



Home Sweet Home

Cabin owners share their insight on the planning and building process. Their answers may surprise you.

As you embark on your cabin-building adventure, you'll likely experience a mix of emotions as the project looms ever closer: excitement for your home to come together, anticipation as move-in day draws near, pride as the culmination of all your efforts finally comes to life. But there's probably a little apprehension mixed in

there as well. Unless you've built something as complicated as a custom home before, you're likely a little overwhelmed with the sheer number of details involved.

Rest easy — although it may at times seem impossible, these happy homeowners have been there, done that and lived to tell the tale.

Getting Started

"We knew nobody who had ever done anything like this before!" laughs homeowner Anne Payne, who built a log-home getaway with her husband, George, in Keysville, Virginia. "We really started planning in probably 2003 or 2004, just poring through magazines — we had stacks and stacks of them."

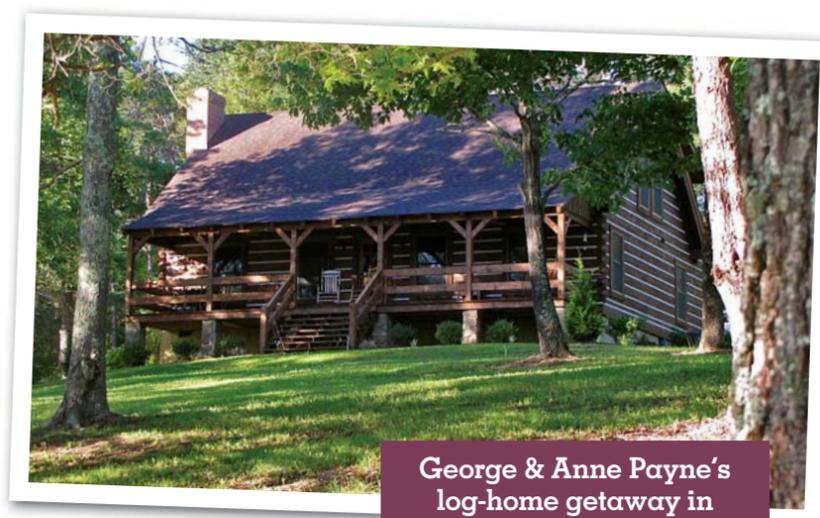
From property decisions to floor-plan modifications to doorknob selections, you can be as hands on or off as you like, but the more time you take to make the right decisions and more input you give your building crew, the more your home will be built to your liking.

Terry and Shelley Smith of Bryson City, North Carolina, spent three solid years researching and working out their future home's details. "If he wasn't on the Internet, I was," says Shelley. "We had subscriptions to several magazines, went to log-home shows, and talked with many log-home companies and manufacturers. There's no such thing as too much research when there's this type of investment."

Design Details

Working out a floor plan is one of the first hurdles you'll have to overcome, as every subsequent detail depends on your layout. You'll want a design that accommodates your ideas for the home, whether it's for entertaining, retiring or vacationing. Magazines, web sites and log providers offer a wide variety of floor plans, but you can modify existing plans to fit your needs.

"One thing I'm glad we did is add an extra course of logs to the downstairs," says Anne. "It makes the small areas look bigger, and ceiling fans and lights would have been an issue." George adds, "The builder gives you the ceiling height, but by the time you put floor joists in, that takes away a whole log of head-room."



George & Anne Payne's log-home getaway in Keysville, Virginia

Building from a log provider's stock plan can be cheaper, as the company has worked out all the kinks of translating the plan to a real home. But most homeowners make at least slight adjustments to their design. Once you've decided on a layout, make sure you're happy with it, as any change order could cost thousands of dollars and significantly delay construction.

"We played with plans for two years before we got to a point where we knew this was what we wanted," Shelley remembers. "And then we made a commitment to each other that there would be minimal changes. That helped a lot with the budget."

