

COVER STORY

She's on the move

Alex McLeod hits the road with two series

By MIKE McDANIEL
Houston Chronicle

Follow the bouncing Alex McLeod.

For the next seven weeks, the Galveston native can be seen as hostess of television's next outrageous show, Fox's *Joe Millionaire*.

On Jan. 17 and 24, she's co-starring, with *The Amazing Race*'s Phil Keoghan, in a travel/reality show called *Best of Both Worlds*.

And, of course, McLeod can still be seen most weekday afternoons in repeat telecasts of TLC's popular *Trading Spaces*. She was the show's first-year host.

On paper, *Joe Millionaire* reads like *The Bachelor*, but with a couple of twists — one pleasant, one nasty. The show takes place in France, which is the good news. The bad news is that the 20 women vying for this bachelor's affection believe he is a millionaire. Instead, he's a heavy-equipment operator reportedly making \$19,000 a year.

The ditch digger and the gold diggers.

McLeod admits the premise of the show is similar to ABC's *The Bachelor*, but says *Joe Millionaire* "has so much more flair. It takes place at a chateau. We really cater to every whim of the girls. And there's a twist at the end. It's so over the top. It's got a lot more camp."

It doesn't bother her that the women are being duped.

"Frankly, that's part of the allure of the show," she said. "They know when they get involved with a reality show like this that certain unpredictabilities ensue."

She said Joe — his real name is Evan Marriott and he's 28 — "is definitely single and definitely looking. That's why he was chosen."

Many critics lambasted *The Bachelor*, labeling it "sleazy" and "emotionally fraudulent," but McLeod sees no harm in shows like this.

"A lot of people say (the women) just



Alex McLeod, left, teams with Phil Keoghan for the A&E specials *Best of Both Worlds*, Jan. 17 and 24. She's also the host of *Joe Millionaire*, premiering at 8 p.m. Monday on Fox/Channel 26.

want to be on TV, to be famous, but really, it takes a lot of guts to open up your love life and your home to people and make yourself that vulnerable," she said. "I couldn't do it."

When pressed, she said that "everyone's motivations for being on this show are different. It will be obvious that some of them are there because they're looking for love. Some of them are there maybe because they want to be on television. Who knows, some of them may be there because they wanted to travel to France for a month and stay in a chateau. And it's true, some of them will be there for money."

In *Best of Both Worlds*, McLeod and Keoghan flip a coin to determine who vacations in luxury and who roughs it.

In the opening show on Jan. 17, the pair travel to Hong Kong, and McLeod wins the coin toss.

"Let me just tell you, I was ecstatic in Hong Kong," she said. "It was definitely luxury all the way. I stayed at (a premium

hotel) The Peninsula in a suite for 10 days. I did a private yachting excursion. I went shopping for antiques and jewelry. I got a dim sum lesson from the head chef at the hotel. I hung out with Jackie Chan. It really was over the top, I have to say."

Keoghan stayed in a guest house, went dragon-boat racing and got a suit made on a budget.

While McLeod was shopping for high-grade jade at one of the most expensive jewelry stores in the city, poor Keoghan had to shop at a jade market, which offers lower quality merchandise.

In Hawaii, the tables are turned. While Keoghan toured an island in a helicopter, McLeod saw the island via hang glider.

"I'm not a very good flyer so this took a lot of courage," she said. "I ended up doing it three times because of sound problems. It was kind of like a martini. One is not enough, but three is too many."

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McLeod

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She also took a surfing lesson from professional surfer Buzzy Kerbox — something in her limited budget that she could also afford for Keoghan. In turn, Keoghan took McLeod on a diving adventure.

If enough people watch, A&E will make more episodes of *Best of Both Worlds*. That would please McLeod to no end. It

gives her a chance to show a side of herself viewers have never seen.

"The potential for this show is so enormous," she said. "Honestly, it keeps me awake at night, it's so exciting."

"What's really fun, Phil loves the economy tour and I love the luxury tour, so I think this is going to work out perfectly."

On the cover: Evan Marriott is the bachelor in *Joe Millionaire*. Graphic design by Robert Wuensche / Chronicle