

Discover your Inner Artist!

Claire Lloyd writes about her experience at the *Painting in Spain* Art Centre in Alcalá de los Gazules

Learning to draw and paint had always been high on my Things-to-do-when-I-retire list. I'd done a few watercolours years ago and enjoyed art at school, but never managed to find the time to fit it into a busy working life. You need time and you need space: time to think, doodle, touch and re-touch; space to get all the gear out, make a mess and leave it overnight without it getting in other people's way. Those were my excuses, anyway. When we retired and moved to Alcalá in 2008, I had all the time and space I needed and - I could hardly believe my luck!! - an English couple, Andy and Helen, had just opened an art school about two hundred yards from our house.

I signed up for a weekly 2-hour class which Andy runs for people who live locally. There were five of us, a nice sociable number but small enough to enable plenty of one-to-one attention. We started off with a still life, then a couple of life drawings, some lessons on perspective (drawing the interlocking white boxes of an Andalucian hill-town has to be a challenge for anybody!) and a few sessions on specific topics like skies, trees and water. In one lesson we were given photos ripped from magazines to copy, and I still have a rather curious drawing of Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall holding a chicken (free-range of course).



We used a mixture of pencil, charcoal and acrylic paints; I had never used the latter before, and needed a bit of help to abandon the water-colour techniques I had tried so hard to master in my youth. But after a couple of sessions, and after seeing Andy's own works in acrylics, I realised that this was the ideal medium for me. They are very forgiving so you can paint over your mistakes, they are much cheaper than oils (and don't take days to dry), and you can paint on anything from MDF to wallpaper.

Once we had learned basic drawing techniques, we were asked to bring in examples of paintings we liked. We were then given objects to paint in

that style. For "homework" over Christmas I was given a bunch of red carnations and roses to paint in a bold style against a black background. God, how I sweated over those carnations! But going back next term, Andy showed me how to look at a small area through a cardboard rectangle and just paint the coloured shapes I could see in the rectangle. Stop thinking carnation, start thinking crimson triangles! Once I got the hang of actually painting what I could see, and not what I thought it ought to look like, it all began to fall into place. All through the winter I was spending entire days in my room painting - birds, animals and my favourite subject, Alcalá itself. I feel very privileged to live in such a picturesque place.



So, if you're looking for a new hobby why not sign up for a few sessions? You really don't have to worry about whether you're "good" enough. Like any skill, painting and drawing can be taught and learned. Andy's relaxed and constructive teaching method is perfect for bringing out the best in people and helping them develop confidence in their own style, whatever that is; there is no right and wrong. It's all about learning how to look and then copy what you see; this is a technique you can learn, not a genetic attribute.

The Art Centre also offers residential courses, workshops and one-to-one tutoring. Residential guests get en-suite rooms off the main studio area, plus Helen's splendid home cooking. The Centre is just a minute's walk from the Plaza Alameda, where the Alcalainos sit out on a summer evening eating *caracoles* and playing dominoes while house-martins swoop overhead. In the other direction, the roof terrace offers an unbroken view of El Picacho and the Parque Nacional de los Alcornocales. The ever-changing colours and textures of the forests and mountains are inspirational for both artists and photographers.

[More information on Painting in Spain](#)