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ENDS OF THE EARTH

The Do-It-Yourself Desert Retreat

Using a kit and simple tools, an advertising executive builds his own weekend home in the California desert. The retreat has plenty of modern style but no sewer, no mailbox—and no air conditioning

By *Max Taves*

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Andre Nitze is no stranger to frontiers. In the late 1980s, as his native East Germany crumbled, the punk-rock singing teenager lived in an abandoned apartment next to the Berlin Wall.



The view from the living room of Andre Nitze's desert home near Pioneertown, Calif. DAMIEN MALONEY FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

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minutes away.”

Living here every weekend with his girlfriend in this 1,200-square-foot two-bedroom, one-bathroom home requires self-reliance. There’s no city sewer, no power lines and no air conditioning. The mailman delivers to a post-office box about 10 miles away at the only restaurant-bar in Pioneertown, a tiny dot created by Hollywood in the 1940s as a backdrop for filming westerns.

Building the house involved self-reliance as well. Mr. Nitze spent \$87,000 on 10 acres and then—along with five friends who, like him, had no prior building experience—built the house. Using tools little more complicated than an Allen wrench, he and his friends completed the house in less than 14 weeks of paid vacation time from Germany between 2010 and 2012. (Mr. Nitze did get professional help for the concrete, plumbing, electrical and the roof.)

Today, when he’s not in Los Angeles, Mr. Nitze, 41, lives three hours away on an entirely different type of frontier: on the outer edge of civilization north from Palm Springs, off a 1-mile-long dirt road in the remote, rocky high desert of Southern California.

To say that Mr. Nitze lives off the grid is an understatement. “My indication of civilization is Starbucks,” says Mr. Nitze, the chief executive and founder of Golden Alligator, a digital ad agency that does branding and strategy for firms like Red Bull Europe and Exxon Mobil. “The next one is 40

Mr. Nitze relied on a customizable set of prefabricated building blocks called an itHouse. Designed by Los Angeles-based architect Linda Taalman of Taalman Koch Architecture, the home reminded him of Berlin's New National Gallery, which was designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. Building the house using the kit cost about \$204,000.

Yet Mr. Nitze's home shows little trace of an amateur's touch. Made of little more than an aluminum structural frame, steel decking and glass, the rectangular and almost-completely transparent house is spartan.

Ms. Taalman's cost-minimizing, uber-functionalist design means Mr. Nitze's home lacks (and doesn't require) drywall. There are no tiles and no paint. Eight solar panels charging 16 golf-cart-size batteries power everything.

A south-facing overhang provides shade in the summer, when temperatures regularly top 100 degrees. Three sides of the home are covered in glass and 20% of the home can be opened, allowing cross-ventilation. Radiant-heated floors provide the home's only heat. And all water is from the well. Mr. Nitze stopped watching TV six years ago, but he gets Internet through a small antenna affixed to his roof. He also spends time hiking, reading and playing music.

While there are few human neighbors, bobcats are regularly seen as are rattlesnakes, says Mr. Nitze, who says living here has changed him for the better. "I see things more relaxed," he says. "I've found a better balance between work and life. I forgot myself back in the city...I focus more on my friendships."

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