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A Brush with Greatness in Canada: Trip to Northern Ontario Brings 'Out 'Artist in Everyone.' by Patti Nickell

TEMAGAMI REGION, Northern Ontario --

Etched on a stone tablet at the base of High Rock, a sacred spot for First Nation people in this part of Ontario, are these words: "All races and tribes in the world are like the different colored flowers in one meadow."

While I might have hoped for a different kind of inspirational message as I started my climb (something on the order of "You will find a sherpa waiting halfway up the mountain to offer you a chilled martini and relieve you of your backpack") these words nevertheless seemed appropriate for the task at hand.

I was one of a group of seven aspiring watercolorists preparing to trek up the mountain, art supplies in our backpacks, hoping to find our muse in the place the first Group of Seven, the famed school of Canadian artists, found theirs: the pine forests and shimmering lakes of the Temagami Region.

It is easy to see why they chose Temagami, some five hours north of Toronto. In this vast area are the world's last large stands of red and white old-growth pines, some as old as 350 years; a 1,500-mile web of canoe routes, the largest network in North America, that weave among lakes; more registered archaeological sites than anywhere else in Ontario, from Ojibway pictographs to relics from the province's once-thriving lumber camps and silver mines; and a rich cultural history that encompasses First Nation people (the native people of what is now Canada), French fur traders and an assortment of colorful characters such as Archie Belaney, the Englishman who fled his native land to reinvent himself as Grey Owl, a writer of wilderness fiction and one of Canada's first conservationists.

In short, there's a lot for an artist to paint here.

The Group of Seven movement began in the early 1900s, when several Canadian painters started to notice the similarity in their styles -- bold colors in an impressionistic representation of nature. During the next few years, more artists were welcomed into the circle, and by the time they

put on their first joint show in 1920, artists in the group were widely praised for their uniquely Canadian style. They became as successful at capturing the feel of the sub-Arctic on canvas as Georgia O'Keeffe would be in portraying the American Southwest.

Though well-known in Canada, the Group of Seven remains relatively obscure throughout the rest of the world. Many have never heard of Franklin Carmichael, Lawren Harris, A.Y. Jackson, Frank Johnston, Arthur Lismer, J.E.H. MacDonald and Frederick Varley. (One woman, Emily Carr, was admired by the group and invited to take part in their shows -- a radical invitation at that time -- but was never an official member.)

Caryn Colman is doing her best to reverse the Group's present anonymity south of the Canadian border. Colman, an artist, and her husband, Francis, operate Smoothwater Ecolodge, ably assisted by daughter Emily and several lovable dogs and cats. A year-round, intimate, family-run home lodge on a picturesque lake, Smoothwater is the perfect venue for bringing city slickers back to nature. It specializes in on-site programs such as yoga and Pilates; paddling classes in summer and dog-sledding and cross-country skiing in winter; organic cuisine with a focus on edible wild plants (did you know you can use stinging nettle, day lilies, dandelions, rose petals and cedar to make breads, appetizers and desserts?); and the painting workshop I had come for.

Though I have painted in oils since I was a teenager, watercolor has always intimidated me -- all those colors running willy-nilly across the canvas and me unable to control them. During the four-day program, under Caryn's quietly encouraging tutelage, I gradually relaxed and gave in to the flow of colors and the melting of brushstrokes. By the end of the trip, I had actually finished two paintings that I wanted to frame.

My budding skill with watercolors was enhanced by the Temagami experience itself. Canoeing the lily-dappled lake on a misty morning, I couldn't help but pay particular attention to the reflection of the towering pines in the silvery water. Hiking the trails near the lodge, I found myself looking intently for shy wildflowers that seek shelter between ferns and mosses. On a side trip to Cobalt, once the richest silver mining town in North America, I found myself thinking of the ruins of the old mine not just as a collection of rocks but as a mysterious story that had never been fully told.

Through a combination of wilderness experiences and painting demonstrations and classes, Caryn seeks to draw out what she insists "is the artist in everyone."

There is more than one kind of artist, as those of us in the program discovered. Caryn is not only a painter; she is a chef extraordinaire. Her palette is the plate, and she decorates it using regional, wild and organic ingredients. Each evening, after a day of hiking, paddling and putting paintbrush to paper, guests gather in the lodge for appetizers and wine before sitting down to a three-course dinner. One evening it might be cumin-sesame fritters; another, herb-and-flower encrusted fish with maple beer sauce; and another, stinging nettle and chevre pastry bundles.

Evenings ended early as we all trundled off to the bunkhouse to get a good night's sleep. After all, we had to rise at dawn to greet our muse and get a head start on trying to capture artificially on our canvas what Mother Nature had achieved naturally on hers.