



Cache The Fever

Grab a GPS and join the scavenger hunt of the century.

BY CHRISTY KARR

“NOT ALL WHO WANDER ARE LOST,” declared J.R.R. Tolkien in his 1954 work *The Lord of the Rings*. Often our destinations become secondary to what we experience getting there. As boaters, a day spent cruising is part of the sport’s glory—a harmony between man-made technology and the natural world.

Now there’s another such combination, a technological twist on old-fashioned treasure hunting. Armed with GPS devices, people of all ages are participating in a movement that can provide you and your family with an incentive and itinerary to search for carefully placed outdoor containers—many of which are filled with goodies.

This emerging activity is geocaching (pronounced “gee-oh-cashing”), and while those who practice are celebrating the activity’s eighth birthday this month, the game’s roots reach far back in history. Long ago, explorers on extended journeys would place caches of food and supplies in hidden locations for their return. Some of these reserves were communal, supplying those in need with a compass or perhaps a change of socks.

In the 1970s, global positioning system (GPS) technology was developed by the U.S. Department of Defense, relying on a group of satellites orbiting the Earth to provide users with latitude and longitude coordinates to determine location. Until May 1, 2000, these signals had been classified under “selective availability,” producing scrambled readings and an accuracy radius of 328 feet.

But with President Bill Clinton’s deactivation bill, readings became more precise, allowing users to arrive within 82 feet of a waypoint.

This change not only expanded the GPS market but stirred up some creative ideas. Dave Ulmer, a retired computer engineer, reacted with a posting on an online discussion group, stating he was “thinking of burying a five-gallon plastic bucket with a lid at a stash point. Putting in some stuff. Adding a logbook and pencil so visitors can record their find.” He urged readers to “make [their] own stash in a unique location, put in some stuff and a logbook. Post the location on the internet [and] soon we will have thousands of stashes all over the world.” Two days later, the first geocache was hidden near Portland, Oregon—and now the idea has evolved into a high-tech treasure hunt involving more than 1 million people in 220 countries.

“Boaters would be thrilled to find out [geocaching] exists,” says Norm Rogers, owner of a 19-foot 1972 Winner sterndrive. He and his wife Chris are fervent boaters on Lake Minnetonka, just west of Minneapolis. Introduced to geocaching two years ago, Chris admits, “It kind of became an obsession.” With over 200 finds and three placed caches, the Rogers now avidly geocache from their boat. Their blog, Northwoods GeoCats (geocats.blogspot.com), provides accounts of their adventures.

To join in the fun, cachers must have access to the internet and a GPS. To locate a cache, each player must log on to a registered geocaching website to receive waypoints. Many sites, such

Norm Rogers

The Rogers and Taflinger families use their boat as a geocaching base in Door County’s Fish Creek Harbor.

as Groundspeak’s geocaching.com, provide a brief explanation of the surrounding environment, including terrain and difficulty ratings ranging from one star (easy) to five (most challenging). Groundspeak’s site allows users to search for caches by country, state or zip code. The site’s mapping feature reveals 480,000 registered caches, allowing geocachers to plan itineraries based on their location. After loading the coordinates into a GPS and consulting a topographic map, the hunt begins.

A cache is commonly placed in a waterproof container, such as a film canister, pill box, Tupperware or ammunition box, and is often wrapped in camouflage tape. Contents can be toys, disposable cameras, marbles, small change, gift certificates, bobbers, decks of cards, pencils, DVDs, CDs or books. One hunter found a brand-new portable television, while other finds have included an invitation to a home-cooked dinner and a wooden spoon valued at \$1,000. All caches contain a logbook for guests to record their name and the date they found it.

Geocachers often double as environmentalists who contribute to the beautification of natural settings. Some geocaches contain a plastic bag, encouraging players to “cache in, trash out” (CITO), by picking up any litter they encounter while hunting.

Participants are quite innovative when it comes to placement. But whether the cache is floating, submerged underwater or a short walk ashore, inhabitants of the Great Lakes region are sure to be living near one or two. Many are accessible by hiking or driving, but it’s not unusual to find caches on islands, near boat ramps or just offshore. All hunts involving a boat are marked as five-star terrain on geocaching.com.

Some caches are discernible from 20 yards away. Others are placed so well that even the best GPS unit can leave experienced geocachers unable to locate the hidden gem. “Water caches are more the exception than the rule, but recently I [saw] one floating in a little river,” explains cacher Beabird. His “Muggle” name (a term for non-cachers, in a nod to *Harry Potter*) is Chris Plenio. “It was attached to a hunting duck.”

