

Canada's Temagami region: where legends have sought inspiration

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We weren't really tourists in the magnificent lake country of Ontario; we were more like pilgrims seeking the same inspiration that drew Canada's legendary painters, the Group of Seven.

We found it. We painted it. We loved it. "It" is nature, and very few places are as unspoiled.

We began our journey just outside Toronto by visiting the McMichael Canadian Art Collection in the former home of Robert and Signe McMichael, who were avid collectors of works by the Group of Seven.

The Group of Seven - Lawren Harris, J.E.H. MacDonald, Arthur Lismer, Frederick Varley, Frank Johnston, Franklin Carmichael and A.Y. Jackson - were originally influenced by Tom Thomson whose artwork celebrated the unspoiled nature of Ontario's wilderness. Thomson's untimely death in 1917, still a national mystery, prodded the artists to join together; their first Group of Seven exhibition was in 1920.

"In Thomson's artwork, the land is the thing," noted Stephen Weir, who led us on a tour of the McMichael galleries. "He captures the spirit of the north; a Canadianness no one had done before."

Thomson and the Group of Seven are still Canada's most famous artists. Their gorgeous canvases depict windswept trees against Ontario's ever-present lakes, or monumental landscapes where light becomes a spiritual beacon, or mountain scenes that reveal vast, rugged wilderness. Their art was revolutionary at the time and many say it contributed to the Canadian identity. It certainly inspired us, a group of six dear friends from all over the U.S. who were traveling to the Temagami region of Ontario to take part in a watercolor workshop led by Caryn Colman of Smoothwater Outfitters & Ecolodge.

We were simply astounded to learn that Ontario boasts more than 250,000 lakes - one-third of this inland province is fresh water. Temagami is one of its most

beloved wilderness areas. Lake Temagami, the biggest lake in the region, has more than 1,200 islands. It is said that Canada's famed conservationist of the 1930s, Grey Owl, began his odyssey in Temagami when he married a local woman, Angele, whose First Nations people still live on Bear Island in Lake Temagami. The region of Temagami covers some 1.5 million acres and is home to the world's largest old-growth red and white pine forests. Besides the red and white pines, there are spruce, birch, aspen, maple and oak trees, the latter turning the landscape red, orange and yellow in the fall, which the Group of Seven frequently captured beautifully.

About a 4 1/2-hour drive from Toronto, Smoothwater Outfitters & Ecolodge sits on James Lake, a part of the ancient canoe trails that define Temagami, which means "deep water" in the local Ojibway language. There are more than 1,500 miles of canoe trails in Temagami, where some portages date back 6,000 years. We went canoeing one afternoon at Smoothwater, whose name befits the placid waters we glided upon. But we had come mostly to paint.

"You'll get plugged into a really strong force here - nature," Caryn told us during our first meeting in the lodge's wonderful window-walled Gathering Hall overlooking James Lake. "I want you to feel the mystical draw of this place. Temagami is a power spot in the world where the Earth's magnetic field holds a lot of precious metals. I want you to take pleasure in the land as inspiration."

Caryn gave us lots of instruction in watercolor, but her greatest gift was simple encouragement. "Don't be too reined in by the end result," she advised. "We just want to enjoy the creative experience of it."

We took our painting supplies on some splendid field trips. One afternoon we barged across Lake Temagami to High Rock, an important site for First Nations people here, since it affords a 360-degree lookout, and its 300-foot height brings them closer to the heavens. We hiked up a trail carved through roots and rocks, winding through jack pines and peeling birch trees, until we could see the enormous lake dotted with uninhabited pine-covered islands, all perfectly misty like a watercolor painting.

Another day we wandered over to Cobalt, the silver mining capital of North America in its heyday, where ruins of old mines and character-filled buildings of an Old West town offered a different kind of landscape.

We would gather back at the Ecolodge (also the home of Caryn, her husband, Francis Boyes, and their daughter, Emily) to enjoy one amazing meal after another. We quickly dubbed Caryn the Alice Waters of Temagami; like the famed Chez Panisse chef who revolutionized U.S. restaurants 35 years ago when she championed using local ingredients, Caryn has led the way in Temagami by using

local producers of vegetables, fruits, honey, maple syrup, cheeses, meats and fish. She even grows a lot of her own organic produce and leads culinary workshops in foraging for and cooking local wild edibles.

Breakfast, lunch and dinner at Smoothwater were invariably as splendid as the surroundings. Some of our favorite dishes were Caryn's Temagami Wild Blueberry Kuchen, her fritters of carrots in chickpea flour served with homemade spruce jelly, Lake Temiskaming whitefish encrusted with fresh herbs, her homemade beer biscuits with local raw milk cheddar, and her hearty homemade breads. Our last night's feast featured Caryn's Poutine, which isn't really the classic poutine known throughout Ontario that consists of french fries covered with gravy and cheese but instead is a healthier version combining caramelized Jerusalem artichokes and wild mushrooms with homemade chicken gravy and local Swiss cheese curds.

Caryn and Francis have recently created a labyrinth on their property that she calls a meditative walk to help one focus. As we meandered through its maze of a trail, we understood the greatest lesson we learned from Caryn: "It's the process that's important, not the finished project," she told us. "At the end of the week you'll have something you want to frame just because you'll enjoy it."

She was right. I, for one, have never painted before. I am not good at it. But I really enjoyed trying to paint the beauties of what I saw in Temagami. And I discovered that I want to keep pursuing it.