

April 2003

# Escape from Experiment Island

Two MIT doctoral students team up with other contestants to engineer getaway vehicles on educational television's latest reality show.

By Gregory T. Huang

On a remote Scottish isle, Dan Paluska '97, SM '00, is floating three meters above a grassy field. Suspended from a gigantic array of helium-filled balloons, he's pulling himself along a rope, so he can retrieve an airplane propeller. It's a wacky battle of wits: he and his team have five days to build an amphibious vehicle that can get them off the island, and they need that propeller. They're stressed out and bickering. But Paluska is having the time of his life.

Welcome to *Escape from Experiment Island*, the latest reality television show from BBC producer Cathy Rogers. Filmed last summer on the Isle of Rhum in the Inner Hebrides off the coast of Scotland, the six-part weekly series premiered on TLC last January. Its premise: two teams, each comprising four contestants who haven't met beforehand, compete in a series of techie challenges to build vehicles capable of getting them off the island. The hosts of the show provide equipment, tools, and technical instructions. There's no prize for the winners, only bragging rights. "Before filming," Paluska says, "the director sat us down and said, This isn't *Survivor*. There's no million dollars. We're going to ask you to do things, so have fun and don't sweat the details. It's about good tele."

## Almost Famous

Five MIT graduate students made it onto the show, including Paluska and his girlfriend, fellow Artificial Intelligence Lab researcher Jessica Banks SM '01. You might call them MIT's first couple of nerd reality TV. By day, Paluska is a mild-mannered researcher who designs and builds walking robots. His credentials include a stint as a cover boy, along with one of his robots, for *Wired* magazine's September 2000 issue. Banks is no slouch either. The spunky robotics researcher is an artist who plans to start a company that will specialize in robotic furniture.

Banks and Paluska say they were drawn to *Experiment Island* because of its exotic sense of adventure and competition-and the free trip to Scotland. Last summer, after answering an open-casting call on campus and passing an audition-which involved team-building exercises filmed by camera crews on the Boston Common-the two were tapped to appear in different episodes. And that was just fine with them. "We like to separate church and state," says Banks.

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## Mission Impossible

It sounds like the opening line of a bad joke: a plumber, a software engineer, a graphic designer, and an MIT student are stuck on an island. But it's a reality for Paluska's team. In this episode, each team is instructed to build a one-person hovercraft—a vehicle that rides over land or water on a cushion of air. From day one, the plumber and the engineer are at each other's throats, arguing about the design. Paluska finds technical block diagrams are not effective for communicating his ideas. The designer mediates. The engineer annoys everyone. Competitive juices flow, and tensions climb sky-high.

The conflicts come to a head at the end of day four. The plumber—whose behavior strikes Paluska as erratic—lashes out at his team in an obscenity-laced off-camera tirade. Although Paluska feels a line has been crossed, he puts his concerns aside for the sake of the team.

The competition boils down to a showdown on the beach on the final day. To win, Paluska and his team must beat the other team's hovercraft in a land race. They catch a break when their opponents' craft—which seemed to work during its test runs—fails to get moving quickly enough on the sand. Paluska's team ends up winning the race, and a wild celebration ensues. "Winning cures everything," he says.

Banks's experience, filmed a few weeks later, is a roller coaster ride as well. Her teammates are a district attorney, an aerospace engineer, and a theater technical director. Their mission is to build a one-person cable car—using a bicycle and an electric motor—to cross a ravine. Throughout the week, there are disagreements about how to get this done. The engineer clashes with his teammates, especially Banks, who wants to take charge. "He was nerdy, obnoxious, and wouldn't admit being wrong about anything," she says.

One highlight of Banks's episode: constructing a battery out of lime juice and metal to power a voltmeter that can charge up the cable car's battery. In their climactic race, Banks's teammates come up short, but she insists that the experience is all in good fun.

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## Reality Bites

Truth be told, the show's premise is a bit overstated: the vehicles never actually escape the island. And some precious moments don't show up on film. Before Banks left for Scotland, Paluska gave her a mosquito net hat but didn't say why. Experience had taught him that the island was infested with biting flies that plagued the contestants throughout the shoot. "During one scene where the hosts were talking to us, the director yelled, 'Cut!' And we all scattered to put our mosquito hats on," Banks recalls.

Some sequences, like the balloon race, were shot repeatedly for dramatic effect. Paluska's most amusing memory: the crew filmed each team celebrating victory-complete with champagne and a dazzling helicopter ride around the island-before the final race had even begun. "I guess," he muses, "they had the helicopter by the hour."

Paluska and Banks returned to the Institute inspired to work and ready to reflect on some valuable lessons. It was satisfying, says Paluska, to show progress on a technical project within the course of one day: the work proceeded at a faster pace than most of his graduate school research. And he was surprised at how serious and competitive both teams were.

As for group dynamics, Banks learned that she "could back down and not always have to be the leader." More important, she adds, despite some personality clashes, she bonded with members of both teams and has kept in touch with them. In all, she says, "it was the most incredible and fun experience of my life."