

WELLNESS MENTORING

Pop star Grimes has worked with spiritual healer Natasha Severino, also her makeup artist for this *Vogue China* photoshoot. PHOTO: BRYAN HUYNH

On Christmas Eve, in the small city of Rio Branco in western Brazil, the cosmopolitan fashion and homewares designer JJ Martin meditated for five hours straight, not moving once from her plastic chair through the warm, muggy night.

The LA-raised, Milan-based creative director of La DoubleJ was taking part in an 11-hour Velada vigil held in a tiny church, a ceremony that incorporated elements of Christianity with shamanic practitioners, elaborate altars, mediums and Santo Daimé: the drinking of ayahuasca (a tea that results in psychedelic experiences).

The eight nights that followed were spent bunking in a squashed commune with an Amazonian tribe in a remote jungle, with no bathrooms or Wi-Fi. One minute Martin was freezing cold, the next she "itched like crazy from microscopic bug bites" – but it seems there was method in her madness.

It was an experience she gratefully describes as "a test of fortitude; a lesson in not trying to fix, criticise or punish, who/whatever was responsible for my own pain".

In the luxury fashion world, Martin's signature maximalist pieces regularly feature in shows including *Emily in Paris* and are worn by the likes of Gwyneth Paltrow and Adele. But it's not just a love for print and pattern that brings the 48-year-old joy these days.

A passion for her "woo-woo weirdo" (her words) spiritual journey and the wisdom of her favourite spiritual healers is something she's equally dedicated to sharing with her social media following and customer base.

That involves anything from inviting like-minded people to join her on the 'sacred initiation journeys' she co-hosts to destinations such as Egypt, to penning a *Spirit Tickle* e-newsletter that's a bi-weekly digest of what to read, listen to and add to your contacts when it comes to energy shifters, hypnotists, shamans and channellers.

If anyone is going to espouse the positives of seeking out a spiritual coach it's Martin, who says she's seen hundreds of healers, teachers and gurus and now "acts as a co-creator" with her handpicked few.

"The first time I worked with one was when I was struggling to fall pregnant and doing IVF. Literally nine months later I gave birth to my company. The moment I focused on what I was here on this earth for, my life started to take off – and I soared."

Google the words "spiritual coach" and pages of practitioners pop up under an array of terms: soul path guide; intuitive coach; spiritual mentor; manifestation coach ... Yet, most spruik the same purpose: a deeper connection to self.

Melbourne-based Ricci-Jane Adams, a doctor of philosophy and the principal/founder of the Institute of Intuitive Intelligence, works predominantly with people she describes as leaders with high-energy, demanding roles.

Generally women in service, they are "health professionals, policewomen, lawyers, doctors, physios..." About half of these clients Zoom in from abroad.

"My clients feel that without a spiritual teacher, they're susceptible to toxic habits – like alcohol for example – to manage stress," she explains. Through one-on-one mentoring sessions and retreats she hosts in Bali and Costa Rica, Adams focuses on clearing the fears, thoughts and convictions that hold us back, as well as teaching clients to finesse their intuitive intelligence.

"I use embodiment practices like body shaking, breath work, meditation and dance," she explains, and although she doesn't work with plant medicines ("you need a shaman for that"), her 'pilgrimages' are in high demand.

"COVID-19 shone a light on the brittleness of our lives and everyone's now looking for a place to satiate their souls and nourish something deeper. There's definitely a deep fatigue and weariness out there."

As in the United States, the number of Australians who do not adhere to any religion is on the rise, increasing to 38.9 per

cent, according to the 2021 census. An affiliation with traditional religions – Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism – is on the decline here, as it is in the UK, where the 2021 census found the fastest-growing belief system was shamanism, increasing tenfold over a decade.

"Traditional religions no longer fulfil people because they're institutional: they're a one-size-fits-all model and we're a highly individualised society," says Carole Cusack, professor of religious studies at the University of Sydney. "[The number of] those calling themselves SBNR – spiritual but not religious – is definitely growing, particularly in the US since 2000 and gaining momentum after 2010.

