

I, SPY

Tara Wells goes undercover in Washington, DC's International Spy Museum

My mission, should I choose to accept it, is to find the mole. I can neither confirm nor deny that I am a spy. My boss? Unclear. My colleagues? Unknown.

To enter the International Spy Museum in Washington, DC, I had considered lowering myself by cable to avoid alarms. Deciding instead it's best to hide in plain sight, I wave my timed-entry ticket at the attendant.

"I'm in," I whisper into my imaginary earpiece as the elevator disgorges me into the shadowy world of international espionage.

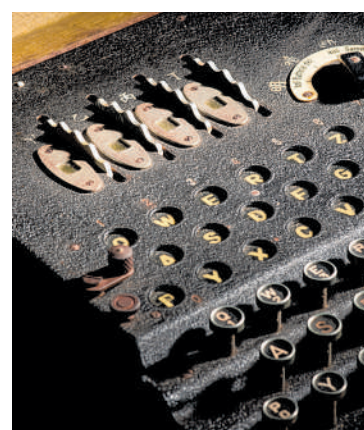
My first covert task is to assume a new identity – name, nationality, occupation – assigned with a codeword to use throughout the museum. For the highest chance of mission success, I'll become an expert in spy artefacts (there are 10,000 in the collection) and real-world case studies as my top-secret training programme.

Lesson one: An alias is not enough. Good spies need a physical disguise. Moustaches, fake pregnant bellies and even those rubber masks (or "personal surveillance identity prosthetics") that *Mission Impossible's* Ethan Hunt loves ripping off, all exist. A glance around before I surreptitiously take notes from Tony Mendez's sketches (former CIA Chief of Disguise and the real-life inspiration behind the 2012 Oscar-winning flick *Argo*) about how to transform from a trench coat-wearing businessman into a shawl-covered old lady.

Being able to slip across borders is worthless without the required information, the "intel". To gather evidence of the mole, I chose a surveillance device. Thankfully, I won't have to strap a camera to a pigeon (Germany, 1917) now that drones have been invented, and a fake tree stump listening device (CIA, 1970s) doesn't match the setting. Glasses hiding a tiny camera in the bridge (timeless) will do the trick. But it's the bigger, bolder surveillance attempts I'm here for.

Beware of Russian children bearing gifts, as the saying goes. In 1945, a group of school kids visiting the US Embassy in Moscow gifted an impressive timber carving featuring a bald eagle. The Great Seal hung in the ambassador's office for seven years before technicians discovered a tiny transmitter: the eagle was a bug.

Spies on all sides have taken the saying, "if these walls could talk", and tried to make it true. The early 1980s were a fraught time in the Cold War. The US Embassy in Moscow was still being built when the cement was found riddled with Soviet bugs. An exhibit next to a piece of the discarded structure might explain why US spies were on to it... because, meanwhile in DC, the Soviet Embassy's construction had its own surprise



element: besser blocks containing dormant bugs were remotely activated to drill a 1mm hole from inside the wall and insert a microphone. The CIA planted it; the FBI listened to it; and the KGB eventually found it.

At the Spy Museum, the truth – or the version that's allowed to be told – is more fantastical than fiction. It's like peeling back a stamp on a mysteriously addressed postcard to discover a teensy microdot hidden underneath. Get the right magnifier and something the size of this sentence's full stop could actually contain an entire document someone doesn't want you to read.

As long as people have used information for power, there have been ways to communicate using methods others can't understand. As part of my mission, I crack a message written in pigpen cipher. Invented in the 16th century, it replaces letters with symbols.

If my coded message was written using the Enigma machine, I'd still be there now. It took nearly a year for a team of Allied experts to unravel the German code during World War II. The Enigma machine, like a strange typewriter, would change enciphered keystrokes daily, and codebreakers would have to decipher it anew.

Far quicker – and remaining uncrackable to outsiders – was the United States' use of Native American "code talkers" during both world wars. Bilingual Navajo, Cherokee, and Comanche soldiers transmitted radio messages in their native, unwritten language. The programme remained classified – and the code talkers' work unacknowledged – until 1968 in case they were needed in future wars.

When I confirm the mole's identity, I'm sure the New Zealand Security Intelligence Service (NZSIS) will be knocking on my door. But then I read about the secret agent tasked with killing Leon Trotsky and decided I'll politely decline their offer.

In the early 20th century, Trotsky helped

DETAILS

THE INTERNATIONAL SPY MUSEUM

is an independent non-profit organisation, remaining open daily during any US Government shutdowns. Advance ticket purchase is recommended.

spymuseum.org

washington.org

STAY

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establish the Soviet Union but was exiled to Mexico by his successor, Joseph Stalin. A prize was on his head. Ramon Mercader worked for the NKVD, the Soviets' secret police. On the off-chance of getting close enough to Trotsky to assassinate him, Mercader started a two-year relationship with the sister of his former secretary, convinced her to move to Mexico, befriended Trotsky, then pulled out an ice pick. Death for Trotsky, "Hero of the Soviet Union" for Mercader and, I assume, years of therapy for the girlfriend. I want out.

This message will self-destruct in five, four, three...

● The writer travelled as a guest of Destination DC.



The Great Seal exhibited at the International Spy Museum; exhibit galleries at the museum including the Enigma machine.

Photos / International Spy Museum