

Travel and Adventure: New tours in Washington, D.C., showcase spies and stars

by Ruth A. Hill

WASHINGTON, D.C. - Remember when Forrest Gump stepped into the National Mall Reflecting Pool to greet his girlfriend Jenny? And did you know that Martin's Tavern in Georgetown used to be a watering hole for international spies who met there to hand off secrets? These are just a couple of the many chatter topics takers of D.C.'s newest city tours get to ponder.

HOME OF THE SPIES - A morning tour of the International Spy Museum primes guests for all the fun and education of the Spy City Tour in the nation's capital. CNS photo courtesy of International Spy Museum

HISTORIC HOTEL - The Willard Hotel has had its share of spy intrigues, including one that helped avert disaster during the Cuban Missile Crisis. CNS photo courtesy of International Spy Museum. **SEEN ON**

THE SCREEN - The Georgetown staircase that was immortalized in a scene from 'The Exorcist.' Across the street is The Tombs restaurant, where the Brat Pack hung out in the '80s movie 'St. Elmo's Fire.' CNS photo courtesy of the Washington CVA. Because international spies and Hollywood producers never seem to tire of doing business in the nation's capitol, the International Spy Museum and a New York City company have created new bus tours to reveal some of the documented scenes and secrets. Riders get a fresh perspective on the capital that's not just enlightening - it's also fun.

What the International Spy Museum's Spy City Tour and Gray Line's On Location TV and movie sites tour have in common are itineraries that cover the metropolis - places like offices, restaurants, hotels and government buildings people pass every day never knowing that they were part of the drama.

There are a few get-off-the-bus stops too, where guides explain the historical roles landmarks and sites like the Lincoln Memorial have played in the national story. Both tours run on weekends from Union Station, where there's ample parking and a Metro stop.

If you're willing to be a spy recruit for a couple of hours one Saturday, go for the Spy City Tour after you've done a morning tour of the International Spy Museum. It's a great day of fun and education, and trainees from about age 12 on up enjoy the action. My companion was intrigued. She's the widow of a former CIA operative.

"You are spies in training," guide Natalie told us, "and you must be ready to keep your wits and cool about you. D.C. is Spy City because there are lots of people here who want to know what our government is up to. What you probably don't realize is people are meeting their contacts all over town and what we have here is an underworld of secrets that get exchanged frequently - usually for money."

Our mission, she said, would be an undercover operation. "You will be asked to decipher a top-secret message left by an agent, crack the code and deliver the information back to headquarters."

To grease the challenge, she distributed spy lingo sheets that revealed meanings behind such terms as "dead drop" and "The Farm" so we could better understand her language and that of the guys talking to us via DVD recordings. One passenger declared he felt like Agent 007, and that's the idea.

"Take this hotel (now the trendy Hotel George)," she said as we turned away from Union Station. "Back in 1941 when it was the Bellevue Hotel, Walter Krivitsky, the former head of Soviet military intelligence for Western Europe, was found dead in Room 524 from a bullet hole in his temple."

In front of Joanna's 1819 Club on M Street, Natalie told us a more contemporary tale. It's where stripper Priscilla Sue Galey befriended FBI mole Robert Hanssen in 1990 while he was spying for the Russians.

As we rode between sites such as the former Soviet Embassy, former KGB Maj. Gen. Oleg Kalugin told us via DVD what it's like to work undercover while stationed in Washington. Peter Earnest, a former CIA senior intelligence officer and executive director of the International Spy Museum, disclosed key spy concepts, lingo and recruitment strategies. Former CIA Chiefs of Disguise Tony and Joanna Mendez shared a few secrets of the "quick change" and how spies move through hostile territory without attracting attention.

Spycraft has been around in America for a long time, we learned. In fact, George Washington was not only the father of his country, he was also the father of homegrown intelligence gathering, appointing people to spy on the British during the Revolutionary War. He also experimented with invisible inks. Those stories are in several books and the new Education Center at Washington's Mount Vernon estate.

On into Georgetown, we passed restaurants, homes and other sites where spies from other eras lived and passed their product. In a garden near Dumbarton Oaks, we got our directive to decipher a message. Some got it, some didn't. Back on the bus, our discussion of what to do next was interrupted by Natalie's alert that a vehicle was tailing us. But that's another story.

Of course, spies have always operated near the Capitol, the White House, and the Lincoln Memorial, and so have Hollywood operatives. Movie and TV producers have also used the Church of the Pilgrims ("Wedding Crashers"), Hay Adams Hotel ("In the Line of Fire" and others) and the Willard Hotel ("Minority Report") in various flicks. If you're along for this new ride, you get to see 30 or so locations and clips of the movies in which they appeared.

We stopped in The Shops at Georgetown Park long enough to remember "No Way Out," "Best Friends," "True Lies" and to buy a snack. Then it was on to '70s classics sites used in "The Godfather II," "All the Presidents Men" and "Being There," and the TV shows "West Wing" and "24."

To enliven the motorized rolling trek, our actress-guide Karen threw out an occasional movie trivia question. "In 'The Exorcist,' what did the writing on Regan's stomach say?" she queried us. One movie buff among us got it right away.

That set us up for a look at the steep, stone Georgetown steps near Key Bridge and across from The Tombs restaurant where the Brat Pack hung out in the 1980s movie "St. Elmo's Fire," the same steps on which two people fell to their deaths in "The Exorcist." Karen described some technical challenges associated with scenes shot in the adjacent house. Then another piece of trivia emerged: The author still lives in Georgetown.

Current filming projects are now under way in D.C., she told us. Sarah Jessica Parker is working on a half-hour HBO comedy series based on "Washingtonienne," the D.C.-set novel inspired by author Jessica Cutler. Parker is the executive producer of this "Sex in the City"-style sitcom. Director Mike Nichols and actors Tom Hanks and Julia Roberts are collaborating on a political drama about the CIA's covert operation in

Afghanistan to arm mujahedeen. With the working title of "Charlie Wilson's War," it's another story of intrigue that could give people more reasons to look at D.C. as not just a world capital, but also Spy City.

IF YOU GO

For Spy City Tours dates and rates, call 800-GRAYLINE or visit www.grayline.com.

On Location Tours Inc. also offers TV and movie site tours in New York, including "Sex and the City" hot spots, "Sopranos" sites and Central Park movie sites. For tour dates and rates, go to 212-209-3370 or visit www.screentours.com.

Ruth A. Hill is a freelance travel writer. © Copley News Service

Travel and Adventure: New tours in Washington, D.C., showcase spies and stars by Ruth A. Hill