



HIGHER EXPECTATIONS



Comfy leather furniture, railings with black scenic inserts, a rustic table and whimsical décor lend the loft sitting area an informal air.

A COUPLE BUILD THEIR DREAM GETAWAY IN VIRGINIA'S BLUE RIDGE MOUNTAINS

STORY BY DICK AND ELAINE GEHRZ

PHOTOS BY FRANKLIN AND ESTHER SCHMIDT

Dick and Elaine Gehrz were born and raised in the Midwest and lived there all their lives until they decided to relocate to southwest Virginia in 1993 so that Dick could start a new pediatric practice. Even before the move, Dick and Elaine had been attracted to log homes and contemplated a small lake weekend home once their children had grown. Now they considered building a mountain home that would enable them to get away on weekends and to host family and friends.

While driving on Interstate 77 near Fancy Gap, they stopped to look at a model home by Appalachian Log Structures. Both were impressed by the quality of the home's construction and especially liked the classic design, with square logs, chinking and dovetail corners reminiscent of original pioneer log structures in the area.

They bought a 5-acre lot at approximately 3,000 feet elevation, bordered by a pond and stream and with a view of nine mountain ridges and a drop of 2,000 feet to the Piedmont Valley in North Carolina. Over the next year, they looked at model log homes, pored over countless log-home magazines and surfed the Internet. They were looking for a classic Appalachian-style, rectangular-log design with dovetail-corner joinery, chinking both inside and outside and covered porches. The architectural focal point was to be a centrally located river-rock chimney.

Dick and Elaine reviewed countless floor plans. They wanted an open layout with a two-story living room connected to an open dining room and kitchen, a first-floor master bedroom and an upstairs loft with two bedrooms. Because the building site was located on solid granite and had a 35-degree slope and limited space, the plan the Gehrzes chose was a modified version of Appalachian Log Structures' Wilmington II model, a 1-1/2-story design with a 28-by-42-foot footprint.

A first-floor powder room was changed to a walk-in pantry, and minor changes were made in positions of windows and some room sizes, none affecting the cost or architectural integrity of the original plan. To take advantage of the sloping land, they added a walkout basement, for a total of 3,200 square feet of finished living space.



An American magnolia wood rocker and built-in bookcases highlight a reading nook in the living room.

Once the site was determined and a log-home plan selected, they decided to name their house “Björnstugan,” Swedish for “Bear Cabin,” to honor Elaine’s Swedish heritage.

The precarious building site presented challenges. Special accommodations had to be made for access of construction equipment, delivery of the logs and other materials, excavation of the rocky site and building retaining walls to prevent erosion.

The Gehrzes contracted with Bill Warden, a friend who had completed several major renovations for them, to coordinate the overall project, build the foundation, complete all of the interior construction, do the exterior and interior finishing, and construct the driveway and retaining walls. Aldean Snow, the local representative for Appalachian Log Structures and owner of Snow Realty and Construction, was responsible for assembling the log walls, roof and porches.

Dick and Elaine assisted throughout the project, acquiring supplies from local building-supply stores and delivering them to the job site and providing technical advice derived from their extensive reading about log-home construction. They obtained unique plumbing and lighting fixtures through the Internet and traveling to rustic-furniture stores in the Midwest and Southeast. They also designed the river-rock chimney, oak mantel, log railings with scenic panel inserts and a glass-block shower stall.



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The homeowners designed the fireplace and 38-foot chimney, which contains 60 tons of Pennsylvania river rock and charcoal-tinted mortar and took retired mason Dave Price nine months to build. An oak staircase rises around two sides of the chimney. Furnishings include a comfortable leather sofa and ottoman and a Tiffany lamp.



An open layout makes the kitchen a natural gathering place. Maple cabinets feature leaf-shaped drawer pulls and handles. A custom-designed china cabinet with leaded glass doors is built into the peninsula facing the dining room. Accenting the kitchen are collections of Cream City enamelware and antique picnic boxes.



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Construction began in spring 2000 and was completed in spring 2004. The logs were delivered to a staging area and then shuttled to the building site on a smaller truck. On site, the truck was attached by chain to a bulldozer to prevent it from slipping down the mountain. The logs were then transferred to the subfloor with a small boom.

The construction crew completed assembly of the entire log structure in six weeks, lifting most of the logs, each 16 feet long and weighing 400 to 500 pounds, into place by hand. They also were responsible for post-and-beam construction of the roof and loft, building the porches and shed dormers, and installing the tongue-and-groove ceilings, windows and doors. Appalachian Log Structures provided chinked pine siding that matched the log walls to cover the second-floor exterior walls. Interior stud walls were built with expansion joints to accommodate settling of the log walls.

