

Geocaching

The Search for Hidden Treasure

Armed with a GPS and a set of coordinates, the game is on

BY DIANE SELKIRK
PHOTOS BY EVAN GATEHOUSE



According to the Global Positioning System (GPS), we were exactly where we were supposed to be. The problem was we were in the middle of a big expanse of empty dock—perfect if the goal had been to tie up our boat but we had a different plan. Like modern day pirates, my family has taken up treasure hunting, right down to the treasure map, and ours was a quest for a mysterious cache.

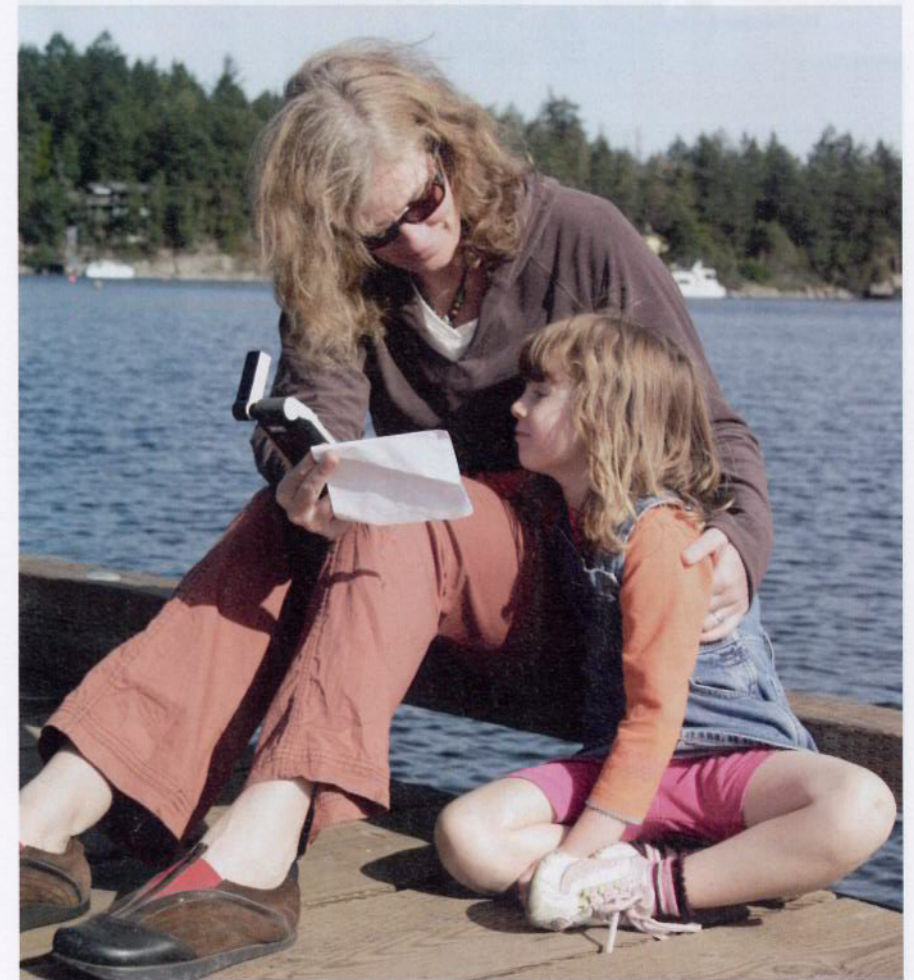
THE HUNT One sunny afternoon, we set sail for the Gulf Islands. Evan was on the bow with the telescope pressed to his eye (actually, he was holding a GPS), and as we neared shore our daughter Maia hoisted the Jolly Roger and armed herself (well, she really gathered up trinkets to use as trade items). I gave the treasure map (a computer print out) one final look and we made our way to land.

Following a compass course of 145 degrees, we headed down the beach and then made our stealthy way through town, taking a short cut through a store and finally ending up here in the middle of the dock—completely perplexed. Maia lay on her stomach and looked over the side, deep into the depths. “Do the directions say anything about getting wet?” she asked.

I looked over the directions. “A bit nautical, but no longer buoyant,” read the clue. We scoured the dock one more time before all three of us looked over the side, wondering. Then I had a thought, “Maybe we should double check that we entered the right coordinates into the GPS.”

This proved to be the problem. Comparing the printout to the GPS, we discovered we needed to change a 1 to a 7. The correction sent us back up the dock and over to the beach where we found an old hull. Maia looked low, Evan looked high and I located the loot. Tucked up in the bow was the treasure chest—in this case, an old plastic box filled with dollar store trinkets. Maia searched through the box and traded a bead necklace for a container of slime. Then we filled out the logbook and—after a careful check for muggles in the area—carefully replaced the treasure.

