

# I SPY ...

## It's hard work being a spy.

On a freezing January afternoon somewhere outside London I discretely run up a hill to keep pace with my target. If noticed, I might look like someone torn between the idea of a brisk walk or some gentle cardio as I alternate quick runs with purposeful strides. Not that it matters, so long as the target stays in sight and I remain unseen.

Thirty metres ahead a casually dressed, middle-aged man approaches the high-street carrying a plastic bag in his left hand. Inside the bag is a package I have earlier observed being passed to him on a park bench. The package has proved to be a game-changer in the two hours since we first identified the target and as such, the man has progressed from being

'suspicious' to 'potentially dangerous'.

I say 'we' because I am not alone. With me are two former Secret Intelligence Service officers who are coaching me and another woman in the basics of operational surveillance. As this is our first 'field op', we are paired with an agent and must follow and memorise his movements. Street surveillance has its own rules and it takes patience tracking a target unseen. Radios and ear-pieces help us with the task.

'Keep painting the picture' the agent tells us. This is surveillance-speak for providing a narrative of what the target is doing: everything must be accurately described for the backup team to visualise a scene they can't yet see.

The target takes us on a relentless journey up and down streets, along alleyways, through a housing estate and finally to a car-park where I spot him examining something in the boot of a car. When I hear the words 'explosive devices' our foot-chase ends. A speedy and discrete vehicle pursuit plays out and leads us to a farm. The denouement

is loud, aggressive and final. At the height of the shouting the target gets down on his knees and an agent beckons me to search him. My adrenalin is everywhere and I start fumbling with the man's jacket. Then he looks me dead in the eyes: 'It's ok, you can stop now' he says, with a smile.

I heard about Secret Me, a spy training school run by former Special Forces and Intelligence agents in a short newspaper review. At first, I thought it was a joke. Spy schools are not generally advertised, though I have occasionally seen full-page, MI6 recruitment advertisements. MI6 outlines the practice of spy craft (surveillance; team-work and secrecy) but their advertising bats off any suggestion that the job resembles James Bond and his hedonistic life style: instead the agency describes spying as a career 'that fits in with family life'.

Secret Me caught my attention because "We train people to keep their heads when all about them are losing theirs". They describe themselves as working "with clients from a broad range of professional and personal backgrounds to better



understand their limits and help them build the emotional and mental resilience required to extend them”.

The course is by invitation and was described as a luxury weekend experience at an unnamed location with a curriculum offering Combat Skills (live shooting with pistols and rifles), Surveillance Techniques, Kidnap & Escapology, Cyber Skills, Threat Recognition (martial arts) and some glamorous Bond-esque, add-ons such as: Seduction & Persuasion, Drinks & Poisons, Poker & Hustling and Appearance & Style.

Equally tantalising was a description of the weekend as the first part of a spy-training process: the weekend - known as The Camp - can be followed by Phase 2, a five day experience with further training in core skills and ‘scenario based’ work in Europe; then graduates from Phase 2 who make the grade can go forward to Phase 3 for a week-long mission overseas.

I sent an email through the Secret Me website and penned a rambling thesis about my suitability as a trainee spy. Not having a precedent for this I listed my favourite spy authors (Fleming; Le Carre & Graham Greene); and nominated **Three Days of the Condor, The Bourne Identity and The Spy Who Came in from the Cold** as the best spy movies ever made.

I probably should have left it there but warming to the theme I included an anecdote about a time in my early 30s when I created aliases as a means of surviving dinner parties where your neighbour asks ‘what do you do for a living’ as the first course touches down and intuitively you know it’s going to be a long haul to the coffee. I used to memorise the details of someone else’s life and paid scrupulous attention to the jargon of a job description. I should add that this was pre 9/11 so it would be less than appropriate to say some of these things now but with my

best poker face, I sometimes described working as an arms dealer or as a senior research scientist for Boeing. I failed once - and spectacularly - when having introduced myself as a special advisor to the Ukrainian Ambassador, my companion replied in fluent Ukraine.

