

**HOW TO CHOOSE A PAINTING HOLIDAY**

Since my first painting holiday in Provence in 1989, I've been on a number of painting holidays in a wide variety of locations with various organisations and tutors.

There's a vast number out there creating 'the best painting holiday ever' and there's an awful lot of options to choose from in terms of locations, organisations and tutors.

My experience over the years has taught me that there are a number of things to bear in mind when reviewing the advertisements and literature for painting holidays. What I've tried to do below is outline some of the things to think about and provide mini checklists of questions to ask if you fancy the idea of booking a painting holiday.

In summary, good questions to ask fall into three main categories - as set out below.

**CONTENTS**

How to choose a painting holiday .....	1
Is this a business-like operation?.....	2
How long has the painting holiday business been operating? .....	2
How well qualified are they to deliver a painting holiday? .....	3
What does the documentation say?.....	3
Is the tutor competent and effective?.....	5
What sort of work does the tutor do?.....	7
What sort of approach is proposed? .....	7
How much time is given over to painting? .....	7
How much time is given to each student?.....	8
Do the logistics work for you? .....	9
Accommodation and meals: what's included? .....	9
Travel - what's included? .....	10
Insurance - how does this work? .....	11
Where are essential local facilities? .....	11
Conclusion .....	12

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### IS THIS A BUSINESS-LIKE OPERATION?

A painting holiday which glides effortlessly forward like a swan always means that somebody is doing masses of work out of sight to help make things run smoothly!

Painting holidays demand a lot in terms of organisation. Studio facilities need to be found near suitable accommodation; painting trips need to be organised for those painting landscapes – which means locations need to be found and transport organised and parking arrangements investigated. Decisions need to be taken as to how much kit (e.g. easels) needs to be provided by way of support. Insurance needs to be organised. The turnaround weekend can be particularly demanding in terms of getting people to and from airports and train stations and making sure that bed linen and bath towels are washed and dried and back on beds. There may be a need for somebody who is reasonably proficient in the local language and there certainly needs to be an awareness of where the local art shops, banks, chemists and hostels are located! There also needs to be somebody who can answer the many questions which prospective customers come up with!

If you're choosing a holiday based on the artist, it's generally the case that a good artist will not deal with an organisation which isn't business-like as it could damage their personal reputation and future income from teaching. However there are no guarantees.

### HOW LONG HAS THE PAINTING HOLIDAY BUSINESS BEEN OPERATING?

In nearly 20 years, I've been on painting holidays run by organisations which have been doing it for a long time, by people who were starting out and by people who have deliberately deceived me as to their experience in running painting holidays!

It's a reasonable assumption that booking with organisations with a long history and lots of experience would be some sort of guarantee of having a well organised holiday. It's certainly the case that many organisations which have been providing holidays for years have created a well oiled operation of good repute.

However, sad to say, doing the same thing for a long time can also mean that some may now be cutting corners and/or not trying as hard as they used to and/or boredom has set in! With large organisations it can also mean that 'back office admin operations' are slick but that holiday guides to assist the artist are employed on a contract basis and some may never have done a painting holiday before and/or may not know the area.

By and large, most new painting holiday organisations will try really hard to win repeat business because it's the key to their survival in the longer term. The downside of an inexperienced operation is that it might not always get the logistics right and sometimes people simply won't have thought out every aspect of what they need to do/provide. Personally, I've been willing to go on holiday with people who are starting out or relatively new. I've often had a great time, even if some aspects of the painting holiday were slightly unexpected or quirky at times. This option is for people who are willing to take a risk and try new things rather than those who prefer the tried and trusted.

By way of contrast, I'd recommend avoiding any organisation which attempts to convey the impression that they've been doing it for a long time when actually they've never run one before and don't have a clue about what they are doing. The baseline here is that their egos and bank balance have become more important to

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them than doing their homework and being honest with their customers and frankly it doesn't augur well for the holiday. I'd always recommend that organisers are completely honest about their experience with all those making enquiries.

For the record, if I ever mention an organisation it generally means I have had good experiences with them in the past. However I never ever state the name of any organisation which I refuse to use again in future.

#### HOW WELL QUALIFIED ARE THEY TO DELIVER A PAINTING HOLIDAY?

Painting holidays are often not cheap. Consequently many of us want to feel reassured beforehand that we're going to get good value for money.