Finding Your Crew

When it comes time to finally putting the home together, nothing is more important than hiring the right personnel to finish the job.

Carthage, Missouri, resident Erin Wampler used a builder recommended by her father and was ultimately pleased with his work. But, she says, "I do wish I had gone to see some of the homes [the builder] had built and talked to the homeowners to get more references."

Jeff and Amber Mitchell, who are currently finishing up their log home in



Terry & Shelley Smith of Bryson City, North Carolina



David Long illustration



Jeff & Amber Mitchell's nearly complete cabin in Loretto, Pennsylvania



Loretto, Pennsylvania, echo Erin's sentiment. "Look at other work [the builder has] done and check references," stresses Jeff. "Don't be afraid to ask questions, as it's your home and you'll have to live with it."

The Paynes couldn't have been happier with their builder, as he allowed them to change their minds often without significant repercussions. He also found plenty of deals through his local connections, such as custom hand-made cabinetry that was cheaper than the stock cabinets they had previously settled on. "Having a local builder who knows local resources and tradesmen really helped," Anne says.

No matter whom you choose for your team, get references from previous customers and check on each subcontractor to make sure everyone working on your home is properly licensed and insured.

Expect the Unexpected

Unless you're a professional builder, you will likely run into some unforeseen surprises. Doing your homework will cut back on any unwelcome curveballs, but don't be taken aback if a few still fly your way.

"Our land didn't perc (drain), which was a big, big issue," laments George. "All of the surrounding land perced, so I assumed ours would. We had to take extra legal and labor measures that we

weren't planning on." This unexpected hiccup wasn't discovered until after their land had been cleared, and it cost the couple a lot of time and money to install a pump and lay several hundred feet of pipe.

John Duke and his wife, Darien Fisher-Duke, are renovating a circa-1910 hunting cabin in Richmond, Virginia, and have run into a few problems of their own. "[An earlier] renovation was bedeviled by a phantom sewer line," explains John. "Eventually a new line had to be run, in spite of what city records showed."

Despite efficient planning, extra interior light often seems to be a necessary addition. Logs are darker than drywall and absorb more light, so "you can never have too much lighting,"

"Doing a lot of the work ourselves has allowed us to stay in budget and get some of the 'extras' that we've wanted to do."

— Jeff Mitchell, cabin owner

stresses Erin. "But you can always turn the lights off."

As you plan your budget, make allowances for unanticipated pitfalls and be reasonably understanding with your builder, log provider or subcontractor when something unexpected arises.

Affording Luxury

Aside from anticipating as many expenses as possible, there are other ways to keep costs down so you can splurge on the important stuff. A good way to allocate funds is to invest in areas that



John Duke & Darien Fisher-Duke in "Condemnation Plantation," their renovated historic cabin in Richmond, Virginia

keep your home structurally sound and be more frugal with less-vital details.

"We put our money into things that would be hard to change later," Terry reasons. "Real stone versus manufactured stone would be hard to upgrade." Another thing you won't want to scrimp on: your home's sealant. Starting out your log home's existence with the appropriate protective elements in place will save significantly on time, money and headaches in the future.

One way to save money is to perform the construction tasks you're capable of handling. Jeff and Amber did a lot of the prep and finish work on their home, and they plan to tackle their own landscaping. "Doing a lot of the work ourselves has allowed us to stay in budget and get some of the 'extras' that we've wanted to do," says Jeff. Frequently being on-site also keeps your contractors in check and ensures that your home is being built to your specifications.

Looking toward the future, incorporating energy-efficient elements into your home's design will save you money over time. "We expect to be in the cabin long enough that we will be rewarded with lower energy costs for some of the things we are doing now," says John. Most energy-efficient appliances will pay for themselves within a few years, so it's worth investing in them now.

As you work your budget, remember that this is your dream home and you'll have to live with the decisions you make. Shelley really wanted arched windows on one gable end of her home, but her builder nearly convinced her to change them for ease of construction and cost. "I was considering it," she remembers, "but Terry said, 'Would you be happy without them? If not, then go with them.'" She did.

