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An off-the-grid cabin is designed to suit its elevated, woody location.

remote *grandeur*



If you drew a triangle connecting Denver, Salt Lake City and Albuquerque, New Mexico, this cabin would be roughly in the middle. But you'd never know from the rich colors of the unpolluted sky. "There's no light pollution that emanates from the sky — it's the most brilliant starlit sky you'll ever see in America," says former home-owner Kris James. A 150-foot suspension bridge creates a dramatic entrance. The cabling, repurposed from a Vail chair lift, boasts an approximate 400,000-pound breaking strength.



The cabin boasts large double-paned glass windows that allow a tremendous amount of light into the cabin and views of the breathtaking landscape. Gravel Mountain — towering at almost 13,600 feet — is one of the 13ers visible from the south-facing picture window.



The cabin's refrigerator and stove run on propane, which is stored in two 1,000-gallon tanks original owner Terry Finn had buried on the property in order to maintain the pristine landscape.

When building a cabin at 11,500 feet, nearly two miles above sea level, challenges are inherent. Add in a remote location only accessible by Jeep road and dangerous mountain passes, and the difficulties increase.

For Terry Finn, the secluded location was all part of the plan when he purchased two 5-acre parcels of land in Colorado's San Juan Mountain range from The Nature Conservancy. Terry, who splits his time between Lake City, Colorado, and Dallas, originally intended to build a series of about 10 hut-to-hut cabins that outdoor enthusiasts could rent as they trekked through the area on foot, skis or horseback.

"I'd lived in Alaska for years, and I'd seen how the trapper cabins were built, and kind of wanted to emulate what I had seen in Alaska," says Terry. "Some of them are very bare bones. My idea was to have a nice one [with] electricity and running water and propane."

What was to be the showpiece of the hut-to-hut series sits along a Jeep road 16 miles from Lake City. Terry dubbed it Thoreau's Cabin, after the American

author and nature lover. Construction was underway when Terry started to work on a second property, but when arsonists burned that one to the ground, he abandoned his hut-to-hut idea and concentrated his efforts on Thoreau's Cabin.

Organic Materials

Terry constructed the 1,200-square-foot cabin on the far edge of his plot, where it abuts a vast 104,000-acre protected wilderness preserve. An avid outdoorsman who studied forestry in college, Terry used local materials — from lodgepole pine to native flagstone — to ensure the cabin fit with the rugged, breathtaking landscape.

Terry made certain only the finest materials went into the construction of Thoreau's Cabin. Hand-peeled, 36-inch saddle-notch logs add to the durability of this off-the-grid property. The cabin's second owner, Kris James, built the table and chairs (below) from a kit that matched the quality and authenticity of the existing custom furnishings (right).



RESOURCES

Square footage: approx. 1,200

Bedrooms: 2

Bathrooms: 1

Builder: Mountain Enterprises Construction (970-901-2229)

Cabinetry; doors: Al's Custom Wood Products (972-247-0160)

Designer: Frontier Log Homes (970-249-7130; frontierloghomes.com)

Flooring; masonry: Josh Columbo

Log provider: Wildhorse Woodworks (970-944-2529)

Stain: Native Sun Construction (970-944-2495; nativesuninc.com)

Windows: Weather Shield Windows & Doors (800-222-2995; weathershield.com)

“[It was] definitely an intentional choice to get it to fit in and to also have it look like it could’ve been built 100 years ago by a trapper,” he says. “We got a permit from the Bureau of Land Management to get all the stone. We just gathered it from the mountainsides within a mile or so from the cabin, then we just brought it over there and laid it.”

In order to honor the history of the region, which experienced a mining boom in the 1880s, Terry sourced railroad track from the nearby Monte Queen Mine site for the railing off the cabin’s back porch. To construct the stunning suspension bridge — the cabin’s primary entrance — Terry scoured the San Juan Mountain range to study and photograph bridges used more than 100 years ago to cart gold and ore out of the mines on mule back.

“I saw 50 of them all around southwest Colorado,” he says. “We just put the best of a bunch together to build ours.”

Off the Grid

Thoreau’s Cabin sits off the electrical grid, so Terry harnessed the power of the sun to charge four 130-watt solar panels on the roof. In addition, two 1,000-gallon propane tanks — buried on the property to avoid marring the

pristine landscape — supply power to the stove, refrigerator, hot water heater and some lights.

Terry also took advantage of the high altitude’s intense ultraviolet rays to heat the home from the ground up. The sun shines in the south-facing window, and heats the natural flagstone floors and the concrete substructure beneath.

“Even on the coldest winter days, you could be in the cabin, and it would be 65 or 70 degrees,” says Kris James, who purchased the cabin from Terry in 2001 and owned the property for five years. “It’s like in-floor heat.”

Thanks to the heat from the stones and the thermal mass of the oversized lodgepole pine logs, the cabin’s pipes will not freeze, even in sub-zero temperatures.

A Challenging Landscape

Though Thoreau’s Cabin is less than 20 miles from Lake City — the county seat — it is only accessible by four-wheel-drive vehicle in the summer, and by snowmobile or cross-country skis in the winter.

Many of the vendors Terry sourced for things such as concrete work or on-site well excavation were hesitant to commit to a project in such a remote

location. In the case of the well, Terry ended up paying triple what a well in town would have cost. As for the foundation, he was on his own.

“I knew how heavy this cabin was going to be, so I couldn’t go cheap on the foundation,” says Terry, who had to pour the concrete himself when the company he hired backed out at the last minute. “We rented concrete mixers and had to bring up 2,800 80-pound or 90-pound bags of concrete to mix by hand.”

For work crews, the elements, such as early snows and thin mountain air, posed unique challenges.

“At that elevation, construction is really hard on your workers because they run out of air so quick,” says Terry. “You have to be in top condition to build stuff at that elevation. So it took at least two summers and some winter work to get it built, even though it is a small cabin.”

The extra cost, effort and special attention to detail paid off in the end. Thoreau’s Cabin has had three owners since Terry completed construction, and all attest the little cabin on the mountain’s edge captures the imaginations of all who see it.

“I’ve traveled all 50 states and have never seen another log cabin as unique and as special as this cabin,” says Kris.

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