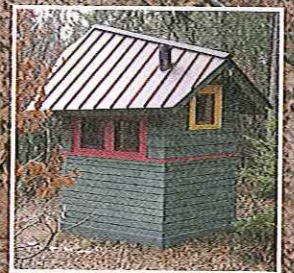




Whimsical Taj Ma'Outhouse

At this northwoods cabin, functional is also fun



BACK VIEW

STORY BY FRAN SIGURDSSON
PHOTOS BY JOHN SYLVESTRE

There was a time when every cabin had an outhouse. You could heed nature's call and admire the bamboo fishing rods and wood skis in the Sears catalog at the same time. (For you whippersnappers: Such catalogs sometimes doubled as toilet paper.)

Alas, indoor plumbing usurped the outdoor throne. But stalwart outdoorsmen like John Sylvestre are restoring the privy to its rightful place behind the cabin.

When Sylvestre purchased a cabin in northern Minnesota in 2000, adding an outhouse was his first priority. "The outhouse is something unique to cabins," he explains. "It's definitely something people talk about. People have an image of an outhouse: It's dark, you hold your nose, dodge snakes ..."

Sylvestre's whimsical version, "Taj Ma'Outhouse" as he dubs it, is anything but dank and smelly. For starters, Sylvestre sited the outhouse to maximize natural ventilation from prevailing winds. Screened windows on four sides of the southeast-facing structure keep it light and airy. The pit is vented with recycled copper pipes that extend from the seat board through the copper roof. Lastly, a polyurethane finish prevents odors from penetrating the wood.

Sylvestre's design was inspired by memories from his youth. "When I was growing

BIG BENEFITS – An outhouse can provide an auxiliary bathroom on crowded weekends. It also can be a handy alternative for wet swimmers so their sandy feet don't track up your cabin floor.

up, my great-uncle had a cabin in northern Minnesota with an outhouse," says Sylvestre, recalling bygone summers and hunting trips at the family retreat. The two-holer (no waiting required) was paneled, with windows on either side.

"It never smelled. It wasn't their only bathroom, but it was always an option," he says.

Today, Sylvestre is a keen outdoorsman who routinely ventures into the wild on remote canoeing trips during the summer months. "When I get back from a two-week adventure, an outhouse is a huge luxury," he laughs.

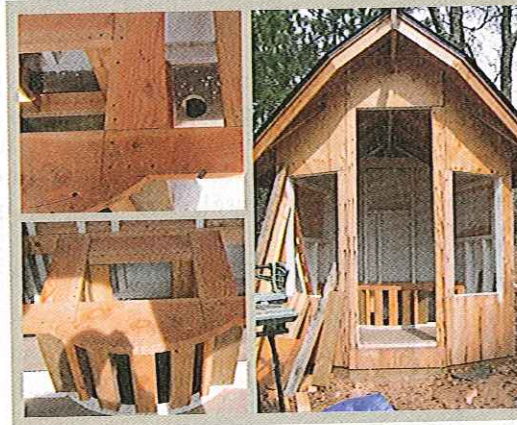
However, on a cold Minnesota night, an outhouse doesn't seem so luxurious, even Sylvestre's deluxe model. "It's interesting to go out there when it's 15 degrees below zero," he continues. "You don't spend a lot of time out there."

Sylvestre's next priority? Remodeling his 1970s-era cabin, which, incidentally, has three bathrooms. ■

Fran Sigurdsson's favorite outhouse is the two-hole 18th-century privy at historic Fort Johnson, near her upstate New York lakehome. It is rumored George Washington sat there.



ONE MAN'S CASTLE – John Sylvestre is a man on a mission to prove outhouses can be stylish, fun and, most important, odorless. To accomplish the latter, his design includes well-placed windows and proper venting.



ON THE WEB ▶

Subscriber exclusive! To see John Sylvestre's design sketches and more of his photos, go to www.CabinLife.com. Look under "DIY & Advice."

GETTING DOWN TO BUSINESS

For practical matters, John Sylvestre relied on info from the University of Minnesota Extension Service:

- Privies must be at least 100 feet from any water supply and set back from a lake as required by local shoreland standards.
- If the pit has an earth bottom, it must not be closer than 3 feet to the water table. If that distance cannot be achieved, the pit should be a liquid-tight holding tank, with the waste periodically pumped out.
- The pit should have at least 50 cubic feet of storage capacity and should be built of materials that will not rapidly disintegrate.
- Proper venting is critical to an odor-free outhouse. Vent the pit through the seat board with a flue at least 7 square inches in area. Extend it at least 12 inches above roof level.
- The vent must be flush with the underside of the seat board and not extend down into the pit. (Otherwise, rank gases that are lighter than air will collect under the board and escape when the seat cover is raised.)