

RETIREMENT LIVING

Log Cabin Chic Lures New Upscale Settlers



These aren't your ancestors' log cabins. Julie and Mark Stamper built this log home perched on a bluff in the Colorado woods.

MY HUSBAND, Tim, and I are building a log home in northern Wisconsin. The house, surrounded by towering pines, will have a lake view. We intend to use it for vacation and retirement. We may also swap it with other homeowners around the globe when we retire. An American heritage home will surely be appealing to foreign visitors.

The home will be simple, but we will not be roughing it like the frontier settlers. The 2,200-foot house will have three bedrooms, two full baths, a finished walkout basement, a loft, and beamed cathedral ceilings in the living and dining rooms. The kitchen will have modern appliances.

We will have one thing in common with the pioneers, though. Call us crazy, but the log home is being built by my husband and a couple of men with log-building experience. The cost is \$150,000, or \$68 a square foot—far less than the \$130 to \$185 a square foot it usually costs to build with logs.

We're able to save money because Tim rehabs old buildings for a living, so he has plumbing, electrical and carpentry skills. It's been my husband's lifelong dream to build a log cabin, and at 56, he's on his way to reaching this goal.

Tim shares this fantasy with many. More than 24,000 log homes are built each year, representing 7% of all custom homes, says Eric Johnson, who heads Johnson's Log Home and Timber Frame Shows, which runs exhibitions and is based in Queensbury, N.Y.

In the last few years, log homes have evolved from rustic cabins to upscale trophy homes and, increasingly, retirement residences. "I call it 'Gucci rustic,'" says Michael McCarthy, editor in chief of *Log Home Living Magazine* (www.loghome.com/loghomeliving). "Whatever amenities you can put in a conventional home, you can put in a log home—granite countertops, wine cellars and media rooms." Expect to spend about 10% more for a log home than for an equivalent stick home.

Although you can build a log house yourself, most experts don't recommend it. Five years ago, Julie Stamper's family built a log home in Westcliffe, Colo. She had an advantage: Her husband, Mark, is a professional log-home builder. "There are people who want to do it themselves and say this is like a Lincoln Log set," Julie says. "They get in over their heads and need someone to come bail them out."

As with any custom home, there is a dizzying array of decisions to make, from flooring (we've chosen bamboo) to lighting fixtures. With a log home, you have a dizzying choice of, well, logs. You can choose handcrafted logs that have the irregular shape of a tree trunk, for example, or milled logs that are shaped uniformly on all sides to fit more precisely.

"People will see a log home on HGTV, and they'll say, 'Those are gorgeous, and it would totally fit our mountain lot in Colorado. Let's do it!'" McCarthy says. "What most folks don't realize is that a lot of homework is required."

Among the most important decisions are the selection of the log-home manufacturer, which supplies the logs, and the builder, which could be the manufacturer or not. You can select a floor plan or model and order its corresponding package from the manufacturer. Or you can design a log home from scratch.

Most homeowners tweak existing floor plans or models to fit their own needs. The manufacturer will deliver the entire package, and either the manufacturer or local builder can erect it.

Don't Forget the Plumbing

But you need to be clear on exactly what you're buying. Sometimes the package only includes the logs, while other packages include all building materials, such as windows and doors. Some packages may not include the plumbing and electrical materials. Most convenient, but more expensive, is a "turnkey" home—that is, a home that's in move-in condition with the kitchen, bathroom and amenities installed.

It's a good idea to give yourself months, if not years, to plan your home. Clip ideas from log-home magazines. Peruse Web sites. Go to exhibitions where manufacturers run information booths.

There are more than 550 log-home manufacturers. It's important to evaluate a company's reputation, experience, architectural expertise, financial strength, product selection and manufacturing capacity. Check the references of at least three manufacturers and builders and look at their homes.

Consider companies that have affiliations with trade associations such as the Log Homes Council (www.loghomes.org) of the National Association of Home Builders, the Timber Framers Guild (www.tfguild.org) or the Timber Frame Business Council (www.timberframe.org). The trade groups establish ethical guidelines to ensure code-complying structures. However, there are many unaffiliated small operations that are respected in their communities.

After interviewing several companies, we chose a local outfit, Black River Country Log Homes in Black River Falls, Wis., owned by Dave Gjerseth. "Dave has a good reputation locally," says Tim. Dave also has good contacts with local, highly regarded subcontractors and tradesmen. We liked the idea that the company uses indigenous hand-selected trees rather than sending for logs elsewhere.

While we're going simple, Julie and Mark Stamper's home is something of a showcase. They moved from Arvada, Colo., a suburb of Denver, to live full-

time in their log home. "We were looking for a lot with big aspen trees, a mixed forest, rock outcrops and a little stream," says Julie.

It was Thanksgiving in 2002 when they fell in love with the property and asked Mark's parents if they wanted to invest with them. The two couples built the home together, with Mark taking the lead.

The 4,000-square-foot home has three stories and a three-car garage. Another 1,550 square feet above the garage has two bedrooms and a living area for Mark's parents, who are in their seventies.

The house has a large family room, a sauna and an art studio for Julie, 52, a retired teacher, who makes silver jewelry, quilts and fiber arts. They're building a woodworking shop for Mark, 44, and a solar greenhouse to grow organic vegetables. "I love this life," Julie says. "There's something that is authentic and uplifting about living like this."

Since 1999, Kim and Don Acker, who are both 53 and empty nesters, have lived in a 2,100-square-foot, two-story log home in Sioux City, Iowa. Don is a financial adviser, and Kim quilts and creates scrapbooks. The Ackers wanted to build a log home because they love the feel and look of the wood. They used flat logs, similar to those used in old settler log homes. Stonemill Log Homes, in Knoxville, Tenn., erected the structure along with the doors and windows, and a local crew finished it.

"We feel like we are on vacation every day," says Don. "Our home is unique, a real eye-catcher. Countless people have stopped and knocked on our front door and asked us where we got our siding."

Log homes can be idiosyncratic. The Ackers began to see cracks in their logs and hear strange squeaking sounds as the logs settled. That's normal for log homes in the first few years after they're built. Now the Ackers say the house is so solid and quiet they don't even hear the wind.

With the economic downturn, builders and tradesmen are hungry for work. Thad Marcom, president of Strongwood Log Home, a manufacturer with offices in Wisconsin and Tennessee, says: "Two years ago, all of our crews were backed up by 18 months to build a house, and costs were going through the roof. We lowered our prices 10% to 15% in 2008."

For us as well as for others I spoke with, a log home is like creating a family heirloom. My mother plans to spend Thanksgiving with us in our new home. We look forward to our retirement among the trees and the logs. **K**—LEAH DOBKIN