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Local touring company combines a love of gardens with English history

By Sophie Braccini



A modern 9-acre Sussex garden with great drifts of colorful flowers and wispy grasses. Photo Darron Brackenbury

whimsical, some uniquely creative - and she selected those that had the beauty she felt would most satisfy discriminating travelers and garden lovers.

The diversity and the richness of the gardens Julie Stokstad saw during a Rose and Heather Tour was the highlight of her vacation. A fellow docent at the UC Botanical Garden, Stokstad went on the breakout trip Gray organized last August. She said that her favorite days were when she saw three different gardens in one day. "One had so many salvia, which is one of my favorite plants," she says. "Another one was created around ruins, with different layers created by incredible tree strata." She remembers one that was composed with beds of different plants with the same color - one yellow, one orange, one red - and included different textures, heights and graphics. In the more private gardens, she said most people visiting there were British, and there were no big crowds; being off of the beaten path really pleased her.

Stockstad was met by her son during the trip. The young man, who lives in England and also enjoys gardens, also appreciated the historical aspect of the trip. Gray includes historical, and/or literature discoveries on her trips so people can indulge in different types of intellectual pleasures, such as meditating in the garden Churchill liked to stroll, or staying in a hotel that was first patronized by Queen Elizabeth I over five centuries ago.

Stockstad also appreciated Gray's command for logistics and how quickly she works to satisfy her clients. One of the historical accommodations felt on the very small side to Stockstad, and since the trip is designed to provide luxurious accommodations, Gray intervened and made changes to please Stockstad.

Gray explains that part of her career in England, after getting her degrees in environmental science and business, was working for the Parks and Recreation Department of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea. She says that this is where she learned how to make people happy and solve all kinds of problems.

Her tours accommodate 10 to 14 people for 11 days and 10 nights, touring in an executive mini-bus and staying in unique local high-class hotels. Some garden tours are guided, others are self-paced; Stockstad said she really enjoyed the freedom of the self-guided tours.

Gray began the tour company almost two years ago; she created a business plan, made comparative studies with other tour operators, conducted focus groups, worked on her marketing plan, and constructed her website. Before the first breakout tour, Gray made two test visits to select the accommodations, the food options, choose the right bus company and fine-tune her logistics.

The next two Rose and Heather Tours are scheduled for May 7-17 and May 28-June 7. There is an early bird discount for people registering before Jan. 30. For information, visit www.rose-and-heather-tours.com.

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