

Better Travel Souvenirs - Watercolor Postcards

by [babair](#) on July 2, 2008

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Author: babair [author's website](#)

I'm trying to be all things to all people. :-)

Intro: Better Travel Souvenirs - Watercolor Postcards

Digital photography is so ridiculously cheap and easy that a weekend trip can result in 150 jpegs. Sure you can post them on Flickr or Picasa, but what then? Yes, your friends looked at them once, but does anyone ever look at those online photo albums twice?

On the other hand, a small painting that you made with your own hands? That gets matted and framed and hung in a place of honor. You can make a painting for yourself, or make one for your friends at home. (If they're into that kind of thing ... don't give art to people who aren't arty. It just makes everyone uncomfortable)

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| Some of my original watercolors are available for sale in my
| Etsy store: <http://artsibitsi.etsy.com>
+-----

Watercolor is a great medium for travel. It doesn't take up a lot of room in your luggage, and the paintings dry quickly so that they can be packed with a minimum of fuss. You can work fast and small; I like to do 4x6" postcards. I can bang out a decent little landscape in less than an hour, from set-up to finish. Your results may vary.

Watercolor is also a great medium for novices. Nobody expects a watercolor to have photographic quality and detail. And if you make a real mess, you can shred the evidence.

Painting is a nice way to pass time on long, quiet afternoons while the rest of your group naps.

Finally, if you want friends, sit down in a quiet corner with a box of paints and a brush. You will become instantly irresistible to passers-by.



Step 1: Materials

Actually you can probably purchase a lot of this stuff on the road. I've picked up everything in foreign countries and at some pretty rustic markets.

To pack

- Watercolor paper (140 lb or more) cut into 4x6 cards. Heavier stock really is better.
- Cheap paints - I can't tell the difference between the 50c grade school paint box and the \$45 travel paint set, except for the choice of colors. The quality of the pigment seems similar, and they take up about the same amount of room in your luggage. However, if you need "burnt sienna" and brown won't do, pay for the better paints.
- A few brushes, at least one fine tip and one broad tip. I have one round calligraphy brush that I really like.
- Pencil and eraser
- Waterproof container - I use a transparent pouch with a sliding zipper

To get on site

- Paper towels or napkin
- Glass water

Optional

- Black marker ... added at the end, improves your paintings dramatically
- Painter's tape - use this to hold your paper to the table. Keeps the edges from curling. And if you're painting outside, keeps the whole thing from blowing away,.
- Watercolor pencils & sharpener - Oh, these are so neat. And they make me feel so much more talented than I am.

