

SERT

Spiritual Emergency Response Team



Year One

2025-26

Field Notes

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About this project.

SERT (*Spiritual Emergency Response Team*) is an informal, volunteer-run, donation-based initiative that began its activity in May 2025, in the Sacred Valley (Perú). We offer short-term support, guidance, and educational resources to individuals and organisations working with plant medicines and other entheogens, whether they are navigating a challenging moment, wish to strengthen their ethics, safety, and sustainability, or both. What began as a local service is now also available internationally.

This document covers our work through July 2026. It brings together some of our activity and figures from Year One, along with field notes, reflections, and vision for what comes next.

It is shared for informational and educational purposes only, and nothing in it constitutes medical, psychological, or legal advice.

The SERT team
October 21st, 2026.





Bárbara Espina *

Founder & Exec. Director

Editorial

A Heroic Dose of Care

As I figure out where to start writing this piece, a voice immediately comes through, clean as a whistle: "Andean culture is fundamentally agricultural, cyclical, ritual, and celebratory". It's my Quechua teacher, artist, community leader, wisdom carrier, and dear friend, Ubaldo Puma, stating what can serve as a time-tested recipe for sustainability.

One of the cornerstones of this ancient way of life is the concept of *ayni*. It means "sacred reciprocity", and to attempt to encapsulate it -like I've heard before- as an ancient form of "what goes around, comes around" would be a catastrophic failure.

Ayni starts in the soil. Like the people who live by it, it is rooted in the earth, and in cosmic space-time relation with all that is, was, and will be, seen and unseen.

An example of *ayni* is farming communities harvesting together at the end of every season, *picchando* coca leaves and drinking *chicha*. They will do this for every community member's plot or *chacra*. The same applies to fixing a road or building a house. All day long, for as many days as it takes. If there's coca, they're good.

This is one way of being a community: articulated around shared land, cultural identity, and survival. Of course, there are others.

Community & Collective Care

In spiritual and psychedelic circles, the word "community" seems to be doing a lot of work around identity and belonging through ceremonial practices, lifestyle, aesthetics, social and professional events, and shared values. These are all real and meaningful forms of connection. However, what interests me here is community beyond affinity and belonging: interdependence, mutual care, and shared responsibility. **Community as a sustainable system designed to ensure and preserve life for generations to come.** Less of a social club, and more of a self-governed, survival mechanism.

Ayni is a core quality running through the veins of this great model of reference. Or rather, it's the material the veins are made of. It's living tissue, like coca leaves and the hands that pick and pray and celebrate with them. Mutual care and support keep the system alive at the cellular level. Care, turns out, is a form of ancient technology.

Ancient doesn't just mean *really old*, it speaks to me of something that has endured because it works: sustained in practice, embodied, carried in living memory, or held in ways of relating that remain relevant across generations.

At its core, ancient means sustainable.

Many of us, feeling a strong pull toward these other ways of inhabiting the world, grew up within a system which is not designed to preserve life, but to exploit it, and therefore destroy it. We need, kind of desperately, I'd say, new ways of inhabiting our bodies, our relationships, and our planet, and this is guiding many toward psychedelic practices and related ancestral traditions, where life unfolds in community.

Perhaps this is part of what draws us here: these traditions carry a different understanding of where the individual sits within the web of life. Let's not forget that traditional, ceremonial use of master plants is ultimately oriented toward supporting the community's wellbeing. Not individualistic, self-serving intentions, but collective care.

In this conscious or unconscious human search for an alternative, something else is happening.

Psychedelics are no longer only a story about substances, non-ordinary states, spiritual awakening, or individual healing. Aside from a remarkably lucrative industry, these practices are now becoming the *axis mundi* of new human settlements and ways of organising life. But what are our references to embark on such a journey?

Spiritual Tourism Turns Permanent Settlement

Let's focus on ayahuasca-related activity for a moment. **According to ICEERS' landmark study on ayahuasca retreat centers operating in the Amazon jungle and Costa Rica**, out of 232 centers mapped, 173 were running in Perú alone in 2019. Within the country, the Iquitos area concentrated the highest volume (38,7%), followed by the Sacred Valley (23,7%) and the Pucallpa jungle area (22%). As great and necessary as this research is, these numbers are only beginning to tell part of the story.

The Sacred Valley bears a disproportionate burden, especially when we remember that many local residents are natives to this location and its surrounding mountains, in no relation whatsoever to what many foreigners come here to do.

