

KING OF THE CASTLE

In the shadow of the Sangre de Cristos, David Buxton's 4,200-square-foot home melds luxe living with eco-consciousness

STORY AND PHOTOS BY STEVE LARESE

As a boy growing up in Maidenhead, England, David Buxton dreamed of one day being king of his own castle. After many journeys, and battles with a few of life's dragons, the 49-year-old has turned that dream into a reality. His kingdom is 6.6 acres of the sage-covered high desert north of Taos, his moat is the Río Grande, his subjects are songbirds and sunsets, and his castle is a 4,200-square-foot self-sustaining home.



Buxton designed and built an Earthship—or, as he likes to call it, a solar castle—down bouncy Taos County Road 007, near the edge of the Río Grande Gorge. His creation is testament to the maturity of the Earthship concept, a building technique that has evolved beyond the hippy-esque do-it-yourself projects of the 1970s to Taos's Greater World Community, a subdivision (for lack of a better word) of homes built of adobe and recycled materials, heated by the sun, insulated by the earth, and whose water is collected by rooftop catchment systems. The results are satisfyingly comfortable dwellings. Earthships, which originated in Taos, now shelter people in France, Mexico, Belgium, Nicaragua, England, and Japan, and are “off the grid”—they draw nothing from local utility companies. Thus, they're easy on the planet, and can be built where conventional homes can't.

One would never realize that Buxton's palace is green if he didn't point it out like an evangelist. “This style of building will be mainstream soon—it'll have to be,” he says. “It's crazy not to use the sun and wind in part of our daily living. The economics are going to dictate that. It's not wacky to live like this anymore.”

Buxton didn't begin as an environmentalist or a home designer. He came to the United States 30 years ago as a



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restless spirit looking for a change of pace. Over the years, as he's wandered, he's worked as a punk rock singer with The Stains (banned from a club in its hometown of Portland, Maine, for tearing down the drop ceiling), an English teacher, a magazine journalist, a bike messenger, and a host of other jobs.

What first appeared to be a tragedy birth to Buxton's dream. An auto accident in Long Island, New York, left him with a broken neck, years of rehabilitation, and a lifelong limp. His will and hard work gave him back his health,



Above—Caption about Sunroom, also called Atrium in another image. El ulpute modignis et lut lor sed dolor iusto et, volum volenit ut aliquis amconsecte dunt irit praesequi el Quisisit nonsed Henim quis nim amcon eugait ut velenim zzriure

and a financial settlement gave him the capital to pursue his alcázar. “It was a hell of a way to make some money, but here we are,” Buxton says with typical British understatement.

Buxton came to Taos in 1998 to be closer to his ex-wife and their daughter, whose upstairs room in the tower is princess-perfect. He had always been environmentally aware, but it wasn’t until 2000 that the idea of building an off-grid fortress dawned on him.

“I bought the property January 2000,” he says. “I know I was a bit late for the whole Y2K thing, but it still seemed like a good idea. Taos really inspired me. I had never built a house before, but you can do anything here.”

When Buxton found himself having the opportunity to design and build his home, he knew he had to marry two elements dear to him: comfort and environmental sensibility. It was a storybook union that is now living happily ever after. “Without much of a clue,” Buxton grabbed some graph paper and a compass and proceeded to draw plans. His cousin, musician Rod

Kemp, came over from Australia to help, and “became more useful as time went by.” Kemp liked Taos so much he’s stayed.

Today, the lavishly appointed, three-bedroom, two-and-a-half-bath home is powered by 2.6 kilowatts of solar and wind-generated energy that runs all essential circuits, including the well pump and a wheelchair elevator. “I recommend everyone who builds a house design it so it can be made wheelchair accessible,” he says. “That way, you won’t have to move if something ever happens. You never know what will happen tomorrow.”

His Bergey wind turbine produces so much electricity that Buxton had to put a resistor on it to keep it from blowing the circuits. Six solar panels supply the hot water and radiant floor heat. Completed in 2005, the two-story adobe is also a passive solar design: it’s oriented to capture the maximum heat from the winter sun, and an earthen berm on its north side helps retain that heat. Other green features include a gray-water system and three 1,700-gallon tanks to catch rainwater for landscaping.



Right—Caption about Hallway and Stairway, in another image. El ulpute modignis et lut lor sed dolor iusto et, volum volenit ut aliquis amconsecte dunt irit praesequi el Quisisit nonsed Henim quis nim amcon eugait ut velenim zzriure. Quisisit nonsed Henim quis nim amcon eugait ut velenim zzriure



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Inside, built-in planters and tall windows create a lush living environment. Craftsmanship in the form of expert woodworking, plastering, and tile by local Taos talent provides the luxury.

Buxton did eventually tap into the local electrical grid, but only to make money. His home acts as a small power plant, feeding green energy back into the grid. “I love seeing that dial going backwards,” he says, adding that his 30 batteries store enough energy to power the house for 10 days, should that ever be necessary.

To nourish his harsh desert property, Buxton employed permaculture principles. He spent months clearing the surrounding sagebrush. Then, to condition the soil, he had the land covered in six inches of horse manure, then knee-deep in straw. “I had a vegetable garden before I had a house.”

He then had Ray Walters of SolarRay (www.solarray.com) install solar panels and the wind turbine, which powered the tools used to build the house. In a blessing ceremony, Buxton and his friends threw objects meaningful to them into the foundation. When they planted trees, they discovered

that the soil was now so much richer that earthworms were living in the high desert.

“That was a real thrill for me,” Buxton says. “I knew we did it right when the property was good enough for earthworms. Now, every year, I see a new species of bird here.”

He also built a trombe wall: a passive-solar exterior wall of black-painted adobe fronted with glass. The heat trapped in the few inches of space between wall and glass can reach 400° F, warming the home through the wall. Decorating the glass is a reproduction of a Celtic chalk drawing of a horse that pays homage to Buxton’s Druid roots. The castle’s interior is protected by a tongue-in-cheek rubber gargoyle.

Before Buxton broke ground, he threw *I Ching* coins to determine his project’s outcome. The result? Innocence changing to progress. The hexagram adorns the shield over the home’s front entrance—Buxton’s coat of arms.

“I don’t know what I’ve ended up with, but it feels like a cloister,” he says. “It’s so quiet and peaceful here. I get to live how I want to live, and I’m in tune with the seasons, with time. I pay attention to the move-


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ment of the sun, to the wind. I have to.”

What now? Buxton says he’s spent all his money building his castle and would sell it for \$2.1 million if someone offered. (If you’re interested, go to www.solarcastleforsale.com.)

What would he do with the money? “I’d build another one,” Buxton says. “Smaller, less money, easier to keep clean. I like being a bum. If I can stay a bum, I’d be happy.”

It’s good to be king. 

EXPERIENCE IT YOURSELF:

If you don’t have \$2.1 million to buy Buxton’s Earthship, you can still stay in one for a night or two. Check out a few at www.heliohouse.com (\$150 for the first night, \$100 per subsequent night) and www.earthship.net (\$135 and up per night).

Writer/photographer and *Guestlife New Mexico* editor **Steve Larese** and his wife, Kat, do what they can at home by dumping their washing machine water into a rain barrel. They have the best-smelling xeriscaping in Rio Rancho.