Part of what makes the sport so inviting is that boundaries involving physical ability and age fail to exist. “The people that do geocaching are very varied,” says Plenio, who lives in the Fox River area of Illinois. “I know one who is 82.”

In an age of isolation epitomized by video games, chat rooms and iPods, many parents are finding it more difficult to engage their children in outdoor activities. But Plenio succeeds in using geocaching as a “weekend bonding experience” with his 4-year-old. “He knows it as ‘treasure hunting,’” Plenio says. Although introduced to the activity five years ago, Plenio, a self-proclaimed “gadget freak,” has located approximately 200 caches. He modestly claims that “for geo-

win a portable Garmin GPS



Designed to maintain GPS location in harsh marine environments, the Garmin Colorado 400c provides chart coverage for the U.S. and Bahamas. The 7.3-ounce waterproof device runs on two AA batteries and has 15 hours of life. It offers WAAS, shaded relief and satellite imagery mapping, a 3-inch color screen, an electronic compass, a barometric altimeter, a temperature display and a photo viewer. Its pre-loaded maps provide detail of shorelines, depth contours, navids, harbors and marinas. The device supports geocache downloads from geocaching.com and allows users to store up to 1,000 waypoints.

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catchers, it's not that many. Some have found thousands."

Their adventures typically last about an hour and a half, and often include multiple caches. "When you pick a cache," he says, "more often than not there are a few in the area. It's like a walking tour. You find three, four, five, 10—even 20 in one day."

"It's addicting," says TeacherMike, a member of Seattle-based Groundspeak. "Who would have thought we'd be using billion-dollar satellites to hunt for Tupperware?"

Geocaching has grown to accommodate an assortment of players. The way each person approaches the activity depends on that individual's idea of adventure. For more than 10 years, Chris Rogers and her sisters have gathered in Door County, Wisconsin for one week in June. In the past, the women and their families enjoyed a variety of activities. But Norm says the reunion has become "a geocaching event nowadays," with land and island caches that involve the entire family.

Pat Taflinger and her husband Dave trailer their 21-foot Maxum from Algonquin, Illinois up to the reunion. Their sons,

"Beabird" strategizes with his son Sam and friend Daniel, both 4, on the Fox River. Sam calls geocaching "treasure hunting."

Matt, 14, and Brian, 11, have "always loved scavenger hunts at birthday parties." For her, it's no problem getting her children involved. "That is really what [geocaching] is," Taflinger says. "A great, wonderful scavenger hunt."

"Geocaching gives a destination aspect to boating," says Chris as she describes last summer's Chambers Island hunt. "This particular destination [was] up off the shoreline way deep into the woods." She adds, "It took us 45 minutes to get there by boat. But we spent the whole day out there."

After beaching the Maxum in the cove on the island's north shore, the family started their search for the cache. With a Garmin 12Map GPS, they successfully located an ammunition box after a half-hour of eight people searching. Later, the family enjoyed Chambers' other hidden treasures. "There's a huge lake in the middle of this island that we never would have seen," Chris says. "Geocaching got us off the boat and onto these paths, to this lake we never would have seen from the [water]."

Another family adventure included a trip to Horseshoe Island, part of Wisconsin's Peninsula State Park. Named for its distinctive shape, the isle boasts a deep harbor for docking and easy access by small craft. Though currently home to just one geocache, the clear water provided great conditions for fishing small-mouth bass and swimming. The cache is hidden along a child-friendly one-mile trail.

"Boating provides an extra layer of activity and fun," Norm says. "Island caching is definitely something everyone on a boat should give a whirl." Cruising and geoaching are both habit-forming, he adds. "The combination is great. It's the best of both worlds."

For more on this phenomenon, head to lakelandboating.com/geocaching.

Pointed in the right direction

A GPS is all you need to get started on a geocaching adventure. Trimble offers a Geocache Navigator application available for GPS-enabled cell phones. For less than \$10 a month, the service combines your phone's Assisted GPS capability with its wireless network.

Basic handheld GPS units start at approximately \$100 and offer few features. More expensive devices can cost up to \$1,000 and may include topographical maps, increased memory storage, a fishfinder and a Wide Area Augmentation System (WAAS), which provides accuracy within 10 feet. Factors to consider are mapping capabilities, reception, accuracy, power, durability and storage capacity.

Chris Plenio