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REAL ESTATE

Finding Peace of Mind for Your Home Away From Home

By JULIE SATOW APRIL 13, 2018



Nathan Lavertue and Geneva Simms keep tabs on their country house in Dutchess County with a range of smart home tools. Lauren Lancaster for The New York Times

Geneva Simms and Nathan Lavertue were driving to their country house in Dutchess County one recent weekend when there was yet another spring snowstorm. But when they arrived late that night, their home, which was built around 1780 and was once a Quaker meetinghouse and a stop on the Underground Railroad, wasn't bitterly cold. That is because during his lunch break in Brooklyn, Mr. Lavertue had turned on the heat remotely, using his smartphone.

The New York Times

“We have three cameras — two exterior and one interior — four Nest thermostats, two Echo Dots, one Echo Show, one traditional Echo and 10 smart lights. And also the Nest smoke detector,” said Mr. Lavertue, a global experience design director for IBM, who installed the equipment himself. “The cameras are for security, but they provide plenty of entertainment. I have really funny footage of Geneva running after a U.P.S. truck.”

Like a lot of second-home buyers, Mr. Lavertue and Ms. Simms, a personal trainer, corporate wellness coach and founder of [Empower to Power](#), were overwhelmed at first with figuring out how to protect their country house when they weren't there. The married couple, who rent in Brooklyn and had never owned before buying their Stanfordville house last year, researched their options and then turned to do-it-yourself smart home components. They plan to add another smoke/carbon monoxide detector, several more smart thermostats and a digital front-door lock from [August](#) to complete their home security system.



Mr. Lavertue has two exterior cameras and one inside the house. Lauren Lancaster for The New York Times

But while smart home systems can offer second-home owners peace of mind while they are away, they cannot step in if a pipe bursts or a driveway is buried beneath a pile of snow. For that reason, many homeowners, even those with extensive smart home systems, supplement the technology with old-fashioned human help.

The New York Times

“Usually, I suggest a two-pronged approach,” said Jessica Chutka-Pelletier, a broker with Douglas Elliman in Chappaqua, who sold Mr. Lavertue and Ms. Simms their home. “For ease of use, I suggest apps and a lot of DIY things, then I give my buyers a list of local people to call.”

Among the professionals she recommends is her husband, who happens to be a general contractor. Mr. Lavertue and Ms. Simms hired him to do renovation work and a lawn care company to plow their driveway.



The house also has four Amazon Echo devices, which have a variety of uses, including playing music and monitoring the cameras outside the house.

Lauren Lancaster for The New York Times

The New York Times

It was through word of mouth that Justin Brent got his start. Mr. Brent is based in Pound Ridge, in Westchester County, and has worked in the town's maintenance department for more than two decades. He is also chief of the local fire department. And he is the proprietor of [Pound Ridge Home Management LLC](#), which he runs with his wife, overseeing more than a dozen second homes in the area.

"I started out doing some landscaping, and word spread from there," said Mr. Brent, who checks on his customers' homes once a week, conducting a 21-point inspection, from the mailbox to the basement, for a fee of \$55 an hour. The company also provides ancillary services, or will find third parties to do so, from power-washing furniture to changing light bulbs and fixing HVAC and plumbing systems.

"These are weekenders, so if they come up on a Friday night and the heat is broken," he said, "it is an emergency and they have to call the heating company to come."



Four Nest thermostats help Mr. Lavertue and Ms. Simms keep track of the temperature in different parts of the house. Lauren Lancaster for The New York Times

The New York Times

Mr. Brent said he addresses any problems that arise during the week, “so that when they come up, they only have to turn the key in the door and turn on the lights and enjoy themselves.”

Mary Trier has a similar company on the North Fork of Long Island. Her job, particularly during the fall and winter months, centers on coastal erosion and protecting homes from storm damage. “I thrive on the bad weather,” she said. “I am fixated with the weather report.”

Ms. Trier provides a range of services, from securing beachside steps to critter control, and charges a monthly retainer of \$120 to \$125, which includes weekly property checks. For anything more, she charges an hourly fee of \$25 to \$30.



Justin Brent is the chief of the local fire department in Pound Ridge, N.Y., but he also runs a home management company, taking care of more than a dozen second homes in the area. Ben Zucker for The New York Times

The New York Times

“I started out with just a few houses and that stayed constant for a while,” she said. “But recently business has exploded.”

“For a long time, the North Fork was somewhat sleepy,” said Sheri Winter Clarry, an associate broker at [Corcoran](#) in the North Fork, who often refers clients to Ms. Trier. “There was always a summer market, but more people are now coming for the weekends year round, and demand for services like Mary’s has grown.”

For those who want to supplement services like Mr. Brent’s or Ms. Trier’s with smart home systems, there are a number of options, from traditional firms like ADT to relative newcomers like Nest.

Nest, which is owned by Google, makes products that feature modern, sleek designs but are relatively costly. The Nest Secure system starts at about \$500, with the option to buy additional products like [Nest Hello](#), a \$229 video doorbell, or Nest x Yale lock, a \$279 key-free deadbolt operated with a passcode.

“The system provides peace of mind,” said Maxime Veron, director of product strategy at Nest, adding that the majority of the company’s customers install the systems themselves.

While Nest is largely a la carte, many companies offer comprehensive options, including services like ADT Pulse or [SimpliSafe](#). These systems have a lower upfront cost and offer 24/7 monitoring, although they can also come with lengthy, multiyear contracts and expensive termination fees.

The New York Times

[Wirecutter](#), a product review and recommendation site owned by The New York Times, gave SimpliSafe its top score, citing the round-the-clock monitoring and the fact it does not require long-term contracts. PCMag.com [also recommended](#) SimpliSafe, giving it four out of five stars, as well as [vivint.SmartHome](#), which it gave four and a half stars. PCMag.com awarded Nest Secure just three stars, citing the high cost and limited voice commands.

Of course, some homeowners can't be bothered to deal with installing smart home security systems, or face having to work with management companies. They prefer to have someone on site at all times. That was one reason Joanne Intrieri recently decided to buy a home at the Four Seasons Private Residences Fort Lauderdale.

Ms. Intrieri and her husband, who are based in New York City, already own property in Arizona and Pennsylvania. "We know what it's like to have sandstorms and snowstorms, and have to find people to fix things when you aren't there," she said.



At the Four Seasons project, owners will have all the conveniences of a hotel, as well as on-site managers to cater to most needs. "Having been there and done that," she said, "I don't want to have to lift a finger."
