

REALITY BEHIND ‘BELOW DECK’

Filming Bravo’s hit reality franchise about yachts and yachties is a complex logistical operation.

PALMA, Majorca — A provocative theory in vogue among physicists and philosophers suggests that we humans are not experiencing, and have not ever experienced, reality.

What we understand as reality, the theory proposes, may merely be one of an astronomical number of vivid computer simulations of an ancient past, designed by humanity’s distant descendants to study the evolution of their forebears. If so, the United States of America is about as real as, say, the Mushroom Kingdom in an unattended game of Super Mario Bros. Our creators are not the deities of any major world religion, but the architects of the simulation we inhabit.

How might they perceive our lives — this advanced civilization for whom every facet of our existence, from elation to exhaustion, is merely edu-tainment about the human experience?

Hopefully with an excitement similar to the rapt fascination with which the production team of “Below Deck Mediterranean” watched the cast of “Below Deck Mediterranean” living out the events that would become season five of “Below Deck Mediterranean” (currently airing on Bravo) twenty-four hours a day for six straight weeks, from a small headquarters hidden in a stateroom on the “Below Deck Mediterranean” yacht as it sailed around Majorca late last summer.

“What happened?” exclaimed Courtland Cox, a gray-bearded, Argus-eyed executive producer, after one of more than a dozen simultaneous feeds broadcast Malia White, the franchise’s first-ever female bosun, cutting herself off with a midsentence expletive.

“Seriously?!” Ms. White grumbled on the monitor.

“What happened?” Mr. Cox, of the 51 Minds production company, repeated, voice rising in concern. In the cramped control room, which was, by the accounts of all present, a decadently spacious control room, several pairs of eyes pored over video monitor mosaics — large computer screens subdivided into Brady Bunch tiles, each displaying a different view of the action taking place on or in the immediate vicinity of the yacht. The screens rested on a plywood platform erected weeks earlier over the magnificent bed in (what The Wellington’s paying guests were not aware was) the vessel’s true master suite.

“Did that boat — ?” Mr. Cox interrupted himself as Ms. White recommenced fuming onscreen.

“Sometimes life really sucks,” she said to no one.

Because cast members are banned from interacting with, or even acknowledging, the coterie of producers, editors, camera operators, audio specialists, fixers, and occasional representatives from Bravo network brass who spend weeks tracking their movements — much of the production crew’s on-location work consists of attempting to reconstruct the cast’s inner monologues as they unfold inside cast members’ minds.

To aid in this implausible task, the production crew relies on 19 cameras; typed chronologies of every action that has taken place since they began rolling; a walkie-talkie tuned, baby monitor-style, to the channel where the cast members communicate about work; extra ears in the form of two editors perpetually plugged into alternate live audio feeds; architectural diagrams of the yacht on which they sail; a hand-drawn map of the marina in which they dock; call sheets laying out each day’s likely schedule; cheat sheets featuring the photos, names, and roles of boat crew members (“DECKHAND”) and yacht guests (“PRIMARY’S FRIEND, MARRIED TO YUKI”); and, at time of filming, more than

160 episodes’ worth of experience anticipating and on-the-fly adapting to human behavior.

Thus, in seconds, Mr. Cox deduced what had prompted Ms. White’s reaction: a newly-arrived boat was obstructing her path through the marina — exactly as her boss, Captain Sandy Yawn, had warned might happen, over Ms. White’s breezy protestations hours earlier. Mr. Cox’s chuckle was diabolic.

Beyond ‘Housewives’

Those who have never seen “Below Deck,” “Below Deck Mediterranean” or “Below Deck Sailing Yacht,” and who do not wish to spend the rest of their lives glued to Bravo’s flotation-themed programming, must never, ever watch

even one minute of either program, for the “Below Deck” franchise lures in viewers with the pitiless ease of sirens summoning sailors to hurl their ships against the sun-warmed Grecian coast.

Typically, every incarnation is set in a new locale and follows what is presented generally as an eight to 10 trip “season” in the life of a luxury charter boat, from the perspective of the vessel’s crew.

Unlike Bravo’s ostensible tentpole franchise “The Real Housewives,” which depicts the lives of the same cabals of wealthy women year after year — and often underperforms “Below Deck” in ratings, according to Noah Samton, a senior vice president of current production for Bravo — the yacht shows feature few familiar faces. Apart from captains and chief stewardesses, the majority of crew members arrive fresh each season, and are never seen again.

