

# Geocaching an adventure that's catching on



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## **Kids use an iPhone's GPS technology to track buried treasure in Muskoka. (PETER GILBERT/QMI Agency)**

To a child, taking a tour to view Ontario's fall colours is about as much fun as watching paint dry on a front porch. The concept might seem appealing at first, but the fun deflates after about 10 minutes -- unless you add the promise of adventure.

Geocaching -- aka hi-tech treasure hunting -- is one adventurous way to keep kids connected during long car rides and sightseeing tours. Pronounced "JEE-O-cashing," the game emerged about 12 years ago as a way to use global positioning systems (GPS) to locate "treasures" buried in obscure spots.

Experienced geocache enthusiasts, or "cachers," hide small finds -- under rocks, inside trees, behind bushes -- then mark the spot with a GPS device. Along come novice cachers -- families, friends, hikers, cyclists -- armed with GPS-enabled smartphones loaded with an easy-to-use geocaching app. To locate the treasure, they follow the path indicated by the app -- usually a red line and a flashing dot. The process is about as easy as watching paint dry, but a whole lot more fun.

According to the website [geocaching.com](http://geocaching.com), at least 4-million people worldwide take part in the pastime, and thousands of geocaches have been planted in nearly every country in the world.

I tried geocaching first on a rainy Sunday in August and found it to be a thrilling, Indiana-Jones-like adventure for my kids aged six and nine. We passed an entire day in a small section of Muskoka travelling from one treasure cache to another. There were nine hidden along one country road alone, plus one at a nearby town dock, and another intriguing cache on a deserted island.

Here's how it works:

First, I visited [geocaching.com](http://geocaching.com) and found its link to the smartphone-friendly "Geocaching" app. Its \$9.99 pricetag seemed

hefty considering most of my apps top out at 99 cents but with the promise of good times for me and the kids, I laid down the cash. Turns out it was well worth it. Under the guise LoriExploring, I signed on as a "basic" member. My iPhone magically fed the app my location (example: N25 13.906', W81 5556'). I clicked on "Find Nearby Geocaches" and we were off.

I was astounded to find there were 20 geocaches within an 8-km radius of my location, all with adventurous names like "Big Stump," "Lakeside View," "Rock On!" and "You've Got Mail." Each cache is rated by size and level of difficulty -- we stuck to those with one- and two-star difficulty ratings -- and each listing includes a description of terrain, clues and tips ("logs") from cachers who have found it in the past.

I packed water, snacks and trinkets, armed my kids with my iPhone, clicked on "Navigate to Geocache" and off we went on our day's hi-tech treasure-hunting adventure. Some caches proved harder to find than others, and at times we were frustrated by the inaccuracy of my iPhone's GPS technology, but in each case we were able to make the find.

According to the website, every cache contains a logbook, and almost every cache contains both a logbook and a treasure: "The logbook contains information from the owner of the cache, and notes from visitors. Larger geocaches may also contain any number of more or less valuable items. These items turn the cache into a true treasure hunt. A geocacher never knows what the owner or other visitors to the cache mave have left there to enjoy."

The caches we located were small watertight containers containing miniature trinkets that, despite their size, still managed to thrill the children: Handmade bracelets, pencils, pretty rocks, etc.

Geocaching etiquette dictates if you take a treasure, you're required to replace it with another so there's always something inside to discover. Some more sophisticated caches contain what's called a "trackable" or a "geocoin" -- items with a trackable tag. These trinkets are to be moved from cache to cache so their owners can follow their progress via computer. It's common for geocoins to make it from coast to coast, country to country -- even continent to continent.

After a day of geocaching, it's fun to follow up by adding notes and logs to your treasure's online link at the website.

"When geocachers return from an adventure," it says on the site, "they can log their finds on an online cache page, creating a dynamic community and social network."

Warning: It's not hard for a family to get hooked on geocaching. Since discovering the activity, I've met families who, while on roadtrips or even just a jaunt to the hockey rink, can't resist pulling off the road to uncover a cache.

Even if you're not that jazzed by geocaching, most kids will be -- and it's one way to keep them engaged while gazing at the fall colours.

## POLL

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