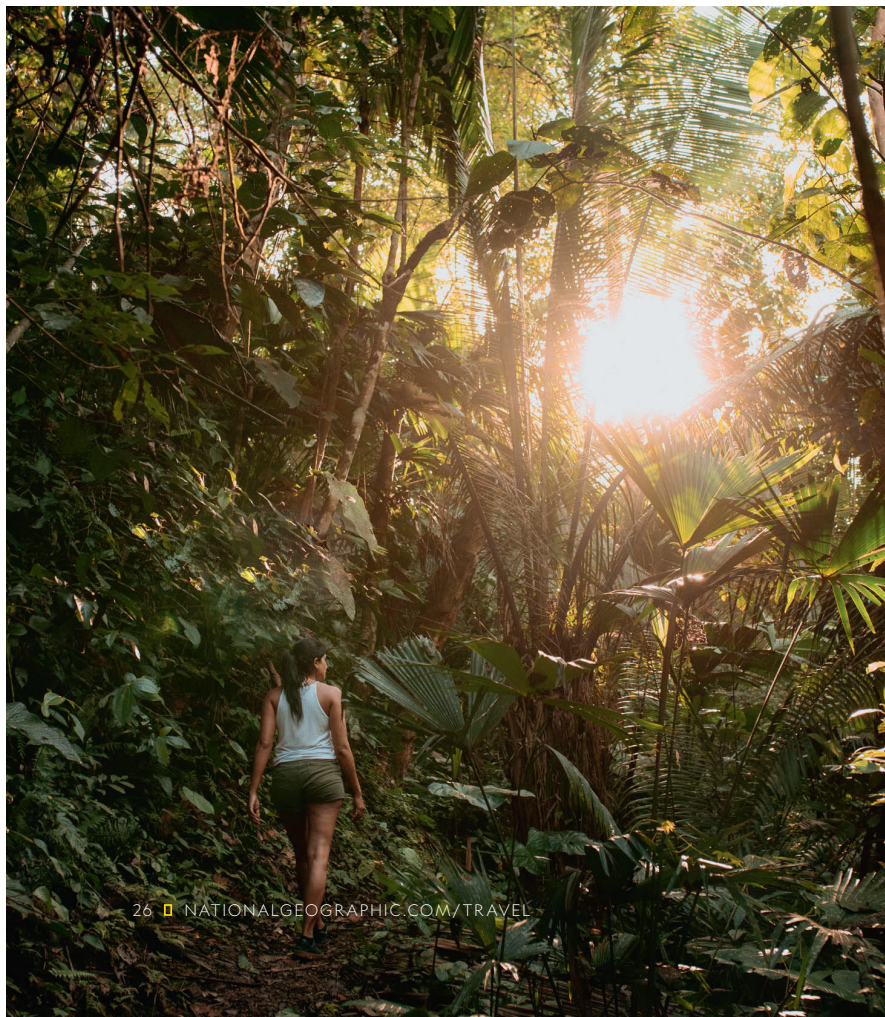




RULES OF THE **RAINFOREST**

In Peru's Amazon, Indigenous women are opening their communities to visitors and sharing traditions shaped by centuries of living alongside the rainforest. From cultivating medicinal plants and embracing sacred trees to crafting pottery using ancestral techniques, the way of life they reveal casts the forest as healer, teacher and home

WORDS: JESSICA PRUPAS



There's a flash of red down the road. We've already been driving for hours through the Peruvian Amazon and, at first, I think my bleary eyes are deceiving me. But as we crawl further down this long dirt strip — flanked by pineapple fields dotted with straw-hatted workers — a woman appears, her crimson dress looking like a burning flame. As we approach, I notice a cascade of necklaces across her chest. Around her waist, a belt adorned with snail shells — strung vertically like a beaded curtain — clinks and clacks as she extends her arms in greeting. “Welcome to the Nuwas Forest,” she says in Spanish.

This is Margarita Cumbia Sawao. She's an elder of the local Awajún community, whose women have become custodians of this once-threatened area of the rainforest. They're one of several groups of Indigenous women in the San Martín region — most of which lies in the upper Peruvian Amazon — that are working to preserve the ancestral knowledge of their people. In recent years, some of these groups have begun welcoming tourists, sharing their customs and traditions with visitors from around the world. In the Nuwas, guests are invited to learn about the Awajún's way of life, which was once threatened by extractive farming practices and illegal settlement by Peruvians who'd migrated here from the Andes.

Margarita ushers me through the entrance to the Nuwas — around us, rows of lush, emerald-green palms and shrubs sway in the tropical breeze. This is where Margarita and other Awajún women grow their native plants, many of which have medicinal purposes. I can smell oregano and lemongrass wafting through the air, both of which are used to treat stomach bugs and colds.

Margarita explains that she moved here 40 years ago from an Awajún village further north. “We had relatives here who we'd visit. The community wanted more Awajún families to settle here so it could secure legal title to the land,” she recalls, her toucan feather earrings bobbing as she speaks. “There was nothing here then. It was all forest.” Margarita and two other women asked the community chief if they could use a remote plot to grow medicinal plants. “He said, ‘What are you talking about? Why would you want land so far from your house?’ But we persisted.”

