

I spy a dream made reality

Spy school: More women are wanting to learn combat, surveillance techniques and weapons training. **VICKI-MARIE COSSAR** finds out what it's all about

I feel like I should be wearing dark glasses and a trench coat as I weave in and out of the crowds on the busy Underground platform. My target is in sight and I do not intend to lose him. I'm watching Michel Grey, a French explosives specialist wanted for the murder of US nationals.

If you've ever fantasised about being an undercover agent, then Spy Games could help your dream become a reality. This training and events firm offers everything from spy training days and overseas spy hunt missions to hostage rescues.

Since the release of Angelina Jolie's espionage thriller, Salt, the company says it has seen a 30 per cent rise in women wanting to take part in its events and has designed a new female spy and surveillance day to cater for the demand.

'Females see Angelina playing this kick-ass spy and think: "Why not me?'"

says Spy Games managing director and ex-SAS operative Dave Thomas.

'Females are just as competent as males when it comes to spy training and very often learn the ropes quicker.'

After 12 years risking his life on undercover missions, Thomas set up a surveillance company in 1993. His assignments included following targets, installing covert cameras and debugging. He set up Spy Games in 2001 and recruited friend James Sullivan, an

ex-Commando in the Royal Marines, who had been working as a security consultant for blue chip organisations. Together they are an impressive, if on first sight slightly scary, team. Their mission: to let people enter the exciting world of spies and secret agents.

Joining a group in a secret location in the countryside, I'm half expecting to be blindfolded along the way. We're shown equipment from tiny bugging devices and cameras to a recording pen (that also writes) and tracking systems. We then begin our weapons handling – with a replica

Beretta handgun – and Sullivan demonstrates his quick-draw technique, looking every inch the military man. Next, we pick up the pace with some unarmed combat techniques, learning how to defend ourselves in a bar brawl and how to stop an attacker armed with a knife. I'm quite alarmed when Sullivan talks about going for loose parts of the body, such as lips and ears. The final session features target work with a sniper

rifle and, for the record,

I manage to knock two of the three cans off the wall from 15m away.

By this point we're all raring to start our mission. We're given a mug shot of Grey, the terrorist (played by Paul Tyler). A report just in from MI5 has located him at a hotel in Hemel Hempstead, Hertfordshire. We're driven to his hideout, where Agent Jones and

I casually get a table in the reception and spot him at the next table.

While he pops to the bathroom we drop the tracking device into his holdall and make a swift exit. Now the fun begins. We wait for him to leave and are soon hot on his heels to the train station.

The rest of the day involves tailing Grey across London, on the Underground and on foot, while the team and I gather information, take photographs and stay out of sight. Ducking and diving, I'm sure I've been spotted so it's time to switch disguises. I let my hair down and take off my jacket to keep undercover. The day is a haze of fun and



adrenalin-fuelled surprises and when we meet for the debrief I'm astonished to be told Grey didn't spot me. It seems my espionage skills are better than I thought. Eat your heart out, Angelina Jolie.

Salt is out on DVD and Blu-ray on December 13. Female Spy and Surveillance Day, £99 (four hours). Tel: 0845 1303 007. www.spy-games.com. Metro readers can claim a 15 per cent discount on all experiences bought before December 31.



A real master of disguise

Retired CIA intelligence officer Jonna Mendez lived undercover for 27 years in places all over the world. She started as a secretary for the CIA but quickly moved into clandestine photography.

'My first day they sent me up in a twin-engine aeroplane,' she says. 'They took the doors off and hung me in a harness in the back.

I had a 35mm camera with a huge lens and we flew around all day taking pictures of licence plates. It was so much better than typing and that was the beginning of the rest of my career.'

Mendez has an impressive record and worked in disguise, identity transformation and clandestine imaging until she was promoted to chief of disguise.

'A lot of people would ask me if I was a cosmetologist but disguise was whatever it needed to be, from wigs, moustaches



and glasses to changing women into men so they can move around a Middle Eastern country with ease.'

Mendez says people don't realise there's an enormous amount of tedious planning involved in espionage and it's not all fast-paced like you see in the movies. In her experience, a good spy is someone with life experience.

'The CIA don't want someone fresh out of college,' she says. 'They want someone who can think of their feet, someone who is a problem solver and has strong interpersonal skills. Having a familiarity with an overseas environment is a great advantage.'

Mendez retired from the government in 1993, earning the CIA's Intelligence Commendation Medal. She is a founding board member of the International Spy Museum in Washington. www.spymuseum.org





Photo shoot: Vicki-Marie Cossar, main picture and inset, brushes up her weapon skills

