

BLACK GOLD OF THE SUN

Powered by the Far North sunshine, this warm cedar homestead shows that

good living doesn't mean compromise. Photographs by **Suzanne McNatty**





Rolling green hills tumble gently towards the wide, placid Takou River, slowly carving its way to the long crescent of Takou Bay a kilometre downstream. The scene, almost exactly as a child would draw a peaceful country vista, is as far as I can possibly imagine from the bleak, windswept oil fields of Baku, Azerbaijan.

For Ian and Anna Sizer, that's exactly the appeal.

The English couple dreamed of New Zealand from Baku, their base for more than six years. It took seven annual visits to New Zealand, working their way up from Central Otago, before they found and fell in love with this 150-acre section, 20 minutes north of Kerikeri.

Their new careers—organic beef farmers, boutique accommodation proprietors, busy parents—are worlds away from their past lives in the oil industry, Anna as an environmental consultant and Ian as an exploration engineer. "I made the mess, and she cleaned it up," says Ian with a wry grin.

Ian and Anna, both raised on farms in the South of England, met in Algeria in 1996. Running an ecological survey of the central Sahara together, they discovered many shared beliefs about how the oil industry should work with local communities and the environment. Increasingly, they also shared grave concerns about the impacts of petroleum consumption and the inevitable peak of oil production.

Between them the couple have racked up four decades in some of the world's least-appealing lands: Kazakhstan, Georgia, Algeria, the Congo, Venezuela, Papua New Guinea, Mozambique. You get the feeling they must pinch themselves every morning when they awake to the warm orange glow of sunrise over the Bay of Islands.

Moving to New Zealand has given the family a chance to put their environmental and community beliefs into practice, and the sunrise is hard-earned. Their cedar weatherboard home overlooking the Takou valley took 26 months to build, with the Sizers' uncompromising determination putting sustainability and self-sufficiency at the forefront of every decision.

The six-bedroom, three-bathroom home is completely off-grid. It's not connected to an electricity supply or water mains—there's not even a local waste collection service. The humble telephone is their only external service; broadband internet was obtained

after tenacious lobbying.

The Sizers have tenacity and determination in spades. One example: resolute on using compact fluorescent lightbulbs in every fitting, yet unwilling to compromise on aesthetics, Ian selected contemporary frosted-glass light shades for the bathrooms—then took a glass-grinder to them. Hours of labour later, the newly expanded interior of the light fittings would accommodate the extra length of the long-life bulbs.

It took many such hours of commitment and lateral thinking to engineer such an energy-efficient home. Their DishDrawer was rewired to use water direct from the solar hot water system, rather than waste precious photovoltaic power heating water from cold. An intelligent motion-sensor system detects when the kids leave a room and turns lights off automatically. Recycled matai floorboards were sourced from a South Auckland community hall and squash court, then painstakingly varnished using only natural oils.

Without even a single solar panel on the roof, initial impressions of the house give no hint it's anything other than a regular, everyday sort of fantasy dream home. Built by the couple's neighbour Rick Harris, from plans by Kerikeri architect Brian Hutching, the only clue the owners are *Good*-reading sustainability types is the bank of solar hot water tubes angled north next to the driveway.

Through the front door, and you're in a modern homestead, huge kitchen with all the (energy-efficient) mod-cons, infinity pool disappearing into the distance outside the window. Children's toys litter the floor thanks to Harry (5), Lucy (4) and Oliver (18 months), and—the day I visit, at least—everyone's eating chocolate cake. "It's not very organic," says Anna apologetically.

Recycled timber has been used on all the internal floors, and timber for the lounge ceiling and main staircase came from macrocarpa milled on the property. The external decks are gum, also milled on the property.

A second deck, downhill from the house, cleverly disguises four 25,000-litre rainwater tanks, which feed the house via a small ram-pump—a technology pioneered in African villages, that uses water pressure rather than electricity to pump water uphill. Grey water is fed down here for native tree irrigation; sewage, too, is treated on-site.

A 1000-LITRE HOT WATER CYLINDER IS HEATED BY TWO ARRAYS OF 30 SOLAR TECHNOLOGY TUBES. SIX ADULT FRIENDS AND TWO CHILDREN CAME TO STAY THE DAY AFTER IAN AND ANNA MOVED IN. "THERE WERE EIGHT OF THEM AND FIVE OF US, AND WE STILL DIDN'T RUN OUT OF HOT WATER, AND DIDN'T HAVE TO USE THE GENERATOR," SAYS ANNA



Ten 175-watt photovoltaic panels charge a 48-volt battery bank through an inverter system, which converts the power to 220 volts for the house



All the windows are double-glazed and wool insulation was used throughout. A single wood-burner is enough to keep the whole house warm, and the wetback heats the hot water on cloudy days



Dozens of Turkish, Azeri and Turkmen rugs were collected while the couple lived in Baku, Azerbaijan. "People said I would never regret buying them," says Anna. She took them at their word, amassing heavy stacks of rugs in rich jewel tones, never dreaming she would one day have 420 square metres of polished Kauri floors to cover. "Now I wish I'd bought even more"

Just along from the water tanks is a huge bank of photovoltaic panels—the source of the home's electricity. Like the solar panels in the driveway, the photovoltaic panels are built into the hillside and angled due north on struts. There are ten 175 watt panels, about twice as many as a smaller suburban house might need, but without any back-up from the national grid Ian wanted to err on the side of caution. A diesel generator is on standby for the odd run of cloudy days, but it won't be necessary if the hydro-electric system on the drawing board gets up and running.

Relying on solar power has had unexpected advantages. "You get in tune with the weather," says Anna. "You see that it's sunny and nice outside, so you do the washing, put the dishes on, since you're getting a lot of power."

Ian insists that going off-grid is not hard. Anyone could do it, he says, it was just being one of the first in the Far North that made things difficult. With help from master builder Rick and the Far North Environment Centre in Kaitaia (ecocentre.co.nz), Ian coordinated all the research, engineering design and sourcing of materials. Drawing on his engineering background, he also worked with solar specialist electrician Darren Hill (thewattshop.co.nz) to design the alternative power systems for the house.

"All the information and technology you need is out there," he says, "it's just a matter of drawing it together."

Now the Sizers have done it themselves, they want to show others that complete energy independence is possible—even in the most high-end homes.

"It's not about sacrifice," says Anna. "You don't have to change your whole life, you just have to do things a bit differently."

How many years will it take to see a return on their considerable investment? Well, they haven't run the numbers for a while, says Anna. "We expect the price of oil to exponentially increase, so whatever economics you use to calculate your return on investment, they're likely to be wrong—and you'll get payback sooner than you budget for."

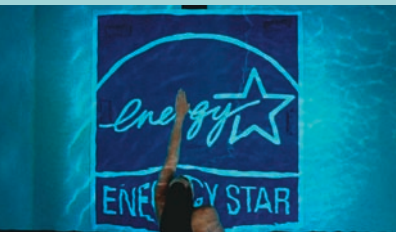
Besides, equally important is doing what feels like the right thing. "It's based on a conviction that if we can do something like this, then we should."

Annabel McAleer



*LEFT: The striking spiral staircase was bought on Trade Me, enclosed with child-safe barriers and fitted with under-stair LED nightlights
ABOVE: Bathroom light-fittings were ground down to make room for ecobulbs*

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