

This guide is about how to make the most of a painting holiday. If you've been thinking about or planning a painting holiday you may find it useful.

HOW CAN I MAKE THE MOST OF A PAINTING HOLIDAY?

Once you've booked, how can you get the most out of your painting holiday? In this guide I've looked at four key areas which can make a big difference to your enjoyment of a holiday.

- Art materials
- Timing
- The best way to enjoy yourself
- The best source of advice about a future painting holiday or tutor

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ART MATERIALS

Art materials are important because:

- If learning new techniques, you'll want to make sure you have all you need
- You don't want to run out of things you need when you're nowhere near your favourite art shop
- Art materials can contribute significant weight to your luggage
- The colours you'll use will vary with the places you visit
- You'll come across new materials and might want to try them out!

ART MATERIALS – THE REQUIREMENTS LIST

Most tutors generally provide a list of art materials to bring with you. Do consult it – I know that tutors despair of people who turn up with very little in the way of art materials.

However also be aware that some tutors fail to update these and/or specify materials which are difficult to get hold of. Consequently I recommend querying everything you haven't got that might be difficult to get hold of or impractical or impossible to take. You'd be surprised how much then turns out to be *not* essential or can be bought locally or can be borrowed!

For example:

- I've been asked to provide a robust drawing board. However I always take a foam core drawing board which fits in the bottom of my suitcase because it's light, practical to carry and doesn't add undue weight to my luggage. I need a very, very good reason to consider anything different!
- I can't take fixative on airplanes because it is inflammable – so need to buy when I get there and then leave the can behind. Oil painters have similar problems with turpentine and equivalent.
 - It helps enormously if painting holiday hosts provide all kit which can't be taken on planes.
 - It's vital that they make arrangements for any essential purchases you may need to make – ideally before you arrive.

SKETCHING KIT

My website provides [advice about sketching toolkits](#). You can see my kitchen sink approach to my sketching kit in [Travel sketch toolkit - what I take overseas](#) (with images) - this details what I personally regard as essentials for my trips overseas - but everybody has a different perspective

PAINTING PLEIN AIR KIT

If you're not used to painting plein air then the most important thing to do before you go on your painting holiday is assemble all you need for a day's painting plein air – and then walk round the block with it all. That

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way you'll soon find out whether it's easy to carry, whether the weight distribution works – and whether you actually have enough hands!

There are many drawn out discussions around and about in Art Journals and on the Internet about which are the best easels for working plein air – and which easels are the best ones for travelling. It's not an area of my expertise as I rarely use an easel and never take one – however

- If you use an easel check whether there are any available to borrow at your destination
- If you take your own, I recommend keeping easels as light as possible – however bear in mind that they may then need to be weighted down when erected
- Remember that tripods have a dual use as both support for a pochade and use with a camera

Speaking personally, I'm a dedicated [Art Bin](#) user for my pastels and pencils – but I do collect pencil cases too! I'm also not averse to using [my Venetian shopping trolley](#) – and the chair I use for art in the field is more well travelled than I am. (see [In praise of my sketching chairs](#))

ART MATERIALS – THE COLOURS

Get advice about colours to take if the locality is very different to your home and the colours you normally use. I once watched somebody paint lush tropical vegetation in Bali with the colours he usually used for the English countryside!

TRYING DIFFERENT ART MATERIALS

A painting holiday is a really great time to play and experiment with new materials. However it's not really a good time for serious testing – but it will give you an idea about whether you want to investigate the potential of a new material further.

There are various ways that you can experiment with new art materials while on holiday

- Using whatever is recommended by or available from the tutor
- Buying art materials in local art shops which you're not familiar with
- Swopping art materials with others on the holiday

PACKING IN ADVANCE

The critical issue is getting the balance right between personal stuff and art materials.

My main recommendation is to **do a trial pack well in advance of leaving** - you'll be surprised at how many compromises are required to get everything in - and you might want some time to reflect.....

On the next page is my packing routine – and I do not jest! This is ABSOLUTELY ESSENTIAL READING for all “everything but the kitchen sink” artists (you know who you are and I know I am one of them)

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My packing routine – recommended for every “everything but the kitchen sink” artist

I want to take everything – but can only take a limited amount – so this is what I do!

- Weigh my suitcase on the digital scales – that gives me the number of pounds/kilos available for everything else! Groan and decide to go and buy a lighter suitcase.
- Assemble all my ‘stuff’ for the painting holiday. At this stage I sometimes weigh my ideal amount of art materials just to give myself a fright to make sure I start being more realistic!
- Start by packing all precious art materials/equipment in my hand luggage. Seriously - what am I going to do if the suitcase goes AWOL? If it’s precious and it won’t go in my hand luggage then it doesn’t go on holiday – simple!
- Pack the rest of my ‘stuff’ and reweigh the ‘big’ suitcase
- Work out how much weight allowance is left for clothes and toiletries etc.
- Revise piles of clothes to take and ‘stuff’ already packed – there’s always too much of everything!
- Remember that I need to leave room in my suitcase for all the new art materials I may want to buy – so I turf a few more things out
- Remember that I could always leave an order and arrange for them to be shipped and/or turf out all my novels before coming home
- Reweigh ad infinitum until a happy compromise – or at the very least a compromise – has been achieved.
- Rewrite my list of art materials to be taken – and pack so that I have a checklist for when I need to pack to come home. (Added after a trip where I spent HOURS searching for an item which figured in the original list but which I’d forgotten I didn’t actually pack in the end!)
- Resolve to give up attachment to “stuff” before my next painting holiday

This is why I recommend doing a trial pack well in advance.

