

LUXURY IN A LOG HOME

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HIGH-TECH 'SMART HOUSE' MIXES ENERGY-SAVING DEVICES WITH CONVENIENCE, COMFORT

When you hear "log home," what thoughts spring to mind?

Rustic? Old fashioned?

Linda Gaura says she wasn't ready to rough it when her husband, Jeff, suggested several years ago that they leave their comfortable Mecklenburg County subdivision and build a log home in a secluded part of Union County.

A native of upstate New York and a former Peace Corps volunteer, Jeff Gaura wasn't afraid of "alternative living," as he calls it.

But lucky for Linda, roughing it wasn't what her husband had in mind. And the result turned out better than she says she could have imagined.

In September 2004, the Gauras moved into their new, soaring log home made from state-of-the-art logs on 20 acres in northeast Union County.

And they have made theirs a "smart house" - with solar panels to heat water, a computer that controls lighting, a TV camera at the end of the driveway, and a heating system that runs hot water under the floors to keep the 5,500 square-foot home cozy in winter.

The couple admits they've spent more than the average homebuyer to make their home energy efficient, but they say they didn't spend a penny without asking whether it would save them money in the long run. They plan to stay in the house for decades, so spending more up front means savings down the road, Jeff Gaura said.

"We didn't do this because it's cool. The reasons we did it were all about money," he said.

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From simple to sophisticated

Building a log home has been a dream of Jeff Gaura's since he was a 10-year-old boy in a small town outside Syracuse, N.Y. A local man rounded up Gaura and his friends and had them chop down trees, and stack them to build a log cabin.

The home the Gauras share with their kids, 16-year-old Michael and 5-year-old Alex, is quite a bit more sophisticated.

Instead of traditional tree trunks, the logs used by Fort Mill, S.C., builder Real St. Laurent were made from 2-inch-thick pieces of wood stacked and glued five and six pieces thick, then cut to resemble real logs. Because those smaller pieces can be kiln-fired and dried out more thoroughly before being glued together, the house settles less than a traditionally framed house.

The logs they chose are shaped like a D, so from the outside the Gauras' home resembles a traditional log home, while on the inside the walls are flat. That makes it easier to hang pictures and cabinets.

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Computer controlled

Instead of using traditional electrical wire, the couple opted to wire the home in less-expensive computer cable. Behind their wall switches are circuit boards with computer chips that talk to a computer in the basement, which can turn lights and power outlets on and off.

A technology lover who owns his own networking company that integrates voice, video and data for businesses, Jeff Gaura spared no detail.

From a panel in the kitchen, the Gauras can control lights and outlets all over the house.

They routinely turn off most of their outlets when not in use, which they say saves them money by not having electricity running through appliances like televisions or video game consoles. That's because even electronic equipment that's turned off uses power.

Solar panels heat water at the Gauras' home. They're careful not to use

too much hot water during the dark hours, so they can get the most out of the sun's rays.

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Radiant heat under floors

In winter, the family uses a radiant heating system: Hot water runs through pipes under the home's hardwood flooring to keep it warm. On very cold or dark days, the family can use heaters powered by propane gas to heat the house - no easy feat, as the open floor plan is 40 feet wide and 30 feet high.

A camera at the foot of their driveway shows who comes and goes, so they can monitor the home while they're away by using the Internet. The footage is saved for two weeks.

Linda is now an authorized dealer for the log company they used, Anthony Log Homes of El Dorado, Ark. She started a business, PNC Homes, to represent the company.

Linda says the home is their dream house.

"When we first moved in, we'd wake up in the morning and say, 'I can't believe we live here,'" she said.

Now, a favorite pastime is watching shooting stars from their new poolside hot tub. And they say they love that they can sit on their front porch for an hour and not hear a sound.

Go Green, Save Money

USE SOLAR PANELING TO REDUCE ENERGY COSTS. The Gauras say their electric bills average about \$250 in the hottest and coldest months, and they spend about \$1,000 a year on propane. And with the tax credits they got from both the federal and state governments, it became much more affordable. Check www.dsireusa.org.

BUY AN AIR CONDITIONING UNIT WITH A BUILT-IN DEHUMIDIFIER. Even on the hottest days, it feels like it's 72 to 74 degrees in the Gauras' home, though the thermostat reads 80. Low humidity makes the rooms more comfortable.

UNPLUG ELECTRONIC EQUIPMENT LIKE TVS, DVD PLAYERS AND COFFEE MAKERS WHEN THEY'RE NOT IN USE. The Gauras estimated they were spending 8 cents an hour on electricity to TV room electronics even when they weren't in use. Over 50 years, they plan to save \$10,000 by cutting power to those.

Illustration:PHOTO:4

1. JASON E. MICZEK - PHOTOS SPECIAL TO THE OBSERVER. Linda and Jeff Gaura's 5,500-square-foot log home in Union County has an open floor plan. It's 40 feet wide and up to 30 feet high in places.; 2. The logs for the Gaura's home are made from pieces of wood stacked and glued, then cut to resemble real logs.; 3. JASON E. MICZEK - PHOTOS SPECIAL TO THE OBSERVER. The Gauras' shed is equipped with solar panels to heat water for their high-tech log home in Union County.; 4. A technology lover, Jeff Gaura spared no detail in wiring the house. Here he's at the breaker panel and motherboard for the home's centralized lighting system.