

Geocaching combines technology, the outdoors and the spirit of the hunt

May 18 2010, By Buzz McClain

It's been 10 years since HackAttack and Ma Bell planted one of the longest-active geocaches in the country and the oldest in Texas -- known as Tombstone, in Arlington -- but since then it has been found 342 times and counting.

Gurphamily has been there. So have Scooby Drew and Mohina, who lost Voodoo the Traveling Flamingo on the way. SurrenderTheBooty made it his 4,000th cache. Suchmann, Zeppocruz and techiegirl64 have also been to Tombstone.

So has GeologyBarbie, aka Brittany Meagher, who visited the cache at night, despite the rumors that it's haunted. "It was a bit creepy," she allows. "And a sad story. All those poor babies. But it's kind of interesting that it's right there in the middle of the school."

OK, wait.

If all of this sounds like a foreign language to you, you must be a geomuggle, that is, someone who does not participate in the hiking hobby known as geocaching ("cache" is pronounced "cash"). In a nutshell, geocaching combines hiking and technology as participants -- cachers -- set out to locate hidden objects or landmarks using hand-held [GPS](#) units to zero in on coordinates posted on Internet geocaching websites, the most popular of which is www.geocaching.com.

You use a portable GPS device to look for the targets. When they find

them, they sign the customary logbook using their geocaching noms de plume -- which explains the whimsical nicknames -- and replace whatever trinket may be in the box with one of their own (though not all caches have trinkets). When they get back to their computer, they note their discovery and show their appreciation with a heartfelt "TFTC" (Thanks for the Cache).

In the decade since the first caches were planted and sought, Tombstone among them, the informal game has garnered a worldwide participant base of an estimated 5 million. (Tombstone, by the way, is in the graveyard of the Berachah Industrial Home for the Redemption and Protection of Erring Girls, which operated between 1903 to 1942; the cache is the marker of one of the infants buried there.)

"People who are already hikers, it gives them something to augment their activity," says (real name) Harry Downer, aka Roland -- Oso, president of the Texas Geocaching Association. "For others, it gets them up off the couch." The Texas group's membership includes "doctors, lawyers, factory workers, outdoor enthusiasts. ... It's a wide variety."

Downer, 44, lives in Garland, Texas, and caches "a couple of times a week, but we have members who go out every single day," he says. "A few people I know are on a two- or three-a-day caching spree. It gets pretty addictive for some of us."

Downer, who works as a mechanical designer-drafter for a company that makes light systems for mass-transit vehicles, picked up the hobby in 2003 when looking for details on orienteering as a merit-badge counselor for a Boy Scout troop. He tried caching for himself -- and successfully found caches -- and has been caching ever since.

Meagher, a 26-year old geology student in the master's program at the University of Texas-Arlington, has been caching since December, after

finally getting a GPS for Christmas.

"It started as a solo thing, taking family members and my dogs," she says. Although she still caches alone on occasion, she's generally with other cachers as her social circle grows with each hike. "Sometimes you meet (other cachers) on the trail and introduce yourself."

"Swag," slang for "freebies" and is the common term to describe the trinkets left in caches for trading. "I'm very big into the trading," she says. "I know kids love the stuff so I always do it for the families. But I'm only collecting specifically Beanie Babies these days; stuffed animals are common things people place in caches."

Meagher points out to muggles not to take the containers, which sometimes happens. "The rule is, put it back better than you found it," she says. "It's no fun having a bunch of DNFs (Did Not Find)."

Some caches are "virtual" caches, without physical containers. "A cache can be about making it difficult to find or it can be just bringing you to a spot -- a waterfall, for instance -- that you didn't know about, or highlighting a cemetery or historical plaque," says Downer, who has hidden about 50 caches himself. "Some are about the location, some are about the cache and some are about a 'tricky hide.'"

With his 4-year-old \$200 Garmin Legend C GPS navigator, his BlackBerry (for referencing caching pages for extra clues) and his pen (not all caches are large enough to hold pens for signing logbooks), Downer occasionally attempts to locate a difficult cache "20 times before I find it" and sometimes comes home "with my head down." But chin up, there's always another cache.

All you really need to be a geocacher, Downer says, is "a sense of adventure and a GPS." Those hand-held units fetch anywhere from \$80

for a gray screen that can't download maps -- still effective -- to "\$600 for all the bells and whistles you could want."

Apple's iPhone has a GPS application that is suitable for geocaching, but Downer warns that the app "tends to drain the battery quite quickly," making it more suitable for short hikes not far from parking lots rather than distance-intensive hikes.