The ultrawealthy guests are still more evanescent. Viewers are told, and immediately permitted to forget, their names as, one after another, each group of six to 10 high-rolling vacationers is welcomed aboard. At its salty core, the franchise is a workplace drama.

Just as one needn’t be a wind turbine technician to appreciate a warm summer breeze, no knowledge of, or even interest in, boats, or the sea, is required to enjoy 900 hours of “Below Deck.” The most fundamental element is the ship’s hierarchy, which simultaneously commands and receives no respect. Multiple seasons in, the landlocked viewer may yet be unable to articulate even one specific duty of a lead deckhand — but what the viewer will know, and will demand, is that he not speak to the bosun like that ever again if he wants to continue serving on this ship.

The operation’s inherent expense and scheduling logistics — booking 47 hotel rooms for six straight weeks for production, for instance — render the filming timeline largely inflexible. Whereas a season of “Housewives” might shoot for four to five months, “Below Deck” is allotted one third of that time to produce the same number of episodes. It is, for a reality show, uncommonly constrained by the bounds of reality.

“You can’t say, ‘Oh, the show’s not going great. Let’s extend shooting three weeks,” Mr. Samton said. He was seated in “Below Deck” mission control as part of his traditional once-a-season set visit to ensure production was running smoothly. “The window for shooting the show is the window and that’s it. Whatever we get, we get and we’re done.”

Which is why it was tough, that September morning, to tell who was more distressed that the yacht had not left the dock: the captain or the network executive.

The problem was wind gusts, which, for insurance reasons, precluded Captain Sandy’s attempt to pull out of the crowded marina, lest she assume personal liability for any possible damage or injury, to the tune of tens of millions of dollars.

“It’s heartbreaking,” said Mr. Samton. “I actually didn’t sleep last night.

When working out of his NBCUniversal office at 50 Rockefeller Plaza in New York City, Mr. Samton receives daily briefings of the cast’s activities, assembled by the shows’ producers — similar to behavioral reports from your child’s teacher (“except so much more exciting!” said Mr. Samton).

Per production policy, the production crew cannot influence the captain’s decision about how or when to operate the boat — such as by notifying her that the wind has died down to insurance-approved levels.

Cast members scrambled, around midday, to orchestrate a beach picnic that would distract the guests from the fact their seafaring was being limited to those waves that had migrated from the open water to lap gently against their docked luxury yacht. In the control room, where crew members had been working since six that morning, anxiety begat snacking.

“I eat stuff in the control room that I would never eat in my real life, ever,” said Mr. Cox, perusing a packed shelf of Spanish supermarket treats. “I get halfway through a thing of gummies and I’m disgusted with myself. But I just start stress-eating Swedish Fish.”

Simultaneously, on one monitor, the yacht’s chef, Hindrigo Lorrán, nicknamed Kiko, prepared a sumptuous spread of jamon Ibérico to tide the guests over until their six-course dinner.

“Every location we go to, there’s some sort of special flavor of Pringles,” said Mr. Cox, reclaiming his chair. “So that’s a highlight for everybody.”

How to Make Reality on a Boat

A suitable “Below Deck” locale offers easy access to a major airport (to fly charter guests in and out, at network expense), six weeks’ worth of available hotel rooms to accommodate production (in Thailand, every crew member ended up in a mini-villa), and a robust network of local suppliers able to continuously outfit the yacht with perishables like ice and fresh meat. It must also, of course, be a place that will look beautiful on TV — the better to complement beautiful cast members.

While the pool of professional, available yachties is smaller than that of, say, housewives, it is, at least, a pool crowded with foxy, daring exhibitionists, which makes it conducive to casting.

The yachting industry, Mr. Samton said, “attracts the kind of people that are good TV.”

“First of all, they’re a lot of young, attractive people. A lot of people that are sort of escaping their lives for some reason, or have this adventurous streak in them.”

The zigzag of frantic, round-the-clock shifts followed by sudden reprieves between charters — plus regular

windfalls in the form of huge tips (the average, divided evenly among all boat crew members — including off-camera crew, like engineers — is around \$20,000) — fosters a work hard, party hard atmosphere.

“People who aren’t on TV are pretty good at keeping drama behind closed doors,” said Mr. Samton. “We’re really good at finding the people who are going to wear it on their sleeves.” (A psychiatric evaluation is a standard part of the casting process.)

