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I SPY U SPY

Everyone's a secret agent
at the museum of espionage



I Spy, U Spy

Trust no one within the Spy Museum's new web of lies

BY JULIE WAKEFIELD



Spy vs. Spy: An operative (above left) waits for contact from her handler at the bus depot in Khandar City during the Spy Museum's new immersive experience Operation Spy. Field agents (above right) test their spy aptitude on a mission to recover a missing nuclear triggering device that has fallen onto the black market. Can they crack the safe in time? What would Jack Bauer do?

As the afternoon sun radiates peak heat, our seven-member intelligence team arrives at a bus depot in the remote, strife-ridden country of Khandar. A nuclear triggering device has fallen onto the black market. Our mission: retrieve the gizmo and discover who's behind the theft and imminent sale. The aroma of exotic spices wafts through the marketplace. We meet our contact, a hunky Brit with a shaved head and thick accent. The man identifies himself as "Greg," the station operations manager, and leads us down a narrow cobblestone street to a hidden command center.

The scenario seems real given such recent events as the polonium-210 poisoning of Alexander Litvinenko and the lingering threat of suitcase nukes. But Khandar is fictional. Our team of friendly Gen X and Gen Y volunteers: two journalists, a publicist, lawyer, accountant, entrepreneur and technologist, has turned up to play Operation Spy, the ultimate spook game. This new interactive experience at the International Spy Museum allows visitors to "think, feel and act" like field agents. "Guests will discover what it's like to live in the world of espionage," says museum founder Milton Maltz, who worked at the National Security Agency during the Korean War. "They get to test their skills in a hostile environment."

Spying involves a lot of grunt work, says museum executive director Peter Earnest, "but there are moments when events are fast-breaking and cause your heart to pound. This new experience captures a moment like

that." The evoked emotions seem so authentic that the 36-year CIA veteran believes that the nation's intelligence agencies should send new recruits through the simulation.

"The exhibit takes museum-going to a new level," insists Maltz, chairman of The Malrite Company that also founded Cleveland's Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. The exhibit's launch marks the fifth anniversary of the unique D.C. museum, which has exceeded attendance projections by drawing 3.5 million visitors to a cluster of historic buildings on the corner of F and 8th streets NW. (One of its buildings served as the headquarters for the local branch of the U.S. Communist party in the 1940s.)

The International Spy Museum has earned a reputation for its hands-on approach. Current attractions include its high-tech "School for Spies" which tests visitors' aptitudes in basic skills: observation, concealment, risk assessment and threat response. The museum and its more than 1,280 spy objects have bolstered Penn Quarter cachet. "Now it's jumping on 7th Street," Earnest says. "It looks like a mini-Broadway."

Once our team's inside the secret station, the Khandar City intelligence chief warns via satellite uplink: "Don't screw up!" After all, the fate of the world rests on our shoulders, she reminds us. The spy den, replete with surveillance monitors, cool gadgetry and assorted blueprints and intelligence trees feels like a real hideout where 24's Jack Bauer might plot a mission. Whom should

we trust in this netherworld of intelligence? The pressure mounts with word that the trigger's sale happens tonight. How will our decisions pan out? A computerized system tracks and scores the team's performance throughout the hour-long mission. There are six possible outcomes, and the choices we make determine the game's ending.

At the station, we intercept a classified communication and plan our first move. Greg leads us on a descent into a pungent alley "beneath" the operations station. The creepy passageway alone explains why children under 12 are not allowed to participate in Operation Spy. A "rat" scurries through a nearby pipe as we attempt to break into the office of Khandar's director of energy. Greg whips out an electronic decoder to override the building's entrance security. "I saw that on *Mission Impossible*," says team member and IBM consultant Richard Zielinski. "MI's wasn't real though," Greg retorts in character. The device runs the potential sequences and finally locks on the pass code.

"We're in," says team member Byrant Welch, a newly minted lawyer. We find ourselves in a lavish office with Middle Eastern tapestries and real cigars on the antique desk. Next assignment: crack the director's safe, and search for more intelligence data. Will we secure the trigger before the director returns to his office? Time is running out.

Jackpot! The safe opens. But the sound of footsteps grows louder down the hallway. Now what? We must make a run for it. Our

support team arrives in a box truck, and we climb in the back for a bumpy getaway. The truck screeches and veers through Khandar's crumbling streets, an experience somewhere between a trip on a flight simulator and an amusement park ride.

The journey ends at the safe house in a cozy living room, furnished with hand-woven rugs and a fireplace. We learn that fellow agents have apprehended a suspect whom we must interrogate with the help of a polygraph. The attractive double agent codenamed "Topaz" seems at first to cooperate with our questions. "What was your relationship with the director of energy?" Bryant asks by closed-link television. But is Topaz fooling the machine? "She's hiding something," Rich says. "She and the director are involved somehow."

Decision time. Do we trust diplomacy to find the trigger or gamble on an "off-the-books" black op to seize the device? Topaz is the linchpin. It's a judgment call whether she's telling us the truth or whether she's indeed conspiring with a terrorist group. Our team, including the conservative Bryant, unanimously votes to forego diplomacy. We call for an 11th-hour clandestine, military intervention. Seconds later, the intelligence chief deploys a special forces team. Has our mission failed? Will the black ops team be exposed? Has our choice impacted world history? Lofty questions await our escape from a helicopter pad.

Once out of danger, our debriefing agents tell us that we've scored four points out of a possible five. Not bad for amateurs. "It was awesome," Rich exclaims. "It's an intense escape that forces you to suspend your disbelief," says Scott Kamp, a Virginia-based accountant. "With this exhibit you transcend reality and go to another place."

"So much intelligence work is gray. It's not always clearly black and white, because the situations constantly change based on decisions made along the way," sums up the Spy Museum's Earnest. "The exhibit gives you a sense of that grayness—that's the intelligence world." Even for the skeptics on our team, the entrance fee, \$14 in addition to museum admission (\$16 for adults), seems a fair price to test one's spy moxie in the heat of the moment. At minimum, the exhibit, which cost nearly \$2 million dollars to develop, had us spies-for-a-day wondering whether the rats in the alley might be real and what really happened that day in Khandar. Despite TV news accounts running in the debriefing room report that there has been a smooth diplomatic resolution to the country's internal conflicts, "only this team," our handler tells us, "and a few other intelligence officers scattered worldwide will ever know the truth." 



Covert agents penetrate a secure compound in hostile territory.



See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil at the Spy Museum.