It’s also why painting holidays which give you the option of taking your own car suddenly becomes a lot more attractive as an option!

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TIMING

I always sleep really well on a painting holiday. I'm usually absolutely tired out from all the fresh air, hard work and lots of socialising - plus all that concentration associated with drawing and painting!

Here are some tips about timing - some of which are aimed at the plein air painter:

- If travelling far – don't try too much until you're over the bad jet lag day. Look around, get used to new sights and sketch.
- If travelling independently – try travelling out a couple of days earlier so you can get used to a place. I found this to be a big bonus and always try to do this if possible
- Try getting up very early and drawing/painting before breakfast - the light is almost always great and the process is almost always meditative
- Resist all attempts to remove you too soon from early evening light which can be very beautiful. I suggest you:
 - Find places close to where you stay where you can paint prior to dinner.
 - I've developed a habit of haring back at the last minute having not stopped to change for dinner. If you have your own car, take a change of clothes and do a very quick change in the cloakroom!
- Stay out late and try night painting! It's really interesting and helps you to practice seeing colours. You might feel more comfortable doing this in a small group rather than on your own. If you're definitely interested why not try taking a look at some of the Nocturnes of James McNeil Whistler before you go?
- Do remember to get enough sleep. Late night socialising can be very enjoyable and I've sat up into the wee small hours discussing art and artists on more than a few occasions - but from experience and my observation of others who've done the same I can tell you that you won't be doing a lot of productive work the next day!
- Remember that you can always arrange to tack some days on at the end of a holiday if travelling independently – and by then you'll know all the best places to go to paint!

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THE BEST WAY TO ENJOY YOURSELF

Unless you arrive in need of a good rest I advocate a “work hard and play hard” routine - with power naps at well timed intervals!

WORK HARD

My personal opinion is that the people who get the most out of a painting holiday can are those who work hard. It's enjoyable rather than hard although it might also be a challenge.

Some people work better if they have an aim in mind. If this is you then here are a few suggestions about ways you can work hard with a purpose. The most important thing is that it's something you want to do.

- Decide to learn a new technique and become proficient
- Decide to try painting a new subject and learn how to do this well.
- Decide to produce more finished studies than you have ever done before. For example, produce a new work every morning and a new work every afternoon
- Decide to go home with stacks of material to work from in your studio – fill a sketchbook and do some more finished studies. Don't worry if you don't produce a 'finished work' (This is what I now do)
- Make a daily journal of your art and how you spend your time on your blog. (I do this – see [Travels with a Sketchbook](#) – but mine are compiled when I get back!)
- Inveterate sketchers also take a sketchbook to dinner with a view to drawing all my companions by the end of the holiday (Well I do!)

PLAY HARD

Having worked hard you really deserve some time off.

Having a good break at lunchtime and also at dinner in the evening always feels like a well earned respite which should reinvigorate you for the rigours of learning new things, trying new techniques and an awful lot of drawing and painting. Plus of course this is when you get to learn about all sorts of other things which are art-related!

However I'd like to highlight a couple of cautionary notes. Do watch out for the after lunch need for a siesta if your host provides excellent food and you eat too much! I also can't recommend sitting or standing to draw or paint in a hot climate after you've had any alcohol with lunch. I've seen painters lose a complete afternoon's painting due to either or both of these temptations!

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THE BEST SOURCE OF ADVICE ABOUT A PAINTING HOLIDAY OR TUTOR

If you enjoy a painting holiday, you'll doubtless want to go on another - but where can you get the best information and advice?

Without a doubt, the best advice you will ever get about painting holidays and tutors will come from people who have personal experience of the holiday or tutor.

Now that's not to suggest that you take everything people say as the literal truth. You will always need to filter information anybody provides by considering:

- personal preferences: Some people love demos while others want good crits from their tutors. I've found personal preferences count for a lot when students assess tutors.
- level of experience and awareness:
 - I've found that people who are new to painting and being taught are quite likely to be impressed by anybody who is more skilled than them. Their advice tends to be more helpful to other people who are new to painting.
 - People who have made progress with their painting tend to offer more valuable advice than those who continue to do what they've always done no matter how many tutors they've met.
 - More experienced artists can become quite critical about the level of competence of some tutors - in some cases, with justification. However they also tend to be better judges of what an artist/tutor is actually good at - from a more experienced artist's perspective.

Interestingly, individuals' level of experience and individual preferences are much less important when it comes to assessments made about standards of accommodation, meals and refreshments and the host's handling of the overall logistics.

Keep an eye out for blog posts and forum threads about workshops and painting holidays. The main difficulty about getting recommendations from online forums and blog posts is it doesn't enable you to filter the information provided UNLESS you know that individual very well indeed.

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