

The Washington Post

We're, like, uh, Earth to 'Real World'

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A wet slice of tomato dangles from the edge of the kitchen sink. A schedule for kickboxing classes is taped by the fridge. A copy of "Eclipse," the third novel in a series about angst-y vampires, rests on a nightstand.

These are signs of actual, unedited life inside the "Real World" house, whose doors were thrown open for The Post shortly before the cast departed this month after filming since July. How could we not go and try to kick down the artifice?

What we found: a hair in the downstairs bathroom sink. So real.

Also: Cast mates Mike and Ashley each have a Bible beside their beds in their shared Lincoln-themed boudoir. Ashley has bookmarked Luke 16. *No servant can serve two masters* . . . and no "Real World" cast can leave a house without one roommate punching a hole in the wall. Yes, really. We saw the hole.

They came. They saw. They got good at Jacuzzi sex. They had the time of their lives, they say, in the \$5.7 million mansion at 2000 S St. NW. D.C. is *sooo* great, they say, so driven and electric. They use "driven" and "electric" often to describe themselves and

Washingtonians. There is a faint, stale whiff of prepackaged buzzword, like they've been coached to brand the production before it airs Dec. 30.

In the Reagan bedroom -- with its pair of oversize, neon, pop-art portraits of the Great Communicator -- the cast mates sit down to talk about themselves ("driven") and Washington ("electric"). They are between 21 and 23. They are nice and normal, at least for people who auditioned for, and then voluntarily subjected themselves to, round-the-clock surveillance for four months. The eight students were moved here and set up with jobs by MTV. They have just skimmed -- and laughed off -- the trite, five-sentence cast bios written and distributed by MTV publicists buzzing around the kitchen upstairs.

. . . *A typical jock . . . a free-spirit vegan . . .*

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the quintessential ladies' man . . . Portuguese beauty . . . raised in a fundamentalist Christian cult . . .

Mike Manning from Thornton, Colo., who worked for the Human Rights Campaign during his stay, wants to move to the District in the next two years. "I love how it's young but at the same time intellectual," he says. "You can walk down the street and you meet 10 different people and everyone has their own cause and purpose."

Ashley Lindley from Fort Bragg, Calif., puts it more sharply: "It's nice to be around intelligent people who can hold a serious conversation. I've lived in L.A. and all you talk about is the way people look."

Callie Walker from Huntsville, Tex., who shot photos for the Washington Blade, seems relieved to have experienced life in a big city. "I've just been going to school in Texas, running with the mundane," she says. "Being in D.C., there's so many opportunities and so many people so passionate about what they want to do and where they want to go -- it's ignited this fire in me."

Erika Wasilewski from Chicago, who was observed towing a suitcase to the house an hour earlier, doesn't lend credence to the rumor that someone moved out of the house because of high-drama levels. "It's helpful to not push other people's buttons," she says, when asked what it means to be a good roommate.

Josh Colon from Philadelphia, who mixed drinks at Rhino Bar in Georgetown, is eager to lift his shirt to explain his tattoos. The snake fighting the panther represents the "everlasting struggle with life," the voluptuous woman is his "most current girlfriend" and the snarling tiger face is an ex-girlfriend, "the man-eater."

Emily Schromm from Columbia, Mo., who interned for Africa Action, thinks the do-gooder route will take her to the continent next. After all, she scuttled a sojourn to Uganda to do "The Real World." (No one should be faced with that choice, we think.)

There's a rumor that Ty Ruff from Baltimore, who worked in marketing for the Capitals, tossed Andrew Woods from Denver off the balcony of the house. True?

They say "You'll have to watch the show" instead of "Yes."

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Then a tour of the mansion, which over the years has housed a Blockbuster video, an Ethiopian restaurant, a lesbian bar and a church. Now it's an exhibit of shoddy-sexy cable-station decadence.

The foyer looks like a biopsy of a Brookstone. Two vibrating leather chairs flank a faux fireplace, which contains a faux fire. Look to the left, past the ginormous fish tank (which the crew cleans, not the cast). In a corner alcove is lumpy furniture suited for lounging and/or heavy petting, an arrangement Hugh Hefner might've conceived if his decorators shopped exclusively at Target. The kitchen features a knife block sponsored by Subway.

Commercialism romances hedonism, but there is a stab at stateliness, too. Yes, the line of shiny Roman columns on the main floor calls to mind Caligula more than Camelot, but let's not dwell. Another alcove resembles the Oval Office, with a broad wooden desk cluttered with West-Wingy ephemera, like a toy presidential limousine. Bald eagles are everywhere. Eagle statues prop up a glass coffee table with their white, feathery crowns. Bronze and ceramic eagles swoop out from the wall, mid-attack. It's Norman Bates, with a dash of John Ashcroft.

The house would be livable if not for the industrial fluorescent lights embedded in the ceiling. There can be no shadows in the "Real World" house, no hiding. Cameras peek from every corner of every room. The blue-

curtained confessional -- where cast mates reveal their rawest emotions to a stationary camera -- appears to be modeled after the White House briefing room. The satire (the accidental irony?) is breathtaking.

In the Lincoln bedroom, a cocktail-of-the-month calendar hangs near a clipping of Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken." Framed photos of Ben's Chili Bowl hang near framed photos of monuments. Metro's rainbow spider web of subway lines is painted along one wall of the billiard room, and the Jacuzzi patio is decorated with bunting.

The cast mates seem as real as they can be while shackled to an MTV contract. But the house, with its mix of tourist kitsch and federalismo, feels like a landmark to what the rest of America sees when they visit the District, which, of course, is the farthest thing from real.

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