

Discovering Fun with Geocaching

By Mike Hagen

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I've always been fascinated by hidden treasure, but doubt if I'll ever find a sunken Spanish Galleon or lost Peruvian city. Fortunately, I can still enjoy the thrill of discovery with geocaching. It's true that I won't find gold doubloons in a geocache and that their location is given in precise coordinates not cryptic drawings on a faded map. But discovering a geocache is almost as much fun as finding Bluebeard's treasure!

Finding our first geocache

A few weeks ago I took a large group of people out on a geocaching adventure. We logged onto the Geocaching Web site www.geocaching.com and typed our zip code into the site's geocache locator. Surprisingly, there were over 25 caches within a few miles of our home. We picked two of the most interesting looking ones and printed off the clue sheets for our intrepid group of explorers.



Participants on the geocache adventure. From left: Doug Hagen, Scott Hibbs, Heather Hibbs, Dan Frohlich, Matthew Hagen, Teresa Frohlich, Stephanie Hagen

I chose to use my HP Jornada Pocket PC loaded with Maptech topographical software www.maptech.com. This moving map software shows your current location and your destination superimposed on a topographical map. The GPS unit I used was the Magellan GPS 310 (www.magellan.com.au) which was attached via a serial cable to the Pocket PC.

Our group split up into two teams and set off in separate cars to find the first geocache. Using my GPS-equipped Jornada and the Maptech software I was able to quickly pick the best roads to get there. The first geocache was located in a 368-acre park next to a popular walking trail. Based on the clues from the geocaching Web site, we knew the geocache was located

in the brush, so we all began hacking around in the weeds to find it. After about 30 minutes of searching, we found the little box and opened it up to see what was inside. There was a small toy horse, a thimble and a plastic disk from a toy gun. I took the toy horse and left one Japanese Yen. The group of us signed the logbook, and then carefully re-hid the box where we found it.

The second geocache was located in the middle of a city. We chose it because we knew that it would take some cunning to find it. The two teams took off in hot pursuit of the treasure. We arrived at the same parking lot and eventually found the tiny cache in the middle of the parking lot. It was a film canister with rice and a quarter in it. I took the quarter and left another Japanese Yen. This cache was too small to have a logbook.

Correcting for GPS error

After finishing our adventure, we went home and logged back onto Geocaching.com to post our comments on the caches. We wrote about what we took, what we left and about our experiences. The neat thing about geocaching is that it's a community experience.

We didn't know until later that day, but all three of the GPS units we were using, including my Magellan GPS 310, displayed slightly different locations for the same coordinates. This made the search even more difficult because everyone thought that their GPS was correct. This problem could have been eliminated by "calibrating" the GPS units before hand. This involves going to a well-known landmark (i.e. the Space Needle or a prominent mountain top) and comparing the actual latitude and longitude of the landmark with the ones displayed on your GPS unit. The SwopNet Waypoint DataBank www.swopnet.com/waypoints or the Waypoint Registry Database www.waypoint.org/gps4-map.html list the coordinates of significant locations in the U.S. and around the world. Once you find your GPS error, you can add or subtract latitude and longitude values so that your GPS is accurate for the day's adventure. Keep in mind that GPS error is constantly changing and your calibration will only be valid for a short period of time.

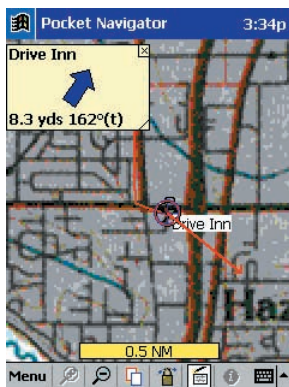


Scott Hibbs inspecting the Geocache and his PPC. Teresa Frohlich (background) was one of the geocache adventure participants.

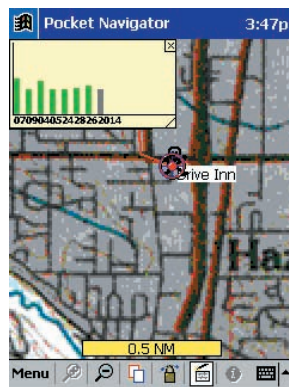
Geocaching around the world

As I mentioned earlier, Geocaching is a worldwide phenomenon. A quick search on Google.com will bring up geocaching sites in Germany, UK, Turkey, Canada and Australia. You can count on there being geocaches just about anywhere you go. For example, Geocaching.com listed 225 geocaching locations in Italy. Spice up your next European vacation by planning to visit a geocache or two.

Geocaching is a great way to spend a Saturday afternoon or even an entire vacation. It's an adventure for the young, the old, and everyone in between. You probably won't find a pirate's treasure, but you will find a lot of fun.



Direction finder showing distance to geocache



Geocache location with satellite track



Geocache track in park



Overall city view of geocache track