

Energy efficiency in homes overseas: sun lovers get the green light

Expatriates can keep costs down by being more energy efficient.

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Ever dreamed of sipping a glass of wine under a lavender-scented sky while the cicadas saw busily among the olive trees? It's a dream that many of us cherish: to leave the grey, chilly British Isles and set up home on the shores of the Mediterranean and live out our days in eternal summer.

It is a dream, however, that for many this year turned to nightmare due to the falling strength of Sterling, according to HiFX, the foreign exchange specialists. In the current economic slowdown everyone is feeling the pinch.

But there is a way to live the dream and reduce your daily costs considerably by living in a low-energy home which is as self-sufficient as possible.

That's what Peter Hughes and Kinga Monica have done to their historic watermill in Almeria, Spain. With its solar electric and solar thermal panels, rainwater harvesting, wood-burning stoves fed by their own olive grove and a vegetable garden, the pair only have to pay about €25 (£21.50) a month for their running costs.

"We discovered that property prices in the UK were too high for us to be able to do what we wanted, so we searched in Europe," says Peter. "We wanted an affordable ruin that would be a blank canvas for our eco-tourism plans, but also somewhere with great beaches that visitors could get to easily," he says.

They were stunned to discover the coastline of Almeria, which although close to the Costa del Sol, is protected by the Spanish Government and completely unspoilt. In 2004, they bought the ruins of Molino del Canarico, little more than a collection of tumbledown walls filled with mud and rubble, for €100,000.

"We endured two years of bureaucratic wrangling before we could start work on the project, but this gave us time to comb roadsides, derelict houses and reclamation yards for original doors, reclaimed marble and slate tiles."

They also planned the home's eco qualities, from the hi-tech solar thermal collectors to the low-tech cave below the building that acts as a natural air conditioner – a reservoir of cool air during Almeria's hot summers.

"We had a choice of being connected to the electricity grid and exporting any extra we generated for an income, or staying



Self-sufficient: Peter Hughes and Kinga Monica at Molino del Canarico, a watermill and 'affordable ruin' that they have since restored

off-grid and storing our solar electricity in giant battery packs.” In the end the couple, who were on a tight budget of £70,000 for the complete restoration, decided to save on the £20,000 it would have cost to connect them to the grid, and opt for the batteries.

“We’re completely self-sufficient, we have no alternative!” says Peter. “We have all our needs: television, kitchen gadgets, we even ran high-power drills off the batteries without running out during the building work.” They have caught the eco-renovating bug so Molino del Canarico is now for sale at £300,000 on www.whatgreenhome.com (<http://www.whatgreenhome.com>) as Peter and Kinga expand their plans for a larger project.

For those for whom this kind of rugged self-sufficiency is not so appealing, there are increasing numbers of eco homes abroad, particularly in Spain where regional laws forbid the construction of new homes without solar energy built in.

Robert and Jacqueline Bell, from Epsom, in Surrey, have recently bought a property in an eco village near Alicante, specifically with a view to keeping their costs down when they retire.

“We have always wanted to retire abroad, but we’ve been concerned at what has happened to British pensioners this year – and about high running costs,” says Jacqueline Bell, a retired bookkeeper. The three-bedroom villa they have bought at Gran Monóvar includes solar thermal water heating, grey water recycling and other water-saving features.

Gordon Miller, editor of [whatgreenhome.com](http://www.whatgreenhome.com) says that while location is still the chief priority for buying abroad, low running costs have been creeping up the agenda, particularly this year.

“Now the law requires all new homes in Spain to have solar panels,” he says, “Spanish homes for British expats are going to be extremely attractive.”