

"CACHING"

in on adventure



Putting a new twist on the centuries-old pursuit of treasure hunting, GPS-equipped geocachers scour the Yukon in search of hidden delights.

|| By Jerome Stuart ||

When I was a boy, at Christmas I would create a treasure hunt for my sister, Jenifer. I'd hide her present somewhere in the house and leave a wrapped box under the Christmas tree with a note that read, "Where you sit down to dinner, there you'll find a clue / your present won't be that far away from you!" And then she'd run to the dining room and look under her chair, where she'd find another note. Sometimes it took eight or nine clues before she found her Christmas present.

"I used to love that," Jenifer tells me over the phone, from her home in Texas. But can searching for a present really be better than just finding it under the tree?

When I heard about geocaching, I thought about the Christmas treasure hunts of my childhood, but on a global scale. Hidden all over the world are presents called "geocaches". People hide these so others can have the joy of finding them. Usually cache containers are waterproof—you don't want the weather to ruin a good cache. As part of the cache, there's a logbook—in which you can record your visit—and some trinkets, such as buttons or coins, that geocachers trade out once they've found a cache. The trinkets don't have real value—it's all about the hunt. More than 750,000 geocaches around the world are waiting to be found, with 74 "active" caches right here in the Yukon.

For example, the Treasure Island cache contains 100 trombones and nine golden coins hidden by a group called "The Pirates of the Yukon". The Bells are Ringing cache celebrates a wedding on the shores of Schwatka Lake and contains bells, roses, rings, and a wedding-cake candle. Two wine glasses are there for you to celebrate, too, and you're encouraged to write marriage advice inside the logbook.



Photo: Jerome Stuart

Naturally, I couldn't wait to go in search of a geocache. Caches are often well hidden under or behind something to protect them from vandals. To locate a cache, you have to know its coordinates, which requires a Global Positioning System (GPS) receiver. You enter your position and the cache coordinates into the GPS device and it uses satellites to map a route. However, a mobile device, such as a cellphone or Blackberry with Google Earth software installed, makes geocaching easy for anyone.

To begin my hunt, I found two people with their own GPS devices: Anthony DeLorenzo and Michael Pealow. DeLorenzo works as a policy analyst, and Pealow as a business and economic development consultant. Both are avid mountain bikers and love exploring, which makes it easy to understand why they enjoy geocaching.

DeLorenzo started geocaching when he bought a GPS receiver in 2004. "I wanted to know what I could do with it," he says. "Geocaching took me places I'd never been—a really cool spot or a trail you might not come across."

Though some caches are easy to find, geocachers don't often like the "drive-bys" or the "park-'n'-grabs"—those caches on the edge of a road or under a rock that take only seconds to find.

"Personally, I like the caches that are harder to get to," Pealow says. "If I have to work for it, I feel a greater sense of satisfaction when I find it." For him, the location makes a great cache. "If it takes me to an amazing place—especially one that I wouldn't have known about otherwise—I'm happy."

"With the technology, it's kind of an outdoor sport for geeks," Pealow adds, with a laugh.



Photo: ©Stockphoto.com/Renee Lee

He's got a point about the geek factor. You can log your finds online and brag about how many you've found and their difficulty levels. But the website, www.geocaching.com, shows that people of all ages, and with limited GPS training or computer skills, are looking for geocaches, too, and having a great time.

"Yeah," Pealow agrees. "I've seen families with little kids, older people who are traveling along in their RVs, outdoorsy people, high-tech people.... Some do it for the thrill of treasure seeking; others for the joy of getting outdoors."

Wherever you want to travel, it's likely someone has been there before you and left you a geocache. Kind of nice of them, eh?

Pealow tells me about a cache he found in Skagway that contained a "travel bug"—an object that is trying to get somewhere specific and needs to hitch a ride with a geocacher.

Geocaching lingo:

Blair Witching: When GPS readings appear to "flip" over a desired coordinate (usually near the cache site), preventing the seeker from locating a cache.

Booty Nuggets: Treasure found in the cache used for trading.

Chromes: "Crow Miles" describing linear distance without regarding elevation or terrain.

Drive & Dump: A cache placed with little thought, usually very close to a road or parking lot.

