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WASHINGTON, D.C. | MUSEUMS

International Spy Museum opens Operation Spy attraction

Spies like you: An interactive game at the capital's cloak-and-dagger museum sends visitors on a crucial 'mission.'

By Susan Lendroth, Special to The Los Angeles Times

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 International Spy Museum
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Washington, D.C.

Got your cloak? Dagger? Tickets for Operation Spy?

The International Spy Museum last week opened the capital's latest intrigue, a new interactive experience that incorporates exhibits, movies, computer games, theatrical shows and rides into one exhilarating adventure. It also packs plenty of intrigue and derring-do. Unlike traditional museums, where guests read and gawk at displays, here, they can become a spy -- at least for an hour.

In Operation Spy, open to museum-goers 12 and older, guests are assigned the roles of U.S. intelligence officers on a dangerous mission in the mythical country of Khandar. Based on actual cases drawn from intelligence files, the scenario involves a missing nuclear-triggering device sought by underhanded arms dealers.

Operation Spy to the rescue.

Matching wits with black marketers and unscrupulous government officials, each team of espionage operatives must navigate -- with the help of a guide -- the twists and turns of the unfolding plot. The challenge is not only to figure out whom to trust and whom to thwart in the high-stakes game, but also how to accomplish the mission.

"Our goal is to reach guests on an intellectual and emotional level by placing them in a situation that mirrors a real intelligence experience," said Peter Earnest, executive director of the International Spy Museum, who spent 35 years in the CIA.

In the case of Operation Spy, that real intelligence experience includes waiting in a bus depot for a field-station agent to rendezvous with the group, walking down a cobblestone street where the scent of exotic spices fills the air and hands-on activities, such as video surveillance and safe-cracking. Teams encounter several "players" on their journey, including an intelligence chief and highly suspicious characters.

Once each "asset" is briefed at the command center, the operation moves at high speed. Decisions must be made quickly, and operatives need to compare notes to jointly choose a course of action.

Will they save the world? Operation Spy's outcome is not predetermined. The performance of each group, which can range from four to 15 participants, is tracked and evaluated throughout the hour and then assigned a score of one to five stars. There are six possible endings to the adventure in Khandar, and the one revealed to each team at the end of the mission is based on the final score and the choices that were made. Only time and the team's actions will tell.

No matter what, everyone gets to keep their souvenir passport.

The museum spent two years developing Operation Spy. Project advisors included a who's who of the world of espionage: Major Gen. Oleg Kalugin, former chief of KGB foreign counterintelligence; David Major, president of the Centre for Counterintelligence and Security Studies; and Jonna Hiestand Mendez, former chief of disguise at the CIA.

Tickets for Operation Spy are \$12, or \$24 for combination tickets that include admission to the International Spy Museum, 800 F St., N.W. Advance tickets can be purchased through Ticketmaster at (800) 551-7328 and at the International Spy Museum, (202) 393-7798, www.spymuseum.org.

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