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Exhibits

I, Spy: The Secret Agent Experience

For \$14 a Pop,
Museum Offers Tourists
A Chance to Save the World

By JOHN MAYNARD
Washington Post Staff Writer

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In the land of the free museum, the organizers of the city's newest exhibit are betting you'll pay to role-play.

Today the International Spy Museum debuts "Operation Spy," an interactive experience in which participants get to pretend they're spies for the U.S. government, traveling through and under the back streets of a fictitious city, trying to find a missing nuclear device.

"Operation Spy" is also one of the city's costlier museum experiences. Tickets to the museum itself are \$16, but if you want to do the "Operation Spy" exhibit, too, you'll pay eight more bucks.

Or put another way: For \$24, you can pretend you're on TV's "24."

"We perceive the additional \$8 fee for 'Operation Spy' to be a great value for the hour-long experience," museum spokeswoman Amanda Abrell said. (Tickets for admission only to "Operation Spy" are \$14.)

The privately owned Spy Museum, run by the for-profit, Cleveland-based Malrite Co., is Washington's most expensive museum. The Smithsonian museums and the National Gallery of Art are free; among museums that charge an admission, the Phillips Collec-

See SPY MUSEUM, C7, Col. 1



BY ANDREA BRUCE — THE WASHINGTON POST

Spooky: In "Operation Spy" at the International Spy Museum, participants prepare to board a simulated helicopter in pursuit of a missing nuclear device.

Play Spy for An Hour (And \$14)

SPY MUSEUM, From C1

tion can cost as much as \$12 and the Corcoran Gallery of Art runs from \$6 to \$14.

With its emphasis on hands-on activities, the Spy Museum — one of the city's most popular tourist attractions — seeks to draw, in part, a Disney-park audience. Since its opening in 2002, the museum has drawn more than 3.5 million visitors.

"Operation Spy" cost between \$1.5 million and \$2 million to create, Abrell says.

During the one-hour virtual-world "mission," museum-goers get to maneuver hidden cameras and fiddle with recording devices. Visitors are on their feet nearly that entire time, at one point tiptoeing through a creepy, dark tunnel created by the exhibit designers, and later ransacking a authentic-looking office of a "foreign government official." The mission takes place within the confines of the Spy Museum at 800 F St. NW. "It takes interactivity one step further," said Peter Earnest, the museum's executive director. "There's more of a visceral feel than just looking at stuff on a display case."

"Operation Spy" was scheduled to open in June, but glitches throughout the summer delayed the opening. "There's a number of moving parts," Earnest said. "A lot of synchronizing and special effects."

"Operation Spy" has its share of effects, but a promotional video running on the museum's Web site might oversell the experience with its claim: "Like the most intense movie you've ever seen — except you are in it."

Earnest also boasted: "It's sort of what it feels like to be in '24,'" referring to Fox's hit show.

Sort of, perhaps, but don't expect to extract any confessions from bad guys through torture or to defuse a nuclear bomb with one hand tied behind your back.

Rather, it's more of a participatory experience, with much conversation encouraged among exhibit-goers. There are also some thrills to be had; highlights include a noisy freight elevator ride in the dark and a (simulated) bumpy ride in the back of a cargo van. (Because of the complexity of the exhibit, participants must be at least 12 years old.)

At first, the experience might feel more like jury duty as you and your fellow "spies" gather in a "bus depot" in the fictitious Khandar City, a setting that has a Middle Eastern feel. Although Earnest said the city depicted in "Operation Spy" is not modeled after any particular country, he acknowledged that it could be in the Middle East or southern Asia.

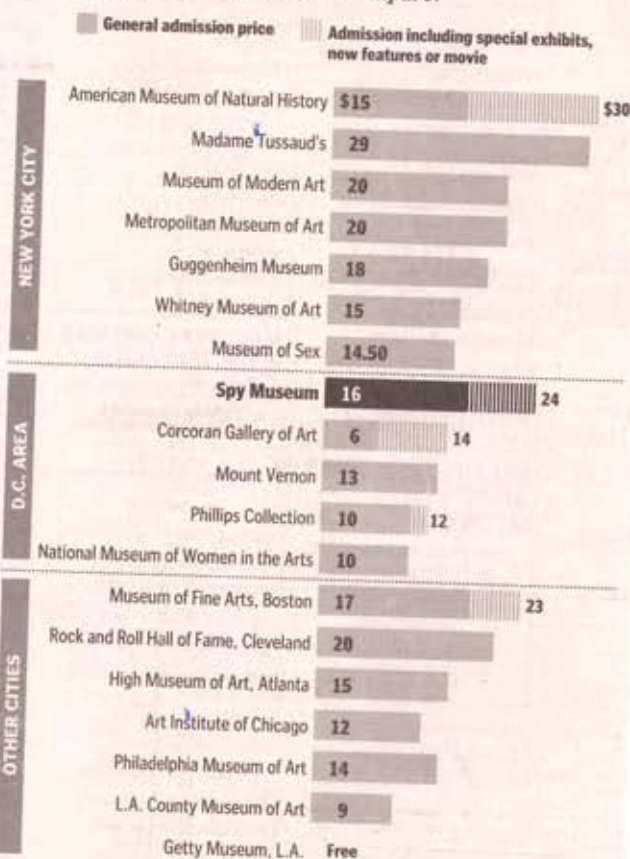
"We are taking you overseas to a foreign, exotic locale," he says.

Earnest said the exhibit's story line is "loosely based" on the real-life case of A.Q. Khan, a prominent Pakistani nuclear scientist who in 2004 confessed to selling nuclear technology to other countries. (Khan was pardoned by his government and remains under house arrest in Pakistan.)

After leaving the Khandar depot, visitors are rushed to a command center to receive video screen instructions from an unidentified intelligence chief

I Spy Expensive Tickets

Operation Spy, the new feature at the Spy Museum, is an immersive experience in which the visitor becomes a counter-agent. It opens today. To enter Operation Spy, it costs \$14. The combined adult admission is \$24. That's the highest museum fee in town, and one of the highest in the country. Here is how some other museums compare.



SOURCE: Museum web sites

THE WASHINGTON POST

(played by Janet Hubert-Whitten, who played the mother on the old Will Smith sitcom "The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air"). "You definitely look like tourists," she says. "Nice disguise."

Although this is a taped segment, our real-life team leader — earlier this week, it was local actress Elise Arsenault — skillfully talks to her and we are made to believe it's a live conversation.

Visitors learn the particulars of the case — that a nuclear trigger device has gone missing, say, and that there's a strong suspicion that the country's energy director is involved. There's also an on-screen secret agent, whom we see in video clips, who has infiltrated the minister's office and may or may not be on our side. During the preview, we were also made aware of a rising movement within the country, seeking to dismantle the government.

Spy-philes at the preview this week were gung-ho for "Operation Spy," including Mark Dubowitz, chief operating officer of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies.

"It was part Jack Bauer, part Jennifer Garner," said Dubowitz, referring to the fictional "24" character and the actress who portrayed "Alias" spy Sydney Barstow. "It was a great way to get people thinking about pressing issues in today's news."

In a preview earlier this summer, Speros Koumparakis, a 32-year-old Marine from the District, said he was "really into it." He also admitted that his TiVo is filled with "24" episodes.

And Emily Guskin, 23, of Potomac said the experience was "somewhat akin to" a Disney ride, adding, "I guess it's a Washington, D.C., version."