When asked if cast members were highly paid compared to other yacht workers in exchange for appearing on television, Mr. Samton said “No, they get paid their normal —” and then cut himself off (“I don’t know if I’m allowed to talk about finances.) A spokesperson for Bravo later confirmed “most” cast members’ pay is “roughly the same as they would make doing their same job on a similar sized boat.”

Once the network has convinced nine professional yacht workers to open their lives up to a TV audience, production’s task is to outfit a boat in such a way that it becomes virtually impossible for them to escape that audience.

“They’re here to share every aspect of their lives,” said Mr. Samton in the control room. “Those are the rules. The only place you have privacy on the boat is the bathroom.”

Below Deck TV Series 2013–JIMDb



Even bathroom sanctity has limits; cast members are informed at the beginning of a season that if two or more people enter one at the same time, a camera should be expected to follow.

“Not just because of sex,” said Mr. Samton. “It could be they’re having a conversation — they hate so-and-so. We need to know that.”

But also because of sex: Toward the end of filming the third season of “Below Deck,” producers discovered that two cast members had secretly been meeting for trysts in their ship’s laundry room — an area that, by chance, was not within the range of any mounted cameras. “The result,” said Mr. Samton, “is now we have a camera in the laundry room.”

In addition to surveillance cameras, there are hand-held cameras, remote-controlled mounted “robo-cams” (which can silently zoom in to reveal the contents of a deckhand’s sext), and the odd Go-Pro stashed somewhere like the inside of a walk-in cooler.

Oliver Sjöström Pixels

“There’s nowhere they can hide,” Mr. Samton

said — including the solitude of their own minds, since cast members are forbidden to listen to music while working, even on headphones, because of its potential to prevent conversations. Headphones are permitted during the legally mandated breaks the cast takes from boat duties. Many use the time to nap — first waving their arms to get the attention of the control room, because they are unable to darken the lights in their own cabins.

In the cigar lounge, Tania Hamidi, co-executive producer, gestured at Impressionistic art adorning the walls. “These, believe it or not,” she said, and pointed to a shelf on the other side of the room “are photos of that shelf.”

Copyright law prevents Bravo from broadcasting images it does not own. Thus, during a week of harried preproduction, down came the yacht owner’s paintings of Bill Clinton and Che Guevara; up went photographs of the room’s own shelves, shot by the show’s director of photography, Laurent Basset.

“Every morning,” said Ms. Hamidi, “I come in and —” she pressed firmly around the edges of the peel-away pictures “— reinforce.” The possibility of one falling during a dramatic moment was an abstract source of worry.

Fake panels were placed over mirrored walls in one guest cabin so camera operators could film the space without being caught in reflections. Along an interior corridor, real panels were removed (later put back) to wire for cameras, lights and sounds without compromising the vessel’s watertightness. In the master bedroom-slash-control room, expensive wood and marble surfaces disappeared under protective cardboard and blue painter’s tape. Across one cardboard wall was scrawled a countdown of sorts: “ALL WE HAVE LEFT IS” — here, part of the original message (“THE ENTIRE THING”) had been crossed out in black marker, and replaced with an update — “THE OVERWHELMING MAJORITY OF IT.” It was the third charter of the season.

Late in the afternoon, Nadine Rajabi, another executive producer, arrived, swapping Balenciaga Speed Trainers for white-soled boat shoes to relieve Mr. Cox of his post. The final task for Mr. Cox was to catch her up on the events that had transpired since she left the boat 12 hours earlier, around 4 a.m.

This, Mr. Cox did in such meticulous detail there is not room to describe even one-tenth of it. His report included information like the color of one guest’s sneakers (yellow); a bird’s eye explanation of a walkie-talkie-based miscommunication the boat crew themselves had not yet untangled; an assessment of Captain Sandy’s mental state vis-à-vis wind conditions (“She’s kind of psyched herself out a little bit about it...”); a thorough recounting of the various mishaps associated with the ill-fated beach picnic (“...then Alex is trying to pour, essentially, a full double magnum of rosé into a tiny Iceland Spring water bottle...”); the particulars of a gossip session between two stewardesses; and an overheard bit of conversation in which one guest bragged to another about having participated in a sexual act in the hot tub the night before.

“We had eyes on the Jacuzzi the whole time,” said Ms. Rajabi dismissively. “It’s not true.” (“He wishes!” she added.)

But what really captured the production crew’s attention was the quality of the table decorations laid out by the second-in-command stewardess Christine Drake, who goes by “Bugsy.”