A week later I meet the co-founder and CEO, Sara Fazlali for breakfast at a London hotel. I have received an invitation to join Phase 1 of the course - subject to security vetting - and I will shortly receive a confidential questionnaire I have been asked to answer honestly. ‘Have people lied on their application form?’ I ask. ‘We have turned people away for lying. It’s an absolute no-go for us to ensure the safety of our clients.’

Since Secret Me launched, participants have included business leaders, entrepreneurs, CEOs, celebrities and high net-worth individuals from around the globe. Counter-intuitively, could the course attract the

wrong sort of applicant? ‘That’s why we have a solid vetting procedure. We check everyone very carefully’.

Breakfast is mainly for me to ask questions about the weekend, but my instinct as a film executive with a career in logistics is to quiz Sara about the legality of the course. So I ask about licensing and permissions (in relation to the firearms training), health and safety, insurance, staff profiles and qualifications -‘yes, all the instructors are former SAS, SBS and secret service personnel’, Sara confirms.

But I am still curious. The thinking behind the business

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fascinates me. There can't be that many people with Special Forces and secret service contacts in their phone book who can go out and set up a commercial personal development business.

We order more coffee and I wonder about the chic and obviously youthful woman sat opposite me. I start by guessing her age, she is 31. First there are the Degrees: she holds four including a Masters from Oxford; a Masters from Kings College, London and currently she is half way through a PhD in War Studies. After Oxford, she worked for the UK government, the United Nations and then with development programs and human rights projects, often in Africa. She seems incredibly young to have packed all this in but then military entrepreneurs don't tend to hug the spotlight like digital geniuses, so why shouldn't she have done all this by her mid twenties?

What was the inspiration, I ask? 'Working in war zones and difficult situations, I discovered that you become very honest with yourself about what you can and cannot do. In Africa the pressures were different to anything I had previously encountered. I found a self-confidence that challenged who I thought I was. So much of our perceived confidence is built around peer review – what our colleagues and friends think – and the bravado that comes from that'.

As Sara worked increasingly with leaders and CEOs she was often surprised how unaware they were about their personal security 'and I

mean security in the broadest sense, not just physical security but how a general ignorance about technology can compromise someone's safety. Today it's not just companies who are vulnerable but business leaders have become targets'.

Spotting a gap in the market, Sara and her business partner realised there didn't seem to be anything of substance to help wealthy and influential people look after themselves. 'Outside of the military, if someone wants to do something about their personal protection they either hire a team to look after them or they can go on a hostile environment training course'.

With a luxurious approach in mind, Sara and her business partner knew they wanted to do something of quality, with discretion, in a safe and comfortable setting. 'We had many ideas when we started but we whittled the list down to ten areas of training and then made a wish list of our best-of-the-best instructors'.

'Is Secret Me an expensive, personal protection

training course?' 'We are offering protection training but that on its own would be dull so we have made it slightly tongue in cheek. We thought if you are a spy you can be everything and nothing; you can choose who you are, try on different identities and maybe even find out more about yourself'.

'From the start I wanted to infuse some old-fashioned glamour into the experience so we have been deliberately playful with the Bond elements for our clients to have fun. And these aspects have a purpose because they explore the subliminal side of strength. As a business woman I have never been able to understand why women have to suppress their femininity to be powerful, so I wanted some Audrey Hepburn in the mix to counterpoint Bond'.

What happened when you went out and pitched this to your 'best of the best' military and intelligence contacts? 'Well, we were very lucky; everyone we approached said yes'.

Five of us share a helicopter out of Battersea

Heliport one Friday lunchtime - destination unknown. Our group includes a Russian couple, resident in London; a scion of one of England's wealthiest families, a city financier and me. This information has flowed from introductions and small talk shared over champagne and canapes prior to our departure. It will also prove to be the extent of what we know officially about each other over the weekend.

Forty five minutes later we set down on the lawn of a substantial, country house in a valley bordered by snow-capped mountains.

