

Get out and geocache

GPS units; not just for geeks

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Last weekend, I navigated my way to one of the area's oldest standing structures, walked along a haunted lake, and hiked beside the Niagara River marveling at some of the world's highest standing waves.

What brought me to these far-flung corners of Western New York? Geocaching.

From Wikipedia, the free online encyclopedia, "geocaching is an outdoor sport that involves the use of a Global Positioning System ("GPS") receiver or traditional navigational techniques to find a "geocache" (or "cache") placed anywhere in the world. A typical cache is a small, waterproof container containing a logbook and "treasure," usually trinkets of little value. Participants are called geocachers."

It's like a scavenger hunt but instead of a map you use a GPS unit in order to find the cache via signals from one or more satellites. Technology gives a new twist to this age old activity and provides adults with an excuse to go traipsing about through the woods looking for hidden treasure without looking completely ridiculous. With over 201,000 active caches located in 218 countries, geocaching is now an international sport appropriate for people of all ages and abilities.

If you are ready to go off the beaten trail this fall and discover a few hidden gems (more like trinkets in an ammo box), geocaching is a great way to get out and enjoy the natural beauty of Western NY.

hit the trail



find the cache



enter the coordinates & navigate



enjoy the view



FROM TOP TO BOTTOM:
Finding the cache along the
Niagara Gorge with a Garmin
eTrex.

PHOTOS BY
SARAH TRANUM

How to get started:

- Check out www.geocaching.com, the official site for all things geocache. Here you can find more information about the sport and, most importantly, find local caches in the area.
- Get a GPS receiver. GPS units can range in cost and extra features, but you can start with a basic, easy to use and durable receiver starting at around \$100. Your best bet is the Garmin eTrex GPS or Magellan GPS 315. Wal-mart, Target, Best Buy and numerous online stores sell these and more expensive units.
- Locate a few caches in the area. Go to www.geocaching.com, enter your zip code and sift through the various hikes available. Here you will find the waypoints (the latitude and longitude) of the exact points where caches are hidden. Along with these you'll find a description of the area, terrain, and level of difficulty of the cache. There may even be a bit of history or lore about the area. Each cache is set-up and posted by other geocaching enthusiasts. People put time and thought into coming up with interesting spots, clues and caches.
- Grab your hiking gear, grab a bottle of water, a couple of trinkets and your GPS unit (make sure your batteries are fully charged) and hit the trail.

There are only a few rules to follow:

- ! Take something from the cache (last weekend I got a fortune card and a pencil).
- ! Leave something in the cache (I left an inflatable ball and a bumper sticker).
- ! Write about it in the logbook (leave a friendly little note about your hike, your experience and the date you discover the cache).
- ! Leave the cache the way you found it and never move it to another location.

Geocaching, as with any outdoor sport, requires a little extra caution. Know where you are going, get an early start and beware of the terrain, poison ivy and wildlife. Other than that, geocaching is an easy, fun, and cheap way to spend a day outside. So get going and have fun!



Three Recommended Area Caches:

Buffalo — Niagara River

ERIE'S END

Difficulty: 2 Terrain: 2

(ratings are out of 5: 1 is the easiest, 5 is the hardest)

This is a multi-part cache that takes you to three different spots along the start of the Niagara River. It's a great urban cache that allows you to discover parts of Buffalo that you've probably driven by but never explored on foot. The terrain allows for a relatively easy hike, the view is great and its close by.

Southtowns — Chestnut Ridge Park

ETERNAL FLAME

Difficulty: 2.5 Terrain: 2

So maybe you already know about the eternal flame and waterfall tucked away in Shale Creek Preserve (a part of Chestnut Ridge Park in Orchard Park). Even if you have already hiked the trail many times before, this cache is a great excuse to return to this magical place. Pack a lunch and plan to spend the whole day, as the cache is only part of the trip. Wear a good pair of waterproof boots and bring a lighter with you to relight the flame if needed.

Northtowns — Niagara Gorge

RAW POWER!

Difficulty: 2.5 Terrain: 4

This is my all-time favorite WNY cache. Located within Whirlpool State Park in Niagara Falls, New York, you will descend 306 stairs to get to the trail along which the cache is hidden. This is by far one of the more challenging hikes in terms of terrain, and it is the best way to experience the true power of the Niagara River (aside from the Maid of the Mist). Along this trail, you can take in the sounds of the rushing water and be in awe of the standing waves, which can reach 18 feet high. You need a solid pair of hiking boots and plenty of time to enjoy this cache completely. Most importantly, stay on the trail, be prepared and leave plenty of time to get back to your car before the sun goes down.

Go to www.geocaching.com for waypoints, descriptions and clues for these caches and many more. Information for this article was gathered with permission from www.geocaching.com.