

ENTERTAINMENT

DINING

SafeHouse and EscapeHouse offer covert ops in Chicago

BY SELENEA FRAGASSI
For the Sun-Times

Cue the “Mission: Impossible” music.

The mystery of international espionage has been an obsession of lay people for years, but now there’s a way even we common folk can feel like James Bond. SafeHouse and EscapeHouse are two new attractions in Chicago, which provide a series of interactive special missions that give a glimpse into a world normally reserved for film, television and novels.

The SafeHouse restaurant and bar has been the talk of the town for months now, particularly for anyone who has driven 90 minutes over the past 50 years to visit the original destination in Milwaukee, which opened in 1966 at the peak of the Cold War. One of the differences in Chicago is that parent company The Marcus Corporation (owners of the adjacent AC Hotel) had extra real estate and opted to add the clue-solving activity EscapeHouse, increasing the anticipation. The Chicago location is ripe with incredible artifacts of the era, such as a piece of the Berlin Wall, a flight deck from an original WWII spy plane that was donated by the pilot and replica machine guns from the estate of John Wayne — plus all the movie memorabilia you might expect, including a deceptive centerfold of Daniel Craig in the ladies’ room.

After attending a preview event, both seem to be living up to the hype. The caveat of the originality, however, means they are also destined to be major tourist traps, begging the question of how much locals



The Gadget Bar at Chicago's SafeHouse.
SUPPLIED PHOTO

will get to actually enjoy it. Because EscapeHouse requires a minimum of four and up to 10 people (you can also buy a solo ticket and be paired with strangers), families are marketed to with expeditions that allow kids. So, your best bet is to go on weekdays and during off hours. EscapeHouse operates daily from 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. and SafeHouse will be open daily until 2 a.m. (3 a.m. on Saturdays). They can be enjoyed separately, but it’s ideal to do them together for the full experience.

Our group of eight started with EscapeHouse on the “easier” of two missions: saving the White House from an impending missile attack. The other option tests your abilities “to break through a high-tech spy lair,” but neither is an easy task. We were stuck in a replica of the Oval Office (designed by the architect behind Universal Studio’s The Wizarding World of Harry Potter) for 60 intense minutes, together figuring out where clues were placed, and then how to actually solve them.

Some special effects add to the drama, though there are no scare tactics like the “Trapped in a Room with a Zombie” offered by local

competitor Room Escape Adventures. This boded well for problem-solving with less distraction. The best part of EscapeHouse, though, is it allows for the eye-opening discovery of just how controlling, savvy or forfeiting your friends are in this kind of situation. Fortunately, we got out with eight minutes to spare.

After, we headed to SafeHouse, though gaining access to this refuge also had its tricks. First you have to be able to find the entrance, but here’s a clue: There is a cover business known as International Exports Ltd. If you don’t know the password, you are then put in a holding room where “Agent M” grills you to ensure you are friendly spies. The staff never breaks character.

The massive basement restaurant is split into various sections, all designed by Chicago’s award-winning The Gettys Group in partnership with SafeHouse’s parent company, The Marcus Corporation.

SafeHouse Chicago, 60 E. Ontario, safehousechicago.com, EscapeHouse Chicago, 54 E. Ontario, escapehousechicago.com.

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DAILY HOROSCOPES

BY GEORGIA NICOLS

MOON ALERT:

After 4 a.m., we have the “all clear” today to shop and do business. The Moon is in Gemini.

IF MAR. 4 IS YOUR BIRTHDAY:

Actress Catherine O’Hara (1954) shares your birthday today. You are kind, compassionate and caring. Sometimes you have an otherworldly quality that is hard to understand. The year 2017 will be one of the most powerful years of your life — a time of accumulation. Whatever you have done in the past will now ripen because it’s your time of fruition. (This is a good year to buy and sell.)

**ARIES (March 21-April 19):**

Today you were interested in mysterious subjects and hidden knowledge. You will be attracted to secrets and discussions about the occult. Explore whatever you can to learn more about the subtle expressions of life.

**TAURUS (April 20-May 20):**

In discussions with friends or members of groups, you will be very tuned in to the subtleties of everything going on. You will be sensitive to whatever is said, which means you will be sympathetic to others because you understand where they are coming from. Granted, there’s an element of confusion in the air.

**GEMINI (May 21-June 20):**

When talking to bosses and parents today, you may want to discuss anything that is ideal and perfect. That’s because you are looking on the most hopeful interpretation of how things might be. The ideal. While this can be illuminating in many ways, it can also be confusing to some.

**CANCER (June 21-July 22):**

Because your appreciation of beauty is heightened, give yourself a chance to enjoy beautiful things and places. Visit museums, art galleries, beautiful shops or pristine parks. Enjoy the creations and discoveries of other cultures — their arts and crafts and their inventions.

**LEO (July 23-Aug. 22):**

When discussing shared property and inheritances, be careful to protect your own best interests. You are in a very sympathetic, caring frame of mind, which could lead you to give away the farm. Don’t do this. After all, you count, too!

**VIRGO (Aug. 23-Sept. 22):**

This is a good day to settle problems with a close friend or partner because you are easily sympathetic and understanding to whatever they have to say. You understand what it’s like to walk a mile in their wedgies. Naturally, this promotes successful two-way communications.

**LIBRA (Sept. 23-Oct. 22):**

Someone at work might bring their problems to you or might seek your counsel in some way or your advice. Possibly, it’s the other way around and you need to get advice or a sympathetic ear from someone else? If things seem to be confused, don’t push the river. Wait for another day.

**SCORPIO (Oct. 23-Nov. 21):**

This is romantic, playful day. Romantic partners will feel a “soul partner” connection with each other. However, this idealism might not be based on facts but rather on wishes and hopes for what could be. (It was ever thus.) Just keep this in mind.

**SAGITTARIUS (Nov. 22-Dec. 21):**

Family discussions will go well because people are very tuned in to each other’s needs and wants. In fact, there’s almost a mystical element present. Nevertheless, confusion and even deception are also possible. Keep that in mind.

**CAPRICORN (Dec. 22-Jan. 19):**

You are in touch with your muse and your imagination, which is why you can dream up wonderful ideas! However, you might also spend a lot of time daydreaming, lost in wool gathering. No matter. Just relax. “If you believe in fairies clap your hands!”

**AQUARIUS (Jan. 20-Feb. 18):**

This is not the ideal day to make important financial decisions because Mercury and Neptune are in close affinity. This can blur the reality of things, even though it can heighten a mystical appreciation for certain aspects of life. It’s tricky. Don’t spend too much money.

**PISCES (Feb. 19-March 20):**

The Sun and Mercury are in your sign, and Mercury is lined up with your ruler Neptune, also in your sign. Yes, it’s a Piscean day! This is why the fillings in your teeth can pick up heavy metal music. Trust your hunches!