Spies: Horrible History you don't learn in school is at the Imperial War Museum, London, until January 4 2015.



Elayne Jude was escorted by her godson (disguised, right) to view it

Camel poo that kills. Exploding rats. Itching powder in submariners' uniforms. Secret messages on the washing line.

Mid-August. Sweltering London seem deserted. But check out the newly refurbished Imperial War Museum on Lambeth Road, and you'll discover Londoners en mass; wriggling, giggling, talking 'Allo 'Allo, dressing up in outsize greatcoats, stamping on hologram rats, crawling through escape hatches, bicycling furiously to power a crystal radio set, and incidentally learning tons about the history of Allied espionage in the second World War.

'Spies' is suitable for 7-12 year olds. Museum staff recommend a visit of about 45 minutes. We spent an hour and a half in the company of my six year old godson, who has reached an age of extraordinary physical grace and an air of utter disdain for the rest of humanity.

Based on, and faithful to, the incredibly successful Horrible Histories series, this exhibition is a godsend to holiday-fatigued parents, and a huge hit with kids. The entrance price is modest, and the exhibition isn't timed; you can come and go as you please, and exit and enter at will. Combining sophisticated education and multi-sensory interactivity, it's ingeniously structured into a classic but near invisible lesson format. It's a paradigm of the IWM's aim to 'give a sense of how war looks, sounds and feels'.

Visitors are issued a map of the exhibition, featuring a mentor, a giant rat in a trenchcoat and Spy-disguise face furniture. Your mission is to undergo comprehensive Spy training, progressing through dedicated zones for codes, camouflage, sabotage, disguises and gadgets. There's a finger-friendly stamping machine at each station, and you can collect a mission accomplished stamp on your map before moving on. At the end there's a test to see if you're a Super Spy, or merely a Trainee Trickster.

Each zone offers digestible chunks of information, displays of artefacts from the Museum's permanent collection, and irresistible opportunities to get physical. The section on modes of transport, for instance, features tiny foldup motorbikes (clear prototype of the Bromley) which were airdropped in a metal case into a lightless wood. To illustrate how hard it is to identify even familiar objects in the dark, here's a series of boxes with staple items of the period inside, and a hole through which the brave can put their hands (is there a rat inside ? do it to Julia, we cry).

The biggest queue (with the most aggressive jostling) invites the trainee Spy to photograph herself on a computer screen, add false hair, hats, noses etc, and email home the result. Godson, above, is channelling Jack Hawkins. It's a brilliant interweaving of new tech with old party pieces. It's also, in this hyper-merchandised museum culture, a rare chance to get a souvenir that has a small environmental impact and no added financial burden to parents.

Godson's parents surfed the crests and troughs of the experience with practised ease. We ageing fairy godmothers had no one to blame but ourselves when brought to the edge of collapse. No interfering Museum bouncers prevented us from cycling to make the radio play (the banging of creaky knees on handlebars quickly cured us of that), and no-one told us we were too big for the floorshow of scuttling rats that exploded when you stamped on them. Clearly inspired by our own party game Twister, this was the game of choice for us. We competed mercilessly with the Godson (the other children backed off, sensing our killer competitiveness) to explode the greatest number of rats. Collision, bloody noses, banged elbows and tears before bedtime seemed inevitable; yet somehow we all got away unscathed to collect our next stamp.

Specially commissioned short videos play silently next to the period exhibits, the clipped consonants of stand-up secret agents, stiff military types and bereted Frenchies relayed through old-fashioned telephone receivers. Other screens show a classic cartoon livingroom, and ask the young Spy to click on hiding places for a radio set. Godson can't resist revisiting this test several times over; real Spy training; how much detail do you observe, and how much do you remember ?

Post-exhibition, the tireless Godson goes for a quick scramble on the jeeps and tanks while we maiden aunts stretch out in the summer afternoon under the high plane trees. The grounds of the IWM, after months of closure, are once again strewn with visitors, picnics spread, tour buses parked, coffee stalls busy.

In the context of current conflicts, in the midst of escalating death and sorrow, in the week that brought thousands of Britons out on to the streets of London to protest our government's response to events in Gaza and saw us commit to humanitarian assistance for the people of a country we invaded and have arguably helped to propel to this crisis; the spectacle of kids in shorts yelling, scrambling on the great naval guns at the entrance and queueing for ice creams on IWM's endless sunny lawns, never seemed so British, so innocent, or so poignant.