

# Geocaching – a Hidden World of Treasures

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**They're around us. Everywhere. And they've been spreading like an epidemic for the past 15 years. You may not have noticed, but there exists a network of hidden treasures spanning the entire globe. Those treasures, also known as caches, are the basis of a game called Geocaching – basically a GPS-enabled, location-based treasure hunt for adults and children alike.**

## Basics

The principle of Geocaching is simple. An online directory, available at [geocaching.com](http://geocaching.com), contains all of the available caches. Each cache

is listed with some info such as geo-coordinates, details about the cache and maybe a hint. There are different types of caches, so this may vary. The goal is then to find the physical cache – for



example, a Tupperware box – which is hidden at the given coordinates. Each cache contains a logbook into which the finders can write a short note. Another log is placed on the cache's website. Logs range from a short "TFTC" <sup>1</sup> to epic illustrations of experiences, along with pictures.

Caches come in different forms and sizes. "Nano" caches can be as small as a fingertip, just big enough to hold a tiny strip of paper for logging. Larger caches may contain items for trade, which may be exchanged for something with equal or greater value. There's a special type of items, so-called trackables: they carry unique identifiers. Their goal is to travel from cache to cache, their travels being recorded along with the log. Some trackables have specific goals, such as visiting all the continents or being carried only from mountaintop to mountaintop.

Geocaching.com, by far the most popular listing site, is run by the Seattle-based Groundspeak Inc., which generates revenue by selling premium memberships<sup>2</sup>. There are also non-

commercial listing sites, such as opencaching. The treasures themselves are hidden and maintained by the cachers themselves. A volunteer-run peer-to-peer review system ensures that caches are not illegally placed on private property, do not violate nature conservation laws, et cetera.

### Why Bother?

As you can already see, Geocaching is very multifaceted: There's something in it for almost everyone. A usual motivation is that it's a reason for you to go outside and do something. For families, it's a great way to spend time outdoors with the kids (they're usually in it for the trading items). It's a both a great way to familiarize yourself with the proximity of your home (If you think you know your neighborhood like the back of your hand, you're probably wrong.), to learn something about the history of a place or to explore your whereabouts when traveling (you'll find places you wouldn't otherwise). Some people like →

**"Nano" caches can be as small as a fingertip**



A trackable item



Sometimes getting the cache is not without risks...

solving the riddles that lead to the coordinates of “mystery” caches (see the box). Some are more interested in the hiding aspect. They create such riddles or manufacture elaborate cache containers. And then there’re the addicts. Every find increments the number associated with your account. The high-score list, where the best 1000 accounts have all more than 10k finds, is being led by some American with 100k finds.

## Glossary

### Terrain vs. Difficulty

Each cache has a 5-star rating for terrain as well as for difficulty. Terrain refers to how dangerous it is to recover the cache – for 5-star caches you will most definitely need special equipment such as climbing gear or a ladder. Difficulty refers to how well the cache is hidden.

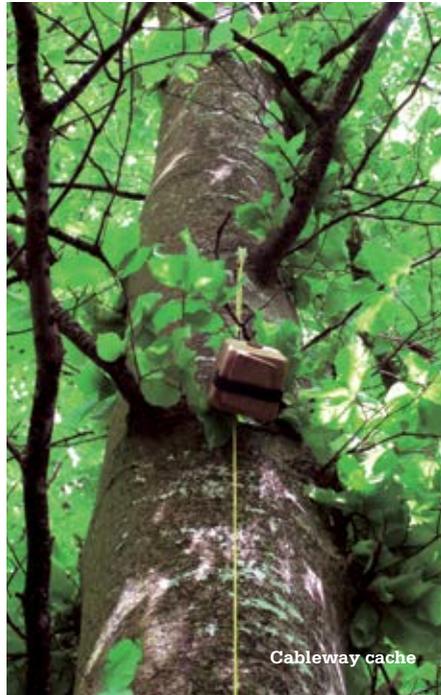
### Types of Caches

- Traditional Cache. A logbook in a container at some given coordinates.
- Multi-Cache. This one has at least two locations, where the first location’s coordinates are given. At the  $i$ -th location, the coordinates of the  $(i+1)$ -th location can somehow be found. The final stage is then the actual cache.
- Mystery Cache. For this one, no final coordinates are provided. Instead, a puzzle has to be solved, ranging from simple algebra to total enigmas.

