

Painting holidays

A French Connection

Poor exchange rates have dissuaded many of us from trips abroad this year but Devon Art Society's **Cherry Lyons** tells Martha Alexander that a cross-Channel jaunt is still well worth the investment

When it comes to painting as a social experience, Cherry Lyons knows her stuff. As the chair of one of the oldest art societies in the country – the Devon Art Society, founded in 1912 – Cherry has to ensure that members are enriched in terms of art education and tutoring, often hand-picking tutors to come and share their knowledge with the group.

Her commitment to the society has resulted in firm friendships and a hunger to learn more. She has attended a number of courses in the UK and recently embarked on her first painting adventure on foreign soil – in France. “I have just returned today from, by far, the very best painting holiday ever,” she says. “It was absolute bliss. My friend Christina and I have sampled painting courses in this country but this was our first foray abroad and we were blown away.”

The pair were based at L'Age Baston, a gorgeous château near La Rochefoucauld in France that is run

by John and Alex Waddington. “They are the most marvellous hosts,” says Cherry. “Your every need is catered for, with exceptional meals and warm, welcoming hospitality. Our rooms were so large, we could have held a ball in them.”

For Cherry, the painting pivots around the presence of her friends that have all encouraged each other to improve via laughter and companionship. “What started by going to a quiet evening class a few years ago has now grown into aspirations of a destiny in painting. We are absolutely besotted,” she laughs.

“Whilst we would probably be considered experienced amateurs and could continue to paint solitarily, we gain so much from the sharing of experiences. It has lasting meaning and a relaxing but challenging atmosphere where we can be ourselves without the pressure from daily interruptions.”

Cherry, who is a regular at Rob and Siân Dudley's monthly watercolour class, has also been taught by Ray Balkwill and Paul Riley, both long-standing ▶

BELOW, CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM LEFT Cherry presents her work; the group on location in the French countryside; the gorgeous Château L'Age Baston; Cherry's colourful watercolour studies



professional tutors in the South West. And while her experience with painting in general dates back decades, watercolour is a relatively new venture. “I painted in oils in the 1970s but picked up a gauntlet with watercolour written on it just a few years ago,” explains Cherry. “I actually think this painting bug is something you catch.”

As with any learning practice, it’s important to keep things fresh. Thanks to having such a wide network of arty people to glean advice from in her quest to improve her work, Cherry has frequently been recommended new opportunities. At L’Age Baston, the renowned watercolourist Jennifer Johnson taught her. “Jennifer came to one of our society evenings to demonstrate animal portraiture and when we found out that she was tutoring in September, that clinched it.”

Jennifer is not retained by L’Age Baston, but is booked in for selected weeks. She believes that good draughtsmanship is integral to successful painting and provides one-on-one tuition with everyone on the course, so that they are not merely watching and copying demonstrations.

“She is a truly inspirational artist with a very special gift of perception. She is able to detect those small but important nuances that help to progress an

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artist’s technique but with individual and personal support,” says Cherry.

Aside from the regret of it clashing with our *Artists & Illustrators* course with Rob and Siân Dudley, Cherry had her bags packed without a backward glance. While her stay in France certainly offered up some stunning scenery, it is the little details that provided the greatest inspiration.

“We were overwhelmed by the château and all its quirky corners,” says Cherry. “There is no shortage of painting opportunities. They even have two huge but gentle donkeys, Picasso and Napoleon, who were joined by Horatio, a young ram, who just wandered into the château and liked it so much he stayed.”

The main point of any painting holiday is to come away having learnt new things. Cherry believes the most valuable tip she received from Jennifer (and the one which has been most instrumental in her improvement) was to look more carefully and deeply at her subjects. “It’s about taking out a good composition from a really large vista. It can be really hard to pick out the best of what’s in front of you and turn it into something good. I feel much more confident in this,” she says, paintbrush already in hand back at her home in Devon, ready to put all she has learnt into some serious practice. 