



# Artful ADVENTURES

Combining a love for travel with a talent for watercolor and words, a Florida artist sketches and scribbles her way around the world. BY KAREN CALLAWAY



There's a sign that hangs in the studio of artist, author, and world traveler Diana Hollingsworth Gessler that reads: "You are here for the joy and delight of your soul." This Amish saying seems to sum up the personal philosophy of a talented lady whose expressive paintings and playfully illustrated books embody this inspiring concept.

## Roots and Wings

Diana loves color. It is easy to picture her as a child, sketchbook in hand, using every single crayon in the 64-pack to make her miniature masterpieces. The fledgling artist came by her talent naturally, thanks to creative genes on her father's side of the family—her dad was a doodler and caricaturist, her aunt a watercolorist.

Once a member of the Air Force's elite Flying Tigers, her father and his military career took the family all over the world, with stops in Virginia and Alabama along the way. The extensive travels planted the seeds for Diana's future wanderlust. In fact, the Spanish pronunciation of her name, "Dee-onna," stems from the family's stint in El Salvador just after she was born. Her supportive parents nurtured the budding painter and made sure that wherever they were in the world, Diana was enrolled in after-school and weekend classes to further her artistic endeavors.

When she graduated from high school, she set her sights on Ringling School of Art in Sarasota, Florida. Her dad had other ideas. He wanted her to go to a university, so the two struck a deal: Diana would attend the University of Florida for two years, then transfer to Ringling's (then) three-year program. Once at Ringling, she immersed herself in the



PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHELLE G. HERBECK

ABOVE: Diana works in her sunny studio, producing prismatic paintings inspired by her world travels. OPPOSITE: *Under the Tuscan Sunset* brings to life the majestic views of the Italian countryside. For information about Diana's paintings, visit [shawgallery.com](http://shawgallery.com).



# you are here for the joy and delight of your soul



## Travel by Color

Diana's artfully illustrated books, published by Algonquin Books, were a natural evolution from the copious journals she's kept to document her stateside and worldwide travels. She's a stickler for details and accuracy, so readers can be sure that all the information included in her books is as correct as possible. As she composes each volume, she puts herself in the tourist's shoes and explains things the way she would understand them. Obviously, it works. Says Diana, "Someone wrote me recently to say that on a trip to D.C., she used my book and a metro map, and that was all she needed."

six-days-a-week curriculum, then emerged with a degree in graphic design and headed to the Big Apple.

"I went to New York with a portfolio, a cat, and \$500," says Diana with a laugh. Thanks to a teacher's recommendation—and her own prolific talents—she quickly secured a job and settled into the big-city lifestyle. "When you're young in New York," she says, "you don't see the dirt, you don't mind stepping over people. You're looking up at the sky all the time." It was there she met her husband, Paul, while they worked for the same publishing company. The couple eventually moved to Florida, where Paul became a real estate broker and Diana continued her work as a graphic artist, all the time creating brightly hued paintings inspired by her myriad travels.

## Bound for Success

It wasn't long before Diana's paintings spilled off the easel onto the pages of a series of books. The idea for these vacation guides evolved from the meticulous travel journals she's kept since 1974. No boring lists of sights seen for this imaginative lady; her journeys are documented in minute detail and accompanied by her signature watercolor illustrations, many painted right on the spot. "I keep business cards, receipts—everything ends up in my journal," admits Diana. "Whenever a question comes up about any place in the world, I say, 'Oh, wait. I

have that in my journal!'" She even offers private classes to teach other travelers how to record their own jaunts with both paint and prose. These journals "record stories, conversations—things a photograph couldn't capture or you might not remember later."

Whether it's a flower-filled garden in Charleston, an ornate ironwork balcony in New Orleans, or presidential china in the White House, it comes to life with Diana's inspired touch. Every tiny stroke, each petite flourish, is sublime, yet the illustrations appear to flow effortlessly from her brush. "My books are deceptively simple because they are deliberately simple," she explains. "When I write the text, it's sort of staccato because I don't have to write the adjectives. The *illustrations* are the adjectives."

Her books are successful for reasons beyond the whimsical watercolor vignettes. Diana completely immerses herself in whatever destination she covers, producing a comprehensive guide to the city that is thorough as well as entertaining. The books include maps and Web site addresses, plus tips and trivia. In her latest offering, *Very Washington DC*, you'll find interesting tidbits including the history of the cherry trees lining the Potomac River, an overview of the city's "grand hotels," and snippets about memorabilia—think Dorothy's ruby slippers and Minnie Pearl's straw hat—found in the Smithsonian National Museum of American History. Her artistic nature drives her to search out unusual things and interesting angles, and

the result is a collection of charmingly illustrated books that are like nothing else on the market.

## Happily at Home

Diana is quick to point out that she would not have the freedom to follow her pursuits without the help of Paul, whom she affectionately calls "Mr. Wonderful." They've been married for 30 years, and he takes care of the household duties so that she can paint and write. He is especially adept in the kitchen, prompting friends to wonder only half-jokingly if he's available for hire. "When people ask me what I'd be without Paul," says Diana, laughing, "I say, 'I'd be a size 2!'"

When she finishes the book tour for *Very Washington DC*, Diana will head for the solace of her art studio. After writing for ten years straight, she's looking forward to spending time with paintbrush in hand, pausing appreciatively as Paul brings her a snack or sip of water. "I love my life right now," she says thoughtfully. "I have the travel, the research, the attention to detail and organization that I love . . . It's like I've been working all my life to get to this point." ♣

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For information about Diana Gessler's work, visit [dianagessler.com](http://dianagessler.com).