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Cabins: A Guide to Building Your Own Nature Retreat

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Log cabins defined a particularly American sensibility long before Abe Lincoln was born in a humble hand-hewn shack in Hodgenville, Kentucky. The image of the cabin-be it an old, musty family summer camp or a childhood project that never quite came to fruition in the backyard maple tree-provokes the nostalgia that burns in anyone who has ever taken Thoreau's admonition to "simplify" to heart. Thoreau himself lived in one for a while, of course, and Robert Frost sought solitude in a Vermont cabin during his last years.

The authors practice what they preach: they've built their own home away from home on a site fifty miles from the bustle of New York City. They describe in great detail—including chapters on "Types of Cabin Construction," "Cabin Designs," and "Outfitting a Cabin"—exactly what it takes to create a little piece of heaven. With a little planning and careful attention to detail, say the Stileses, building a cabin is an easy matter.

The book also contains a lengthy section of color photographs that show the vast possibilities for such a structure, ranging from the simple (a writing cabin in Woodstock, New York) to the elaborate (an architect's studio in Bridgehampton, New York, a structure that owes more to I. M. Pei than to the traditional log cabin) to the exotic (a Caribbean cabin in the French West Indies that can't help but elicit a shudder of longing in even the most home-bound soul).

The authors recognize that individual tastes affect the decisions that prospective cabin-builders face, though most of the designs hearken back to the classic writer's cabin: a one-room structure with shaker shingles, raw wood for walls, a window on each side, and a simple wooden porch that overlooks rolling hills or a favorite lake and inspires contemplation in the glow of a rising or setting sun.

The cabin should have enough room for a bookcase, a desk, a couple of chairs, a cot, and maybe a bathroom or a kitchenette. Anything else is optional-some of the designs the authors present are quite complex by comparison-and the possibilities are limited only by the builder's imagination.

With this study of the what, when, where, and how of cabin building, anyone's yearning for the last great place can be satiated.

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