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An Ex-Spy's Guide to Spy Museums

By LINDSAY MORAN

MY tour of the International Spy Museum in downtown [Washington](#) began with a disappointment — there is no discount for former spies. After my years of trolling the deserted parks and darkened back alleys of Eastern Europe as a [C.I.A.](#) case officer (read spy), I thought I should get a break.

At least I'd arrived in perfect cold-war weather: a bleak, driving rain that called for nothing short of trench coat, fedora and pointy-tipped umbrella. Of course, my tenure in the agency — 1998 to 2003 — postdated its cold-war heyday, but it was precisely the allure of the C.I.A.'s spy-versus-spy game against the K.G.B. in the '70s and '80s that drew me to the murky world of espionage in the first place.

So with a \$15 ticket in hand, I entered a dimly lighted building that seemed infinitely more spooky than C.I.A. headquarters in Langley, Va., where I used to swipe a badge to enter the bowels of a basement reeking of bureaucracy, with overhead fluorescent lights that conveyed the sense of being a lab rat observed from all sides.

Although I've lived in Washington since resigning from the agency, this was my first trip to either of the two intelligence museums open to the public in the city and its suburbs — the other being the National Cryptologic Museum of the [National Security Agency](#) in Fort Meade, Md. My firsthand experience and subsequent disillusionment with America's intelligence apparatus had led me to believe that a spy museum would be hokey, not to mention misleading. In addition, the lines at this one, the Spy Museum, were always too long. On just about any day, a slow-moving line can be seen snaking around the block toward the museum doors.

But I was curious, just as I had once been curious about the inner workings of the C.I.A. And I'd picked a good day — arriving early and finding only a few people ahead of me.

With the smattering of other visitors, I began my tour in the Covers and Legends room, where we were instructed to memorize one of several alias identities posted around the room and told we had three minutes to commit our cover stories to memory. One elderly woman complained that there were not enough aliases for the more mature set. I was reminded of an occasion when the agency's notoriously inept cover office issued me a set of fake documents that mistakenly suggested I had been born on two different dates in two different years.

We proceeded to the Briefing Room, a small, dark auditorium, reminiscent of many in which I and my fellow trainees staved off sleep during lectures on such scintillating topics as Document Classification

Designations. Here we watched a genuinely interesting short film that asked the question, "Could you be a spy?" and outlined a typical agent's motivations: money, ego, fear of blackmail or, last, ideology. I was initially drawn to the C.I.A. out of a strong sense of patriotism — and so wondered if any of the young people in the room were finding themselves similarly intrigued.

EN masse, we exited, and entered the School for Spies, the museum's permanent collection — its entrance adorned, aptly, with a large black-and-white photo of Maxwell Smart talking on a shoe phone. The exhibits, in a labyrinth of well-conceived displays, are varied, interactive and exhaustive. Poster-size photographs allow you to test yourself by identifying suspicious activity, spy signals, dead drops and surveillance systems. "Training films" cover locks and picks, types of bugs and listening posts. Computerized exercises on "imagery analysis" make what some former colleagues have described to me as mind-numbing work seem fascinating.

A display on disguises shows how the same young woman can easily be transformed into a much older woman (with a skunklike streak of silver through her hair), a Sikh or a street person. My disguises, I should point out, were always rather disappointing, although effective: a wig, a pair of librarian's glasses and sensible shoes made me look like a consummate nerd caught in a 1950s time warp.

Then there were the gadgets: all those neat-o toys that I had imagined some Q-like character would design especially for me but that, in fact, never materialized: the fountain pen, wristwatch and buttonhole cameras; the tobacco-pipe pistol; the notorious poison-tipped umbrella (Bulgaria's single Spy Museum claim to fame).

One particularly interactive exercise allows visitors to creep through overhead ductwork, but since a sign warns of "strenuous climbing and crawling in enclosed spaces" and I was nine months pregnant, I decided to forgo the fun, fearful of achieving my own place in museum lore as the former spy who got stuck in the ceiling.

An exceptionally popular artifact — especially with the many teenage boys who eventually infiltrated the museum — was the Aston Martin DB5 (of James Bond's "Goldfinger" exploits) fully loaded with tire slashers, oil jets, rotating license plates and an ejector seat. The vehicle seemed a far cry from the beat-up Mazdas and sagging Dodge Darts I routinely trailed into the C.I.A. parking lot.

Other meandering corridors and offshoot rooms cover the history of espionage from the days of the 12th-century ninjas all the way to the present.

A final film cogently explores the unprecedented challenges posed by a post-9/11 world. It takes the International Spy Museum to admit what the C.I.A. has not: that while the overall mission — steal their secrets while protecting our own — remains the same, we have yet to devise an appropriate strategy to accomplish this in an era dominated by terrorism.

No museum trip would be complete without a foray into the gift shop — not surprisingly, the Ops Center dumps you directly there — and this shop is fun, with items like a Commie Self-Adhesive Mustache and

Beard Kit (\$5), a pen/voice recorder (\$45) and night vision goggles (\$639).