Lessons Learned

Hindsight is 20/20, and it's impossible to go back in time and make changes af-

PLANNING RESOURCES

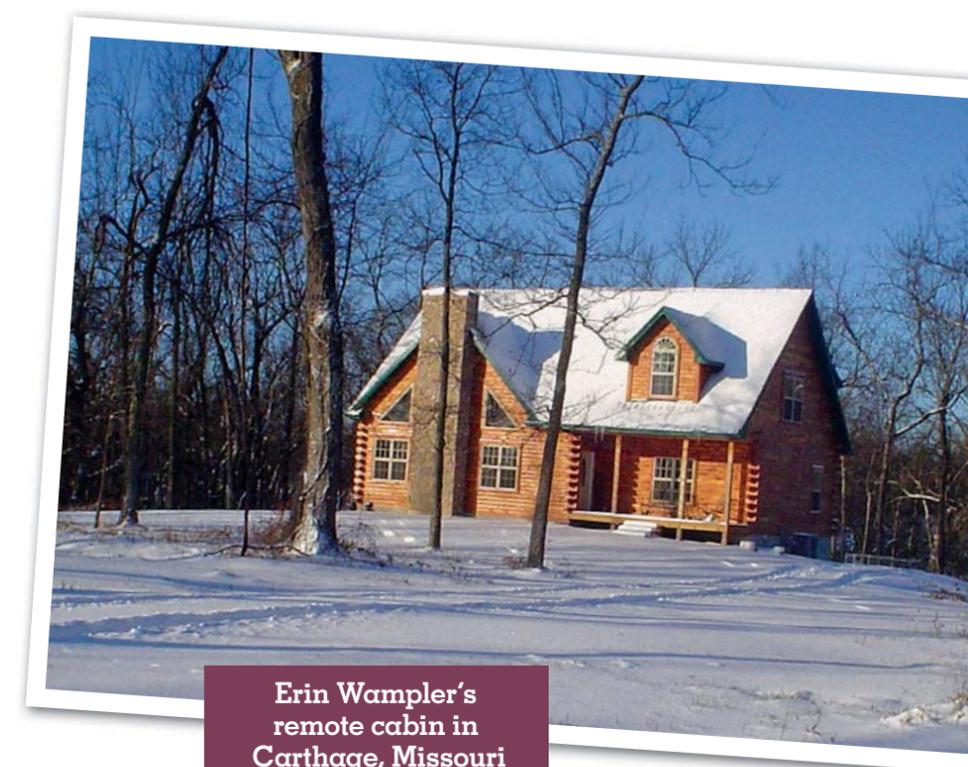
Our sites are great places to get started:

CountrysBestCabins.com

The web's home for *Country's Best Cabins* magazine, this site offers archived articles, a log-company directory, a floor plan search tool, real-estate listings, details about home shows and information fairs, a bookstore with dozens of helpful books and back issues of log-home magazines, a calendar with hundreds of informative log-home events across the country each month, listings for log-home service providers, access to monthly giveaways and much more.

LogHomeU.com

The Log Home Neighborhood is the web's premier log-home social network, with more than 3,000 members posting blogs, sharing advice, participating in forum discussions and helping each other decipher the ins and outs of the log-home building process.



Erin Wampler's remote cabin in Carthage, Missouri

ter the fact, so use the experiences noted here to your advantage.

"Give yourself that time to research and look at your options for everything that's not in a traditional home," Erin advises. "And try not to stress out! If you're involved in it and your builders know you want to be a part of it, you'll be happy with the outcome."

Perhaps the best advice comes from Jeff, as he is still in the throes of building his log home. "Have lots of patience and a strong marriage," he says. "And if you have a golden retriever, make sure all scrap wood and rags are picked up, or you will be finding them everywhere but where you need them." The latter is a problem that may never go away. **CBC**