Force (The Force): The ability to instinctively know where a cache is hidden when you get within a certain proximity. The term alludes to the supernatural force used by specially gifted characters in *Star Wars*.

FTF: First to find.

In-Laws: Unwanted geomuggles who remain at a cache location for extended periods of time, preventing discrete access to that cache.

Letterboxing: Another stash-and-find game that started in the

U.K. over 100 years ago. It is similar to geocaching, but without the use of GPS devices and coordinates.

Log and Dump: A cache carelessly replaced in its original location, often left unhidden and vulnerable to plundering.

Loose Bearings: The point at which your GPS device no longer points in the correct direction (mostly because you've slowed down to a speed that it doesn't know in which direction you're moving).

Plasma Bandits: Mosquitoes.

Smurfs 292: Meeting another geocacher in the woods. The term alludes to *Smurfs* episode #292, where the Smurfs encounter "Wild Smurf", a 150-year-old loincloth-wearing Smurf who was lost as an infant and raised by squirrels.

TFTC: Thanks for the cache.

TNLN: Took nothing; left nothing.

TNLNSL: Took nothing; left nothing; signed logbook.



Some Geocaching definitions found at www.geocaching.com

“The Bells are Ringing cache celebrates a wedding on the shores of Schwatka Lake and contains bells, roses, rings, and a wedding-cake candle.”

“It was a miniature Edmonton Oilers hockey jersey,” he says. “It was in competition with a Calgary Flames hockey jersey to be the first jersey to be photographed in front of all of the NHL stadiums in North America.”

Geo caching didn’t become a fad until the U.S. military removed selective availability (S.A.) from GPS tracking—a feature that purposely misdirected the GPS signal, sometimes 100 m away from a target.

“The United States didn’t want an enemy to use its GPS devices for nefarious purposes,” Pealow says.

On May 1, 2000, S.A. was removed and GPS signals were restored to pinpoint accuracy. Two days later, as a celebration, the first geocache was hidden and was successfully found soon after.

You might think that GPS takes all the fun out of treasure hunting. But geocaches are not always easy to find—even when you’re standing right in front of them. While a GPS device can take you within nine metres of a cache, you still must use your eyes and hands, crawl on your knees, lift things up—actually search for it.

Pealow takes me out to the cache he knows is hidden around the SS *Klondike*, a paddlewheeler in dry dock along the Yukon River. We’ve locked in the coordinates and downloaded the clues. It’s a

bright day, and the GPS device screen accurately takes us to the SS *Klondike* and leads us by a virtual line to the treasure. But when we get there, Pealow tells me we’ve got to search around, and in February everything is covered in snow.

“Normally, we don’t do this in snow,” Pealow informs me. I tromp through drifts that are 60 cm high. (I think I hear my sister laughing in Texas.) I brush away the snow from every floodlight, every wooden bench. I kneel down and put my ungloved hand deep in the snow to search under everything.

“Get the GPS to guide you several times and see where it comes closest to,” Pealow says.

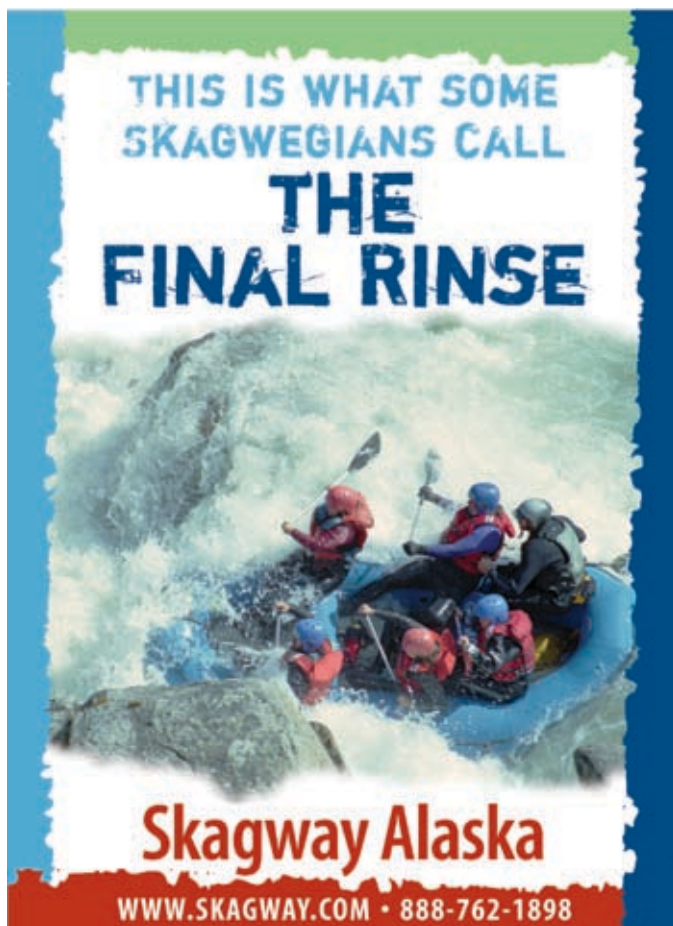
I try that. It comes close to some black metal buckets. This is when the adventure-seeking policy analyst tells me the title of the cache we’re looking for: Black Metal Buckets.