Delivering a well planned and well organised painting holiday requires knowledge and skills which aren't always associated with artists. In other words, the organisation of the delivery is very much a left-brain (structured and systematic) operation - and artists are very often right-brained (creative). I guess that's why I've found that painting holidays are often delivered by a two person operation. One person (the artist) delivers tuition, often acts as the 'host' and sometimes 'gofers' while a second person (the 'organised one') gets on with all the 'boring' organisation associated with clean bedlinen and meals arriving on time and people getting picked up from and delivered back to their train/plane.

#### WHAT DOES THE DOCUMENTATION SAY?

##### **Reading is essential**

It's absolutely essential that you read everything in the literature/websites provided by the host organisation/artist. I've listened to more than a few hosts in the past commenting on people who have booked the wrong holiday because they failed to read all the details.

##### **What does it all mean?**

It's difficult to assess the claims made about their holidays by different organisations. Great holidays sometimes have terrible marketing material while others oversell the experience. Art journals or directories which take advertising or directory entries are rarely going to make critical noises in a negative way.

Initially you have to proceed on the basis of trust until you get to know what to look out for. Here are some of the things I've done in the past when weighing up options

- Review the marketing material and literature. If it's big on style and low on content you may want to be wary.
- Look at how consumer oriented their literature is and how much evidence there is of understanding your perspective and likely queries.
- Can you tell who is actually running this painting holiday? Do they list names and contact details? I feel more secure with people who already have an identity on the web or in painting magazines – at least then I know I'm dealing with real people rather than con artists.

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- Consider their performance in terms of response to your initial enquiry. First impressions count!
- Based on experience, I run a mile from organisations which have a long list of things they don't do or aren't responsible for<sup>1</sup>. These are people who are protecting their own interests rather than promoting an enjoyable experience for you.

**CHECKLIST**

- How long has the business been operating painting holidays?
- If taking people abroad, have they ever operated painting holidays away from the studio?
- Are you clear who will provide support on location and how experienced they are?
- Can you find a name, address, telephone number and e-mail address on the website?
- Tried and trusted vs. up and coming and keen – which do you prefer? Are you prepared to take a risk?
- Did you get a good response to your initial enquiry? Have they answered all your questions?
- Have you read all the literature thoroughly?
- What's your gut reaction to their marketing literature/website – what impression did it give you?
  - Style over substance?
  - Bias towards looking after the customer or looking after the bank manager?

<sup>1</sup>This is based on an experience with my only real nightmarish painting holiday. The people concerned deliberately deceived me as to the extent of their previous experience, had a long list of things a participant must not do or could not do, another long list of things they weren't responsible for, used a vehicle which was unsafe on the road to transport people – which was driven at high speed by somebody who was habitually drunk in the evenings. Fortunately I'd picked up a car at the airport and consequently was independently mobile. My only excuse is that I decided to take a risk and it didn't pay off! Next time I'll trust my instinct. I came to the conclusion that their sole reason for running painting holidays was to make money. So far as I am aware they are no longer in business – which is hardly surprising!

### IS THE TUTOR COMPETENT AND EFFECTIVE?

Learning can be a very individual thing. There are people who probably respond well to every sort of approach to teaching art. However it's important that paying customers are matched to an approach which they are happy with and/or suits them best.

It's also clear to me from many discussions that those paying for tuition have some clear expectations as to what makes a good teacher.

In this section I've tried to reflect not only my own views (some of which come from having qualified as a teacher) but also those of the very many people I've met on painting holidays and elsewhere and talked to about the tutors we've all come across on painting holidays.

### WHAT ARE THE THREE IMPORTANT FACTS ABOUT TUTORS ON PAINTING HOLIDAYS?

I'm a great believer in creating realistic expectations. There are three key points about tutors on painting holidays which aren't often found in print – even if they are the subject of much discussion amongst those who go on painting holidays!

The three important facts are:

- Artists who create good/great art don't always make good teachers
- Artists providing painting holidays aren't always good artists.
- Artists with good reputations may have acquired them on the basis of statements made by people who don't have a great deal of experience of the alternatives which are on offer.

We may have different views about the definition of "good" but I'm sure you catch my drift.

Good things can be said about a lot of the artists involved in painting holidays – but it's rare to find the perfect teacher. People tend to talk about tutors with defined skill sets in ways which neatly describe what they are good at.

For example, some provide excellent critiques, some are very supportive of novices, some provide excellent support materials, some really stretch and challenge people who've got set in their ways. It's wise to listen to what's said and to read between the lines.

