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If you hide it, they will come

Geocaching combines the thrill of a treasure hunt with the geek appeal of high-tech gadgets

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Geocaching combines the thrill of a treasure hunt with the geek appeal of high-tech gadgets

I glance at my GPS to make sure I'm on target as I trek through dense bush towards the treasure.

Following the longitude and latitude co-ordinates loaded on my GPS (Global Positioning System) I get closer to the goal: 30 metres, 20 metres, 10 metres...

Most popular GPS units

1. Garmin 60cx (a rugged unit with a great signal lock; the most common GPS used by geocachers) -- \$249.99
2. Garmin Oregon 450 (offers touch-screen) -- \$369.99
3. Garmin eTrex Legend H (low-cost entry model that does mapping) -- \$129.99
4. Garmin 62 (an update to the 60 series, offers paperless geocaching) -- \$359.99
5. DeLorme Earthmate PN-40 -- \$299.99

-- Approximate prices compared among three sources: Canadian Tire, gpscentral.ca and Prairie Geomatics (prairie.mb.ca)

Basic tools

GPS

home Internet connection

pen or pencil (not all caches have a pen or pencil inside)

mosquito repellent

Also recommended

good walking/hiking shoes, especially when tackling trails

long pants to guard against poison ivy

hand sanitizer -- the best pine-tree sap remover

Geoventure

GEOVENTURE is the annual gathering of local geocachers and is hosted by the MBGA (Manitoba Geocachers Association). Each year, they gather at a group-use camp site in Birds Hill Park for two nights of camping and two days of geocaching activities. This year, Geoventure is Aug. 20-22. More information can be found on their website, mbgeocaching.ca

My pace quickens.

I follow the directional arrow until it leads me to a group of thick trees in the middle of nowhere.

As the GPS displays two metres from the target and then one, I realize I need to reach into the mix of leaves and twigs inside the trunk of the main tree to locate the bounty: a small plastic container covered in camouflage tape.

Inside I find a log sheet where others have made their mark, and trinkets including toy cars and small figurines.

I write my geocache name and take a car. In exchange, I leave a travel-sized bottle of Off for a future hunter.

I'm now officially a geocacher.

The technology-driven treasure hunt is the fastest-growing outdoor hobby in the world, according to Manitoba Geocachers Association president Mike Neale.

"It is a worldwide scavenger hunt," said Neale -- known as Glacier_ice in the geocache world -- during a demonstration at Little Mountain Park.

"Remember when you were a kid and you would play a game where your friend hides something and it's your job to find it? It's that, but on steroids and with technology."

The official definition describes it as a high-tech treasure-hunting game played throughout the world by adventure seekers equipped with GPS devices. The idea is to locate hidden containers, called geocaches, outdoors and then share your experiences online.

All you need to get started are a few basic tools: handheld GPS unit (Neale recommends the Garmin 60cx, which retails for around \$250); home Internet connection to collect and track cache co-ordinates; a pen or pencil; and mosquito repellent.

The relatively new pastime is quickly gaining fans. There are approximately 500 members in the Manitoba association and 1,200 people who geocache in the province, Neale says.

"We've seen some fairly steady growth... 10 per cent per year," Neale notes.

There are more than 1,000,000 geocaches throughout the world that range in size and difficulty.

There are two ratings used to classify each cache: terrain and difficulty.

The terrain rating charts the land around the cache and is subjective to the local environment.

"In Manitoba, we don't have a lot of hills, so a (level) 5 might be a difficult hike that takes you through some nice elevation. But, that sort of terrain translated to B.C., for example, would be worth a 3.

Level 1 is considered wheelchair-friendly, Neale points out.

Difficulty is determined by a number of factors, including the size of the cache, the use of puzzles to obtain co-ordinates and the depth or intricacy of camouflage.

Neale says there are a couple of unique elements that set geocaching apart from traditional scavenger hunts.

The first is the concept of trading items found in caches.

"The rule is you trade something of equal or greater value," Neale says.

The second is the use of trackable items called travel bugs.

"These have unique identifiers on them that you can follow as it goes from cache to cache," Neale says.

"When you find one of these, you log (on the web) that you found it and then you move it somewhere else."

Some of the trackable caches move thousands of kilometres, Neale says.

Because geocaching is just taking off in Manitoba, Neale says it's important to follow a key rule when you're narrowing in on a cache -- don't make it obvious if you are in the presence of non-geocachers. The community refers to these people as "muggles," a term borrowed from the Harry Potter franchise.

"When you're hunting and you have someone around, you need to be aware that they could be watching what you are doing. You don't want them coming back later and taking that container," Neale says.

The Manitoba association is hosting their yearly gathering, called GeoVenture, at Birds Hill Park Aug. 20-22.

To sign up or to learn more about geocaching in Manitoba, go to their website: mbgeocaching.ca.

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