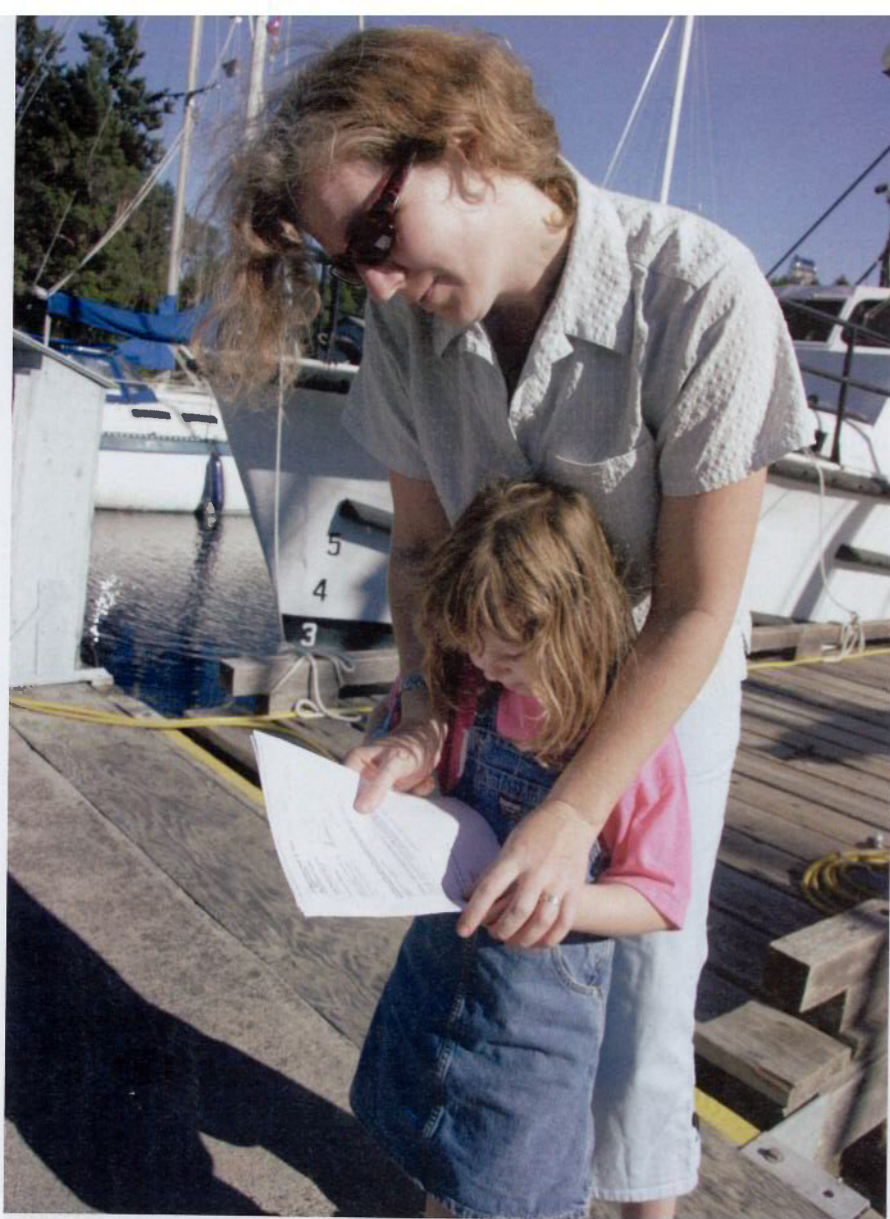
HOW IT WORKS “Muggle,” a word inspired by Harry Potter books, is also a code word in geocaching used to describe



Diane and Maia geocaching the dock

an innocent bystander who wouldn't have a clue what we were doing even if he caught us in the act. Little would he know that we were geocaching, meaning we were on a high-tech treasure hunt armed with a GPS and a set of coordinates. Once the domain of computer geeks who exchanged the glowing face of their computer for that of a GPS, geocaching has evolved into a universal sport and has become popular with everyone from truckers trying to break up a long haul to hikers looking for an excuse to climb a mountain. All sorts of people are heading

out, GPS in hand, in search of treasure. This is how it works: Cachers find a place to hide a weatherproof container of goodies and a logbook. Then they post the coordinates to the stash, along with a write-up, which provides information about the treasure site and a few clues to help searchers find the item. To search for a cache, treasure hunters visit www.geocaching.com and look for caches in the area they plan to visit, on terrain that ranges from easy to challenging. Once you select the caches that interest you, you can



Finding our location before beginning a search

download the information and start your hunt.

