



a high-tech treasure hunt

BY THOMAS J. LEGGETT

Ever wonder why many children's games involve hiding or searching for something hidden? Hide-and-seek and scavenger hunts are among the games that entertain children by invoking their natural curiosity. While people often put aside these games with age, most never lose the sense of delight and satisfaction that comes from seeking out the unseen. This helps explain the rising popularity of geocaching, a high-tech treasure hunting game that lets adults and children explore gems hidden throughout the world.

Participants use a GPS device to locate hidden containers, called geocaches, and then share the experience with other geocachers online. A person can place a cache anywhere in the world, pinpoint its location using GPS technology, and post it on a geocaching website for others to find. The

containers vary in size and shape but always hold a logbook for visitors to record their finds and share information with others. Many caches also contain items for trade—anything from a can of beans to kid's toys—with the understanding that visitors may take something as long as they leave something of equal or greater value. And what many “muggles,” or non-geocachers, do not realize is that these hidden caches are literally everywhere. There are currently more than 750,000 active caches hidden around the world, with hundreds in the New Orleans area.

Although geocaching supply sites sell containers and other equipment, there's no established standard. The containers range in size from a large 5-gallon bucket to tiny “nano” containers about the size of a bolt, but the most popular ones include .35mm film canisters,

magnetic key holders and bison tubes, small water-tight capsules that fit nearly anywhere.

Having found over 4,300 caches all over the country, Henry Leissing, 62, and his wife, Marilyn, are considered New Orleans' most experienced geocachers. Chief engineer at One Canal Place in the CBD, Leissing became interested in geocaching after reading about it in 2002. Last summer, Leissing and his wife drove over 8,000 miles to locate caches in 19 states. This summer, Leissing is planning a trip to the Northeast, where finding caches in Maine will give him the distinction of having geocached in all 50 states.

“My wife and I found our first cache in March of 2003, and it was love at first sight,” he says. “We love the outdoors and traveling, so this fits beautifully with our lifestyle.”

The Leissingers discovered their inaugural cache behind some rocks at Indian Beach in Bucktown, then another behind some bricks at Old Spanish Fort in Bayou St. John. Because there were so few local caches then, they traveled to places where the game was more established. Nashville, for example, was one of the first cities where geocaching caught on, and it remains a mecca for geocachers. Although more caches can be found in urban areas, people frequently hide them off the beaten paths, sometimes near hiking or biking trails, historic monuments, quaint cemeteries, old homes, famous plantations or other interesting destinations.

“When they put caches out, they try to take you to places you wouldn’t normally go,” Leissinger says. “They take you to hundreds of places that sometimes locals don’t even know about.”

By leading visitors into relatively uncharted territory, geocaching can enhance travel, but it can also accompany outdoor fitness and exercise. Each cache is assigned a number rating from 1 to 5. A cache with a rating of 1.1 is easy, while a 5.5 is extremely difficult, sometimes even requiring climbing, repelling, boating or skiing gear. The majority of caches are accessible by car or a short walk, but many are hidden along rugged terrain. People wanting a greater physical challenge can adjust their online queries to access only coordinates with higher difficulty ratings. Because of this variety, the game offers something for people of all ages and fitness levels.

“It’s a positive, good, clean sport you can do with your whole family,” says Rich Trahan, 40, an artist and engineer from Mandeville. “It gets you outside and moving around looking for a hidden treasure. Me, my wife and daughter go geocaching at least once a week together.”

In addition to locating more than 880 caches in 10 states since 2006, Trahan has spent thousands of dollars and hundreds of hours constructing and placing geocaches for others to find. He has created caches for the St. Tammany Parish Tourism Commission as well as artistic caches featured in art festivals. He recently created LouisianaGeocaching.org for the Southeast Louisiana Geocachers group, which meets the second Wednesday of every month.

A working GPS device with state maps is required, making it the most obvious up-front cost for beginners. Decent units range from \$150 to \$600 (depending on accuracy, dependability and other add-ons). Leissinger spent about \$270 for his device and another \$80 to buy current state maps. Because all cache coordinates are posted on Geocaching.com, a comprehensive site developed by a Seattle-based web designer, a \$30 annual membership fee gives users access to all cache sites worldwide. To expedite the process, users may want to make a \$30 one-time payment



for a Geocaching Swiss Army Knife (GSAK), a tool that allows caches to be automatically sent to a GPS unit and a PDA device, meaning geocachers can travel paperless. When going “into the field,” Leissinger recommends bringing a walking stick, flashlight, hiking boots and an extension mirror to look underneath objects. With relatively small entry costs, the greatest expense stems from traveling.

“The biggest cost for me is gasoline,” Leissinger said. “Last summer, I drove 8,000 miles because I enjoy doing this so much, but the cost of gas added up.”

Leissinger, who uses the moniker “Bamboozle” and often presides as the elder statesman of the Southeast Louisiana Geocachers, is known for establishing one of the world’s most unique caches, located on the roof of Canal Place in New Orleans. For those entering the building in search of this cache, Leissinger personally escorts them to the roof and gives them a history of the city to accompany a panoramic view of the French Quarter, CBD and Mississippi River. Because of its uniqueness, geocachers from around the world seek it, and many reserve it for one of their “milestone caches,” one that bears some kind of numerical significance for the individual.

Kurt Hettinger, 44, a.k.a. “Hedge,” a geocacher from Bakersfield, California with three years experience, sought out caches during a recent business trip to New Orleans. Although he didn’t make it to the Canal Place cache, he considered one of Bamboozle’s caches called Shady Rest one of the more noteworthy in the city. Other standouts included Menu Venue by Big Doggy, placed right outside K Paul’s restaurant, and another called “Ain’t Dere No More,” a well-camouflaged hide in Audubon Park dedicated to the late Saints broadcaster Buddy Diliberto.

“It’s a mix of technology and the web, out-and-about exercise, a virtual community with other oddball puzzlers, and a dash of old-fashioned sleuthing,” Hettinger says. “It’s a wacky little hobby whose time has come for those who both embrace the computer but also wish to get off their behinds and out into the real world.”

While in New Orleans, Hettinger also took time to train for a marathon. To make his 14-mile run more interesting, he ran from cache to cache along a route that would have otherwise remained unknown to him.

“I saw lots of little sights and spots of local color that I’d never have experienced otherwise as an out-of-state visitor,” he said. “Bamboozle has a nice string of caches that led me to a gorgeous evening with a sunset on the river—without caching, I would’ve been stuck on the hotel treadmill or milling around Bourbon Street.”