The instructors begin the sessions by introducing themselves with a short resume of their careers. This has the effect of creating an atmosphere of instant reverence: everyone is highly trained and experienced and all have seen conflict in different ways, whether in Regiments posted to Iraq and Afghanistan or chasing down people who have chosen chaos and destruction as a way of life.



Our first session is three hours of martial arts and self defence: we are shown, then practice, smart escapology movements, designed to save our lives should we find a knife at our throat or a gun at the back of the head.

The physical challenges – martial arts, pistol shooting, live rifles and the surveillance detail – are scheduled from the morning until 5pm and are punctuated inbetween with talks, often in the library next to an open fire. A former communications agent illustrates with ease how detailed information can be found about each of us in the public domain. We are offered some digital tools to use in our lives. In another talk, a professional hostage negotiator works through the psychology of decision making under stress and the value of emotional intelligence.

The men on the course have all shot before but I have never picked up a pistol or rifle in my life. In the pistol class I am pleased to discover that I have no problem hitting the target given how badly I throw a ball. But what remained with me even to this day was my ability to stay calm and focused despite any distractions around; the ability to control my breathing and relax muscles on demand. Useful for anyone in high-stress situations.

By day we dress for warmth but in the evenings we have been asked to wear cocktail dress on the first night and black tie on the second. The evenings are comfortable and I wonder how seriously we will be able to explore 'the subliminal side of strength'.

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On the first night, a mixologist blends Martinis and talks about poisons. A Burlesque artiste invites us to complete a psychological profile that is as revealing as I can remember. Formal dinners are held in a candle lit Elizabethan dining hall.

We play poker with an expert and I am gutted to discover my 'tell' is so obvious; not for nothing is a game of poker a dramatic set piece in a Bond film. The drama of the evening is contagious and a current of electricity charges the atmosphere. We discuss playing into the night but Sara reminds us of the challenges ahead in the morning.

On the second day I learn that it is physically impossible for anyone to point and fire an MP5 semi-automatic rifle with their right hand and at the same time hold and fire a 9mm pistol with the left. This is a myth manufactured by Hollywood and countless movie stars. My reality is

this: a semi automatic rifle is heavy and cumbersome for anyone untrained to handle it. For me the experience is strange and stressful. Surrounded by three former special forces officers - one of whom crouches next to me and coaches me throughout - I am taken through a field in a simulated attack and shoot at surprise targets. Standing when I should be taking cover, I realise that in a real scenario I am a dead woman. For the first time in the weekend I want to be somewhere else, somewhere warm. I make it to end and slightly redeem myself as I am complimented on my peripheral vision and ability to spot suitable cover.

'Welcome to the Safe House'. In London, four days after the weekend I sit in a café with Sara reflecting on the experience. I have shared anecdotes about the weekend with friends, but apart from my husband no one can really get their head round what I have been doing. 'The idea of the Safe House is to give clients access to anything you might want, whether it's asking us to run anti-surveillance or counter surveillance courses for your business, or spending a day doing defensive and evasive driving or perhaps just spending an evening drinking cocktails and playing poker'.

The Safe House is probably one of the more original private clubs and its exclusivity is a step on from the luxury of the first weekend. 'The number of courses are tightly controlled, and discretion

will always be important to us', says Sara.

I ask how much Phase 2 costs. 'Five figures'. And Phase 3? 'Expensive'. I ask Sara to describe a Phase 3 scenario. Sara leans in. 'Think about everything you know from a classic spy action drama – the yachts, private planes and fast cars. Then imagine that's just the start. The adventure of Phase 3 is about drawing on everything you have been taught - guns, knives, physical combat, counter intelligence, the psychology of your enemy... It's the ultimate survival experience'.

Again I ask about safety, though I acknowledge the weekend was impeccable. 'You have to pass Phase 1 to do Phase 2. And we would never let anyone go into Phase 3 without ensuring they have the training to get through it', says Sara.

I ask what Sara is afraid of in life. 'You can be targeted by people around you and live in fear; someone could rip your bank card and steal your identity. But if you become fearful then you aren't really living. I say live and be self-aware but don't be afraid. I don't see the point of fear'.

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