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SHOWBIZ: Get Real

Young cast of popular MTV show lives it up at the Palms

By CAROL CLING
REVIEW-JOURNAL

Almost everyone who's ever moved to Las Vegas from somewhere else -- and that includes 99.9 percent of us -- has faced the question, in jest or in earnest:

"Where will you live? In a hotel?"

To which almost all of us replied sarcastically, "Get real."

For seven camera-ready 20-somethings, however, that's exactly what they got for 18 wild weeks.

Or at least as close to real as MTV's "The Real World" ever gets.

The cable network's pioneering reality series begins its dirty-dozen 12th edition at 10 p.m. Tuesday with an hourlong episode that sets the stage for a season full of Sin City madness, from group hot-tub encounters to romantic roulette.

The primary locale: the Palms, where MTV's lucky seven lived, worked, played and partied during the show's February-through-June production schedule.

But no standard guest rooms would do for these soon-to-be celebrity residents.

Instead, their own private Vegas world centers around a custom 28th-floor penthouse with panoramic Strip views on three sides and more than 2,800 square feet of edgy design elements.

Even before the hotel debuted last November, Palms officials went after "The Real World," showing off the under-construction casino to the show's producers, explains Palms owner George Maloof.

Besides, the MTV staple's core audience fits in with the clientele the hotel is trying to attract, notes Tracy Chaplin, producer of "The Real World's" Vegas venture. "It's really an ideal match between the Palms and 'The Real World' in the style of the property and the youthfulness" of its target clientele.

The hotel's architect worked directly with production and network officials to customize the "Real World" dream suite, transforming standard spaces into one hip high-roller suite designed for maximum exposure. Curtains replace bedroom doors. Two bedrooms feature two queen beds each; the third has

three. A hallway hosts three wash basins, while the showers have room for two -- or more. (To say nothing of a view through windows to the living room and the bath.) And the dining table boasts dice embedded in the clear plastic, furthering the Vegas vibe.

As "Real World" cribs go, "this is right up there at the top," Chaplin says, citing not only the suite itself but "having the convenience of everything -- pools, nightclubs, restaurants, movie theaters, gambling" located an elevator ride away.

(Now that "The Real World" has departed, mere mortals can book the suite, Maloof says -- at the bargain rate of \$7,500 on weekends and \$5,000 Sundays through Thursdays. But forget about this weekend; a celebrity bachelor party has dibs.)

The MTV suite remains "as is," Maloof says, "including the area they call the confessional room. The cameras are the only thing we took out."

Now that they've stopped turning, that is.

During the 18 weeks "The Real World" spent in Las Vegas, those cameras churned around the clock, keeping six crews busy capturing the antics of MTV's very own Glitter City gang.

As usual, the "Real World" lineup reflects a wide geographical and ethnic diversity, from small towns to big cities, from East Coast to West.

Alton (MTV insists on a first-names-only policy for "Real World" cast members), 22, hails from San Diego. Arissa, also 22, comes from Boston.

Brynn, 21, is from Portland, Ore., while 22-year-old Frank's hometown is Lewisburg, Pa. New Yorker Irulan, also 21, calls the Bronx home.

Rounding out the "Real World" septet: Steven, 23, from San Marcos, Texas, and Trishelle, 22, from Cutoff, La.

All cast members had to be over 21, because in addition to living at the Palms, they'd be working (and playing) there.

Past "Real World" casts have worked at a radio station (in Seattle), served as recreation-center lifeguards (in Chicago) and run their own business (in New Orleans).

Las Vegas cast members, by contrast, all worked at the casino -- some marketing and promoting Palms nightclubs. One worked as a go-go dancer. Others tended bar and served cocktails at Skin, the Palms' by-the-pool bar.

On one sultry summer afternoon, Steven pours drinks -- something he's good at, having worked his way through business school as a topless bartender at a gay bar.

Arissa and Trishelle, meanwhile, report for duty on the pool deck, serving drinks and clearing ashtrays while uniformed in bikinis, flirty fringed miniskirts and boots.

And director Laura Korkoian prepares her four-member video crew for action. Communicating with a camera operator on an audio link, Korkoian instructs, "OK, turn on the tape."

Moments later, Arissa strides across the pool deck, a camera trailing in her wake, as Korkoian watches the image from a miniature monitor positioned on a poolside table.

"This camera brings a lot of attention -- unwanted attention," Korkoian says.

That's why "I'm not near the kids" as they go about their route, she adds. "The less intrusion in their lives, the better."

