ritual. post.ranchinn.com; doubles from \$995.

shaman, Jon Rasmussen. These practitioners act as intermediaries between the physical and spiritual, inviting us to face roadblocks like fear and grief. Though the word *shaman* might conjure images of mysterious figures speaking in tongues, today's shamans often work in cities and wear everyday clothes.

Even though I had arrived at Miraval wanting something beyond yoga and facials, I wondered if I was ready to buy into the hype. But I'm spiritually adrift in these strange times, and eager to uncover new methods of self-discovery. The next morning, my curiosity led me to a canvas yurt for my Spirit Flight. I was greeted by the charismatic Tim Frank, a trained naturopath who is Miraval's resident shaman. For the next 100 minutes, he said, we would be doing "a reboot on the hard drive of your body, spirit, and consciousness." Perhaps sensing my skepticism, Tim, who conceived the ceremony 15 years ago, told me that he had learned his trade from his mother and aunt, both healers. His godfather, Tim added, was a Cherokee medicine man. "He said that if you meet someone promising to heal you, walk away. There's a fine line between shaman and showman." True shamans take a humble approach.

To start the session, Tim helped me explore my fears—of aging, of creative risk-taking, of never falling in love. We set "intentions" to clear these blocks, which he followed up with some spiritual hygiene, waving smoking bundles of sweetgrass and sage to rid the room of negative energy. Then he filled a shell with alcohol, which he set fire to before quickly pouring the flames onto his T-shirt and jeans. "Everything is cleared by fire," he explained. He said that intense focus and pure intentions keep him from burning himself.

The room was a sultry 107 degrees, the optimal temperature for the deep-tissue massage Tim gave me using lomilomi, a Hawaiian technique employing long strokes that are believed to stimulate the nervous system.

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He followed this with an abbreviated acupuncture session. A moment after he finished, there came a flurry of sound. Tim was chanting and playing drums, flutes, and rattles. I felt exhausted and tranquil. "I've given up on trying to figure out why or how this works," Tim admitted.

Four months later at Rosewood Mayakoba, a resort 30 minutes south of Cancun on Mexico's Riviera Maya, I took part in a different kind of shaman-led treatment. The hotel offers a three-day retreat called the Marry Oneself Journey. On a deck beside a cenote, I met with Fernanda Montiel, the hotel's shaman, petite and swathed in a red caftan. Incense burned in a small chalice. "Most of us are looking for answers in the wrong places," Fernanda told me.

Gently tapping various parts of my body with a wooden arrow, she pointed out areas where I hold my emotions. For example, I carry stress in my knees; to relieve this, I need to bend them and learn to be more flexible, both physically and mentally. Her underlying message was that I need to engage in more self-love. "By connecting with your emotions, you strengthen your

relationships with others," she said. She chanted in her native Nahuatl language and played music on singing bowls, drums, and shells. A black-and-yellow bird landed on a branch, perching front-row for the ceremony. Fernanda grinned. "You have powerful ancestors," she said.

We stood before an altar scattered with rose petals and palm fronds. "This is a commitment with your own heart," she said quietly, before reciting a series of vows that I dutifully repeated. In a few minutes, it was official—I was mine. Fernanda draped a Mayan necklace around me, explaining that it grants protection. Then she gave me homework: dancing, reading, drawing mandalas, and meditating.

In the ensuing weeks, I've leaned in to my fears—pausing to identify what scares me and to accept the uncertainty of things. I find myself acknowledging the importance of healing ceremonies. "We get so caught up in our responsibilities and the roles we play that we forget who we are," I remember Tim saying. Shamans teach us to be present, and in today's warp-speed world, that's a critical start. ●