For example – a number of artist/tutors are loath to be critical about the work of others. Some simply won't provide any at all. On the one hand this can be a good thing as it avoids damaging those who are sensitive. On the other hand, if you're paying somebody so you can improve your art, you're entitled in my view to some honest feedback. The sensible tutor finds out how people like their feedback, tailors it to the situation and the individual but doesn't duck issues which need to be highlighted. The advantage of a painting holiday is that a tutor can get to know you and develop feedback over time.

It's a good idea to value what people are good at and to learn what you can put up with in terms of deficits – and what you can't!

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## WHAT SHOULD YOU LOOK FOR IN A TUTOR?

I've come across some excellent artist/teachers who don't have any teaching credentials at all – some are good and some are not. I've also come across some very expensive artist/tutors with no teaching ability whatsoever and/or an inclination to do as little as possible. It should be noted that anybody teaching art in a state subsidised set-up in the UK *must* now demonstrate both qualifications and competence in teaching.

Having qualified as a teacher, I'm going to suggest some of the attributes, knowledge and skills which I would expect might be found in a good tutor on a painting holiday. These include:

- **Attributes:**
  - an ability to relate to lots of different people;
  - an ability to communicate in appropriate ways
  - a commitment to continuous learning – and an interest in how others learn
  - a commitment to individuals achieving their potential
  - respect for diversity (i.e. this can mean being open to different ways of doing things)
  - energy (i.e. teaching new people that you don't know is very tiring – and energy from a teacher stimulates energy in a 'class')
- **Knowledge and understanding:**
  - A good understanding of how people learn
  - Knowledgeable about their medium and subject matter of choice. (People normally specialise – and 'the expert' has more credibility and more to teach)
  - Knowledgeable about their chosen tools and what they can do
  - Knowledgeable about art generally and aspects of art which cross all media (e.g. composition and design ; colour)
- **Skills:**
  - Skilled at creating a learning environment
  - Skilled in assessment
  - Skilled in giving feedback
  - Skilled in leading balanced discussions which involve everybody

As you can see a lot of this relates to enabling people to learn rather than producing great art. However, it's unlikely that you'll be able to learn a lot about whether or not the tutor has any of these attributes, knowledge and skills from their website or marketing material. I'd recommend looking for evidence of the emphasis employed by the artist/tutor.

All too often, the only information provided about a tutor relates to who has bought their work, where their galleries are, whether they've ever won any prizes etc etc – none of which is directly relevant to how well they can teach. The artist's statement can sometimes be helpful about their approach to art. One has to wonder whether anybody has ever made an assessment of whether they are an effective teacher.

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### WHAT SORT OF WORK DOES THE TUTOR DO?

I've always worked on the principle that if I liked the work then I'd like the tutor. The only really disappointing holidays I've ever been on were both linked to being unable to see artwork by the tutor in advance or where I was giving them the benefit of doubt associated with very little evidence of their work!

To find out more:

- Look for evidence of the tutor's own work in the literature or on the painting holiday website.
- Plug their name into your browser and check to see whether they have a website – and then review their work.

### WHAT SORT OF APPROACH IS PROPOSED?

There are three key issues here

- The tutor's individual preferences for how they like to teach or lead.
  - Check whether the tutor has a page on a website devoted to their workshops and painting holidays.
  - Read what the tutor has to say about how to prepare for one of their workshops/painting holidays in the literature or on his website
  - Check whether there is list of what you need to take with you.
  - Check whether the 'course' outline clearly identifies intended outcomes for 'students'
- Whether the tutor explains clearly (or not) how the painting/tuition part of the holiday is delivered.
- The range of participants' knowledge and skills – which effectively is a complete unknown unless this is clearly specified beforehand by the tutor.

Those teaching a broad range of skill levels will bore the more competent while those starting out might feel frustrated by explanations or demonstrations which seem to move too fast.

My personal view is that one size rarely fits all and is the approach most likely to create some level of disappointment. In my view the painting holidays which state the level they are aimed at and/or differentiate their approach for people working at different levels are most likely to meet people's expectations.

### HOW MUCH TIME IS GIVEN OVER TO PAINTING?

This varies from tutor to tutor and there really is no hard and fast format. It very much depends on:

- The competence of the 'class'
- The tutor's preferred way of teaching
- How much people want to paint
- What sort of media people are painting in

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Some artists like to do lots of painting in front of students while others absolutely refuse point blank to demonstrate anything at all about how they paint – their view is its private and they can't "perform" to order. People will be happy with one or the other – or neither.