Mass caches happen on occasion, such as the "Texas Challenge," with 300 to 500 turning up at a state park for a weekend-long camping event each March; there are hundreds of caches and dozens of teams competing for points. Next year's Challenge is in Houston; in 2012 it will be in D-FW. Last month the Texas State Parks and Wildlife Department, working with the cache association, set 13 caches in 13 state parks in North Texas, in a program intended to popularize the activity; see details at www.tpwd.state.tx.us/geocaching/ .

Among Meagher's memorable caches is "a really great one in Farmersville, northeast of Dallas on the Chaparral Trail," she says. "It was a group CITO -- Cache In, Trash Out -- and we hiked about eight miles; I met a lot of people and we picked up a lot of trash that needed to be done."

And late last month, during a hunt for a cache in River Legacy Park, "a little jungle area in the middle of Dallas and Fort Worth," she says, she spotted a bobcat. "He was right by the trail, just hanging out. He was really pretty. I wish I had my camera."

BEFORE YOU CACHE IN

Before you head out on a geocache, take some advice from Bryan Roth, one of the authors of "The Complete Idiot's Guide to Geocaching" and vice president and co-founder of Groundspeak Inc., which maintains the

geocaching.com website.

Create an account on www.geocaching.com. Choose a short, fun username for your account that will be displayed on the website as well as written on all of your geocache logs. Get started by searching on the "Hide and Seek a Cache" page. Chances are, there will be at least one cache within a mile or so of your house. (We just looked to see what was near the Fort Worth Star-Telegram newsroom at 400 W. Seventh St. and were surprised to see that we are surrounded by dozens of hidden caches!)

Ask the experts. If you know someone who geocaches already, tag along with them for a few finds. This can help you decide what type of GPS device and other supplies you may need for your geocaching adventures.

Start off easy. For your first search it's best to look only for geocaches with difficulty/terrain ratings of 1/1 (on a scale of 5). This will give you a better chance of success with your first geocache.

When you come to the cache location, use the cache details, the hint and "geo-sense" to find the container. Think about where you would hide a cache and that just might be the location. Geocaches are often hidden in plain sight! Sign the cache log and then replace the container exactly as you found it for the next geocachers to find.

Be prepared. Tell friends and family where you're going and how long you expect to be gone. Always bring water, extra batteries and a compass in case your [GPS device](#) fails. Mark your car location as a waypoint so you can find your way back if you head off trail.

CACHING-IN ON TRAVEL

Geocachers are used to traveling to destinations to find caches they learn

about on the Internet; now there are travel destinations catering to cachers. The Spa at Loretto, a boutique hotel in Santa Fe, N.M., has launched a "staged" geocaching experience by Santa Fe Mountain Adventures, in which the outfitters hid native beads in six caches throughout the Sangre de Cristo Mountains.

By the end of the successful hunt, women -- this is a "girlfriends getaway package" -- create a souvenir necklace or bracelet from the beads.

The idea, says a hotel spokesman, is to "give participants a sampling of what a geocaching experience would be like to inspire them to take it up as a hobby in the future."

For information about the Spa at Loretto's geocaching program, call 877-857-5685 or visit innatloretto.com.

HOW THE GPS WORKS

Brittany Meagher says all portable GPS units will show latitude and longitude. Some in-car units may have a geocaching mode, too. More expensive GPS devices will have more options and be more reliable, but they'll also be pricier. (She uses a GPSMAP 60CSx, which allows her to plug the GPS into her computer and download coordinates directly from geocaching.com.) But most of the time, she says, you won't be looking at latitude and longitude on your screen -- you will be using the GPS distance display and compass screens to find your cache (for example, the screen may say, "Go 513 ft NW"). Brittany also points out that every unit has an error value, so remember that the person who hid the cache might be a bit off on the latitude and longitude and so might you. She says, "This means that when your GPS says you are right at the coordinates, the cache might still be within a 30-foot range based on what the error is."

For more tips on buying a good geocaching GPS, go to www.geocaching.com/about/buying.aspx.

For a video demonstration on what a geocaching GPS's screen will show you -- maps, comments about caches, etc., go to www8.garmin.com/outdoor/geocaching/O . It's Garmin's commercial site, but you will get a good overview of what to expect.

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Distributed by McClatchy-Tribune Information Services.

Citation: Geocaching combines technology, the outdoors and the spirit of the hunt (2010, May 18) retrieved 18 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2010-05-geocaching-combines-technology-outdoors-spirit.html>

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