The idea for geocaching was born on May 2, 2000 because, as many boaters know, at midnight on May 1 of that year U.S. President Bill Clinton had Selective Availability turned off, making the GPS much more accurate. So now with the right coordinates, not only can you find a specific island when you go looking for it, you can also find a small plastic container that someone's stashed under a log on that very same island.

Because many boaters already own a GPS (the main piece of equipment needed to partake in geocaching), I initially assumed that boaters would be some of the biggest proponents of the game. But it turns out that while some boaters do geocache, most of the time



Geocache map showing caches around Vancouver

you're dealing with an anchorage full of muggles. So you need to be really sneaky when you search.

THE HUNT CONTINUES "Muggles! Pretend it's a cellphone," Maia hissed. I looked down at her small insistent face as she ripped the GPS out of my hand. Putting it up to her ear she began to holler, "Oh hi,



Moderate sized cache

Nana! We are having a great trip, Nana!" The people walking past gave my five-year old a strange look as she yelled at our GPS in a location that was well out of cell range. "Whew—that was close," she said as the danger passed. "Which way now?"

If nothing else, geocaching has made getting out and about much more pleasant. Before we sail to a new anchorage or go on a trip, we print out all the cache sites in the area. The Gulf Islands are rich with hidden caches, and we've found two or three in almost every location that interested us. So now when we suggest going for a walk, Maia immediately gathers up her geocaching loot. She loves exploring new places and going for hikes if she thinks there might be a treasure waiting at the end for her efforts.

Evan read the clue to us again, "We're looking for a shiny bush near a hollow log." I checked the GPS and saw that we still had 0.85 nautical miles at a bearing of 273 degrees ahead. As we walked, Evan and I admired the view and Maia speculated about what she might find in this treasure box: "I hope I get a book, or a ball, or maybe a toy."

Most cache boxes are filled with trinkets for kids. Small weatherproof items that suit a variety of ages work best, but some cachers have added another element to the game with the creation of a special new treasure: geocoins. These custom-minted coins are unique finds intended to continue travelling, so if you're lucky enough to find one, you're expected to keep it in motion by dropping it at your next cache.

"How do we get past this?" Maia asked as she stared at an inlet of water that blocked our way. If it was warmer or the tide was lower we could probably have just walked across. Instead, we had to backtrack and find a new way to get to the cache site. This isn't an unusual problem. Most cache sites are a little tricky to find. Some cachers believe that if you find every site you set out to look for, the game just isn't as much fun.

Personally, I feel a bit ripped off when I don't find the treasure. But it does happen. Sometimes the coordinates are wrong; other times the cache is either too well hidden or so poorly hidden that someone not playing the game stumbles across it and removes it.

FOR TREASURE HUNTERS

WEBSITES

www.geocaching.com
www.bcgeocaching.com

HIDING A CACHE

Geocaching is expanding in the Gulf Islands and other favourite boating regions, and by planting a cache you can participate in the fun.

1. The cache site should be unique in some way. A great viewpoint, unusual location or meaningful spot are all good choices.
2. Ask permission before putting it on private land. If you place the cache on public land, contact the managing agency to find out about the rules. National Parks is developing a new geocaching policy, but current rules state no physical caches are permitted on parkland.
3. Be respectful about where you place a cache. Don't use it if it's the location of an endangered animal, has delicate ground cover or is an archaeological or historical site. Don't bury the cache or damage the surroundings to hide it.
4. Protect the cache by placing it in a waterproof container and hiding it where it won't be accidentally found but isn't so difficult that searchers can't find it.
5. Take the waypoint of your cache. Double-check the waypoint to be sure it's accurate.
6. Report the cache by filling out the online form at www.geocaching.com.
7. Once you hide a cache you are responsible for its upkeep, so place it somewhere you intend to return. —DS

This time, though, the cache was there. After backtracking and finding a new place to cross the little inlet, we found the log and shiny bush. Maia slid the container out, and while I filled in the logbook she began the difficult task of trying to decide which treasure to take. Finally, she decided on a small chapter book and in exchange left a couple of bouncy balls. Then we carefully sealed the container and hid it away.

At the cache site, Evan and Maia read a chapter of her new book while I enjoyed a peak-a-boo view of the anchorage. This is often my favourite part of the search. Because we end up taking trails and going for hikes that have no real destination, we often find surprises along the way—unexpected views, interesting historic sites, all sorts of things. And each of these surprises is part of the treasure. ☺

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