A very common format is for each morning to start with a demonstration. Tutors who provide critiques often finish the day with a group critique session. In between there is time for painting. Lunch often appears at a set time – but there is often some flexibility about this for more advanced painters. When painters are all based in the same location there may be evenings given over to slideshows and/or talks and/or longer demonstrations.

Tutors who know something about teaching recognise the need to break up sessions between demonstrations, discussions and people working on an exercise or their own work. Tutors who lack training tend to spend too long on demonstrations during the day.

People who are not used to working at their art often find it really tiring to give over a full day to their art, while more experienced painters often get frustrated if they don't get to use every minute of available painting time.

#### HOW MUCH TIME IS GIVEN TO EACH STUDENT?

Tutors vary in how much time they devote to each student and when they are available. This in part depends on how many people participate in each holiday. It's very common for tutors to say when they are off-limits as otherwise they never ever get a break. I've known a number of tutors recently who have doubled up – which strikes me as being a very sensible solution to keeping the energy levels going.

Beware the tutor who is using the painting holiday to produce the new works for their next exhibition! That's something which they should be doing before or after the paying customers arrive/depart!

#### CHECKLIST

- Tutor - Check the literature/website to see whether it is specific about
  - The style of the artist's artwork and range of subject matter
  - Evidence of which media is used on a regular basis by the artist
  - How long the tutor has been teaching and/or whether s/he has a teaching qualification
  - Any evidence of his/her specific skills in teaching
  - Any evidence of student satisfaction (blogs are becoming increasingly important sources)
  - Any evidence of his/her approach to teaching and how each day is organised
  - what materials are required/recommended
- Painting Holiday - Check the literature/website to see whether it is specific about
  - how many places are available
  - likely contact time with 'student'
  - how many trips out of the studio or away from home base are planned

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**DO THE LOGISTICS WORK FOR YOU?**

Logistics essentially covers all the boring bits which support a holiday and which can actually make or break it! Do not underestimate how much of an impact the topics covered in this section have on a holiday.

**ACCOMMODATION AND MEALS: WHAT'S INCLUDED?**

Painting holidays seem to vary quite a bit as to how accommodation is provided. Here are some of the options I've come across – with my comments.

**Host organisation provides accommodation at or very near studio facilities**

This option is much more common in Europe for some reason. Standards of accommodation can vary quite a lot – from the very basic to the upmarket. I've slept in all sorts of rooms from the tiny to the huge, with furniture which varied from the virtually non-existent to expensive antiques and I've been housed in properties which have ranged from a converted piggery to a registered heritage property.

There's generally been some sort of conversion involved if the accommodation is provided by the host. It's not uncommon to be entertained on at least one evening with a photo album showing how the conversion went from whatever it was before to the current accommodation!

If accommodation is provided in a house it's very common for the size and quality of rooms to vary even if the price of the holiday doesn't. The way it generally works is that those who book first get the best. If accommodation is provided in an old house it's possible – but unusual – to also find ensuite facilities.

Recommendations

- Check to see whether there are adequate photographs of what's on offer – and that you ask whether this shows the best or the average.
- If you like the organisation and the tutor then I recommend that you make sure you check out all the rooms before you leave, book early the next time and specify which room you would like!

**Host organisation block books rooms at a local hotel or cruise ship**

This is frequently the only option when a local artist organises a painting holiday overseas or away from their home base. It has the advantage of providing accommodation at hotel standards and the same standard for everybody and minimises the amount of attention to domestic logistics required of the hosts!

This option also means that everybody is located in one place which is much more sociable than being split over several different locations – and the social aspect is one of the main things that a lot of artists really enjoy about a painting holiday.

This option can sometimes mean that you have to travel to the hosts/studio location each day – and might be unable to return to your room as and when you wish. Be sure to check whether the accommodation is located at a distance from (a) the studio and (b) the hosts. My own personal perspective is that I'll only contemplate this variation if I have independent transport.

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**Host Organisation lists suitable accommodation located nearby – you have to organise and book**

Thoughtful artists, organisations and art societies which frequently host painting holidays but are unable to offer accommodation usually offer a list of recommendations of local places to stay. If they're very sensible they indicate the opinions of previous students and what sort of price bracket it is.

**You have to find, organise and book your own accommodation**

This options means spending some time using [Trip Adviser](#) to check out what is available locally and how it has been rated in the past by other people.