"You can now be religious in many different ways and spiritual coaches are part of the spiritual marketplace, but they're also a niche service for upper-and middle-

class people. Intuition and empathy are what's important here; if you consider traditional religions, that's the kind of relationship people should ideally have with their religious leader/teacher."

Australians are also focusing more on meditation: Google Trends reveals there are more searches per capita for "meditation" here than in any other country.

And our growing awareness of alternative spiritual practices is also being driven by technology. The hashtag "spirituality" has 26.8 million posts on Instagram and a whopping 17.8 billion posts on TikTok, where Gen Z are heading for their daily doses of tarot, astrology and shamanism.

The explosion of virtual learning has also played a part. Australian makeup artist Natasha Severino moved to LA 10 years ago to further her career and boasts an enviable CV that includes international *Vogue* covers

and ad campaigns for Ralph Lauren and Louis Vuitton.

Despite her success, however, the 43-year-old was desperate to explore a 'higher purpose' path. So she signed on to study online with two schools (22 Teachings and the Academy of Oracle Arts), through which she has built a network of "mentors, teachers and fellow magical practitioners".

Years of unprocessed childhood trauma and a history of drug and alcohol addiction led to Severino being prescribed a cocktail of pharmaceuticals over the years. She ultimately turned to psychedelic therapy and spirituality as her "awakening of sorts".

"I can only speak for myself, but my problem wasn't a medical one, it was a spiritual one," she explains as to why she became a student of the Hermetic Qabalah – a mystical philosophy that encompasses astrology, the white-magic practice theurgy, plus alchemy and tarot.

Studies in vibrational sound and energy medicine followed – treatments she now offers to her clients, some of whom cross over into her makeup world, including the visionary pop star Grimes.

"Operating from a higher perspective means I've become a better and more creative makeup artist," says Severino. "With Grimes we like to be experimental and create together."

"I want to align with people who have a platform and influence," Severino adds. "They're the ones who inspire change on a mass level."

Nicho Plowman, Sydney-based co-founder of the successful self-guided meditation app Insight Timer and a Vedic teacher to a long list of successful entrepreneurs, sees the relevance of spiritual coaches as something individuals need to determine themselves.

"I spent a lot of my 30s trying different things in search of a path to happiness and at 39 found Vedic meditation," he says. "We all need to do our own research, but 'outsourcing' this conscious journey – the idea we need others to light the way – doesn't really work."

"We all have the capacity for self-sufficiency in our spiritual journey. My advice is to find something that encourages that, [but you may need] occasional mentoring to ensure you hold yourself accountable." Another Sydneysider, energy medicine practitioner David Flakelar, agrees.

"I cringe at being called a healer," says the founder of Inner Performance, whose clients include interior architect Blainey North, professional surfer Owen Right, Olympic athletes and lawyers.

"I make my clients their own guru. I tell them, 'I'm the leading surgeon, but you're the assistant surgeon'. I'll use my own natural energy to transform, release and balance blocked energy in my clients – and they need my knowledge and skills to heal what's ailing them – but I also teach them how to deal with ongoing issues."

"And meditation is often the key ingredient that's going to help them achieve that goal."

Meditation may be widely respected and accepted as a self-care tool and a way to improve performance in the workspace, but openly declaring you have a shaman or love of crystals results in raised eyebrows. (A successful businessman interviewed for this piece recently held an energy-cleansing ceremony on his development site, but then begged for anonymity.)

On the flip side, you have entrepreneurs like Martin, who proudly declares her spiritual journey is what helped her find the fire in her belly.

"I'd never have built my business if I hadn't taken the steps to broaden myself energetically, emotionally and raise my consciousness," she says.

"Opening my mind spiritually has allowed me to see my business from an aerial view and stay calm and centred when the world spins around you. And anyone who runs a company knows that can be an everyday occurrence." **LSB**

Higher power

More of us are seeking counsel from those who promote a deeper connection to self, writes **Eugenie Kelly**.



Ricci-Jane Adams, above, and JJ Martin, right, who believes in the power of crystals, below.



LA-based makeup artist Natasha Severino became a student of Hermetic Qabalah.



COVID-19 shone a light on the brittleness of our lives and everyone's now looking to satiate their souls and nourish something deeper.

Ricci-Jane Adams, Institute of Intuitive Intelligence