

A 1:25 scale model of the Crac des Chevaliers (Fortress of the Knights) in Syria (above and below) shows the castle under siege in 1271 by the Mamluk sultan Baybars. It is a focal point, along with a medieval bazaar, of "Castles of the Crusades: A View in Miniature" at the National Geographic Museum at Explorers Hall.

SECRETS *of* MEDIEVAL 'CASTLES'

Colby Ellis, like most 12-year-old boys, loves video games. However, Colby doesn't just indiscriminately shoot up the bad guys as they dash across the screen. He takes pride in the weapon his virtual character holds.

Thus, it's not surprising to find him fascinated by the medieval weapons in the "Castles of the Crusades" exhibit at the National Geographic Museum at Explorers Hall. The New Hampshire resident stopped at the exhibit recently during a tour of the District with his grandmother.

The exhibit features a miniature replica of a castle siege, including weapons such as the scorpion — a huge bow that shoots arrows — and the classic battering ram.

Colby energetically explains to his grandmother, Betsy Tyrol, how the siege-engine catapult functions.

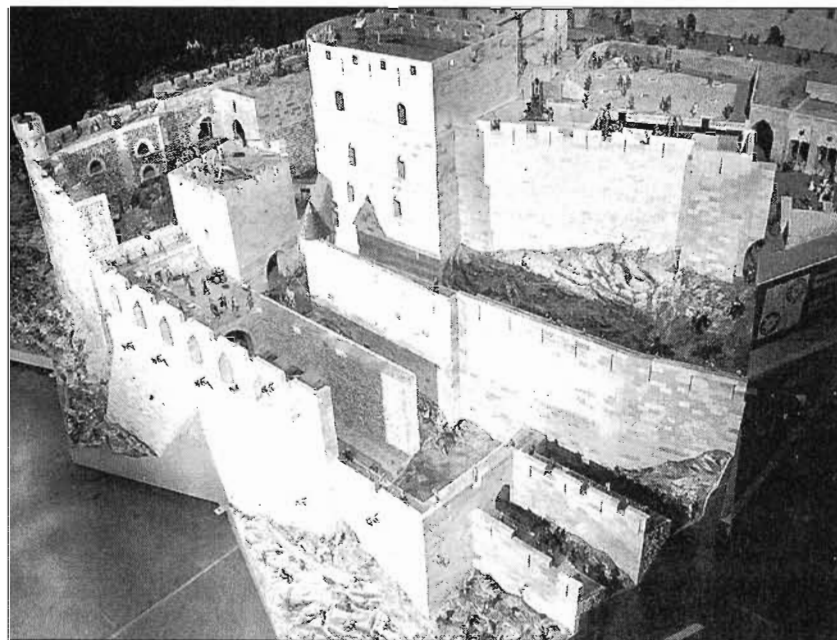
"Normally, catapults use spring power, but this siege-engine catapult is powered by weight," Colby says, pointing to the model of the weapon in the exhibition hall. Colby not only knows how far the catapult can launch rocks over the castle walls, he knows the French word for it, as well: "Trebuchet" rolls off his tongue.

The exhibit was constructed for the museum by the International Castle Research Society, a benefit society that studies castles from 800 to 1400 and then builds models of them.

Constructed under the guidance of German architect Bernhard Siepen, the exhibit is aptly subtitled "A View in Miniature" because the catapult and other models are built on a 1:25 scale of the actual size.

The replica depicting the splendid Syrian castle Crac des Chevaliers includes more than 2,000 hand-painted figurines shown engaged in various aspects of castle life — eating at luxurious banquet tables, soaking in Romanesque baths and, most important, defending the fortress against the invading enemy.

"When a castle is under siege for any length of time, the community still has to eat, drink and sleep at some point — and so do the attackers," says Susan Norton, director of the National Geographic Museum at Explorers Hall, referring to the activities de-



Field trips

pictured in the castle replica. "There's a whole industry that goes along with it, including the torture chambers and bakers."

In fact, this castle is depicted so accurately that visitor Chris Rosenkrans, 21, immediately peers over the castle walls upon entering the museum.

"It's fantastic," he says, easily recognizing this replica as the castle he visited six months earlier on a trip to Syria. Mr. Rosenkrans says the Crac des Chevaliers, otherwise known as the Fortress of the Knights, is the most famous castle still standing, dating to 1271.

"I recommend for people to go and actually visit these places," Mr. Rosenkrans says. "There are these fantastic wonders that people don't ever hear about."

The model of the castle depicts a siege, which was a common and bloody practice during the crusades for groups such as the Latins and the Muslims who fought to control the Holy Land, according to exhibit labels.

Beside the castle sprawls the other main attraction in the exhibit: "In the Backstreets of the Bazaar." This model depicts in amazing detail the workings of the public and private lives of the medieval community, truly giving visitors "a moment in time," Ms. Norton says. One can see the butcher shop complete with bloody knives, fruit piled in baskets and elephants carrying men with their trunks.

"We like to tell people about something that will come as a surprise to them," she says.

The European feel of the castles and the Middle Eastern bustle of the bazaar reflect the intersection of two cultures during

the crusades, Ms. Norton says.

Betsy Folkins, an Iowa resident who used to live in the District, lived in the Middle East during the Lebanese civil war. Because of the unrest in Lebanon at that time, she was not permitted to tour many of the castles that are featured in the exhibit. Now, Ms. Folkins has the chance to revisit, if only through the photographs and displays at the exhibit, such famous castles as Belvoir, which stands in modern-day Israel.

"This is just amazing. It's so well-done," Ms. Folkins says.

Certainly the 5½ years the International Castle Research Society spent studying the Crac des Chevaliers shows in the intricate craftsmanship and detail. After the research was complete, the team constructed the model castle and shipped it in sea crates from Germany. The replica possesses the "authenticity and craftsmanship to carry it through," Ms. Norton says.

"If there is a man on that parapet, that's because there really was a man on that parapet," she says.

The museum is the first venue in the United States to feature this castle.

Young Colby is taking advantage of the museum's access into the medieval world, where catapults, moats and knights were a part of everyday life. As he leads his grandmother down the hall, he can be heard explaining the various methods of invasion or defense.

Apparently, some video games do more than numb the brain; some may provoke curiosity about another world.

WHEN YOU GO:

Location: The National Geographic Museum at Explorers Hall is at 1145 17th St. NW, Washington D.C. 20036.

Hours: 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Mondays through Saturdays and holidays; and 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Sundays, through Sept. 4.

Admission: Free

Information: 202/857-7588 or www.nationalgeographic.com/museum.

Notes: Other exhibits at the National Geographic Museum at Explorers Hall include:

■ "Soccer: Planet at Play," through Oct. 29.

■ "One World, One Tribe: Photographs by Reza," through Oct. 9.