Personally, I take the view that failure to provide a list of suitable local accommodation demonstrates a lack of customer orientation and I'd be wary of what this might indicate about the rest of the way the painting holiday is organised.

**Host organisation provides studio and accommodation for groups – but no tutor**

This is not a common option – more's the pity! Compare prices with local B&B and self-catering to see how much you pay to get a studio facility.

**Meals**

There are an infinite number of variations on this one – and they can make quite a lot of difference to the cost of a holiday and the time available for painting.

Speaking personally, the option I've always enjoyed the most is for the host to organise the provision of all meals whether or not they personally make them. When I'm working on my art I want to dedicate my time to making art not making sandwiches or finding somewhere to eat! Some of my best memories of painting holidays have also been associated with evening meals with the whole group sitting around a large table. I've also found that artists are very happy to recommend holidays where the meals have been good!

The rule here is check the details of how meals are provided. If you need to arrange your own meals you need to ask about the local options. I found on one holiday that I had to eat out twice a week – but the local options weren't places I would eat in and we had to travel miles to find somewhere decent! We eventually opted for making a picnic!

**TRAVEL - WHAT'S INCLUDED?**

This can vary significantly – and this is not always an area where you have a lot of choice as a lot of the options are dictated by what sort of support the host will offer. Common options are listed below with comments

**You organise and pay for all your travel to and from the train station / airport nearest to the host**

This is very common. Lots of hosts indicate their willingness to pick up and drop off from specified places. In relation to flights, this generally means making sure you're on specified flights that they will meet/greet. Make sure you get a telephone number to call in case of late flights and/or mishaps.

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**You organise and pay for all your travel to and from the host**

I've done this lots of times – but I like to be independent in travel terms (plus I have a boot all to myself for my plein air kit!). It's an expensive option because it either means car ferries and/or motorail and/or car-hire and/or a very long drive. I've done all of these and there are pros and cons to all of them.

- Taking your own car (plus ferries and/or motorail as required) is probably preferable if you have the time to spare. Make sure you book the car into a garage beforehand for a thorough service and tell the garage what you are planning to do.
- Car-hire means you're dependent on the quality of the car on offer but can be cheaper than the alternative – assuming no accidents! (I've driven sixty miles and negotiated steep hills and twisty bends at night in a hire car which lost second gear after ten miles!)

**Your organise all your travel to and from venue every day**

This is the usual option for one and two day workshops where frankly workshop organisers don't want to get involved with travel arrangements. It's unusual for longer workshops and painting holidays as it assumes independent transport.

**All transport on trips out is inclusive**

It's reasonable to assume that if the painting holiday involves trips then the cost of that is included in the holiday – but it's worth checking! Painting holidays on cruise ships are generally studio based with one or two trips ashore.

**Holiday is studio based with no additional travel costs**

Learning painting skills in a studio based holiday or painting portraits or still life is a lot cheaper than painting plein air – even if you have to pay for the model and/or the content of the still life!

**INSURANCE - HOW DOES THIS WORK?**

The host has to have insurance for their liability to you. Keep an eye out for obvious breaches of it – as indicated in an earlier footnote. You also need to have insurance – and provide written details of it – and it's not uncommon for hosts of painting holidays to refuse to confirm a booking unless proof of insurance is supplied.

**WHERE ARE ESSENTIAL LOCAL FACILITIES?**

On any painting holiday there are probably going to be artists who want to visit the local art shop / bank / chemist and/or hostelry. Well organised holidays know this and have located where all the facilities are that people might need or want to access – even if delivering the holiday abroad.

Holidays which are organised will reflect the local situation on art supplies in the details provided before or after booking. You can be sure that those who don't won't have investigated.

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## CHECKLIST

- Check whether accommodation options are consumer oriented and suitable for you
- Check what's included in terms of getting there and back and around while you are there
- Check the costs and availability of alternative options for getting there and back
- Check how much money you might need (e.g. is plastic acceptable?) and whether or not it's possible to access a bank to exchange money
- Check out what the local art shop supplies and how accessible it is

## CONCLUSION

Painting holidays can be delightful experiences providing memories which you will treasure for the rest of your life. My aim is to help you make sure that your experience is both beneficial and enjoyable and to that end I hope you've found this article to be instructive and useful.

I hope that you now feel more confident about researching and booking a painting holiday.

If you'd like to suggest ways of improving this article or want to tell me about how you got on with your painting holiday this is how to [contact me](#).

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