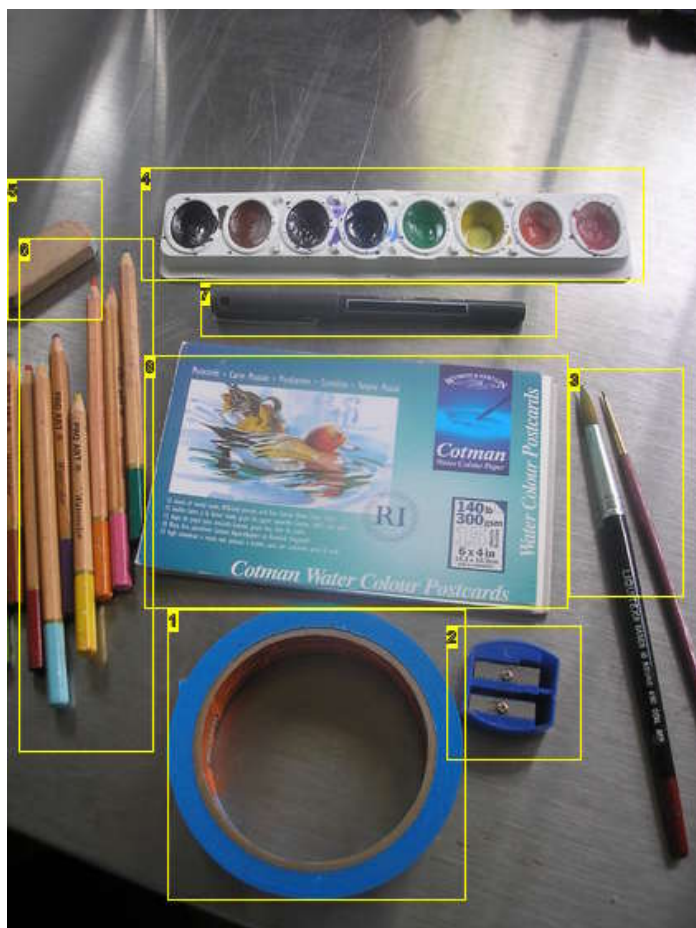


Image Notes

1. not very sticky painter's tape.
2. sharpener
3. two brushes
4. cheap paint box
5. eraser
6. watercolor pencils
7. black marker
8. 140 lb water color stock

Step 2: Decide on a subject

Keep it simple. Just try to capture some impressions while they're fresh. Here are some ideas, organized by skill.

BEGINNER: The easiest type of composition to start with is a landscape. You really can't go wrong with a stripe of green, a stripe of blue, and some brown strategically thrown in. For a seascape, put the blue stripe at the bottom.

Once you have mastered the stripy approach to composition, try adding some blobby trees and some silhouetted birds. Different types of trees have differently shaped blobs, you know. Give it a shot.

INTERMEDIATE: If you are feeling bold, try painting some of the local flora and fauna, like a tropical flower, sea shell or fish. These subjects can be represented fairly simply by their shape and color.

ADVANCED: Is the architecture interesting? Buildings have lots of wonderful angles and shadows. Or try to capture something about the local people, their style of clothing for example.



Image Notes

1. leaf shaped blob

Step 3: Prepare your space

En plein air is a French expression which means "in the open air", and describes the act of painting outdoors. Plein air painters are typically concerned with the changing effects of sunlight on their subject matter. I just like being outside instead of in my hotel room.

The ideal location is whatever is comfortable for you, but you probably don't want to be in the direct sun and wind.

Get all of your materials together. Fetch a cup of clean water and a paper towel or napkin. Optionally, tape down your paper. Wet your brushes.

photo credit: <http://www.co.ozaukee.wi.us/Events/PleinAir.htm>



Step 4: Prepare your paint and paper

Saturation is an art term that refers to the brightness and depth of color. Watercolors may be light and unsaturated, or deep and vibrantly colored. Personally I prefer pure color, but it takes courage and commitment to put a fully saturated brush to paper because watercolor can be very hard to remove or change.

If you are less experienced with watercolor, try this technique: wet an area of your paper with clear water. Be careful that you don't touch any of the other wet spots on the paper. Touch your brush to one of your paints and then to the wet area of your paper. You should see a wonderful bloom of color.

The art term for this is wet-in-wet. This website shows how you can use this technique to quickly complete a simple landscape.

<http://www.watercolorpainting.com/watercolorpainting/wetinwet.htm>

This is a great technique for the sky in your landscape. Wet the top third of your paper, and then dot (or stroke) some blue into it.

If you want to try to get some darker color, leave your paper dry. Load your brush with clean water and drip some right into the paint pot. Let it sit for a couple minutes to soften the pigment. Then load your brush and try it out.