Beyond the retreat activity, many jungle travelers also visit the Valley to rest and integrate post-retreat. So the actual human traffic through this area is far greater than what the aforementioned study's baseline data might suggest (and that was 2019).

A substantial number of group and individual ceremonies take place regularly in private spaces, homes, and temporary accommodations. Some last one or two nights; some are longer "retreats". It is not uncommon, for instance, to have Indigenous ceremony leaders from the Peruvian and Brazilian Amazon,

among, others, coming and going throughout the year, privately offering their work in the Valley.

As this traffic intensified over the past decade, compounded by global crises regarding mental health, quality of life, economic pressures, increasingly hostile political climates, and human rights at large, **temporary spiritual tourism has rapidly evolved into permanent human settlement.** For multiple reasons, a growing number of international visitors have decided to make the Valley our home.

This comes with a responsibility.

None of us arrive empty-handed. We bring with us our ways of thinking, relating, consuming, and living together that shaped us. Of course, becoming aware of what we carry, and of what we may unconsciously reproduce, is an ongoing process of noticing, questioning, and deconstructing. But we gotta get on with it.

Ayni: 400 soles

As a way of illustrating how our unchecked cultural conditioning is replicated, somewhere along the way, foreign *entrepreneurs* and event organizers started using *ayni* as a fashionable marketing term for monetary exchange. For instance, one can spot the following on some random flyer posted around the town of Písaq: “ayahuasca ceremony, *ayni*: 400 soles”, the *sol* being the Peruvian currency.

Ayni is not a fixed monetary amount. That’s called a fee. Using a local cultural term as a marketing trend is an act of cultural appropriation: it strips the term of its traditional meaning while commodifying the ancestral traditions it supposedly honours and celebrates. This is not a sustainable mindset. It is an extractive one.

Ayni is the backbone of a culture where, as I have occasionally witnessed, coca leaves can be a stronger currency than money. Meanwhile, a certain kind of non-native individuals are growing their “medicine business” in the name of *ayni*.

What a paradox.

It must be said that it isn’t just down to foreigners; it’s locals playing the game too. This flow of tourism has triggered a construction boom, alongside an inflation of housing prices driven by those agreeing to pay them. Can you recognize this system? No coca leaves or harvest labour accepted, only soles and USD, preferably cash.

Without delving further into this subject of enormous depth and complexity, I want to redirect focus to an emerging phenomenon in this and other spiritual and sacred plant enclaves of the world. Made up mostly, though not only, of Global North individuals, **a new form of social organisation, which I’ve come to label as a proto-society, is shaping up.** By this I mean the smallest, yet growing, recognizable form of a social system: long-term relationships, building businesses,

raising families, establishing networks, and developing shared ways of living in and around a quite specific cultural ecosystem.

This is happening spontaneously, without a blueprint or specific direction, often with little or no awareness of social, environmental, and cultural impact, and no experience in building a life-preserving system together.

Instead, patterns that many of us came here hoping to escape, are being recreated, often in the name of *healing* and *community*: individualism, extraction, commodification, abuse, and unaccountable power. The destructive ones. And destruction will destroy, multiple times faster than it takes to build a sustainable foundation.

Unless we do something about it. Something along the lines of mutual care at the cellular level. What if care were the new *axis mundi*?

A (Messy) Generational Point of Inflection.

SERT started lending a hand in complex, urgent situations as a response to a need. Our mission, however, encompasses a larger vision. As we keep observing and developing our work, we understand this reality’s needs better, and how to meet them.

The unpredictability of psychedelic practices, what they can open and when, and the equally unpredictable integration journey cannot be contained within a retreat programme,

let alone one-off encounters with unethical practitioners and dubious or non-existent screening.

Without official data, it is reasonable to infer that, given the activity in the Valley, the likelihood of people needing unexpected or extra support here is high. So what could a sustainable community support system look like, locally and globally? And how can it grow respectfully alongside local cultures and ancestral traditions? We are learning too.

Humanity seems to be moving through a generational point of inflection, **an extraordinary opportunity to design structures that truly support life.** And it will be messy. How could it not be? Humans are messy, in every culture, ancient and modern. The point is to take conscious, responsible, collective action to transmute the mess into a more harmonious way of living with each other and the planet.

This takes time, patience, hard labour, and commitment.

It also takes a heroic dose of care and celebrating the small wins.

Here’s to another year of learning, building, and harvesting together. In cosmic space-time relation with all there was, is, and will be, seen and unseen.

If there’s coca, we’re good.

Haylli! Haylli! Haylli!

WHAT'S IN A NUMBER?