Meanwhile, back in the Batcave -- as the show's staff members have dubbed their darkened 28th-floor control room -- four large and 25 small TV monitors record the action (or inaction) throughout the "Real World" penthouse, from the office to the kitchen, the pool table to the living room.

Wipe-clean boards posted in the control room list each cast member's whereabouts, along with upcoming schedules, needed background shots and planned excursions. (During their 4 1/2-month stay, various "Real World" cast members ventured to Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area, Hoover Dam and Los Angeles, among other destinations.)

A "Story Watch" board, meanwhile, details ongoing themes and issues that may crop up, from one cast member's anxiety to another's pompous attitude.

As the cameras roll, generating 250 hours of video for every hour of tape that makes the final cut, a logging department transcribes the unscripted incidents captured on video, Chaplin explains.

Story department staffers then read the transcriptions and write scripts from the real-life scenes.

Then, "we edit to the script that's been written," Chaplin adds. "It's a complete reversal of traditional productions" that start with a script and craft the action to match. Instead, "we take nothing and make it into something."

At the moment, one cast member in the suite makes a phone call, complaining about work, then joins a roommate for a fashion chat.

"I always thought I had a unique style till I came here," she says, citing some suitably glitzy Glitter City attire she's planning to wear that night. "I'm just going to try and be bold."

A few minutes later, the same cast member telephones the control room (on the Batphone, of course) to request a shirt change. In the real world, that wouldn't require any action. In "The Real World," however, it means the cast member's clip-on microphone must be repositioned.

The constant pressures of on-camera life represent a definite challenge, according to cast members, who talked with reporters after "The Real World" completed production in June.

"It's very, very hard to live your life without privacy," Irulan says, "and have

people in on moments you don't even want to be living."

The camera "does draw attention," Brynn acknowledges. "For the most part, when you go out to dinner, people would look."

And sometimes more.

"There were always groups of girls flocking around the guys," Irulan observes, prompting female cast members to ask, "Do you think these ladies are really interested in your sparkling sense of humor?"

Even venting private thoughts on camera, inside the confessional, proved somewhat daunting, Irulan admits.

"Me and the confessional had a strange relationship," she says. "I don't think I ever got used to it."

Yet the process of on-camera introspection "really helped me," Brynn observes. "I turned a bunch of my negatives into positives. ... It's like speed therapy."

After all, "living here with the cameras and six people who aren't afraid to let you know what they see," Irulan muses, "they see things maybe I didn't see, things I've taken for granted."

One thing the cast members never took for granted: their Las Vegas surroundings.

They just didn't always see them in the same way.

Aspiring model Arissa, for example, was captivated by the glamour of "going places and being seen. It's a very sexy place," she says, noting that "Sin City ... lived up to its name."

Steve agrees, pointing out that "there's no other place where there's so much going on." Which means, of course, there's "a lot more time to get yourself in trouble."

Frank expected "probably a lot of partying every weekend," he says. Instead, "I get here and it's (partying) every day!"

And, as Trishelle points out, "the fact that we lived in a casino" influenced their view of Las Vegas life.

But Alton, an avid rock-climber, experienced a different side of Las Vegas in his excursions away from the Palms.

"In the climbing community, you see the slower pace" of those real Las Vegas residents "who don't do clubs, who don't do bars, who live in nice houses," he notes.

Inside the Palms, "it's kind of like the land of make-believe," Irulan says. "The side of Vegas we've seen -- casinos, nightclubs, nightlife -- it's fake boobs, fake lips, fake smiles. It lacks a lot of culture and diversity."

"And a lot of taste," Brynn adds.

One thing the Vegas version of "The Real World" doesn't lack, however, is want-to-see buzz among the cable network's target audience.

"In the test markets we did, there's an overwhelming fascination with Las Vegas," Chaplin says. "Las Vegas is cool now."

And the resulting "Real World" should live up to its otherworldly setting, he predicts.

Beyond "the nonstop pace of things," this "Real World" features "seven great characters -- highly dynamic, highly relatable," in Chaplin's view. "I would love to see this cast in another environment."

For now, however, he'll take the one he has.

"I've got great stuff," Chaplin says of "The Real World's" Vegas venture.

Just don't be fooled by the show's first episode into predicting what's going to happen, cautions Frank.

"It's 360 degrees different than how things developed," he says. "Einstein couldn't figure it out."

But MTV officials undoubtedly hope thousands of "Real World" viewers will try.

This story is located at:

http://www.reviewjournal.com/lvrj_home/2002/Sep-15-Sun-2002/living/19583540.html