

The Globe & Mail, Special Report on Travel, August 2003

Artists Drawn to Nature's Inspiration by Ann Kerr

When Liz Johnston, a tax lawyer in Toronto and an amateur artist, took a week-long vacation in the Temagami region of Ontario two years ago, she found inspiration that she couldn't get at home.

"It's a totally different experience than taking the ferry over to Toronto Island to sketch a scene from nature. The sheer scale of the landscape, the trees and rocks, is exhilarating," says Ms. Johnson, who produced watercolour paintings and pen and ink drawings of the surroundings, located 100 kilometres north of North Bay .

"You really get a sense of what it was that drew the Group of Seven up here," she says.

Ms. Johnson took the course through Smoothwater Outfitters and Ecolodge in Temagami, which provides a variety of art programs throughout the year, in addition to its main canoe-tripping business. While Ms. Johnson took classes, her teenage daughter swam, canoed and "generally had a great time' at the lodge, she says.

A number of tourism operators throughout Ontario offer art lessons for those who not only want to enjoy nature but capture a part of it to take home.

Packages provide accommodations and, in many cases, other activities as well as courses in everything from painting to photography and soapstone carving.

And you don't need to be a budding Tom Thomson to participate. There are programs for absolute beginners as well as more seasoned artists.

In fact, the typical participant is over 40, professional, and looking for a change from sitting on a beach or touring foreign sites, says Rob Stimpson, project co-ordinator for Arts in the Wild, a non-profit alliance formed three years ago to promote art-based travel in Ontario . The 23 members include the provincial government, galleries and museums, and resorts and lodges, like Smoothwater, providing instruction courses.

"These people are seeking more purpose in their holidays. They want to learn something or express themselves, even if they haven't done anything artistic since they were in public school," says Mr. Stimpson, a professional photographer who teaches programs himself for several operators.

The number of participants in art travel is growing, with 750 packages sold through the Arts in the Wild alliance in 2002, compared with 570 in 2001. About 65 per cent of participants are women, Mr. Stimpson says.

About 20 per cent of beginners return to try another one of the programs run by mostly local artists. School teachers can take courses in areas such as painting and photography, but there are also numerous programs for neophytes. Daily rates average between \$100 and \$120, including accommodation at the lodge, food and classes.

"Some people are scared at first because it's been so long since they tried anything artistic, or they feel they can't do it. I find watercolour is good in those situations. It's very therapeutic, very sensual to push the colour around," says Caryn Colman, co-owner with her husband of Smoothwater, and her self an art instructor.

Sessions include explanations of technique, so even those with little background can begin to understand, after only a few hours, how effects are achieved, she says.

Besides the old-growth pine forests for which Temagami is famous, students are also drawn to the remains of the old silver mines in Cobalt, the largest silver-mining district in North America early last century, says Ms. Colman. Franklin Carmichael, one of the Group of Seven, also painted the mines, Ms. Colman says.

But it's not only art that draws enthusiasts to country getaways. Some of the operators are noted for other attributes as well, such as organic cuisine prepared with local ingredients at Smoothwater.

"Every meal is a feast, a work of art in itself," Ms. Johnson says.

In fact, Smoothwater also provides culinary workshops and wine tasting as part of its weekend offerings.

Then there are those who pursue artistic expression in order to enhance their travel experiences. "I get a lot of people who want to learn how to take better pictures so they can improve the record they have of all their trips," Mr. Stimpson says. "Sure, they could do that at night school in the city, but taking a break up here lets them really immerse themselves in the experience." _