

Sustainability doesn't mean losing comforts, couple declare

by Peter de Graaf

NOT many of us can watch the power meter run backwards, or get paid by their power company. But on a sunny day that's what Rolf Mueller-Glodde and Inge Bremer, owners of Ora Ora Resort in Kerikeri, can do.

The couple replaced their hot-water cylinders with a solar water heater some years ago, but now they've taken the next step and installed power-generating photovoltaic panels.

Sunlight striking the 15 panels produces DC electricity, which is converted to mains-type AC power and pumped back into the grid.

While the Landing Rd resort still uses more electricity than it produces, Rolf reckons the panels have shaved a third off its power bills — which means, once you factor in inflation and future power price hikes, they will earn back their investment in 15-20 years.

The most power they've produced in a day is 23 kilowatt hours; the least, 6kWh. On a typical day the resort uses 30kWh. Over a year, the panels provide about a third of their power needs.

Rolf concedes it was a big investment up-front — including panels, power inverter, mounting and installation it cost \$37,000 — so it isn't for everyone. However, it's a different story when it comes to solar water heating.

"That's a no-brainer, especially if you're building a new house."

Some people complain solar water heating is too expensive, but Rolf says a system typically costs \$5000.

Take off \$1000 for the Government subsidy, and that's only about \$2000 more than a conventional hot-water system.

With the hot-water cylinder the biggest power user



TOP TIPS: Rolf Mueller-Glodde with the resort's solar water heater (foreground) and photovoltaic solar panels, at rear. **PICTURE / PETER DE GRAAF**

Rolf and Inge may be producing a third of their power needs but that doesn't stop them striving to save power where they can. You could say it's almost become an obsession — they even have a wireless device which tells them exactly how much power the resort is using at any moment. Here are a few of Rolf's top power-saving tips:

- Switch off everything that's not in use — the spare fridge, the computer, even the clock radio.
- Many modern appliances have a stand-by mode. It might look like they're off, but they're still sucking up power. Make sure they're turned off completely by switching them off at the wall and you'll trim about 5 per

cent off your power bill. Likewise, chargers that are not in use but still plugged in will keep using power.

- Install power-saving bulbs. The outdoor lights at the resort used to be 60W; now they're 8W energy-savers. That's almost a 90 per cent saving.
- Make sure your home is well insulated.
- Consider installing heat pumps — it's a bit of an investment up front, but they're a lot more efficient than regular heaters.
- When you buy a new appliance make sure it's an energy efficient model. Check your existing appliances with a device, available from The Warehouse, or on loan from whiteware stores.

Going solar

Want to be green and cut your power bill? If you install solar water heating — a "no brainer" if you're building a new house, Rolf says — you could be eligible for a \$1000 government subsidy. To find out more go to www.energysave.org.nz and click on "funding available".

A new service by Niwa, the National Institute for Water and Atmospheric Research, helps homeowners to gauge how much sunlight their roof receives and pick the best spot for a solar panel.

Go to www.niwa.co.nz, then click on "Our Services", then "Online Services" and scroll down to "SolarView".

in most homes, the payback time is just four to five years, Rolf says.

As you'd expect from a place that brands itself an eco-resort, it's not just the power supply and hot water which are tinted green. Their on-site "wellness centre" has a composting toilet, their car runs on biodiesel made from fish and chip oil, and waste water is treated in a two-tank system, then used to irrigate their extensive vegetable garden.

"So we don't have to feel bad when we go to the toilet and flush — it saves us watering the garden," Rolf says.

The German-born couple's green credentials are all

Switch to a better deal

Why spend more than you have to on power? With so many competing power companies and pricing plans around these days, it's worth checking that you're not paying too much.

If you live alone, you might save a packet by switching to a low-user plan or, if you have a big family and use a lot of power, you might be able to find a company with a better deal.

Haul out an old power bill and go to www.powerswitch.org.nz and follow the instructions — the website will calculate how much

you'd pay with every other power company in your area. The website is run by the Consumers Institute so it's impartial. Switching power companies is usually just a matter of a couple of phone calls.

If you don't have access to the internet at home, your local Citizens Advice Bureau should be able to help.

Once you've made sure you have the best deal going, it's worth your while to check out the website www.energysave.org.nz for more power-saving tips.

A few small, painless changes can make a big difference.

the more extraordinary when you consider they spent more than 20 years living in the concrete jungles of Hong Kong, Singapore and Korea, Rolf as a commercial banker, Inge in the import/export business.

When they arrived in New Zealand in 2002 they didn't have a clue about gardening or the environment.

They chose Kerikeri because the town's NorthTec campus offered courses in horticulture. Their tutor soon persuaded them that bio-dynamic gardening, based on the principles of Rudolf Steiner, was the way to go.

While it's labour intensive, you don't have to fork out for expensive artificial fertilisers.

Inge says they first had to clear the property of "every weed in the book", then dug out a crater garden with a series of descending terraces, designed to take the back-breaking labour out of gardening, improve drainage and draw cold air away from frost-sensitive plants.

They practise companion

planting — citrus and potatoes, for example, grow well together — while keeping the grass long and using a thick layer of mulch to trap moisture.

Rolf says they always seek ways to reduce their impact on the environment, but they're unlikely to go off the grid altogether.

That's partly because the resort still uses more power than it produces, and partly because it would require a good deal more effort and expense, not to mention a large number of batteries to store power overnight.

"We always talk to our guests about what you can do to live as sustainably as possible, without compromising on luxury," he says. "With a little thought, you don't have to reduce your level of comfort."

"In the beginning everyone thought we were green nutters. Now we are almost mainstream." ■ Rolf and Inge are with Meridian, because it's the only company that buys power back at the same rate it sells it.

GOING FOR IT: Rolf Mueller-Glodde and Inge Bremer put their environmental principles into practise at Ora Ora Resort, Kerikeri. **PICTURE / PETER DE GRAAF**