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COVERT ASSIGNMENT: THE NEW INTERNATIONAL SPY MUSEUM IN WASHINGTON, D.C., SHARES SECRETS FROM UNDERCOVER WORLD

By Anne Miller

Staff writer

WASHINGTON, DC - The kiss of death hovered on my left, as a bevy of bugs on my right were poised to pick up my every move. Above me, a none-too-quiet rustling betrayed an enemy agent settling into place in the air duct.

Drat, I thought. Surrounded. Unarmed. This assignment to scope out the International Spy Museum was proving more dangerous than I had thought.

It all started back in New York.

For years, I have posed as a newspaper reporter. That covers my frequent relocations, my foreign assignments and my propensity to take detailed and copious notes while asking nosy questions.

A few weeks before Thanksgiving, my "editor" called me in for my latest "story." This summer, a museum celebrating spies and spidom opening in downtown Washington, D.C. The initial hubbub had died down, and he wanted me to check out the place during a typical operation. Make sure they weren't letting the wrong things slip.

I arrived in Washington a few days before Thanksgiving. I spent the night at the safe house in the shadow of the Capitol, euphemistically known as "my friend Jen's new place."

After a brief night's sleep, I emerged from the house, clad in my customary black, which anywhere on the East Coast these days lets one blend in with the fashionable crowd (or maybe there are just more spies than anyone guesses).

I hopped the Metro to the Gallery Place stop, a block from my target.

On the inside

The museum occupies five historic buildings. Inside the fancy facade, a barrage of sound clips, lights and displays greets the visitor, with more lights and mystery lurking just beyond the security guard taking tickets between two tall metallic pillars that glow softly.

The price of entrance is \$11 for adults, \$8 for kids and \$9 for the elderly and members of the intelligence community. As if any spy worth his or her salt would admit to the job.

Tickets collected, bags searched, we were hustled onto a steel elevator with a lighted floor that changed colors. A recorded voice issued statements such as, "We are watching you," which I guess might sound slightly ominous to the average 10-year-old.

The elevator disgorged us onto the third floor, where we were asked to pick one of the brief profiles on the walls and memorize the details of that person: name, age, nationality and so on.

After a few minutes, another door opened and a movie welcomed us to the museum. A door on the other side of the room opened to allow us access to the exhibits. The whole intro was a little bit cheesy - more Disney than Le Carre but still entertaining. It's a description that pretty much sums up the museum as a whole.

The movie theater disgorged us into a maze of rooms that displayed enough spy gadgetry to make a KGB operative turn in his super-secret grave. My favorite was the kiss of death, a one-shot pistol disguised as lipstick. One room traced the history of listening devices from the comically large imagine having to haul and install a bug the

size of a can of spinach to the hair-strand-thin type I've come to know so well. As always, I found the chance to study the tools of my predecessors fascinating.

Younger museum patrons could climb into an air duct above to eavesdrop on the adult conversations below, if the kids kept quiet. Which, of course, they did not. (Still, this feature makes this museum an unlikely destination for illicit assignments.)

There were other games to play: Kids were encouraged to find the potential drop signals, the surveillance cameras, the possible spies. The younger boys seemed to enjoy themselves immensely.

One game asked questions about the false identifications we had memorized at the beginning, to give us a crack at faking our ways through security checkpoints. More questioning was promised, but never materialized.

Spies in history

A small room tried to show the 2,000-year history of spying by dressing up the alcoves in different periods, with a short quote from related literature, from the Bible to Sun-Tzu's "The Art of War." A brief history of American spies, female spies, the Dreyfus Affair and others occupied a few more rooms.

In each, visitors sat amid period decor and watched a brief movie. The museum offered little other explanation, however. Instead of letting the story unfold from room to room and giving us a chance to learn as much or as little as we wanted, we were often given only the smallest taste.

There was plenty about World War II, however, with several displays dedicated to the Enigma machine that broke the unbreakable Axis code. A few tidbits about Hollywood spies lined the walls of a hallway. Finally, the public knows one of our best-kept secrets: Julia Child was a decorated spy who served in Ceylon during World War II.

Then came the Cold War, with fake underground bunkers and displays of G-men toys and tales of spies nabbed and released. A screen ran interviews with CIA and FBI agents on how they caught spies and counterspies recently.

For anyone who lived through that era, spy or not, there's a few interesting factoids, but nothing surprising or particularly new to offer on the most famous cases that most adults know anyway (Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, say, or Aldrich Ames).

The whole experience left me feeling vaguely empty empty like the winter nights in Minsk, empty like the heart of a Talib soldier ... but I digress.

Berlin preferred

Personally, I prefer the museum paean to the Berlin Wall in that once-divided city. Those were the good old days of Cold Warriors, when the barbed wire was sharp, the vodka was strong and a good-looking Soviet could never be trusted. Sure, the American museum mentions a few choice morsels of seductive Muscovite agents, but like everything else, they are glossy and brief. In Berlin, they had no fancy museum planners. That museum was a raw, unadulterated trip to the not-so-distant past. The English was mistranslated, the rooms cramped, the pictures grainy, but the wildest stories of escape and espionage were told with passion and detail.

If the Berlin museum was an Elmore Leonard novel, Washington is James Bond. And while Bond may be good escapism, the details of the spy biz, as we all know, are so fascinating they don't need all the bells, whistles or flashing lights.

To sum up: Our secrets are safe. I predict recruitment will skyrocket among the younger generation in the next 10 to 15 years.

As for the general public, I would reiterate the museum's own caveat: The best spies remain forever unknown.

FACTS:

IF YOU GO: THE INTERNATIONAL SPY MUSEUM, WASHINGTON, D.C. Where: The museum sits at 800 F St. NW, a block south of the Gallery Place-Chinatown Metro stop. Hours: 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. November through March; 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. April through October, closed Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year's Day. The last tickets are sold an hour before closing time.

Web site: <http://www.spymuseum.org>

Phone: (202) 393-7798 Cost: \$11 adults; \$9 seniors ages 60 and older and members of the intelligence community; \$8 children and students; free for children younger than 5.

Current exhibits: The museum's permanent collection is divided into five sections. "School for Spies" showcases the tools and basic how-tos of the industry. "The Secret History of History" chronicles spy history from the Bible to the early 1900s. "Spies Among Us" picks up the espionage trail through World War II. "War of the Spies" focuses on the Cold War; "The 21st Century" is pretty self-explanatory, and includes any rotating temporary exhibits. In the gift shop, visitors can listen to CDs of spy movie themes and gawk at \$2,000-plus voice disguisers and desk clock video recorders -- the camera is hidden in the pinhole below the face.

Dining: The Spy City Cafe is not worth a detour alone. But compared with other museums' high-priced fare, the offerings of sushi, salads, freshly made sandwiches and massive cookies are almost worth the money.

Nearby: The International Spy Museum lurks close to the MCI Center, where the Wizards basketball team plays, the restaurants of Chinatown, the headquarters of the Federal Bureau of Investigation and Ford's Theatre. The National Portrait Gallery is across the street.

D.C. tourist info: Try <http://www.washington.org> for the convention and visitor's bureau, or <http://www.wmata.com> for transit maps and schedules.