

# Discovering an artisan's playground

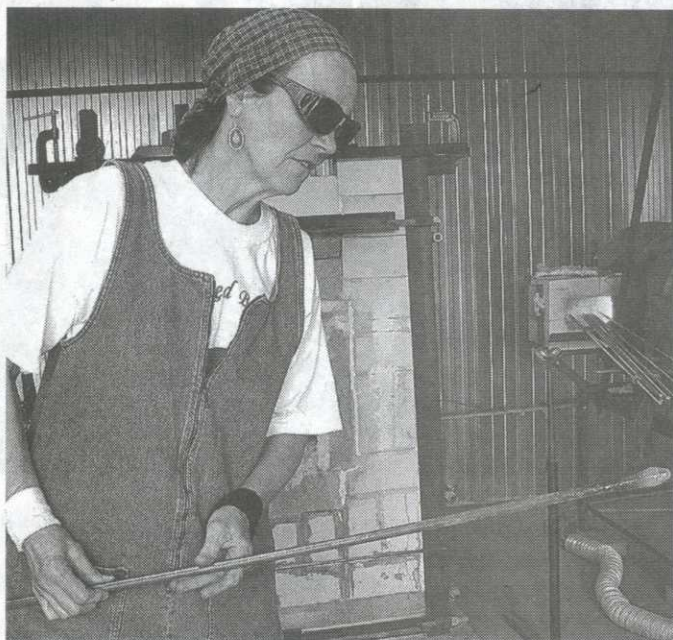
*Glass-making and gallery-going on Prince Edward County's new Arts Trail*

When the thermometer is pushing 30 degrees, sometimes you just need to get hotter before you can feel cooler. That was the thinking behind signing up for a glass-working course on the new Arts Trail in Prince Edward County. The County may be best known for its beaches, farms and vineyards. But it is also home to a thriving arts community.

The Arts Trail links 22 galleries and studios, including the Red Barns, a self-billed "artisan's playground" offering workshops in woodworking, stained glass, pottery and even blacksmithing. After touring the gallery, where impressive works of stained glass, blown glass, glass beads and even glass bracelets are displayed and sold, we were ready to get to work in the glass studio, located in a former apple storage shed.

Our teacher, Heather Watson, had a few words of caution: "When someone asks me 'How long did it take to make that vase?', I tell them 'ten years,'" she said, as we practised manoeuvring between the blazing heat of the glory hole and the work bench. "One guy asked me if he could learn to make a whole set of glass Christmas ornaments in one weekend. I said, 'Maybe you could make a set of glass turds.'" Clearly, a couple of novices like my sister and me shouldn't be setting our expectations too high.

We managed to turn molten glass into some very, shall we say, "interesting" flowers and paperweights. And thanks to the outstanding skill and concentration of our instructor, we didn't suffer a single burn while working with molten glass at temperatures above



*Heather Watson demonstrates glass technique*

*Woodcarving is one of many workshops offered at The Red Barns*

2,000 degrees Fahrenheit.

We practised turning our punties, the long steel rods used to gather glass from the oven, where it is melted to the consistency of honey. "You absolutely never stop turning or the glass flops off," Heather reminded us. "Find the balance, let gravity help you." There's only a small window of opportunity to shape the glass before it solidifies, a few seconds to pinch, twist and stretch it into something resembling a flower, before it hardens and must be returned to the heat of the glory hole to become workable.

Even a paperweight is not without its challenges, but Heather showed us how to fill our glass blobs with bubbles by



using the pineapple mould to make small dents, or add swirls of colour by dipping the glowing-hot glass into fragments of coloured glass, then shaping them with a wet wooden cup.

Our creations had to spend a night in the annealar, a kiln-like box that allows the glass to cool slowly. "Otherwise, the

surface cools too fast and it shatters," says Heather. While the glass cooled, and with a new appreciation for artistic skills, we set out to explore the Arts Trail. Encompassing galleries large and small, the trail offers a great excuse for a drive, with stops across the length and breadth of the county.

Serious art lovers will not want to miss the Oeno Gallery, known for contemporary works by regional and international artists displayed in a converted modern residence on the Bay of Quinte. Picton's Arts on Main is an artist-run co-op with a wide range of works, from hand-painted silk scarves to stone sculptures. Clusters of galleries in Wellington, Bloomfield and Picton are conveniently located to lure beachgoers on rainy afternoons. But others like the La De Dah Sculpture Studio are definitely off the beaten track.

A sense of discovery sent us to the Red Roof Gallery, water colourist Ron Pickering's home studio at the remote eastern end of the county. From there we just happened upon Fifth Town Artisan Cheese as it was readying for opening. A towering blue sculpture had recently been installed in front of the modernist building, almost a statement of good but individual taste.

A little farther down the road at the Rose Museum—one of the county's oldest homes—we stopped to eat our sandwiches on the front lawn. Inside, we admired the crafts, some nearly two centuries old—including a hand-painted rocking chair and a record of births and deaths illustrated with birds—and contemplated the county's rich heritage.

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