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# Taking the kids: Making a trip to D.C. 'cool'

### STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- The International Spy Museum is popular with kids
- Fall and winter weekends in D.C. are a great time for bargain hotel rates
- Arrive before 9 a.m. for tickets to climb up the Washington Monument

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TEXT SIZE

(Tribune Media Services) -- If you think being a secret agent is all just one giant adrenaline rush, think again.



Cracking the safe at the International Spy Museum

Our mission on the other side of the world: Retrieve a missing nuclear trigger before it falls into enemy hands. We don't know whom to trust in Kandahar. We can't speak the language. We've got to conduct video surveillance on an always-moving target, decrypt a secret audio conversation when we can barely hear through the static, crack a safe and then escape from a heavily guarded compound.

Phew. We kept the terrorists from getting the trigger. Everyone heaves a giant sigh of relief. The three middle-schoolers in the group performed admirably.

Welcome to Operation Spy at the International Spy Museum ([www.spymuseum.org](http://www.spymuseum.org)) in Washington, D.C. "Today intelligence is the first line of defense

against ideology-driven terrorism, nuclear proliferation, and other threats to our country," explains Peter Earnest, executive director of the International Spy Museum, who spent 36 years at the CIA. The idea, he explains, is to put civilians like us in a situation that mirrors a real mission.

But I've got a bigger mission ahead this weekend: Can I make a visit to the nation's capital, museums and historic sites at every turn, fun? I've brought along two sixth-graders from Stamford, Connecticut -- my cousin's son, Max Weinberg, and his friend, Miles Singer -- to see if I'm up to the challenge.

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So far so good. The kids loved Operation Spy and the spy tools in the museum's permanent exhibits -- a Soviet listening device hidden inside the heel of a target's shoe, a lipstick pistol and poison gas gun nearly as much as they loved the gift shop, which offered every spy toy imaginable.

New lasers in hand, we adjourn next door to the upscale Zola restaurant ([www.zoladc.com](http://www.zoladc.com)), which has a sophisticated ambience and menu to please the grown-ups, as well as a welcoming attitude

toward kids ... not to mention terrific fries. (Memo to parents: If you take kids to a restaurant like this and they've outgrown the kids' menu, suggest they share a meal -- assuming they want the same thing.)

Over dinner, the boys confess that learning about intelligence gathering was a lot more fun than learning how Congress works, and taking the Amtrak train ([www.amtrak.com](http://www.amtrak.com)) was a lot more fun than driving or flying, because they could stay "plugged in" the entire trip, playing video games, watching movies and buying pizza and hot dogs. (Kids ride Amtrak for half price.)

The Palomar Hotel, a Kimpton Hotel, ([www.hotelpalomar-dc.com](http://www.hotelpalomar-dc.com)), just a short walk from DuPont Circle and Rock Creek Park) proved an ideal choice for my "mission" too. The theme of this hotel is "art in motion" and when we get to our room, the kids find personalized cartoons drawn by a local cartoonist and an iHome to plug in their iPods. "This makes me feel like a king," Miles declares, jumping on the bed. That's exactly what General Manager Brett Orlando, himself the father of young twins, wants to hear. "Our job is to create an experience for kids as well as parents," he explains.

There is a treasure chest of toys for younger kids to borrow, a lending library of DVD movies and welcome swag that includes a card for free cookies from room service.

(Check the hotel Website for the Link in Luxury package that allows you to book one room at a going rate -- weekend rates start at \$229 and a second adjoining room for the kids for \$50. Fall and winter weekends are

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a great time to visit D.C. with bargain hotel rates. Visit [www.washington.org](http://www.washington.org)).

The boys, of course, would have preferred to never leave the hotel but I promise we can skip all the "boring stuff" -- like the Capitol Building, the Supreme Court, all art museums and even the White House.

But even without these stops, we had plenty to fill up our weekend. At Jaleo, ([www.jaleo.com](http://www.jaleo.com)), they sampled tapas for the first time -- but passed on the octopus and squid and reveled at being treated like grown-ups at the trendy D.C. Coast ([www.dccoast.com](http://www.dccoast.com)).

They declared "Shear Madness," which has been running in the Kennedy Center's Theater Lab (<http://www.kennedy-center.org/>) for almost 20 years, a high point -- with campy humor and the opportunity for the audience to help solve the scissor-stabbing murder of a concert pianist who lives above the hairstyling salon.

They also liked the view from the top of the Washington Monument, though they were disappointed when they learned they had to take a 70-second elevator ride rather than climb the 800-plus steps. (TIP: Even in the fall, the entire day's tickets had been given out before 10 a.m. Arrive before 9 a.m. at the kiosk at 15th Street and Madison Drive to get one.)

The kids also gave a thumbs-up to The Bureau of Engraving and Printing ([www.bep.treas.gov](http://www.bep.treas.gov)) where they watched from an overhead glass window, as money was made and sorted. NOTE: Though (free) tickets aren't required September through February, tours still fill up. Be prepared. You may need to wait.

At the National Air and Space Museum ([www.nasm.si.edu](http://www.nasm.si.edu)) where a new exhibit, America by Air, will open next month, the boys were most interested in the gift shop -- until they discovered the Simulator Rides (\$8 each) that allowed them to try their skills as a pilot and gunner aboard an F-4 Phantom II Jet Fighter. "I wish we could do it again and again," Max said.

I insisted they see the original 1903 Wright Flyer but after a cursory look, they were done. Sure I could have forced them to spend more time at the museum -- maybe I should have -- but that would have just made them cranky. Me too.

Instead, we all left happy. The Smithsonian museums and the capital will be here next trip.

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(For more Taking the Kids, visit [www.takingthekids.com](http://www.takingthekids.com), where Eileen Ogintz welcomes your questions and comments.)

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