

Propane or Solar?

Propane-powered versus solar-powered fridges; or, the bear that cost me a few grand.

Last summer a friend flew me out to our cabin in his Cessna 180. As I watched him wiggle his wings good-bye I had two thoughts: a quick swim and a cold beer—it was at least 30°C, without a breath of wind. But first I had to haul everything up the hill.

And that's when it all started. Ted the Bear (as in teddy bear) had been by, I thought as soon as I saw the barbecue tipped off the deck and our propane fridge lying forlornly on its side.

But first things first. It was hot. I needed cold beer. Once the fridge was back on its feet and filled with beer and a week's worth of man food—bread, smokies, milk and two T-bone steaks—I got the barbecue back together. Then I went for a swim.

Half an hour later, I was back to see how the beer was coming. Still warm, but hey—it was a hot day. Two hours later, the beer was still warm. Not a little warm, but that right-from-the-liquor-store warm. My heart sank. The fridge wasn't working.

Little did I know that this was to become the beginning of a series of events that would cost me several thousand dollars. That damn Ted!

Over the next week I spent at least 10 hours trying to get that fridge to work. And



After seven weeks in the fridge Lynda found the vegetables were still fresh.

it just wouldn't. Sometimes the coolant in a propane refrigerator's coils gets vapour lock and won't circulate. The solution looks ridiculous, like something a mean-spirited repairman might suggest just to see if he could get pictures. You light the fridge and wait until the boiler reservoir is hot to the touch. Then you turn the fridge off and tip

the whole thing onto the right side for 30 seconds, then onto the left side for 30 seconds, and repeat.

But even after six cycles of bench pressing my fridge around the deck, I still had warm beer. After some study I saw the problem. I couldn't get a high enough burner flame—all it would produce was a mid-range idle.

Back in town I got the heating circuit fixed, but I still wasn't sure that the fridge would work on reassembly. And since my wife, Lynda and I were getting ready to fly out for two months for freeze-up I started to think about getting another fridge.

Propane fridges aren't cheap. An eight-cubic-foot Consul propane fridge with a tiny 1.1-cubic-foot freezer—good for a weekend, but not practical for a two-month stay—will set you back \$1,500. Crystal

THE BOTTOM LINE

SunDanzer at a Glance

Model	Size (ft3)	Amp hrs.*	Watt hrs.*	Price
Fridge DCR 165	5.8	6.5	77	\$1595
Fridge DCR 225	8.0	7.5	90	\$1595
Freezer DCF 165	5.8	23	272	\$1595
Freezer DCF 225	8.0	30	360	\$1595

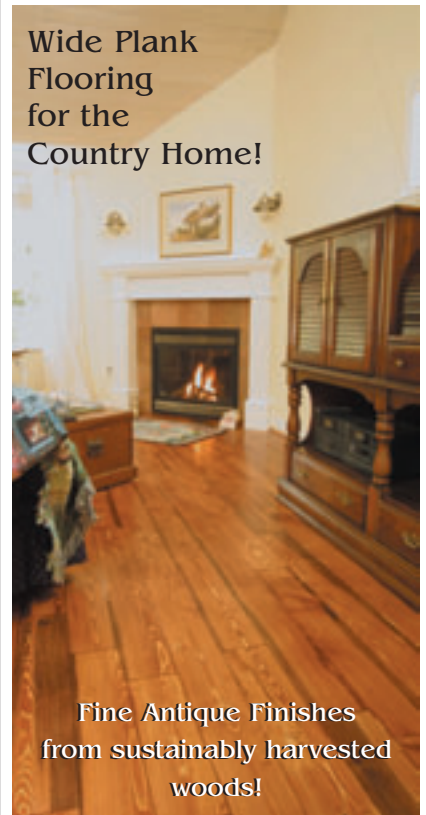
* At 20°C

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Utilities

Gold's 14.5-cubic-foot fridge with a much larger 4.2-cubic-foot freezer is just what we needed but it runs about \$3,750. And both these are Ontario prices, so add freight.

And to top it off, propane isn't cheap anymore either: 20 years ago a 100-pound cylinder of propane—which would run my Sibir propane fridge for two and a half months—cost me about \$20; now it's \$65. Flying it in on a de Havilland Beaver float plane adds roughly another \$65 per cylinder. Pretty pricey for cold beer!

With a fairly large solar power system at our cabin (10 panels that produce 500 watt hours), I started to think about DC electric fridges. I thought somewhat naively that they might be getting cheaper. I phoned around to ask about the industry standard in DC refrigeration, the Sun Frost, and my heart sank. The 10-cubic-foot fridge runs at just over \$3,000 while a 12-cubic-foot fridge with freezer is \$3,600. Oh yeah, add the cost of shipping from Vancouver.

Then a friend mentioned Kelln Solar, an alternative energy dealer in southern Saskatchewan who was selling "some other kind" of DC-powered fridges. When I heard the price it sounded way too good to be

true: an eight-cubic-foot SunDanzer fridge uses the same Danfoss DC compressor as the Sun Frost, operates on 7.5 amp-hours (90 Watt-Hours) at room temperature (21°C), and costs \$1,595. According to the dealer, the SunDanzer fridge can run off a 42-watt solar panel with six hours of collection time. Well, after a lot of study, including calling two other U.S. dealers and the manufacturer, I couldn't find the downside, so I decided to buy one.

Out of the box it was a high-quality product. The galvanized steel outer case and aluminum interior sandwich 11 centimetres of high-density polyurethane foam insulation. The compressor operates on either 12 or 24 volts—no switching necessary—and the frost reduction system means no defrosting. I won't get into the physics of this but this fall we still had fresh lettuce and celery in the fridge after nine weeks without a single slimy leaf!

When we got out to the cabin this fall the pilot helped me lug the fridge up the hill to the cabin. I had the unit hooked up within an hour and food in it in three. We've used it now for two full months and the quoted amp-hour rate is conservative.

This is a freezer-style fridge—it opens from the top—and on first blush you might think it a bit of a pain to use. Not so. There are four stackable baskets that can be put into the bottom of the fridge or at the top where they can slide from side to side like in a regular freezer. Freezer-style fridges are cheaper to make, and unlike regular fridges, where the cold air "falls out" onto your kitchen floor, here the cold air falls right where you want it—to the bottom of the fridge. The final word on the fridge goes to Lynda. Every time she opens the door she says, "I love this fridge."

Now here's the downside: I like the fridge so much I have decided to buy one of SunDanzer's eight-cubic-foot freezers. But we don't have enough room in the cabin for both a fridge and a freezer, and now that the Sibir propane fridge is fixed I don't want to leave it outside for Ted the Bear. So now I have to fly in enough material to build an addition to the cabin. And you know, somewhere out there in the wilderness there's a bear curled up snug as a bug in a rug, lost in his dreams, and he doesn't have a clue what kind of a train wreck he made out of my life. ●

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