“You could have told me that first,” I say.

Caches are not normally buried. Geocachers are very eco-friendly and they don’t want people digging holes to find treasure. A cache may be attached by a magnet or tape or hidden under something, such as a log.

The SS *Klondike* cache proves to be an elusive find.

Even here, with the clues in hand, we can’t find the microcache—a small film canister—that Pealow knows is here.



THIS IS WHAT SOME SKAGWEGIANS CALL
THE FINAL RINSE

Skagway Alaska

WWW.SKAGWAY.COM • 888-762-1898



Design your bathroom with *style* and ...

CINDERWOOD FACTORY OUTLET
FLOORING & CABINETS

(867) 633-5513
cinderwoodfo@northwestel.net

Whitehorse
125A Industrial Road

“It might have been ‘muggled,’” he says.

People who are not geocachers are called muggles, after the *Harry Potter* characters who don't notice the magic all around them. Muggles might find a geocache and take it home, or a muggle janitor might throw it away. A few caches have been destroyed by bomb squads. (An unattended box under a trash can might be seen as dangerous.)

After searching for a while, we finally give up, declaring the site officially muggled.

If we'd found it, we'd have written our names in the tiny logbook (a paper scroll) and returned the cache to its hiding spot so other geocachers could find it later.

While microcaches are common, the standard cache is shoebox size. “I've seen old ammo cans, fake plastic rocks, and peanut-butter jars, too,” Pealow says. Some caches are multicaches: a series of caches you can find only if you locate the first cache, similar to the treasure hunt I made for my sister. There are caches that require you to solve a puzzle first or find the coordinates hidden in a story or on a plaque.

Though we didn't find the cache we were looking for, I know I'll try out this high-tech treasure hunting in the summer. I want to get my own GPS device and search. Or better yet, Pealow and I have got an idea or two about making our own caches and hiding them around Whitehorse.

It's just like Christmas all over again. **Y**

As part of a standard geocache, there's a logbook for recording visits. Some items, such as buttons or coins, can be swapped out, but the cache is to remain in its place.

Photo: ©Shutterstock.com/Carrie Bottomley



Stewards of Yukon wildlife & proud supporters of the Yukon economy for over 100 years.

Providing Professional, Quality Hunts and Wilderness Adventures

YUKON OUTFITTERS ASSOCIATION

B4 - 302 Steele Street, Whitehorse, Yukon
Phone: (867) 668-4118, Fax: (867) 668-4120
info@yukonoutfitters.net, www.yukonoutfitters.net

YUKON
LARGER THAN LIFE



ALKAN AIR
Serving The Yukon

King Air 200
Piper Navajo Chieftain
Cessna Caravan
Cessna 172 • Cessna 206
DHC-3T
Shorts Skyvan
Twin Otter

Camp Mobilizations,
Crew Changes, Exploration,
Drilling, Surveys, Construction,
Mining, Oil Fields

24-Hour Executive Charter Service

105 Lodestar Lane
Whitehorse, Yukon
(867) 668-2107
alkanair@yknet.yk.ca
www.alkanair.com