To run plumbing to the second-floor bathroom, a false wall was constructed in front of the exterior log wall in the kitchen. By using chinked paneling and adding steel hangers on the ceiling beams, the wall blends completely with the adjacent log wall. A paneled soffit over the kitchen cabinets also encloses plumbing from the second-floor bath.

Dave Price, a retired mason, agreed to build the stone chimney. The 38-foot-high, three-story masterpiece contains 60 tons of Pennsylvania river rock and mortar and took nine months to build. Dick and Elaine decided to use charcoal-tinted mortar to highlight the color of the stones. They also picked the keystones surrounding each fireplace opening and designed the hearths and massive hand-hewn oak mantel. Both fireplaces were constructed for burning wood or gas logs. Gas logs were installed for convenience.

Another of Björnstugan's features is the oak staircase rising around two sides of the stone chimney with cedar log railings. Inspired by ideas in log magazines,



For the dining room, Elaine designed a fruit, leaf and acorn wreath, which was burned into the table and colored with oil pencils. The black-iron, bear-silhouette chandelier is one of many bear-theme furnishings that reinforce the home's name, Björnstugan, Swedish for "Bear Cabin."



ABOVE TOP: The comfortable master bedroom is enclosed by pine log walls and topped by a low-beamed ceiling. The sleigh bed is cherry. The wall-mounted, swivel-style light fixtures save space on the bedside table and feature black iron and acorn-and-oak-leaf detailing that enhance the décor. An antique Swedish sampler, recalling Elaine's heritage, hangs by the window. **ABOVE:** Among the master bathroom's reproduction fixtures is the cast-iron double slipper tub, which is positioned in front of a double window, which provides breathtaking views and is framed by flowing sheer curtains hung from an overhead brass shower-curtain ring.

Dick designed a custom loft railing with three scenic metal inserts made specifically for the project. Master carpenter Richard Taylor made the railings to Dick's specifications, handling final modifications and assembly on the job site.

The couple chose 2-1/4-inch red oak flooring for the main living areas and random-width clear pine in the basement and family room for a more informal look. The floors in the kitchen, bathrooms and sauna room are ceramic tile or stone for durability and ease of cleaning.

Dick and Elaine chose a traditional decorating style with rustic influences. The predominant colors are earth tones to complement the logs and give a sense of continuity from room to room. The couple liked the look of the structural black-iron hangers and braces with the logs, so, besides the scenic inserts



The rear porch enjoys a view of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

in the loft railings, they added black cast-iron fans in the living room and loft, and a black-iron bear silhouette chandelier in the dining room. Many bear accents attest to the home's name.

Elaine's artistic talent is evident throughout Björnstugan and is the cornerstone of the home's special character. Elaine designed a fruit, leaf and acorn wreath, which she wood-burned onto the surface of the dining-room table. The design was then colored with oil pencils and the tabletop sealed with many coats of polyurethane. Other wood-burning projects include a 32-inch compass burned onto the floor of the back porch to orient visitors and a woodland scene on a wood chest in the loft. Elaine also stained an unfinished corner cabinet and découpaged floral prints on the doors for the master bathroom. She also applied her sewing skills to create quilts for the children's guest bedroom and to knit a forest-green afghan.

Landscaping presented challenges. The sloping lot required construction of four staggered, free-form retaining walls, spaced 10 to 15 feet apart. Each wall is 60 to 80 feet long and 2 to 4 feet high, and consists of 8 inches of poured concrete reinforced with steel rebar and faced with 8 inches of river rock to match the foundation. The walls are capped with green mountain flagstone. An extensive drainage system was installed behind each wall to prevent erosion. The couple also put in a small pond rimmed with the same flagstone and installed a fountain with a solar-powered pump.

The log home has three full-length porches that overlook the wildflowers in front and the woods and mountain ridges in the back. Dick and Elaine see wildlife wandering through the woods and watch the beautiful mountain sunsets. Björnstugan is truly their dream home away from home.

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The front porch looks at the stone retaining walls and natural landscaping featuring many kinds of wildflowers and indigenous plants, including ferns, rhododendron and mountain laurel.

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Dick and Elaine Gehrz chose 8-by-12-inch yellow pine logs and dovetail corners for their home, which is reminiscent of original pioneer log structures in southwest Virginia. They used chinked pine siding that matches the log walls to cover the second-floor exterior walls.

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