Official SERT interventions during our first year.

What we mean by "intervention":

A temporary service of support, with a defined beginning and end, undertaken by team members specifically assigned to that case. It begins with someone reaching out for help, and **following an initial assessment**, we determine if the situation falls within our scope and we are able to offer support. Each intervention can unfold **across a network of people**, places, decisions, data registering, and practical needs.

Consent and willingness to engage are fundamental to this process.

We could state a number or we could share with you the stories that somehow ended up becoming that number. We do love stories here.

* **Our team has fluctuated between 2-7 volunteers**, mostly part-time contribution, spread out across the Sacred Valley, along roughly 40km, almost double if we include trips to Cusco. No private vehicle available. We depend on cab rides and public transport, coordinating remotely across international time zones when needed.

* **We are implementing something new.** There was no local model, blueprint, or infrastructure for us to step into. We started off with our own professional references and experience, our familiarity with life in the Valley, and what each situation taught us.

SERT emerged as a real-time response to an already existing reality. The work began informally, with some of us supporting people through challenging situations in the area before SERT was created. Including those earlier years, the people involved, either receiving support or teaming up with us, were:

* **Some things this number is leaving out:**

- individuals who reached out for help while in a difficult state, yet decided to disconnect before we could even assess the situation.
- those we referred to other trusted professionals or services (eg.: clinical or long-term support).
- the work around an intervention: initial contact, assessment, research, calls and messages, coordination, consultation, travel, follow-up, documentation, referral, or the time spent trying to determine what the appropriate response should be.
- the invisible, necessary organisational work that can only be done *in between* interventions, so we're better equipped each time.

The measurement of our labour, and of how often people need this kind of support, has its nuances.

7

Countries of origin

3

Languages

10+

Individuals supported

6

Facilitators supported

18

Partners, friends, and relatives involved.

14

Official agencies, authorities, and other relevant professionals and organizations.

WHAT YOU SEE

THINGS WE DO

THE WORK BEHIND SCENES



SHOW UP
In-person visits
Practical/logistical assistance
Family/network liaison

STAY CONNECTED



WhatsApp, FB
Messenger Phone, email,
video support



HELP YOU FIND A WAY FORWARD

Offer guidance on next steps
Accompaniment to in-person
appointments



HOLD SPACE

Offer a space to decompress
and actually *feel* into the
situation.

FIGURE IT OUT

Information gathering
Priorities and responsibilities
Contact and coordinate with
agencies and authorities



CONNECT PEOPLE

Translation / Resources
Trusted professionals
Referral search

Document
Research
Writing
Consulting experts
Graphic Design



Building protocols
Meetings

Talking to people who
know things we don't
Learning along the journey

**Developing professional
relationships**

Making mistakes

Trying again

Outreach

Networking



We're a **small team**
with **limited resources**,
just getting started, in
a context whose scale
and sensitivity we take
seriously. That means
staying cautious about
how much we take on,
and how we promote
and talk about our
work. Building
something truly
sustainable takes time,
trial and error, and a
lot of patience.

Take breaks.



THE TEAM

At the heart of *Year One* is a **core, breathing team**, alive and finding its shape. **Around it, a circle keeps widening:** external advisors, consultants, collaborators, and friends, who've held this year with us. If you're one of them, you know who you are. **Thank you.**

1 2 3 4 5 6

the team grew and grew and shrunk and grew and shrunk and grew...

5 6 5

We grew in capacity, discernment, and skill. We learned how much culture and environment shape every situation, and how the complexity of human relations inside a community brings its own challenges. We also found that selfless commitment needs self-respect and self-care beside it, and that sustainability asks for both structure and trust in the flow.



...We also grew in documents.

ONE YEAR IN



We asked each other about the year we've had, and the one we're walking into.



**BÁRBARA
ESPINA**

Founder & Exec. Director

Freedom of spiritual practice goes hand in hand with the right to health, dignity, informed consent, and safety. These rights do not end when a ceremony begins.

* Looking back

We set out to answer an urgent need and found ourselves building structure around a complex reality. Questions of ethics, cultural reciprocity, and responsibility in plant medicine practices and communities call for organised action.

* Looking ahead

Supporting those who support others is essential to safer, sustainable practices for all involved, and it is a priority for SERT's next chapter.



**FERNANDA
BARAYBAR**

*International
Relations*

Spiritual care offers a guiding light for those traversing their inner worlds, a reminder that it's safe to explore and that there is light at the other end of the experience.

