

Paint Europe

WalkEurope's luxury tours include painting exquisite locations with noted San Marino artist Eva Margueriette.

By Bettijane Levine

Forget Yelp and all those other online ratings and reviews. The best evidence of a tour company's excellence comes from those who've taken the tours and whose level of discernment is similar to your own. WalkEurope art tours were started less than a year ago by San Marino resident Tom Harter; since then, the group has led two European trips to exquisite offbeat locations, with morning walks, sophisticated forays into local cuisine and culture and a few hours of painting instruction each day from noted Arroyoland artist and art instructor Eva Margueriette.



No tourist traps, no herding by guides (the groups are limited to 15 people), no stress or strain. In fact, the debut six-day tours were apparently so exhilarating, relaxing and satisfying that some participants signed up to take all four art tours Harter and Margueriette offer again this year. That's an impressive return rate for any tour company, let alone a startup. The art tours are among WalkEurope's 16 trips this year (four are art tours), many of which are already booked, with reservations coming in from as far as Connecticut and Rhode Island.

The almost-instant success saga of this startup tour company is inspirational on many levels. For San Marino resident Eva Margueriette, 72, it's yet another chapter in her

already long and successful art career and an unexpected one to boot. She tells *Arroyo Monthly* that she had led her students on numerous tours to Europe throughout the years, “and last March I decided I really didn’t need to go again. Then my friend Janet sent me a photo from Tuscany of the pink sky at sunset over rolling open hills. I thought to myself, ‘Maybe I actually do want to go again, to soak up all that beauty.’ Five days later, Tom Harter approached me with his idea” to lead plein-air painting tours in Europe “and I jumped at the chance. The tours brought a breath of fresh air to so many, including myself. Tom provides the space for painters and nonpainters alike to nourish their creative souls.”

The tours are for both working and beginning artists, she says, as well as friends and family of all ages who just want to enjoy the sights, scenery and off-the-beaten-path delights Harter plans for each trip, she says. The groups are limited, she adds, “because we travel like a family, enjoy long European-style meals together and get to know each other. After an early morning walk, we have one long painting session with beautiful morning light, followed by a leisurely lunch, because high-noon light is not as pleasing.” Depending on the location, afternoons might entail shopping, cooking classes, museum tours, wine tasting — or just roaming around. Activities are optional, Harter and Margueriette say, but groups tend to stay together for the engaging company while exploring the highlights Harter has planned for each locale. “The golden-light hour is spent painting, before the sun sets and dinner is served, Margueriette says. “Our painting schedule revolves around the light.”

Well known in the local art community, Margueriette graduated from the fledgling CalArts when it was transitioning from the Chouinard Art Institute and went on to paint for the next 50 years. For the past 30, she has also taught students at her San Marino studio. Her watercolors and oils have won numerous awards, and she has won private and corporate commissions from such institutions as downtown L.A.’s Jonathan Club, USC’s Gould Law School and Pankow Builders in Pasadena. She currently teaches two watercolor classes and one oil-painting class a week, in addition to private instruction. And she’s been accepted into a memoir-writing class at Yale later this year.

For Harter, 63, founder and president of WalkEurope, the new venture is a long-deferred dream come true after a career as a top corporate executive in media and advertising. As West Coast ad-sales director for *The Wall Street Journal* for 20 years, he traveled extensively on business and for pleasure; for 10 of those years, he lived in Europe and Asia. Vibrant, charming, low key and plain-spoken, Harter enjoyed rambling the continents, indulging his penchant for hunting down the most magnificent sights and scenery, and the most distinctive chefs, cuisines and wines — places and people the typical tourist and large tour groups would not have access to. All that travel led to close relations with leading airlines, hotel companies and country tourism organizations, though at the time Harter didn’t realize he was preparing to become a tourism entrepreneur. But in an interview with *Arroyo Monthly*, Harter said he realized only recently that he must have had this in mind since his university days. “After getting my MBA from USC’s Marshall School of Business, I backpacked through Europe and Africa for a year before starting my ad career. And I only recently remembered I wrote a paper for a course while getting my MBA — it was about starting a travel tour company.” Now, 40 years later, he has finally started that company. It’s his full-time profession, and he accompanies all tours. “Trips are designed to get beneath Europe’s sights and culture in

a way that makes it more than a memory," he says. "It's part of your soul, and it becomes part of your life story."

Margueriette's fellow travelers on WalkEurope's 2015 tours included a beginner who'd never before put paintbrush to paper; another is one of Margueritte's student success stories: a working artist who exhibits and sells her work. And both have signed up again this year.

The novice is San Marino resident Linda Mollno, a history professor at CalState Polytechnic University, Pomona, who made her painting debut on a trip last summer. "I knew Eva just from seeing her at functions around town, and I have a friend who's been taking classes from her," she says. "I learned about the trip from something posted on Facebook, and I signed up just because of where they were going. The French Riviera sounded pretty enticing, and I thought I could just read a book while the others were painting."

What happened on the tour, she said, was "pretty amazing. She's just an amazing teacher, and a wonderful person to be around. I was so surprised at what she managed to get us to do. She gave everybody a sketchbook and palettes, with paints and brushes. We sat and sketched and eventually painted, all watercolors, all outdoors. The sketchbook became a journal of our trip. It's a wonderful memory." When the group left France for a six-day tour of Italy, Mollno continued on with them. And this year, Mollno says, she has signed on for three six-day painting tours of several countries. Will painting become part of her at-home routine? "Eva tells me I have talent," she says with a laugh. "But I think for sure I've found a hobby I'll enjoy in the future."

The late-blooming art professional is Linda Salinas, an Altadena teacher who met Margueriette on an Altadena home tour six years ago and started taking classes with her. "I always liked art but had no idea I was able to paint as well as it turned out I could. I stopped teaching and started to paint. I sold 10 paintings in my showing at the San Marino library. I did the cover painting for the Altadena home tour and the people who owned the house bought the [original] painting from me."

Salinas says that last year she went on WalkEurope's painting tours to the French Riviera and Lake Como, Italy. This year, she's going with the group to Florence and Tuscany, Pompeii and the Amalfi Coast. "Tom Harter has everything all set up, all transport organized. Great hotels, great places to eat to get the local flavors. We went to open markets and painted in little towns. We even tried cannabis gelato. We had a cooking class in each country, and wine-tastings. In Italy a well-known chef picked us up and took us to a tiny little village on Lake Como, to a restaurant that had been in his family for generations. Eva gave us each a book for journaling and painting. It's a small group, and you can come with friends or family, whether they paint or not. These trips really do become more than just a usual tour. They become an important part of your personal history."

WalkEurope's tours range in price from \$3,450 to \$5,025 per person, double-occupancy, not including air fare. Call (626) 616-3448 or visit walkeurope.com. For information about Eva Margueriette, visit paintingsbyeva.com.