

on the cover

CACHE ME OUTSIDE

Need some outdoor time?
Geocaching offers a breath
of fresh air.

Story & photos by
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For the TODAY

I feel I must start this story with a confession. When I first downloaded an app to start geocaching, I said to my husband, “How hard could this be? The phone pretty much tells you where the cache is.”

Well, here I am with hat in hand to tell you that is definitely not the case.

For the uninitiated, geocaching is a self-supported outdoor activity where containers ranging from the size of a child’s pinky finger to large camouflaged creations, are hidden then searched for using a wayfinding app and one’s own wits. Each cache contains a log book (or tiny piece of paper) and sometimes small trinkets like charms or keychains which you can take or leave.

On the app, each hide is supported by a description, a hint and a flow of notes left by people who either found the cache or left frustrated. Depending on whether you are the type of person who covers their ears and starts chanting “La la la la” to keep from hearing when someone is about to reveal the ending of a movie you’ve yet to see, or the type who skips ahead in books to see who dies before starting the actual story, you might want to read the notes first or wait until you’ve tried on your own.

Like any good outdoor activity, there is special gear and specific lingo. Some containers hold collectable items, and designations like FTFs (First To Find) add additional motivation. In the app I use, once you’ve found and logged a cache, the green dot turns into a smiley face, which even at my, shall we say, mature age, is pretty darn satisfying.

Geocaching is also an activity that is socially unsocial; you can have a great time reading others’ posts in logs and following their finds on the app, but never actually spending time with them in person.

My first cache find was happenstance. My husband I were on a trail run when we came upon the large, rusting hulk of

an earth-moving machine in a spot that really didn’t make any sense, physically. So naturally we had to climb on it and torture our dog, Scout, by making her pose for photos on it.

As I was getting just the right shot of Scout on the contraption, I heard my husband say, “Hey, that looks like an old ammo box, I wonder if it’s a geocache.”

Sure enough, it was.

That chance encounter was enjoyable enough to encourage me to download the app and try to find more hidden treasures.

And so of course, my first formal hunt was a total bust.

But then cache number two wooed me back. A pill bottled artfully designed to look like a pine cone, it sat just under a few pieces of bark at the foot of a huge pine tree. I felt the trill of victory when I found it relatively easily, and was charmed by the effort put into making it a special find.

Then, just as I decided this geocache thing was fun after all, the app tried to send me over a cliff.

Okay, the fault was mine for staring at the phone while walking instead of paying attention to the terrain, but it’s more fun to blame a non-sentient object than oneself. Once I paid a bit more attention, I took the appropriate route and made the find.

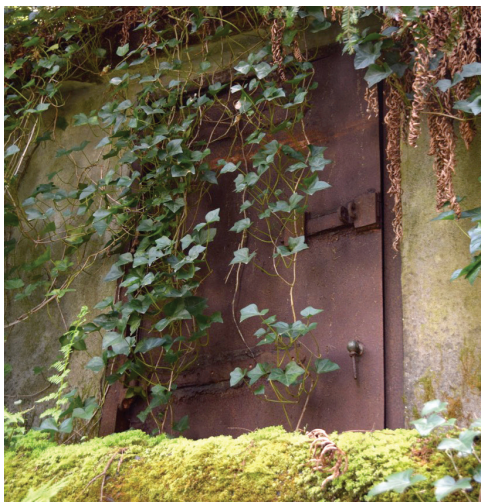
Many caches are located on roadsides so an unfortunate extra challenge is provided by litter before you learn to tell the difference between a discarded pill bottle and an intentionally hidden one. I have started bringing used bags with me so I can help clean up the environment while I search. My idea is not novel; an entire movement called, “Cache In, Trash Out,” was started in 2012 to help “preserve the natural beauty of cache-friendly spaces.”

Geocaching is surprisingly addictive, with a mix of risk and reward that keeps you ever moving forward for that occasional shot of dopamine from besting a challenge.

As a runner, hiker and owner of a dog who just DOESN’T GET TIRED, I have ample motivation for getting out into nature, but for those without similar reasons who are looking to spend more time outside, this might be just the thing.

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Check out geocaching.com for all the information you need about how to get started, including phone app downloads.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Scout the trail dog gets into the geocaching spirit. An ingenious geocache hiding spot. An intriguing location for a cache, somewhere near the coast.