

Painting Canada

An Ontario Arts in the Wild Learning Vacation provides an outlet for creativity.

by Debbie Harmsen

"Gray is not a color. It's what you do to a color."

This is one of the many phrases art instructor Greg Hindle will say during my week at the Lodge at Pine Cove's landscape painting class, part of Ontario's Arts in the Wild program. He wanders among us students, who are perched on rocks, downed tree limbs or fold-up chairs set in a forest clearing. He peers over our shoulders, giving us advice and encouragement as we attempt to re-create in oils, acrylics or watercolors the images before us: age-old pines stretching off the sides of jagged cliffs, a family of ducks out for a swim, a lone bird soaring through the air.

"Look for the chaos," Hindle notes. There are nine of us. Some are experienced and even have paintings hanging in the lodge. Others, such as me and another writer, are neophytes who think in terms of words, not strokes. "Think visually, not verbally," he admonishes us. "You'd never finish painting if you tried to make it always literal."

Instead of just sketching the scene before me, I take a couple structures from my left and mix them with a few in front of me. Hindle informs me this is called a composite. Wow, there's actually a term for it. I feel a sense of accomplishment already. But then when I apply paint to my drawing and my canvas becomes a mish-mash of colors, all pride disintegrates. I suggest I need a paint-by-number. Hindle dispenses another aphorism: "Nothing worse for creativity than negativity."

Through the week, with each new blank canvas, I try desperately to resemble Monet with my oils. One day, as we are stationed near some rapids, the wind whips my tripod and palette against me, giving the term "a painted-on face" a new meaning. One of Hindle's daughters walks by and laughs at my blue lips. "Did you eat paint?" she asks. I've always appreciated

Canadian humor and how they find mirth so easily in everyday things. It isn't nearly as charming when you're the subject of it.

By week's end I have three paintings to take home with me. Some of the more experienced artists have half a dozen or more. I also have started thinking like a painter, no longer able to just admire the glorious sunrise for itself alone, instead analyzing its colors and wondering, "How would I paint that?"

And that is just what instructor Hindle hopes for. "My ultimate goal is to make an art monster out of you," he says, laughing.

His own foray into the field began in high school when a teacher saw potential in him. "She saw something in my abilities as an artist," he explains. His life changed after that because in the art world he felt like he finally fit in, he'd found his niche. He became passionate about both music (he plays the guitar) and painting. In college he spent a year studying art in Florence, Italy. "There were 15 girls and 5 guys," he says, adding with a smile, "Even I could get lucky." And he did: He met his wife, Susan, there. Together they have two twin daughters in college and a son in high school.

During the academic year, Hindle teaches at Ontario College of Art and Design in Toronto. Several of the participants at Pine Cove's program are either current or past students of his. Getting away from the city and coming to this little camp-like resort on the French River provides Hindle with an opportunity to teach landscape painting amid nature far from civilization (it's several hours' drive north of Toronto). "As an artist, I think what really appeals to me about this place is it's primal," he notes. "It's still very untrampled."

Program participants stay in rustic cottages—no televisions, no telephones, though yes, hot showers and in-room coffee makers—and set off each day in canoes with packed lunches to stake out a new location along the river, making camp for the day to paint—and also lay out or jump in the river for a swim break, if so desiring. Hindle mostly works one-on-one with students, though he does provide some group instruction, such as the morning he shows us work by Canada's famous

Group of Seven. These artist pioneers traveled across Canada in the early 1900s to paint the country's varied landscape, the first group of European descent to do so.

In the evenings, the lodge serves fine cuisine, and activities range from group singing as Hindle accompanies on the guitar to quiet diversions such as reading in the library or putting together a puzzle. On the final day there's a group critique of everyone's work.

The owner of the Lodge at Pine Cove, Alex Strachan, was a student of Hindle years ago and was impressed with his abilities. "He's a good teacher and a fine artist," Strachan explains. "That's a rare combination." Strachan has hosted the painting program for four years and hopes to expand it. This year the program will be offered for three sessions, July 24-25, July 31 through Aug. 5 and Aug. 7-12.

A people-person and people-pleaser with boundless energy, Strachan delights in seeing his guests enjoying art and nature. Like Hindle, even if the program doesn't make an "art monster" out of participants, Strachan hopes it will give them an appreciation for art and a chance to escape civilization for a while.

He knows what a difference that can make in someone's life. Before opening the lodge, Strachan was a successful commercial real estate broker, but he wanted to get away from the world of big business. "I hated the lack of creativity in corporate life," he says. "I thought there was a better way to live a life." Running the Lodge at Pine Cove allows him to "meet interesting people, do some good and keep fit," he says.

When he first saw Pine Cove, he thought, "What a really, really beautiful spot."

Hindle agrees. "The colors of the rocks are spectacular up here. It's just a super place to be creative because nature's already being creative, and you're there witnessing it."

And if you eat some paint along the way, so be it. 

The Lodge at Pine Cove: 705-898-2500 or www.frenchriver.com

SIDEBAR--

Arts in the Wild

Pine Cove's landscaping painting class is just one of several art learning vacations offered through Ontario's Arts in the Wild consortium, an alliance of two dozen arts and tourism organizations dedicated to helping people experience creativity through engaging wilderness programs.

Whether the focus is on sculpting, photography, drawing or a handful of other disciplines, Arts in the Wild classes provide travelers with an opportunity to learn a new craft—or perfect one already developed—under the guidance and teaching of professional artists. Classes range from long weekends to weeklong trips, and run year-round, though primarily late spring through early fall. Program locations are spread throughout the province and vary not only in the medium of art offered but in type of accommodations as well, ranging from luxurious lodges to rustic cabins.

Selecting a program and signing up is simple: Visit www.artsinthewild.com and search classes by either art medium or region of Ontario. If you prefer watching others create art and observing the finished work of professionals, gallery tours and studio tour visits are available.