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Wild Canada landscape inspires amateur painters

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By Verna Gates

TEMEGAMI, Canada (Reuters Life!) - An art colony in Canada aims to inspire amateur watercolor painters to improve their skills in a wilderness landscape of waterways, forests and soft northern light.

Summer is the only time when the Smoothwater Outfitters and Ecolodge camp, five hours drive north of Toronto, is accessible to groups of artists drawn to its open skies, flocks of wild geese and moose.

Caryn Colman, who escaped city life in Toronto in 1994 to set up the camp, said the environment had a spiritual influence over her clients' work.

"There is a mystical essence to this area. Temagami is known for its power spots among the native people. There is a magnetic field here that draws the eye into its beauty," she said.

"We are pilgrims on the land to see what it has to offer," said Colman, 51. "Everyone is an artist, it's just a matter of bringing it out."

There are around 20 art tourism camps in Canada. The industry has its roots in the 1920s when the "Group of Seven" art colony made the wilderness their subject, forcing others to take seriously a region whose artistic potential was unexplored.

"They captured the ruggedness, the spirituality and just plain Canadianness of the land. It had never been done before," said Stephen Weir, a guide at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection gallery in Klineberg.

Lawren Harris, one of the seven, became known for painting icebergs and though the seven, who were all men, chose different subjects, each was influenced by the minimal brushstrokes and bold colors typical of European Impressionism, Weir said.

PINE TREES, WATERWAYS

Artists arriving at Colman's studio are given the basics and left to get on with it on the assumption that inspiration will come from a landscape.

Colman, herself a watercolorist, urges her clients to use watercolor rather than oil or acrylic paints, arguing it is better suited to the environment.

Patti Nickell said during a holiday at the camp in July she slowly learned how to manipulate the paints to her satisfaction.

"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," Nickell said.

Rare stands of red and white pine, some as old as 350 years dot the area that contains a 1,500-mile network of water paths, the largest in North America.

The region also offers High Rock Island, a favorite spot for artists and First Nation People, as the original natives of Canada are known. The island juts out of the middle of Lake Temagami, offering a vista of lakes and islands from its rim.

It also includes the town of Cobalt, once at the source of the area's rich silver mines. The town's gray stone and rusting buildings are in sharp contrast to the rest of the landscape.

The combined effect is to force artists to interact with what's around them, a prerequisite for any amateur painter.

"As the days progressed, I found myself looking at my surroundings more closely. I'd never really noticed how many shades of green there are in one pine tree," said Patricia Harris-Lyon.

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