

A BONAIRE GREEN HOUSE

When Alan Gross and Jane Townsend decided to build their dream house amidst the boulders and cactus on the remote east side of Bonaire, they knew they'd have no electric or water service. They approached going off the grid as an adventure — and a quantum leap from the lights of Times Square, where they had lived for 20 years before moving to the island.

Gross and Townsend were scuba-certified on Bonaire in 1984 and liked the island so much that they returned again and again for vacations. After a 1992 cancer scare, they decided not to wait any longer to take the plunge and bought a home on the island. They both took early retirement and moved to Bonaire full time. After four years, though, the area surrounding their home felt too suburban and they longed to move to the *kunuku*, which is the Papiamentu word for "country."

"We like to watch the stars at night, but they were dimming with increased development," says Townsend.

The couple joined a group of like-minded people and together purchased a 750-acre parcel that was divided into 30-acre plots. The new association built dirt roads and called it Luga Aleha, meaning "far-off place." The outback offered peace and quiet but no utilities, and that was fine with Gross and Townsend. "As divers, we had become more aware of ecology," says Gross. "We wanted to help preserve the environment through alternative energy and water conservation."

They challenged their architect to design a low-maintenance house that would accomplish their low-impact goals without sacrificing luxuries like a swimming pool, computers and appliances. The house, finished five years ago, has 1,900 square feet of indoor



Alan Gross and Jane Townsend's home may be in a "far-off place," but this Bonaire beauty is an eco-friendly house with plenty of low-impact luxuries.

space and an equal amount of outdoor patio space, plus a guesthouse. The roof's upturned wings catch enough rain to satisfy all their water needs, and its vents and large shady overhangs provide natural cooling. According to Townsend, the addition of louvered



doors, windows and wall panels makes the house "a big wind machine."

Solar energy powers the house, swimming pool pump and septic tank aerator. The couple worked hard to lighten their energy draw to a fraction of what it was in their old house, says Townsend, "and it didn't require major lifestyle changes." They use propane for cooking, compact fluorescent lighting and energy-saving appliances. A diesel generator stands by in case of emergencies.

As with most construction projects, especially ones on islands, there were setbacks and trials — the foundation had to be redesigned after excavation began, and it was difficult to source the specialized materials such as a drinking-water-safe roof coating, acrylic stucco and recycled plastic lumber. But Townsend says they'd do it all again: "It was a fabulous experience; we loved the challenge."

"We wanted a complete life change," says Gross. "And we finally have it." Though retired, they stay busy volunteering for community projects. And their favorite pastime — stargazing — is spectacular in the kunuku. "We have a telescope," Townsend says, "but often enjoy just sitting back to take in the vastness of the Milky Way."

— Kathleen M. Mangan

Solar power and energy-saving appliances have dramatically reduced the amount of energy the couple uses daily.



Buying on Bonaire

Not only does Bonaire lie outside the hurricane belt, but it also features a healthy resale market with no capital gains tax, so it's a safe place to invest, says Corine van der Hout, managing director of Sunbelt Realty. Property prices have gone up about 10 percent a year over the past two years (more for oceanfront) and are expected to increase by 5 percent a year for the next few years, she says.

Quarter-acre inland lots can be had for \$30,000 to \$40,000; half-acre lots with ocean views run \$80,000 to \$130,000. Condominiums average \$80,000 to \$100,000 for a studio, \$150,000 for a one-bedroom and \$300,000 to \$500,000 for a two-bedroom.

House prices vary widely. A two-bedroom, one-bath house on less than a quarter-acre in Kralendijk costs \$90,000. At the other end of the scale, \$1.8 million will buy a 5,000-square-foot three-bedroom Spanish-style home with private ocean access.

Some of the property on Bonaire is

long-lease land, owned by the government and leased for 60 years with extension rights. Foreigners may purchase property sitting on it, and van der Hout says there is no risk, as it can be sold, mortgaged and inherited.

Foreigners can obtain 15- to 20-year mortgages in the Netherlands Antilles, but interest rates run 10.5 to 12 percent, nearly double U.S. rates. Insurance premiums are also higher than stateside, says van der Hout, but real estate taxes are reasonable.

For more information, request a copy of "Emigrating to Bonaire" from Sunbelt Realty (011-599-717-6560; www.sunbelt.an). They'll send a downloadable version over the internet for free. You can also refer to the government website (www.info.bonaire.com). Since real estate listings are exclusive to each agency, contact these additional firms: Harbourtown Real Estate (011-599-717-5539; www.harbourtownbonaire.com), and RE/MAX Paradise Homes (866-611-7362; www.bonairehomes.com).

— K.M.