The women got to work cultivating this wild patch of the forest. “We all worked really hard. It was a lot of work,” she remembers. Now 26 families live here and the women lead the community,



preserving their people’s ancestral knowledge by growing medicinal plants that are used to cure everything from typhoid to skin infections.

Margarita shows me a tall, leggy plant studded with cylindrical flowers sealed tightly shut. She tells me this vanilla orchid — which flowers for only one day per year and must be pollinated by hand — is revered in her community, often blended into a flu-relieving tea. Awajún women also wear its fragrance to parties, a way to signal to the men that “they’re ready”, she says with a wink. “If a man betrayed his wife, he’d come back smelling of another woman’s vanilla, and she’d know.”

Sacred paths

We climb back into our van and drive deeper into the forest, the open fields turning to wild, knotted thicket as we bump down the road. We pull towards a clearing, where five Awajún women dressed in the traditional garb stand sentry like a row of red, glowing lanterns. “Welcome,” says Nivia Cumbia, smiling brightly at the front of the group. Like Margarita, she wears a tangle of necklaces, which she explains are made from seeds foraged from the Nuwas. Nivia places one over my head that’s threaded with the black-and-red seeds of the huayruro plant, symbols of spiritual protection

Clockwise from right: Vanilla orchids are revered in the Awajún community; the San Martín region is home to thousands of plant species; meandering rivers are the Amazon’s highways; for Awajún communities, rivers provide vital routes for travel and fishing



and good fortune. On each of my cheeks, she paints dots of dye made from the local annatto plant — a custom at Awajún gatherings, where the number of dots are used to signal the wearer's marital status.

We trail the women down a path that follows a sacred route through the Nuwas, each of their steps emitting a chorus of clicking beads, until we reach an enormous tree, its bushy canopy soaring 50 metres above the forest floor. This is the *tsaik*, known as the 'tree of life' to the Awajún. Nivia instructs me to wrap my arms around its great, ridge-carved trunk. "Breathe in and release all the bad," she instructs. The Awajún believe that the *tsaik* washes away negative energy, and so everyone who visits the forest must embrace it before entering. "It fixes everything," she says. "If you're having a problem with your partner, it will fix it."

We continue down the path, dodging tangled vines that block our way. The air is thick with humidity and the smell of burning wood from a distant fire. Greenery explodes from the line of trees that flank our route, rising to the sky like defensive walls. We pause to pay respects to the *guampoo*, its enormous buttress roots looking like they could engulf us. Nivia thumps on one of them, making a loud, hollow sound that cuts through the quiet. "This tree is a home for the spirits of the forest," she says. "When it makes this sound, we know the spirits are happy."

Pushing further down the path, we come to a thatched-roof hut built using woven wild cane, outside of which several Awajún women are waiting to greet us, their faces brightening into warm smiles as we approach. They beckon us inside, where they've laid out a bounty of fresh fruit foraged from the forest, much of it totally unfamiliar to me. Nivia breaks open a prickly cocoa pod and feeds me the fleshy, chewy seeds; there are many varieties of cocoa in the Nuwas, and the Awajún women own and run a chocolate plant nearby. Next, I try the vitamin-rich, savoury *aguaje* — peeling away its fibrous skin to reveal sun-coloured flesh — and the tomato-like *cocona*, an orange-yellow citrus fruit that's used to treat diabetes. "You can find everything you need in the forest," says Nivia.

Before we go, we're called outside so that the Awajún can see us off with a traditional dance. Accompanied by the slow heartbeat of the *tantui* drum — made from a hollowed-out tree trunk — one of the women warbles a traditional love song about a wife longing for her absent husband. We watch as the rest of the group bob and twirl in a circle,

Awajún women wear the fragrance of vanilla orchids to parties, to signal to men that "they're ready", Margerita says with a wink. "If a man betrayed his wife, he'd come back smelling of another woman's vanilla, and she'd know."

the constant clatter of their clothing a percussive rhythm. Earlier, Nivia had told me that the rattle of their clothing is meant to mimic the sound of a waterfall — now, if I close my eyes, it's as though cascades are rushing over the rainforest.

The craft keepers

The next day, we leave our base in Moyobamba — the regional gateway to this part of the Peruvian Amazon — and travel to Chazuta, a small town in the foothills. The journey is perilous at times — switchback roads take us through the thick of the jungle, where greenery-covered cliffs rise around us and plunge into the misty banks below. As we approach the lowlands, mountains give way to farmland and flashes of the Huallaga River appear between trees, glinting in the morning sun.

A sign in the shape of an urn welcomes us to Chazuta — a regional centre for traditional pottery, thanks to the local Indigenous population, which have passed down their ancestral techniques. It's also a hive of activity: vendors hawk bucketfuls of wild, whiskered Amazonian fish; three-wheeled *mototaxis* careen down the narrow streets; fishermen drift down the river on wooden boats, their motors sputtering over the current. The low-rise houses are splashed with vibrant shades of green, blue and pink, fronted by dusty courtyards where children play and street dogs roam.