* Looking back

Witnessing the support needed in spiritual communities, I set out to be a listening ear and came back realizing how much people truly need through a spiritual crisis.

* Looking ahead

Ethics, togetherness and free exploration with safe containers.

LOOKING

BACK,



LOOKING

AHEAD.



As a retired physician, I hold to "first, do no harm." Even with good intentions, crisis can happen, and SERT helps people get the care they need.

* Looking back

Crises can happen in ceremonial spaces, even when everyone has good intentions. A coordinated response means neither the person nor the facilitator is left to handle it alone.

* Looking ahead

I hope SERT keeps building a clear, coordinated response the Valley can trust. I'm excited about our future education with facilitators and retreat centers, so we can help prevent crisis in the first place and keep learning together.

True psychedelic care includes offering support to those who are struggling in the aftermath of their experience.

* Looking back

I came in ready to respond to crisis, but I didn't expect how much of the work would be supporting the facilitators holding it.

* Looking ahead

I hope to see SERT grow into a global framework for crisis support in spiritual and psychedelic communities, one that honors not only the cultures we serve, but the lineages of these healing practices.



**HEATHER
PAULSON**

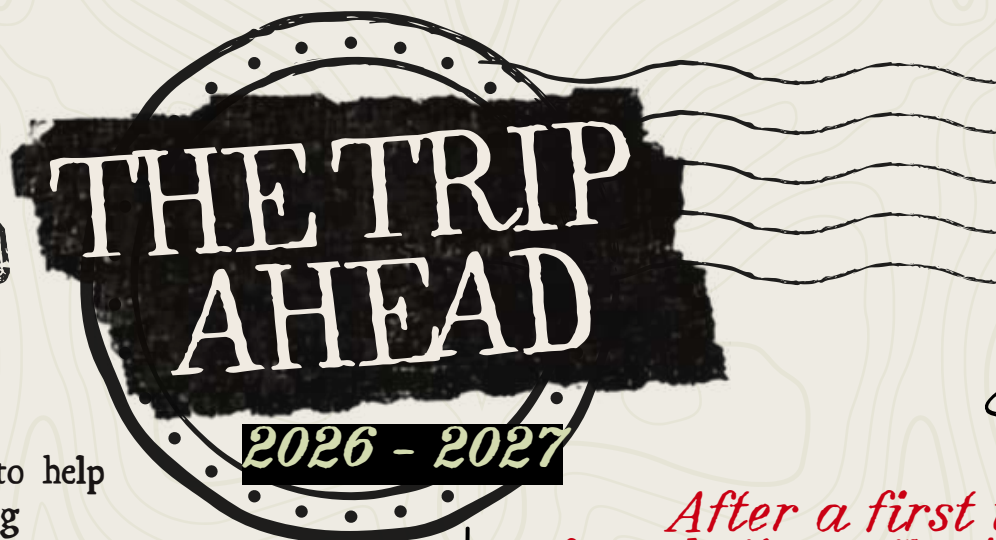
*Responder &
Organizational Advisor*



**LYNN
BEE**

*Responder &
Graphic Designer*

"Slowly and with care, with sap, with dew, with greenness, with clarity", trans. chant by María Sabina.



General Activity

Emergency support: we continue to help individuals going through challenging circumstances, in the Sacred Valley and internationally.

Practitioners support: we are putting more focus on developing ways and resources to support those who professionally safeguard others.

Educational resources: live, digital, in-person, training, and peer-to-peer.

Org. Development & Sustainability

Ethics & Self-care: what these look like for us as a team and organisation.

Community: how we can contribute in right relation with local and traditional culture.

Fundraising: we need support too ;)

After a first year of building foundations, these are SERT's areas of activity for Year Two.

Global Community, Academia & Volunteers

Global Community: we continue to weave networks and relationships with those near and far, and to collaborate in spaces, projects, and events for collective growth and exchange.

Academia: we're growing our academic activity and welcome proposals for internships, research, and collaboration.

