



MAIN PICTURE: ST AGNES BEACON **ABOVE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:** FINDING A CACHE; A KOALA TRAVEL BUG; A HIDDEN CACHE; THE KERNOW KACHERS BADGE

Learn...Geocaching

THE SPORT OF GEOCACHING IS SPREADING THROUGHOUT CORNWALL →

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Throughout Cornwall, ever-increasing numbers of people are ferreting furtively around the countryside. Strange figures can be seen wading through gorse bushes with a mobile-phone sized gadget in their hand, trying not to attract too much attention. But don't be afraid, they are probably geocaching.

What on earth, I hear you cry, is geocaching? In short, it's a high-tech version of treasure hunting. Geocachers seek out hidden booty using GPS co-ordinates posted on the Internet by those hiding the cache. Once found, a cache may provide the visitor with a wide variety of rewards, but the biggest reward of all is the thrill of the search and the discovery of new places.

There are nearly half a million caches hidden worldwide, with between 400 and 500 caches in Cornwall alone

Like many other avid geocachers, I was first introduced to the sport by a friend, known to geocachers as "Flying Pasties", who joined me one morning to look for caches near where I live. I was amazed to learn that there were 20 caches within a 10-mile radius of my house. Despite walking past them on a regular basis, I had never realised they were there.

Caches typically consist of a waterproof container placed

discreetly somewhere outdoors on public land. The container will include a logbook and any number items such as toys, books and cheap plastic trinkets. You never know what the other visitors to the cache may have left for you to enjoy.

Geocaching is a relatively new sport, which requires a sense of adventure and a sharp eye. It combines puzzle solving, navigation, observation and the great outdoors. It's very popular with families - the promise of a treasure hunt helps to get children outside for exercise and exploration of the countryside around them.

Unlike many sports, we know exactly when geocaching first started. At midnight on May 2 2000, the deliberate inaccuracies built into the Global Positioning System (GPS) were disabled and civilian GPS users were able to pinpoint locations up to 10 times more accurately than was previously possible.

The next day, a GPS enthusiast in America placed a bucket in the woods and published the co-ordinates on an internet site. The bucket contained a log book, pencil, and a selection of prizes. Within three days, two people had read about his stash on the Internet and used their own GPS receivers to find the container.

Like many new and innovative ideas on the Internet, the concept spread quickly, and geocaching was born. There are now nearly half a million caches hidden worldwide, and it is estimated that there are between 400 and 500 caches in Cornwall alone.

It is remarkably easy to start geocaching; all you need is

BELOW FROM LEFT: COOMBE, ON THE GEOCACHER'S TRAIL



a GPS receiver and internet access. A basic handheld GPS receiver can be purchased for less than £100, and is a similar size to a mobile phone. It uses signals from several orbiting satellites to pinpoint your exact position on the planet. There are many different GPS units on the market; for excellent advice on which to buy and how to get started, see www.geocaching.com.

The hiding place is limited by the imagination of the person hiding the cache!

While you're on the website, take the first step of registering. It's free of charge, although you can purchase premium membership for around £15 for access to additional features and "members only" geocaches. Simply choose a username and password, and then you are ready to go.

After registration, you can search for geocaches by entering a place name or postcode, and you will be shown all of the caches in the nearby area, with their coordinates and a brief description of the area where they are hidden.

Geo-cache co-ordinates are published on the website and can either be directly downloaded onto the GPS receiver, or inputted manually. Once loaded, the GPS unit will tell you which direction to travel in and how far to go. Satellite coverage does vary, but the GPS unit will normally get you to within a few metres of the cache.

The website often gives a description of the history of the surrounding area, and indicates how well hidden the cache is and how difficult it is to get to. Some can be found by tarmac roads, others require climbing or rough footpaths, so it is easy to see whether a cache is suitable for wheelchairs or children in pushchairs.

Using the GPS receiver to find the cache site is one thing, but finding the actual cache is much more difficult. It must be hidden on land that is open to the public, but beyond that there are few rules and the hiding place is limited by the imagination of the person hiding the cache!

They are often hidden in a crack in a hedge or the base of a bush, but each cache is different and that is what makes the sport so appealing. Some even have to be done at night, following a path through woodland using reflective markers. The first thing to look for is a suspicious pile of rocks, but some caches require a detailed fingertip search.

Each cache includes a logbook, and you can record your visit by writing your username and the date. Your visit can then be recorded on the geocaching website, which keeps a record of all of your finds.