We come to a stop in front of a long, thatched building. Waiting outside to greet us is a woman wearing a flowing, dusty pink skirt, her hair decorated with coral-coloured flowers. She introduces herself as Consuelo Ríos, a member of the Yana Rumi, a collective of female artisans from Chazuta who are working to preserve the town's artisanal heritage. "*Hola*," she says, opening the gate to a palm-dotted garden and breezy, open-fronted studio. The walls are daubed canary yellow and large, earthen vases — hand-thrown by the

Right: In the wet season, the Amazon River expands so much that it floods the forest floor, turning parts of the rainforest into a giant watery maze





women — decorate every corner. Seated around a table topped with bowls of tropical fruit, Consuelo's family — each also a Yana Rumi — welcomes us: her sister, two aunts, niece and grandmother. They all sport the same uniform as Consuelo, their blouses hand-stitched with geometric floral insignia, which, they tell me, is their family symbol. A similar emblem — in white, red and black, the colours of their ceramics — decorates the wall. Consuelo's grandmother created the original design, based on the wildflowers she'd encountered in the Amazon, then her mother and sister painted the next layers.

Pottery may be what the Yana Rumi is known for, but they produce all manner of traditional crafts. The collective was formed in 2019 out of a desire to bring together the many craftspeople who work in Chazuta to better preserve their ancestral techniques. At the beginning, the Yana Rumi included some men. "But they all left," she says. "The work was too difficult for them."

Each woman returns to her station and picks up where she left off, weaving baskets made of palm-leaf fibre and spinning raw cotton into thread with a hand spindle. Her aunt sits at a traditional loom, folding threads in a rainbow of colours into complex, interlocking designs — a traditional Amazonian technique.

I follow Consuelo to the other end of the studio, where shelves are stacked with tools and giant hemp bags line the floor. These are filled with *shaño*, powder made from crushed pieces of fired pots, which is eventually blended with clay to make it grittier and easier to manipulate. Consuelo shows me how she makes the *shaño* using a giant *maray* — a grindstone that was passed down to her from her grandmother. Sitting on the ground, she rocks it back and forth over shards of pottery, pulverising them into dust.

Next, it's time to mix the clay. Tradition dictates that this is done by foot, and Consuelo persuades me to join in. I take off my shoes and step into the giant trough where the clay is drying after being collected from local riverbanks. "This part is therapeutic," she says, as her sister puts on a mix of *pandilla* music — a frenetic dance genre from the Amazon. "*Baile!*" orders Consuelo, and we stomp and shimmy, mulching the *shaño* into the wet earth.

As the clay squidges between my toes, it becomes smooth and pliant. Consuelo collects some and brings us over to her working table, where the pottery is shaped. "First, you roll it out to take out

the oxygen," she instructs, slamming a handful down and flattening it with her palm. We follow her lead, pushing the cool clay down onto the table until it's a flat circle. Then she demonstrates how to shape the raw material into a vessel by making long, wormlike coils and stacking them on top of the base. "It should look like intestines," she says, before showing us how to smooth out each ridge so that we have a small, oven-ready bowl.

We won't be firing our wares today, though. The traditional process, called *shuntu*, takes up to 13 hours and requires a colossal amount of lumber for a white-hot, open fire. The women begin at two or three in the morning, continually feeding the kiln with wood they've collected from the forest. I wander over to their enormous stone oven, its flames leaping out of the small opening as Consuelo's aunt shovels logs inside. Once the vessels have hardened, they're decorated using natural dyes made from materials from the rainforest. White earth is mixed with yellow earth to make lighter pigments, while black is made from the group's namesake, the *yana rumi* — a local stone that's long been used to give regional crafts their distinctive, glossy look.

Consuelo picks up a *tinaja* (traditional jar) that's been fired, the greyish clay having turned a terracotta red in the process. It's decorated with the same geometric flower motifs I've seen on the women's blouses, daubed with thin brushes made from human hair. Around the rim, Consuelo has also painted three lines — another Yana Rumi signature, representing the three generations who work in the collective.

The sun is setting now, bathing everything — the pottery, the women quietly working away, the flowers on the wall — in a golden light. Watching Consuelo's relatives buzz around the studio, conjuring precious treasures from the raw material of the rainforest, I can feel something else in the room with us: the spirit of her foremothers, guiding the hands of their descendants and keeping their heritage alive. ▣

HOW TO DO IT: To reach San Martín, fly to Lima then catch a regional flight to Tarapoto. For the Nuwas, base yourself at Kantu Garden Lodge (from £79 per night) in the city of Moyobamba. kantulodge.pe. To visit Chazuta, stay at Pumarini Amazon Lodge, near Tarapoto, where prices start from 444 PEN (£97) per night. pumarini.com Amazonian roads can be tricky to navigate, so it's best to hire a local driver. You can do so via San Martín-based tour companies such as Millonarios Travel. millonariostavel.com

Clockwise from top: The Yana Rumi's carved pottery often reflects the natural world, with patterns inspired by rivers, plants, animals and ancestral traditions; all members of the collective wear the same blouse, which is hand-stitched with their family's geometric floral insignia; no two pieces of artwork tell the same story