

Finders Keepers:
Kids and adults alike
can enjoy this adventure
game. Prizes are typically
small tokens.



Cool

Geocaching adds an element of adventure wherever you go

STORY BY GLENN KAUFMANN

PHOTOGRAPHS BY STEVE LARESE

I had come to St. Lucia in the Eastern Caribbean on business, but work would have to wait. My first priority was to go on a treasure hunt.

Within minutes of checking in to my hotel, I grabbed my handheld GPS unit, looked up some coordinates, and hailed a cab for Pigeon Island, overlooking Rodney Bay. When I arrived, the GPS indicated I was within 1,500 feet of the treasure—straight up a hill. As I labored up that steep incline I looked down on a pair of surfers, and I thought how stupid it'd be to fall off a cliff on my first day in paradise. But the treasure was out there, and I was determined to find it.

It was all part of an outdoor adventure game called geocaching, a hi-tech version of the old-fashioned treasure hunt. And I was hooked on it. Anyone can participate; by some estimates, 2 to 3 million people play and approximately 870,000 treasure chests, or "caches," are hidden around the world—the cache in St. Lucia being one of them. A cache can be as simple as a hide-a-key box with a log sheet inside or as elaborate as a metal box containing inexpensive trinkets and a logbook.

Before leaving home, I checked the website geocaching.com to find out if any caches were hidden on



Backyard Treasures

With more than 5,000 registered caches, the Land of Enchantment is filled with hidden prizes waiting to be found. But that leaves one question: where to start?

Websites

The sport's main source for caches is at geocaching.com. You can search by zip code or city, then share your experiences and photos online. State events can be found at nmgeocaching.com, including the New Mexico Challenge, where hunters can earn a medallion for finding special caches in each of the state's 33 counties.

GPS Classes

REI stores in Albuquerque (505-247-1191) and Santa Fe (505-982-3557) offer clinics in GPS navigation. The cost: \$20 for co-op members, \$25 for non-members, free for those buying a GPS unit. rei.com.

State Parks

Caches are located in all 34 parks in New Mexico's State Parks system. A list of coordinates can be found at nmparks.com.

Santa Fe Geocaching Challenge

Players are given coordinates for eight popular sites around the historic downtown area. Those who complete the challenge receive a gift. GPS rentals are available. Santa Fe Visitors Center. (800) 777-2489; santafe.org.

Cache



St. Lucia, and I noted the latitude/longitude coordinates. My handheld GPS unit would guide me to within a few feet of the cache, and from there, I'd have to rely on written clues (supplied on the website) to uncover the exact location. Once I found the cache, I'd remove an item as a keepsake and replace it with an item I had brought along.

Later, I'd log my visit on geocaching.com so the cache owner would know the cache is still active.

The very first cache was hidden in May 2000 by GPS enthusiast Dave Ulmer, a computer consultant. He put a bucket containing prize items such as videos and software in the woods near Beaver Creek, Oregon, and posted its coordinates on an internet GPS users' group. Within three days, others read about his stash, located the container, and shared their experiences online. A few months later, Jeremy Irish, a Seattle web developer, created the website geocaching.com to manage the game for hobbyists. Eventually, people around the world caught on and the game has been going ever since.

Now, no matter where I travel, geocaching adds an element of adventure. I've found a cache in a crumbling old fort in the Caribbean, in a playground in Atlanta, and in a snow-covered park in Oslo, Norway. Playing provides a great excuse to explore roads less traveled while away from home and also makes for a fun outing in one's own city.

Over the holidays, my wife, Kalpana, and I went geocaching with my 12-year-old niece, Melissa, and 7-year-old nephew, Brian. Checking geocaching.com together,

we found three caches within five miles of their suburban home in Georgia. One cache was stocked by a 6-year-old girl who'd hidden it with her father.

We decided to look for that one first.

Peeking under swing sets and the seesaw at a playground turned up nothing. Then, under a tree in the distance, something caught Melissa's eye. "I found it! I found it!" she shouted, ruining any chance of keeping the cache a secret from non-geocaching civilians (referred to as muggles). The kids traded an action figure that they had brought with them for a rubber ball that was in the box, and they signed the log. Before we reached the next cache, they were already talking about hiding their own.

In a world where too many conveniences and too little time afford us few true adventures, geocaching is a way to create adventure wherever you go. I never did find the cache in St. Lucia. But as I sat in meeting rooms over the next few days, I secretly relished that I had gotten a perspective of the island that perhaps my colleagues hadn't, thanks to that one simple detour up the hill. ☼

GLENN KAUFMANN is a freelance writer in Bloomington, Indiana.

AAA members can save 15 percent on Magellan GPS units. For more information, go to AAA.com/gps.



Cache Marks the Spot:
Caches can be camouflaged or hidden in plain sight.

Vacation Tours

Santa Fe Mountain Adventures customizes vacation tours for adults and families that include geocaching, as well as mountain biking, horseback riding, and southwestern cultural activities. (505) 988-4000 or (800) 965-4010; santafemountainadventures.com.

Ruidoso Caches

This mountain town has planted half a dozen caches in scenic and historic sites, with plans to expand to 20 or 30 caches. Look for caches with the name Sky Hook on geocaching.com.

Bed-and-Breakfast

Guests staying at Casitas de Gila near Silver City have a chance to search for several caches hidden in the B&B's 260 acres overlooking Bear Creek and the Gila Wilderness. GPS units are available for rent. Room rates start at \$150. (877) 923-4827; casitasdegila.com.

Rankings

For those who get really serious about the sport, there is a website that tracks who has found the most caches. A retiree from Rio Rancho with the handle Zuni Kid tops the list in New Mexico, with 7,300-plus finds credited. Cacherstats.com/New_Mexico1.html.

—Paul Zieke