“Sandy literally yelled at Hannah last year about the table settings,” explained Mr. Samton, referring to chief stewardess Hannah Ferrier. On the show, Ms. Ferrier displays an inveterate resentment of Ms. Drake — and no particular flair for table décor. “So there’s this whole deep history about the table settings.”

Mr. Cox credited Ms. Drake with setting “the most beautiful table you’ve ever seen,” shortly after setting foot on the boat.

Ms. Rajabi looked forward to the ascendant levels of showmanship Ms. Drake would bring to her arrangements of small colored rocks, shells, and glass marbles over the course of the season. “They’re really incredible,” she said.

The obsession with the tablescapes represented a key element of production’s work in the field: anticipating flash points of drama.

“It’s figuring out the archetypes of who the people are and trying to be two steps ahead of that psychologically,” said Ms. Rajabi.

“Table looks amazing, doesn’t it?” Captain Sandy observed to Ms. Ferrier on a monitor.)

“We watch this like a soccer game,” said Ms. Rajabi. “We’re, like, screaming.”

“This is like a soccer game,” agreed Mr. Samton, “except stuff happens in this.”

The raw footage streaming into the control room so closely resembled the final polished product that, on the monitors, the cast members felt as far away as they do on television.

Mr. Cox described his increased ability to anticipate people’s reactions as “the only muscle I have that’s actually grown over the 13 seasons.”

“I find in my brain, when people are having a conversation, my brain instantly shifts to watch the person as they’re getting a piece of information,” he said. “I’m so used to anticipating guest reaction on stuff, I go to restaurants now and I literally, when a plate is set down, stare at the person who’s about to eat it. I’m like, ‘Oh, he doesn’t like it. And she’s annoyed that he doesn’t like it. And my wife is like, ‘Will you please just keep eating?’”

That’s a Wrap

Filming for the current season wrapped in early autumn. The cast left the boat, the master suite bed re-emerged from its plywood sarcophagus, and most members of the production crew took a short vacation, to travel, or to go home and sleep for a week. Then it was time to carve more than 4,000 hours of footage into 20, 44-minute installments.

“You’re writing backwards,” said Mr. Samton over a video chat this past spring. “You’re creating the story after. It’s somebody giving you 1000 words and saying ‘Put these in the order of an essay.’”

Using chronological activity logs assembled in the field,

a team led by Ms. Rajabi spent two or three weeks sketching out story arcs for the season and per episode.

Shooting in Majorca.Credit...Albert Bonfills Morell for The New York Times

“It’s like looking for a needle in a stack of needles,” said Ms. Rajabi, also on the call. In March, to accommodate remote work during the coronavirus pandemic, 51 Minds shipped every editor working in postproduction on “Below Deck Med” a weighty hard drive containing 40 terabytes of video footage — quadruple the quantity of data generated annually by NASA’s Hubble Telescope. (Asked about the coronavirus’s effect on future seasons, Mr. Samton said the network was “exploring changes to almost every aspect of production, from where we shoot the show to how we shoot the show.”)

Footage review in postproduction regularly turns up significant moments that passed unnoticed in the field. Any unearthed context can give viewers insight into cast members’ motives and reactions. “People aren’t just fighting to fight,” said Ms. Rajabi. “They’re triggered for a certain reason.”

But explanatory grace is not doled out equally among the cast. On June 17, Bravo and 51 Minds issued a joint statement announcing that “Below Deck Mediterranean” deckhand Peter Hunziker, who is white, had been “terminated” after sharing a sexualized image of a naked black woman in chains to his Instagram account. The announcement came days after the network fired four cast members from “Vanderpump Rules,” a reality show built around a California restaurant, for racist behavior.

Less than a handful of cast members in the “Below Deck” franchise have been people of color. The firings followed months of increasingly vocal criticism about the lack of racial diversity in the casts of the network’s most prominent shows.

In their statement, Bravo and 51 Minds vowed to edit the show “to minimize” Mr. Hunziker’s “appearance for subsequent episodes.”

Ms. Rajabi put no stock in the common reality TV star defense of having received a bad edit.

“Everything is true to what we shoot,” she said

— though occasionally chopped and screwed in pursuit of a more efficient kind of truth.

“They’re stuck on a boat, and they talk about the same things over and over and over again,” Ms. Rajabi said. “It’s basically, how do you tell the story in 45 seconds at a time?”

The answer, with thousands of hours of footage to choose from: however you want.

Post-It’s come in handy for remembering nicknames. Credit...Albert Bonfills Morell for The New York Times