Image Notes
1. wet-in-wet technique

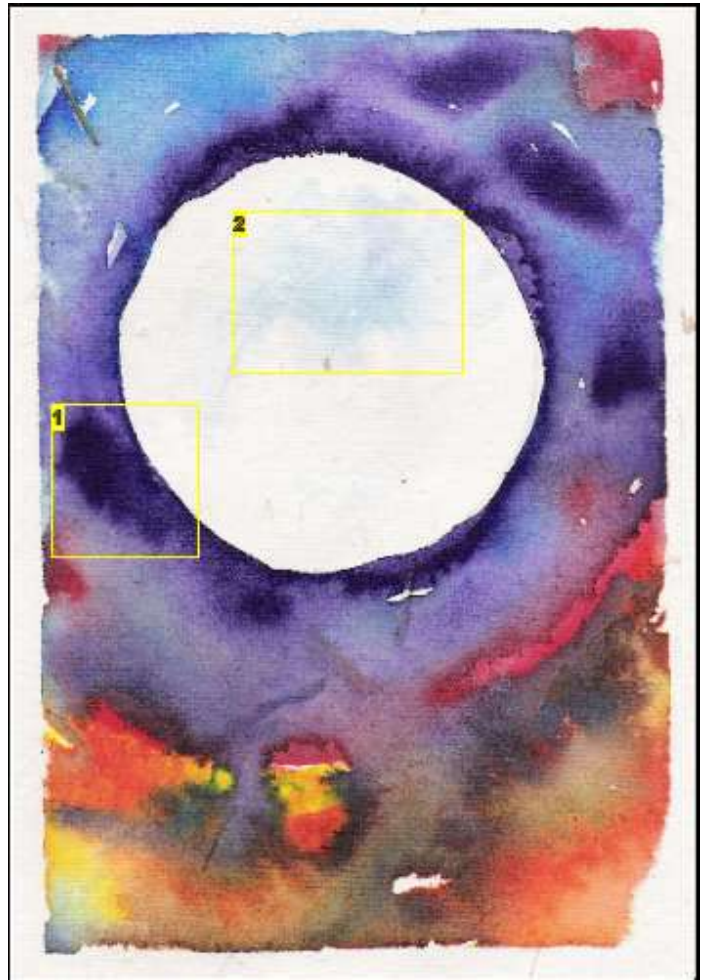


Image Notes
1. saturated color
2. unsaturated color



Image Notes
1. dry wash

Step 5: Sketch out your composition

This will give you some idea of where you're going to be putting your major blocks of color.

Think about what the focal point of your painting will be. You can establish the focal point by its position, its color or its size.

I like to do this part with watercolor pencils. That way, my pencil marks will melt and ultimately disappear into my painting. I look like a friggen freehand painting genius.



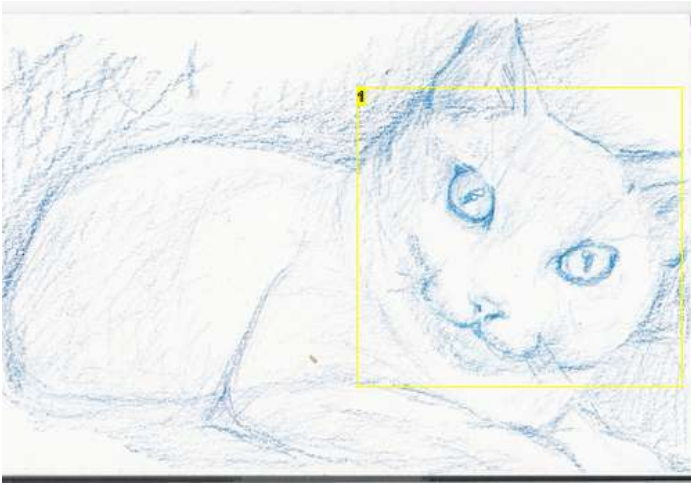


Image Notes

1. These crazy eyes will be focal point

Step 6: Background, then foreground

Start putting color in the major background elements of your composition. Unless you are working wet-in-wet, let the background dry before adding foreground elements. One of the nice things about watercolor is that you don't have to wait very long for the layers to dry.

On a personal note, I am not a good waiter, so I usually work on two watercolors at once. While one is drying, I work on the other one.

Be sure to completely clean out your brush when you change colors. Rinse it in the water and then blot it on the paper towel until no color is left.



Step 7: Chat with visitors

If you are within 500 feet of another human being, that person will be overcome by a burning desire to see what you are doing. Be generous and offer to share your materials.

Pictures are a great way to bridge language and cultural barriers. Paint and exchange pictures with your new friend.

You can endear yourself to your traveling companions by quietly entertaining a child for a good hour.

photo credit [www.flickr.com/photos/qwurky/218542638/]



Step 8: Wrap it up

As fun as painting is, you have to stop eventually. If you are happy with your work, then let it dry completely before wrapping it up and putting back with your paper and paints.

(p.s. the photo rope that I won in the photomajo contest has turned out to be great for drying watercolors)

If you are unhappy with your painting, you can try one last trick before you toss it. Wait for the painting to dry completely. Then add outlines with the black marker. Don't try to be neat. Scribble a little. This is art, after all. It's not meant to be perfect.

Be sure to completely clean out your brushes and store them flat. Clean and return the cup that you used for water.

