

Painting outdoors at the McMichael feels like a mini-vacation

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Just in time for staycations, essential workers are being offered promotions and discounts at several Ontario tourist attractions



Professional artist-instructor Andrew Cheddie Sookrah critiques Jane Stevenson's painting on the grounds of the McMichael Canadian Art Collection gallery. PHOTO BY JANE STEVENSON /Toronto Sun

Fancy yourself an artist? Or maybe you just really like being around art?

I'd definitely put myself in the latter category after my first adult attempt at painting outdoors (a la En Plein Air) on the grounds of the McMichael Canadian Art Collection gallery, about 30 minutes north of Toronto in Kleinburg.

And next to Tom Thomson's original cabin, no less.



Tom Thomson's cabin on the grounds of the McMichael Canadian Art Collection gallery. PHOTO BY JANE STEVENSON /Toronto Sun

It was a stunning, inspirational setting and a chance to create in nature on a sunny Saturday under the shade of a large tree after so much of this year spent cooped up at home due to COVID-19.

Given the surroundings, I was thinking my painting would recall some Group of Seven masterpiece, which the McMichael specializes in. But my ambition outweighed my ability.

So what if my landscape evoked comparisons to the primitive folk art of Nova Scotia's Maud Lewis (I think everyone was being kind given Lewis' talent), while my partner-in-crime Christine, who has some experience painting, presented something more sophisticated akin to Ontario's David Milne?

Our professional artist-instructor Andrew Cheddie Sookrah and Cristine Dimeropoulos, "The Best Assistant In The Universe" (that's what her business card actually says), were knowledgeable, patient, funny and kind over a two-hour lesson in which aprons, paints, canvasses, easels, and advice were supplied.

And bless Dimeropoulos for going to get a round of late-morning lattes from the McMichael restaurant, where we later dined on grilled salmon salad for lunch before a leisurely gallery visit with very few people in sight. (Visits are currently being timed due to the pandemic.)



A delicious grilled salmon salad at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection gallery restaurant. PHOTO BY JANE STEVENSON /Toronto Sun

It was a beautiful, blue sky day with an abundance of large white clouds, so that's what I hoped to paint.

But Sookrah, who is currently doing classes virtually for multiple students and in person one-on-one, had other ideas.

He wanted a full scene of grass, trees, sky and clouds — the nerve! — and we began by taking a photo with our cellphones and then trying to paint that, or some facsimile thereof.

Sookrah encourages things like “scumble your brush,” as he does strokes where his paintbrush never leaves the canvas, or “become a sculptor with your eyes.”

He's also big on orange as a background colour when we first sketch out our painting, and later when we ventured through the McMichael, we saw it over and over again peeking through the magnificent Canadian landscapes by the Group of Seven painters.



Professional artist-instructor Andrew Cheddie Sookrah works on his painting while Jane Stevenson takes a break from painting hers (on the easel) on the grounds of the McMichael Canadian Art Collection gallery. PHOTO BY JANE STEVENSON /Toronto Sun

I was just hoping to paint something that resembled something.

My big breakthrough finally came when I added shade to the bottom of my clouds so they looked more like the real thing rather than one-dimensional fluffy white things. But my tree branches were tragic after I added them with the side of the brush.

The key thing, Sookrah told me, when first attempting art is not to judge too harshly, so I tried to give myself a break.

I vowed to try it again and not to be so hard on myself because I did feel mentally so much better after painting — like I'd been on a mini-vacation.

And that's not a bad trade-off in these incredibly stressful times, even if, when I got home, I was tempted to hide my first En Plein Air painting where no one could see it.

IF YOU GO

Andrew Cheddie Sookrah's next round of classes are being offered via mcmichael.com as both virtual and one in-person options (both tend to sell out quickly and more will be offered from other artist-instructors as the year progresses):

Online Painting Studio (6 weeks)

Thursdays, Sept. 17-Oct. 22, 3-6 p.m.
\$286 public/\$229 members

OR

In-Person Painting Studio (6 weeks)

Tuesdays, Sept. 22–Nov. 10, 6-9 p.m.
\$381 public/\$305 members