



The perfect place to slow down and draw the roses

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I've gone back to school. Sort of. Teachers are giving lessons to lots of eager students, but the classroom – if you can call it that – is like none I've been in.

It is outdoors and it is gorgeous, bursting with pink dahlias, purple kale and bright orange pumpkins.

I'm at Hollyhock, which calls itself Canada's Lifelong Learning Centre, even though it feels more like a retreat than a school. On the British Columbia island of Cortes, it is six hours, three ferry rides and a whole mindset away from Vancouver, the nearest major city.

On the day I arrive, three teachers are in Hollyhock's renowned garden. Two of them – professional painters Robert Genn and his daughter Sara Genn – are instructing a couple dozen students to paint a picture in 37 minutes.

“And when they're done, they'll get a surprise,” Robert Genn says. “I'm going to ask them to paint a picture in 37 strokes. They've got to learn to paint faster.”

I admire these lifelong learners, but I'm happy just to hang out. Beachcombing, reading and lounging in the hot tub while a full moon rises over the Strait of Georgia make up my weekend's to-do list. Oh, and eating well. Along with colourful salads, fragrant soups and a weekly oyster barbecue, there is always dessert, such as the dense chocolate cake served one evening with fresh figs and edible flowers.

Wandering through the lodge on my second day, I stop to see how the photography students are doing. They're here for a macro course, focusing on Hollyhock's flowers.

“You can still tell it's a datura,” chides the instructor gently to a middle-aged woman from Seattle. The pair is looking through her camera's viewfinder at a frilly flower with purple edges.

“The goal is to enter another world,” Allan Mandell explains patiently. “Let the flower be the gateway to lead you into a world of pure beauty where the name of the flower doesn't matter any more. That's where the art is.”

More importantly, perhaps, another student finds where the money is. It happens while a group of us are standing in line for the ferry home on our last day. With a few hours to kill, one of the painting students – Jane Appleby from Vancouver – is showing off her work when an American couple offers to buy one of her small oils on the spot for \$150. Not bad for 37 minutes.

IF YOU GO

From Vancouver, the fastest way is to fly to Campbell River with Central Mountain Air (flycma.com) or Pacific Coastal Airlines (pacificcoastal.com), then take a water taxi (discoverylaunch.com) to Cortes Island. Less expensive but longer is to drive or bus (islandlinkbus.com) to Campbell River, then ferry (bcferries.com) to the island (about six hours total).

Hollyhock has accommodation for every budget, from tent sites (starting at \$87 a person, a night) to oceanfront rooms with private bath (approximately \$300 a person, a night). Rates include all meals, morning yoga and WiFi.

Courses begin in late April and go to the end of October. Search by month, presenter or subject at hollyhock.ca.