### Other terms

- Muggles is a term for people that don’t know about geocaching. Similarly, a “muggled” cache is one that has been destroyed or stolen.
- FTF stands for “first to find”. This is essentially a less idiotic, real-life version of “First”-commenting a post on the internet. Most dedicated cachers use the premium-only notifications to know instantly when it’s game time. They’ll leave everything behind and look for the cache. It’s a moment when you’ll very likely meet other cachers in the field. It’s also why Groundspeak’s business model works :-)
- GC Code: Each cache carries a unique alphanumeric identifier which makes lookup of the corresponding website a breeze.

This diversity is the reason why geocaching has such a large following. Over a million caches have been hidden, and there are several million accounts. As for myself, I first got introduced to caching in 2010 and regularly did it for a couple of years. Now, I still go geocaching about once a month or when traveling. My favorites: Epic multi-caches and series of linked individual caches in the mountains. Like a regular hike, but you feel more like you’re on a mission. One such cache I remember clearly is GC3X4V3 (Erinnerungen an die Jugend), which takes on a 10-kilometer, 1000-meters-of-altitude adventure in the rocky, ragged terrain of the Pilatus region. The owner (the “author” of the cache) grew up in this region and spent his teenage years roaming the same woods, so the cache is like a contemplation of his youth.



Cableway cache

## How Did It Start?

It all began in 2000 after the US military removed “selective availability”<sup>4</sup>, the GPS “feature” which introduces a circa-50-meter error on civilian GPS receivers. Dave Ulmer, based in Beaver-creek, Oregon, thought of using the newly-gained accuracy of GPS to locate hidden containers. He then went on and published the first geocache on the Usenet newsgroup sci.geo.satellite-nav. This first cache supposedly was a black plastic bucket with software, videos, books, food, money, and a slingshot inside. Somebody else then went and found that cache, wrote about the event. The news spread online, in the same year geocaching.com was opened by Jeremy Irish, and the rest is (internet) history.<sup>5</sup>

## Controversy and Fun Facts

Of course, lots of people around the globe doing something out of the ordinary provokes reactions one way or the other. Being approached by the police because of suspicious behavior in public is pretty common (it happened to me twice). Usually, the cops already know about caching and you’ll be fine telling them honestly what you’re up to (“Oh, another cacher. Okay, bye”). Another type of inevitable response is evacuation of public places because of terror scares. Yes, a number of caches have been destroyed by bomb squads. Similarly, caches have been mistaken for drug stashes. Other concerns include caches being considered litter – this has been somewhat offset by cachers collecting trash at cache sites. Then, there’s self-inflicted damage by geocaching (my

father once broke his arm while caching) and the inevitable liability discussions. But caching can also save the day as it did in 2008 on Mt. Hood, Oregon, where two off-track hikers who spent the night in a snow cave were able to phone information about their exact location after stumbling across a geocache.<sup>6</sup>

If you want to give it a go, trying out geocaching is as easy as downloading a free app, as most smartphones contain GPS receivers. You’ll find out how to get started at geocaching.com. Happy caching!



## Footnotes

- [1] Thanks for the cache!
- [2] A premium membership costs around 30 dollars yearly and grants you instant email notifications about new caches in your area, advanced search functionality on the website and access to premium-only caches. Typically, these are delicate caches that require some level of dexterity on retrieval and are at risk of being destroyed by novices.
- [3] [https://www.geocaching.com/geocache/GC3X4V3\\_erinnerungen-an-die-jugend](https://www.geocaching.com/geocache/GC3X4V3_erinnerungen-an-die-jugend)
- [4] For more info on selective availability: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Error\\_analysis\\_for\\_the\\_Global\\_Positioning\\_System#Selective\\_availability](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Error_analysis_for_the_Global_Positioning_System#Selective_availability) Another feature, the “CoCom Limit”, disables GPS receivers as soon as they move faster than 2000 kph and is intended to prevent the use of these devices in “DIY intercontinental missile” scenarios.
- [5] <https://www.geocaching.com/about/history.aspx>
- [6] [http://garmin.blogs.com/my\\_weblog/2008/01/geocaching-save.html#UubcNxAo5pg](http://garmin.blogs.com/my_weblog/2008/01/geocaching-save.html#UubcNxAo5pg)
- [7] <http://goo.gl/vn5uu9>