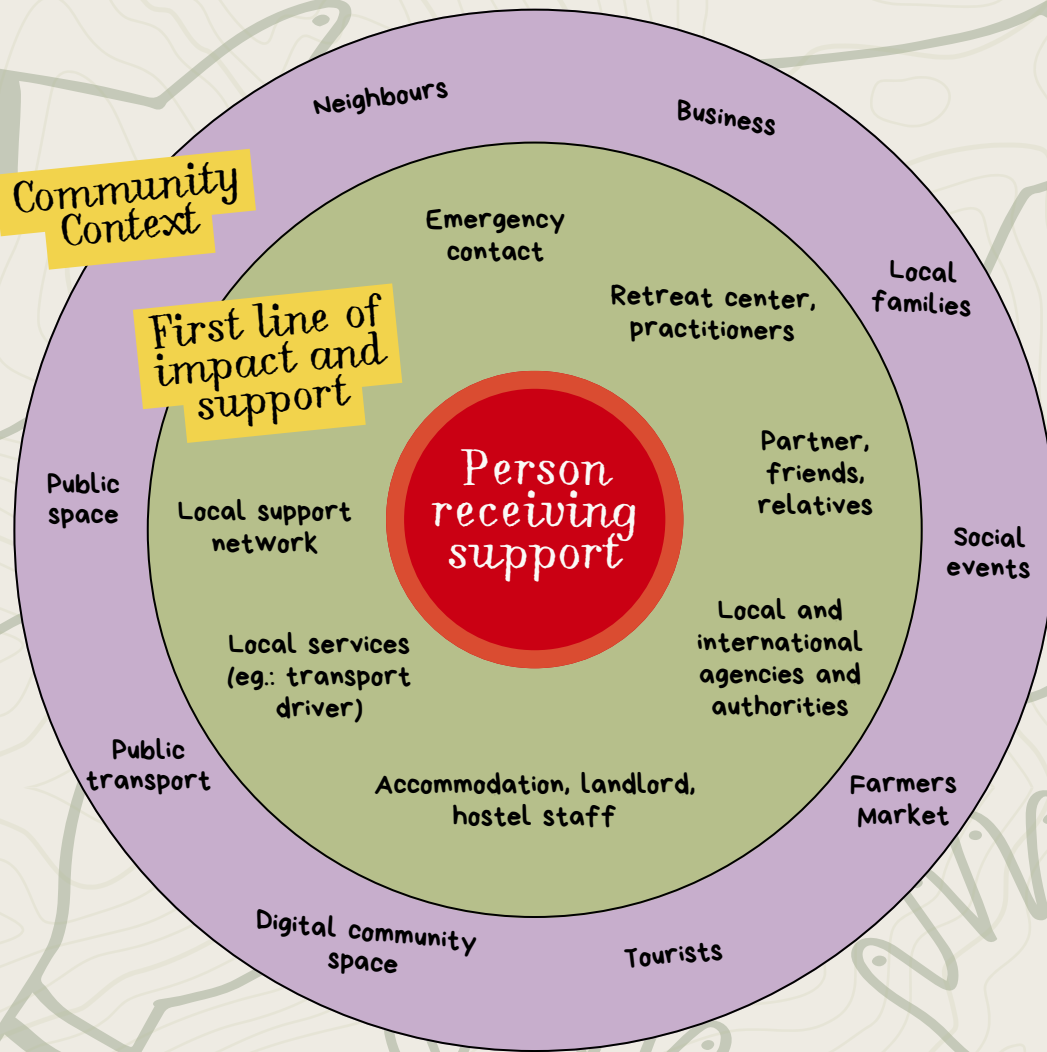
Volunteers: as our needs, ethos, and practice become clearer, so does our capacity to welcome new members to the team.



If you value our work and want to join or support us » reach out:
www.sertsacredvalley.org | hello@sertsacredvalley.org

An example of how a case might ripple out over time. No situation occurs in isolation.

A NOTE ON COMMUNITY



Year One has been a period of building, observing, and trying to understand what happens when a support service enters a living social environment. Impact is hard to measure this early, but some things have become clear.

SERT sees community as a living system. A challenging situation rarely stays between the people directly involved: it ripples through loved ones, practitioners, retreat centres, local businesses, neighbours, foreign residents, and the wider social fabric, **including the digital spaces** where communities connect, communicate, and sometimes collide, and where the boundaries of a local community become porous.

The circles around a situation are therefore not a fixed map of who is involved, but a reminder that **care, responsibility, and impact move through a community** in ways that are hard to predict.



CULTURAL STEWARD- SHIP

What happens in the Sacred Valley can travel far. **It becomes part of the evidence, stories, and debates** that influence how these practices are understood and regulated elsewhere.

The coca leaf's continued classification alongside cocaine, despite decades of evidence telling them apart, remains a stark example of **what's at stake when policy responds to colonial interests rather than the communities** who have walked with it for millennia.



How we respond, organise, and learn matters. **We have agency in shaping what comes next**, and we owe it to traditional knowledge systems and future generations to use it well.

Let's connect.
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Ayllu Masikunapa!