The Spy Museum cafe offers upscale fast food like panini and all-natural potato chips. There my fondest memory of the agency came to mind: its enormous and varied in-house food court, the best the federal government has to offer.

FOR the hard-core intel geek, the other important Washington stop is the National Cryptologic Museum, housed on the otherwise über-secret grounds of the National Security Agency, off Interstate 95 in the [Maryland](#) suburbs. Its drab beige brick exterior certainly creates a more realistic sense of infiltrating a bona fide intelligence organization.

Upon entry to the museum, which is free, I was offered a self-guided audio tour (also free), a hand-held apparatus that I soon discovered requires some basic code-breaking techniques to master. Luckily, I was aided by one of the security agency retiree museum volunteers who, at the time of my visit, outnumbered patrons by about three to one. No waiting in line or getting trampled by [Boy Scouts](#) here.

While recent events may have led the average American to believe that the N.S.A. is something akin to Big Brother, keeping a watchful eye (and ear) on the activities and conversations of law-abiding American citizens, the National Cryptologic Museum does a good job of dispelling that notion, by educating visitors about the security agency's principal function — that is, the making and breaking of codes.

The Cryptologic Museum is not flashy, but it is substantive, a homey little gem that will educate the dilettante and engross the professional. In short order, I discovered that the best way to enjoy it was to listen to the retirees. One veteran cryptologist described breaking an elaborate code in a single weekend — a feat that the news media, at the N.S.A.'s behest, later reported took several months, so as not to publicly disclose the agency's true capabilities.

The National Security Agency's museum, much like the organization itself, is far less willing than the C.I.A. to divulge its trickery. There are ample displays about the men, women and machinery used to decode, but nary a word about the actual methods. One of the few interactive elements is a cipher disk, invented by the Italians in the 15th century, that allows you to test your skills by making sense of what's described as a simple code. Not exactly cutting edge.

A star exhibit is an Enigma machine, a German World War II encryption device that I had imagined as a high-tech apparatus, but which turned out to resemble a clunky old-fashioned typewriter. To me, the most telling artifacts were the vintage posters, from as early as the 1930s, that capture the uniquely guarded culture of the N.S.A. One from 1943, for example, depicts a dead seaman washed upon the shore alongside the warning "A Careless Word ... A Needless Loss."

My C.I.A. colleagues and I shared the utmost respect for our N.S.A. counterparts, humbled as we were by the knowledge that they performed a similar function, working behind the scenes to steal secrets, but one that even the best among us would never fully comprehend. The National Cryptologic Museum reinforces this notion.

The Washington area may soon get another museum for fans of this genre. Francis Gary Powers Jr., whose father was taken prisoner after his U-2 spy plane was shot down over the Soviet Union in 1960, is trying to find a home in northern [Virginia](#) for the collection. Some of the collection is now displayed in his online Cold War Museum, www.coldwar.org. Mr. Powers introduced the site in 1996 after giving lectures to high school students who, when he mentioned the U-2 incident, inevitably thought he was referring to a rock band. The Cold War Museum also collaborates on a bus tour with Carol S. Bessette, a retired Air Force intelligence officer who offers “spy tours” of Washington.

The C.I.A., too, has a virtual museum. Reachable by a link at www.cia.gov, it gives the public a glimpse of the artifacts housed at the agency's headquarters. The actual C.I.A. Museum is closed to the public, and its collection remains far less interesting than that of the International Spy Museum, not to mention lacking in the “Mission Impossible” ambience established by flashing neon strips in the entry elevator.

I finished my tours confident of one important discovery: going to a spy museum can be a lot cooler than actually being a spy.

VISITOR INFORMATION

THE International Spy Museum (202-393-7798) is at 800 F Street NW, [Washington](#), between Eighth and Ninth Streets. Parking is available at lots and garages listed on the museum's entertaining Web site, www.spymuseum.org. The Gallery Place/Chinatown Metrorail Station is one block away. The museum is open daily, on most days from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.; admission is \$15. As of Jan. 2 it will be \$16.

The museum, opened in 2002, is privately owned and was developed by the Malrite Company of [Cleveland](#), which specializes in museum and educational projects. Its advisory board includes two former United States directors of intelligence, other veterans of American intelligence work and Oleg Danilovich Kalugin, a retired major general in the K.G.B.

The National Cryptologic Museum (Colony Seven Road, Fort Meade, Md.; 301-688-5849; www.nsa.gov/museum), operated by the [National Security Agency](#), is open Monday to Friday from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. and on the first and third Saturdays of the month from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Admission is free. From Washington, take Maryland Route 295, the Baltimore-Washington Parkway, or I-95, north to Route 32 East. Exit onto Canine Road and turn left onto Colony Seven Road.

Information about spy-themed walking and bus tours, some in conjunction with the online Cold War Museum, is at www.spiesofwashingtontour.com.

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