Larger caches often contain a diverse collection of objects. These are placed in the cache by previous visitors, and can be taken and moved on to another cache. When taking an object, you are encouraged to leave something else in its place. Once you have written in the log book, you must return the cache to the exact position that you found it, ready for the next visitor to find it. →

BELOW FROM LEFT: KEA NEAR TRURO; THE GPS RECEIVER NEEDED FOR GEOCACHING



GEOCACHING

If you are lucky you might find a "trackable item" in a cache. The two main types of trackable items are geocoins and travel bugs. Geocoins are small decorated coins; travel bugs are hitchhikers which travel between caches and are logged at each site. They can be almost anything, with a dogtag attached bearing a unique trackable code. Using the code, you can use the website to see which caches have been visited and

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how far the item has travelled.

Travel bugs usually have a specific mission, such as travelling around the British Isles or visiting railway stations. I recently found a Koala on the North Cornish coast who was on his way to Australia. His mission was to collect a Eucalyptus leaf and return with it to Cologne. He has been taken through Germany, Spain and throughout the UK and has so far travelled over 5,400 miles – although he still has a long, long way to go.

A traditional geocache is simply a box hidden at the published co-ordinates, but many different types also exist. The most common variation is a multi-cache, where the co-ordinates take you to the start of a trail that ultimately leads

you to the final location. The final coordinates are published with numbers missing, and it is necessary to find clues at waypoints along the trail to obtain the missing information. The missing numbers can be found by solving puzzles, such as how many AA stars the village pub has or what year a particular building was built.

This type of cache can be used to explore an area, such as a village, and visit points of interest along the way. A particularly good example takes you around the village of Veyan, stopping off at a pub, the village well, and the churchyard along the way.

Some multi-caches are spread over a larger area, and each individual cache gives a part of the co-ordinates of a final bonus cache. These caches are linked by a theme, and you must find all the individual caches before you can find the last cache. There is a series of caches that are hidden near Cornish lighthouses, and another that uses coastal lookouts used by the National Coastwatch Institution.

The most complicated caches involve complicated puzzles that must be solved in order to determine the co-ordinates. The puzzle is solvable from the information provided on the cache page, but might require research in order to determine the co-ordinates, which can require as much mental exercise as physical exercise.

Geocaching is very sociable, and geocachers often search in groups. As well as the extra pair of eyes, it's often more enjoyable to explore new places with someone else. Although there is no formal group of geocachers in Cornwall, there

BELOW FROM LEFT: VEVAN; A GEOCACHER'S LOG BOOK




are enthusiasts' gatherings throughout the year, and Cornish geocachers proudly wear a "Kernow Kachers" badge.

I have yet to find a cache in Cornwall that is not a beautiful setting. One of the main attractions of geocaching is that it can introduce you to fantastic places that you would probably never have visited. Caches are deliberately hidden in places that you would like to share with other geocachers, and it's an excellent way of discovering new and interesting places, and learning of the diverse history and landscape of our region.

Caches can be found in many popular locations, including several in the centre of Truro, but the most interesting sites are far from the beaten track. Thanks to geocaching, I have discovered quiet little coves and stunning viewpoints which I am fairly certain I would never have visited.

Cornwall's mining remains are ideal for hiding caches. Easy ones can be hidden in the corner of a ruined engine house, and more difficult caches can be hidden in a spoil heap. Searching for a cache under a pile of stones on a spoil heap is like looking for a needle in a haystack. This kind of cache is common in Cornwall and attracts geocachers from all over the country, keen to tackle a new challenge. They often stay for a few days to collect as many caches as they can.

Cornwall's mix of dramatic coastal scenery, wild moors and scenic villages make it very popular with geocachers, who enjoy the walk to the cache as much as finding it. Many acknowledge Cornwall as one of the best places in the country to go geocaching, thanks mainly to the stunning scenery and the large number of caches in the area.

So if you are keen to explore our beautiful county and discover some of the secrets hidden right under your nose, give geocaching a try. Take a look at who has created the caches nearest to you to find geocachers in your area; you can contact them directly using the website, and they will usually be happy to help get you started. But be warned – once you find your first cache, it can get addictive! 

INFORMATION

The best way to enjoy geocaching is to find the first caches that you look for. Follow these tips to improve your chance of success.

1. Start by choosing a cache with a low difficulty rating
2. Look at the cache size, and try to avoid micro caches - the larger the cache, the easier it is to find
3. If possible, get an experienced geocacher to accompany you on your first search, as you will benefit from their experience and share their GPS unit rather than having to buy one first. Geocachers often hunt in packs and will normally be happy for you to join them
4. The online record of the cache often includes clues about where the cache is hidden, with extra hints added by previous geocachers - read them carefully to locate the cache
5. It is always good to start with a cache in an area that you know well, as it is then sometimes possible to locate a cache by just using the clues
6. Don't try too hard! Geocaching is meant to be fun, and it is often just after you have given up looking that you spot the cache

BELOW FROM LEFT: THIS KOALA TRAVEL BUG IS MAKING ITS WAY FROM COLOGNE TO AUSTRALIA, VIA CORNWALL; THE NARE HEADLAND

