



# VOYAGEUR TRAIL NEWS

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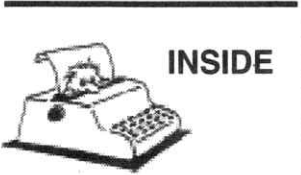
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*The Voyageur Trail Association is a non-profit, volunteer group dedicated to finding and maintaining a public hiking trail along the northern shores of Lakes Superior and Huron, from Thunder Bay to South Baymouth on Manitoulin Island.*

*The VTA is a member of Hike Canada En Marche, Hike Ontario, Ontario Trails Council, and Trans Canada Trail.*



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## GEOCACHING-HIGH-TECH TREASURE HUNTING

by Steve Dominy

Okay picture this. You're spending a few days in Fredericton, New Brunswick. Your work is finished for the day, you've had a good meal, and you feel like taking a walk to get some fresh air. You could strike out in a random direction from your hotel and follow a circular route; however, you don't know the area very well. Then you remember that you packed your GPS receiver, and can log onto the Web through the hotel's Internet Café. A few minutes later you have downloaded onto your GPS the locations for a number of geocaches, within a few kilometres of the hotel, and you strike out to find some. Not only does your walk now have new purpose, your GPS unit will tell you how far you are from your hotel and in which direction you need to walk to get back to your point of origin!

Sound far-fetched? Think again. Last November when on a business trip, a colleague of mine from Alberta spent each evening using his GPS unit to hunt down treasure hidden around Fredericton's downtown. I joined him one evening and actually found my first geocache, that he had been unable to locate.

### What is Geocaching?

Geocaching is a relatively new activity that combines hiking, treasure-hunting and a Global Positioning System (GPS). In the previous newsletter I described what GPS is and how to select a receiver. Besides being useful to keep you from being lost, a GPS unit can be used to find treasure hidden all over the world.

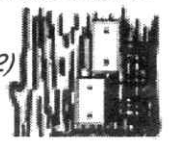
Geocaching involves two separate parties, which are composed either of individuals or

groups. One party hides a cache anywhere in the world and records the latitudinal and longitudinal coordinates using a portable GPS device. The cache is usually composed of a small, watertight plastic container that houses some small items such as key chains, trinkets or coins. The coordinates and related information regarding the location of the hidden cache are publicized on an Internet site. Geocachers search for these hidden caches using their own portable GPS devices in conjunction with maps and clues. The coordinates will get them within a few metres of the cache, and then they start an intensive search.

When they finally discover the cache, they may take one or a few of the items and leave a few different ones for future geocachers. Items traded are usually of equal or greater value. They sign their user name and date in a log book/sheet contained with the treasure, and log their visit on-line. They are expected to re-hide the cache after finding it. □Some enthusiasts simply enjoy the thrill of the hunt. They take nothing and leave nothing. Basic rules include never leaving food in a cache (animals will almost certainly find it), don't bury it, and avoid putting dangerous items into a cache.

As geocaching becomes more and more popular, some participants are adding new levels of complexity to keep it interesting. For example, some geocachers hide caches in particularly difficult locations such as underwater or up in a tree. Some geocachers hide caches in series such

(Continued on page 2)



## Geocaching *(cont'd from page 1)*

that a first cache includes instructions to discover another cache, and so on. Travel Bugs and GeoCoins—numbered metal tags or coins that can be registered by the owner and their movements tracked on-line—can be hidden (see Website for more information). Some folks will select a future date when they will hide their cache, and post that on the Website. The game for some is then to be the first to find it.

### How can I get started?

Anyone can create an account and view all the caches in their area by simply inputting a postal or zip code. The site will show how far a cache is from your location (in order from nearest to farthest), when it was placed, the level of difficulty of finding it, a few clues, when it was last found, and other information. There is plenty of information for beginners on the Website (geocaching.com is the most popular).

### Who is doing this activity?

As of March 14, 2006, there were 244,254 active caches in 221 countries! Within a mere 10 mile / 16 kilometre radius of my house in Sault Ste. Marie there were 45 caches! Expanding that circle to 50 miles / 80 kilometres, there were 161 caches. This is hard to believe given that the activity was only born in 2000 in Oregon when the first cache was hidden and the GPS coordinates posted on-line.

Geocachers tend to be an environmentally-conscious bunch. They have established formal events such as Cache In, Trash Out for picking up trash along trails in parks and other popular geocaching locations. Parks Canada and Ontario Parks both have policies prohibiting the placement of physical geocaches in parks, as it is at odds with their mandate. Only virtual caches (existing landmarks such as a natural feature or statue, for which you have to answer a very specific question to provide the "cache" owner proof that you were there) are permitted in such parks. Some Conservation Authorities have developed guidelines for the placement of physical geocaches.

Granted, geocaching is not for everyone. There is a bit of cult around this activity to the point of a new vocabulary for geocachers. For example, a geomuggle, is defined on [www.geocaching.com](http://www.geocaching.com) as [a non-geocacher]. Based on "Muggle" from the Harry Potter series, which is a non-magical person. Usually this term is used after a non geocacher looks puzzled at a geocacher making circles with their GPS receiver, or when a non-geocacher accidentally finds a cache. Geomuggles are mostly harmless.

### What's in it for me?

If you're looking to add a new dimension to your outings, this may be the activity for you. There are no age limits. World travellers are doing this as a way to explore a new territory and have some fun at the same time. I foresee a time in the not too distant future when a large percentage of Voyageur Trail users will be geocachers. Even if the treasure is not found, you



will have explored a new area, enjoyed a pleasant outing, and perhaps met some new friends along the way.

### Final thoughts

You may be wondering if I have purchased my own GPS unit yet. The answer is no. I've narrowed down my selection to two or three models and am waiting until the spring to make this purchase. However, I am already thinking ahead to a planned family summer trip to England and France when I can put the new purchase to work and explore some out-of-the-way places at the same time. Now that I've found my first geocache (albeit, in Fredericton), I'm rather intrigued by the activity and plan to become more active.

The Voyageur Trail Association is continually striving to attract new users, and this activity may be a way to introduce a new group to our wonderful trail system. I advise as a courtesy to ask permission of a private landowner before placing a geocache, if possible. However, if placed close to the existing trail, I suspect it would rarely raise objections. I'd be happy to hear from any of our landowners on this subject.

Watch for a pending announcement of a geocaching conference in the Sault.

**Other resources:** Ontario Geocaching Association  
[www.ontgeocaching.com/](http://www.ontgeocaching.com/)



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