

Keeping a Travel Sketchbook

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In the interest of continuing to build a regular drawing practice, and for the fun of recording experiences and trying out various quick-sketching techniques, I decided on a recent family trip to Newfoundland to keep a travel sketchbook, a commitment that had always eluded me on previous travels.

My intention didn't go exactly as planned, but what ever does?

What I came away with was some good experimentation and learning about my own processes and limits, and some thoughts on how to streamline my approach in the future. And maybe some tips that you—dear reader—might find useful.

I travel with a partner and two kids—currently fourteen and almost eleven—and am generally the one in the family who is always dawdling way behind to take photos of every tiny plant, rock surface, lichen pattern, and animal track that draws my eye. My partner loves to go on long hikes and keep our itinerary full, and has a long stride and the long-distance stamina that goes with it. My kids are happy to scramble around on rocks for an hour or two while I draw, but only if the setting and weather are appealing. Newfoundland is generally colder, windier, and rainier than what is seasonal in Toronto in June.

All this to say that I had to work around a range of challenges, human and natural, to get to any sketching at all!

In my suitcase I packed:

- a small spiral sketchbook;
- a small pencil case that contained HB, 2B, and 4B pencils; a few Micron Pigma archival ink pens; a tiny metal sharpener; and a white eraser that I could cut or break into pieces to get sharper edges;
- a set of (too many) Faber Castell Polychromos coloured pencils in a roll of fabric that was originally intended to store silverware;
- a small Sennelier portable watercolour set, and three brushes with built-in water wells.

More than I needed, but I was able to squeeze it all in, and wanted to see what I would use.

I quickly found myself tweaking the supplies further. The spiral-bound sketchbook, which had been working well at home, didn't sit well in my small shoulder bag. I only completed one sketch/watercolour in it, from the inside of that week's accommodation, which looked out onto a beautiful lake. On a visit to a Chapter's store in St. John's, I picked up a smaller Moleskine sketchbook and a set of six Faber Castell Pitt artist pens in "landscape" colours.

The pens fit inside my pencil case, and both fit easily in my shoulder bag with my wallet and sunglasses case—sometimes even with my journal squished in. The sketchbook paper was much smoother than what I was used to. I worked around that (although didn't attempt watercolour) because I loved the tiny size, the elastic holding it closed, and the lay-flat binding, which worked well for two-page spreads.

On a couple of hikes, I was able to sit for an hour and frame something in the landscape onto a two-page spread, while my family waited and explored in place. I found myself trying out the Faber Castell pens in a quick and sketchy style, and found they worked really well for that purpose. On other occasions, I brought small rocks and shells inside to sketch, then took them back to where I found them.

All through the trip, I saw many fascinating tiny plants in the limestone barrens of Newfoundland, but the circumstances didn't allow me to stop for long enough to draw in these locations. Finally, towards the end of the trip, I decided to let myself get left behind on a couple of in-and-back-again hikes to sketch wildflowers, and learned that a rapidly-approaching rainfall is great motivation to sketch fast!

These sketches I roughed in with pencil, then finished in black ink and pencil crayon once I was indoors. I added species names and notes from further research in books of Newfoundland wildflowers I came across on the trip, as well as online searches.

I loved the process of trying to identify the flowers from my drawings of them, and feel like I *know* these particular plants now—some of which I had encountered in parts of Ontario, but only in passing—much better than I would otherwise.

What were my take-aways?

Keep things small for daily carrying, especially on hikes: the smallest sketchbook, the smallest set of pencils and pens.

But bring extra supplies to finish sketches indoors in the mornings and evenings while travel companions are otherwise occupied: for example, a small watercolour set and some coloured pencils.

Use quick unfinished sketches, especially of plants, as a way to motivate further research and learning, and to absorb the details of things more deeply than if only taking a photo.

To sum up: work on sketching quickly, give yourself permission to keep things loose and even unfinished, don't get discouraged if you can't capture all you'd like to in a single trip, and just do it!