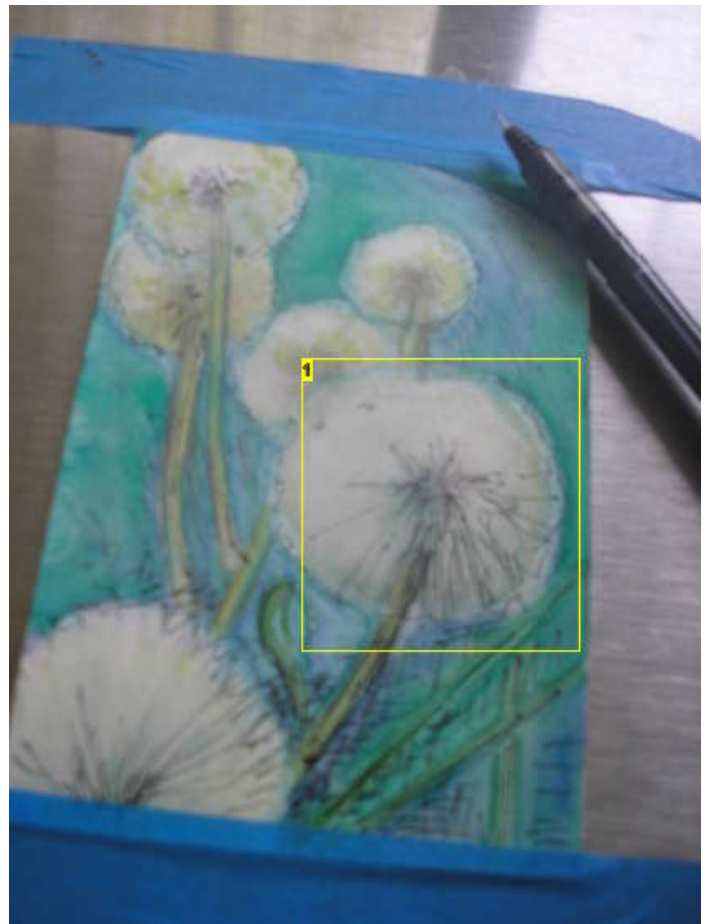


Image Notes

1. added details with marker

Step 9: Back home

Sort through your paintings and pick out one or two that you (still) like. Take the not-ready-for-prime-time-paintings and put them in a box. Someday, when you are dead, these will be worth a fortune to your heirs.

The favored paintings should be matted and framed and hung in a place of honor. This can be done fairly cheaply if you made your paintings a standard size. In the US, these are 4x6", 5x7", 8x10", etc.

The matte is important. It elevates your work. The matte says, "This is not a child's fingerpainting! This is art!" Write a little something on the matte about where you were and when you painted it.

Admire your effort and reflect on your wonderful travels.

:-)

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Image Notes

1. wet-in-wet technique

Related Instructables



Altoids/mint tin mini watercolor paint box-NEW PROCESS!

(video) by
truemirror



Altoids Tin Watercolor kit

by wendykknit



Travel watercolor set

by kariswg1



Movable Pallet Altoid Tin Watercolor Set

by thehaggard



Travel Watercolor Palette (eye shadow box)

by Pretendx2xchoke



make your own cheap watercolor block

by j_larson

Comments

6 comments

[Add Comment](#)



truemirror says:

Thank you for this Ideal and I love this tree, laying on my back looking through a tree was a favorite thing to do, but due to age... I haven't done it in a long time... I'm adding it to my to do list.

Apr 12, 2009. 3:35 PM [REPLY](#)



Kathybear says:

I've done this and have some nice watercolors of the Caribbean and the Pacific coast - with actual sand, which sticks to gouache nicely, for the beach.

Dec 5, 2008. 10:50 AM [REPLY](#)



babair says:
Great idea. I'll have to try that.

Dec 6, 2008. 6:27 AM [REPLY](#)



El Rey says:
Very good no-nonsense primer!

Oct 10, 2008. 3:07 PM [REPLY](#)



ll.13 says:
You have some cool paintings! nice work.

Jul 2, 2008. 12:25 PM [REPLY](#)



LinuxH4x0r says:
Nice! Any good artist should be able to mix their own colors, so really the pro paints don't have any advantage

Jul 2, 2008. 11:00 AM [REPLY](#)
