



Treasure in Our Midst

Geocaches are hidden everywhere, often right under our noses!

There's one atop Mount Steele and there's one in Smuggler Cove. There are lots in Porpoise Bay, about 20 in Roberts Creek, several in Davis Bay and plenty down in Gibsons. Some are wheelchair accessible, one on Jedediah Island requires climbing equipment, and you'll need scuba gear for the one submerged in Saltery Bay.

Geocaching is everywhere on the Sunshine Coast, and chances are you've walked past many without realizing. For every geocache there's a geocacher seeking their next find, or plotting their next concealment.

Geocaching is an outdoor treasure-hunting game. Using a GPS (global positioning system) device, players navigate via coordinates to locate hidden containers, called geocaches. Then, in relative anonymity thanks to made-up user names, they share their experiences.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY
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"In a small community you get to know who's who," Afternoon-shift tells me over hot chocolate in Davis Bay. Afternoonshift is the

user name for a semi-retired couple from Sechelt. "We're not morning people," the female half of Afternoon-shift tells me, when I ask about the user name. "We started in 2006 and now, anywhere we go, we research the caches en route and try and find them," she says. ➤

Above: At least two geocaches are concealed along the Davis Bay waterfront. Do you know where they are?

Young geocachers Emma Judd, Talia Sweet, Ariana Harder and Aubryn Bell share their find on the beach near Camp Byng.



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"It takes us where the tourists usually don't go."

So when Afternoonshift drove their RV to Muncie, Indiana, this summer, they first visited www.geocaching.com, logged some of the caches en route, and set out to find as many as they could — more than 100, as it turned out. They did the same when their son got married in Cancun, hiring a taxi driver one day and bagging four Mexican caches. That's the same 35-year-old son who Afternoonshift sent up a tree in Langley to find a cache.

"Actually, he had to climb it twice before he found it," she says.

At last count, Afternoonshift had found 1,383 caches, encompassing three countries and 18 U.S. states — a respectable total, but one that only scratches the surface of what's out there. Over 1.5 million active geocaches are concealed in more than 100 countries and seven continents. (Yes, that includes Antarctica.) And five million geocachers worldwide are in hot pursuit.

The Sunshine Coast is home to between 200 and 300 caches, with names like "The Crow's Nest," "Whisper, the Firs might hear," and "Gnome for the Holidays." (The latter was hidden by ShyBuddha in December 2001, and is the oldest geocache on the Coast.)

After five years, Afternoonshift have found most of them. They've also concealed a few — 47 to be exact. "Piering over the Bay" is one of them, a cache hidden at Davis Bay pier by Afternoonshift on April 8, 2006.

I've downloaded a free, 30-day trial of CacheSense on my BlackBerry, which allows me to view information on caches in my vicinity. The same information is available free at geocaching.com, but the BlackBerry, any smartphone, or GPS device displays your proximity in metres to the cache.

As part of my geocache crash course, Afternoonshift and I stroll along the Davis Bay seawall to the pier. My radar indicates I'm within five metres of "Piering over the Bay" and there's a helpful clue.

"When you're this close, it's best just to put away your GPS and ask yourself, 'Where would I hide this cache?'" advises Afternoonshift.

It's good advice. Within minutes, I find the cache, a small magnetic key case containing a log book to sign.

Just as I'm duty-bound to conceal Afternoonshift's true identity, I'm not about to reveal the exact location of "Piering over the Bay". But it strikes me how cool it is that for five years, thousands of people have literally walked right past this cache unaware of its presence. Back on the seawall, the same thought occurs minutes later after I find "Wheeling Around The Bay". It's a wheelchair-accessible cache hidden by Sir Vayor, an active geocacher since Feb. 16, 2002, with 822 finds to his name.

The coordinates lead me to some picnic tables. Mindful that the wheelchair-friendly cache must be somewhere within arm's reach of the footpath, the search takes a little longer. The hiding place is ingenious!

Aside from the mental agility involved in geocaching, it's also a great excuse to get outside, says Afternoonshift.

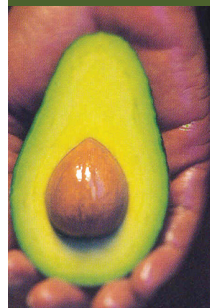
"It's something everyone can do," agrees jacalathecroc, a man with first-hand experience of introducing geocaching to both young and old.

Jacalathecroc named himself after Rudyard Kipling's Jungle

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GO GEOCACHE:

Rookie geocachers will find everything they need to know at www.geocaching.com. It also includes information about trackables — another popular geocaching game involving special coins that feature unique tracking ID and can be passed from cache to cache.

Tomorrow, Saturday, Dec. 10, marks the 10th anniversary celebration of the Coast's oldest active cache, "Gnome for the Holidays". Anyone wanting to learn more about geocaching is invited to the meet and greet at 10 a.m. on Saturday, at Mission Point Park in Davis Bay.

Book character. By phone, he tells me he's been involved with Scouts locally for 26 years, and has seen the popularity of geocaching among kids.

"They'd lose interest in a compass and a map, but give them a device that might take you or I ages to figure out, and they'll latch onto it right away," he says. He's seen similar interest at the other end of the age spectrum.

"I took my 91-year-old mother geocaching in Maple Grove Park in Vancouver, and she has a walker," he says.

Jacalathecroc has hidden 22 geocaches, one of them an elaborate multi-stage geocache. It directs geocachers through five different locations on the Coast before ending at an extremely well camouflaged geocache that requires a "mechanical" trick to retrieve it. He has also used geocaching as a community service beyond just scouting. Last spring he organized a community clean-up in Pender Harbour, known as a CITO — Cache In, Trash Out — that saw geocachers clean up garbage on the Suncoaster Trail, opposite the high school.

Jacalathecroc's comments about kids sprang to mind when I finally went out geocaching in my own neighbourhood. I'd learned of a geocache on the beach, in front of the Camp Byng sign, in

Roberts Creek. BlackBerry in hand, I was heading for the door when my daughter Emma and her girlfriends asked me where I was going.

"There's a geocache hidden on the beach with trinkets inside — it's like a treasure hunt."

It might have been the words "treasure" or "trinket," or the sight of the BlackBerry, but Emma and her friends had their shoes on before I did.

It's unlikely that "Let's go for a hike, girls" would have prompted the same response.

We walked down Gulf Road and the trail to the beach. Near the Camp Byng sign, the girls began attacking the foliage, looking for a small, plastic olive container, said to be hidden at the base of a small cedar and fir.

I'm unsure what the radar indicated because Emma had long since taken my BlackBerry and was directing the search. Within minutes, they'd recovered the container and were examining the contents — a bead necklace, a toy dinosaur, a pencil and notebook. I signed it "CoastLifer" on their behalf.

Walking back up the beach, I studied the details of the cache, named "Capt. George ... Byng there, done that." Someone with the user name Az the crow flyz had hidden it there Feb. 19, 2004.

I must have walked past it a hundred times. **CL**



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