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**NEWS**

Using high-tech satellite receivers, adventuring geeks throughout the Lower Mainland enjoy the secretive sport of geocaching. Photo-Dan Toulgoet

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**[Cache me if you can](#)**

The Bloedel Conservatory is a steamy, geodesic igloo, taunting 38-year-old Frank Hillyer with its warmth as he navigates through slushy snow around its perimeter on a chilly January morning.

**[Breast cancer screening goes digital](#)**

The first digital mammography screening machine in the province has gone into operation at the B.C. Cancer Agency, where doctors hope it will speed up cancer detection and save lives.

**[Et tu, Brute?](#)**

A mayor squabbling with his own political party in an election year.

**[Langara poised to expand](#)**

Construction workers may start digging up Langara's parking lot as early as this summer for the first part of the school's ambitious expansion plan. New buildings will be added to the campus, which measures about 40,000 square metres, over the next 25 years.

**[Cambie heritage society skeptical of Ravco plan](#)**

Members of a local heritage society are concerned construction of a rapid transit line between Vancouver and Richmond will damage or destroy many of the trees along Cambie Boulevard.



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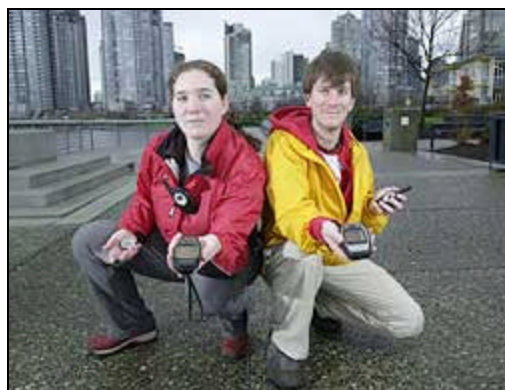
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**NEWS**



Alison Meynert and Colin Richardson became hooked on the game after receiving a GPS unit as a gift a year ago. Photo-Dan Toulgoet

**Cache me if you can**

by Rhiannon Coppin-contributing writer

The Bloedel Conservatory is a steamy, geodesic igloo, taunting 38-year-old Frank Hillyer with its warmth as he navigates through slushy snow around its perimeter on a chilly January morning.

Feet getting wetter with every step, Hillyer consults his handheld navigational unit as he lays the first snow-prints far down an adjacent path. Arriving at a south-facing, stone parapet atop the mound that is Queen Elizabeth Park, Hillyer realizes he's way off course.

Clinging to the side of the stone lookout, he shuffles and slips down a steep gravel embankment onto the lower trail. The digital display on the unit tells him he's almost there: 40 metres . . . 15 metres . . . now eight metres from his target.

He stops, puts down the equipment and, after a few moments of looking around, zeroes in on a crook in an otherwise average stone wall. Hillyer reaches in with triumph; his hand clamps down on a plastic case containing some mysterious, unknown treasure.

He opens the case, searches its contents for interesting prizes, and signs his online alias, "WCoaster," inside a small notebook. Then he restores the contents and replaces the resealed plastic container into the dark crevasse. It's tucked in and ready for the next treasure hunter to come along.

Hillyer is just one player in a mostly secret and highly addictive multinational hide-and-seek sport.

Hillyer and other "geocachers" like him use Global Positioning System (GPS) receivers in natural, rural, and urban settings to track down hidden stores of goods-also known as "caches," a term dating back to slang used by 16th Century French Canadian trappers. The caches are placed and hidden by other players in the ongoing game.

Hillyer acknowledges the secrecy involved in the sport and how it could be misinterpreted by people unfamiliar with the activity. But he loves it.

"You're not really harming anything," he says after replacing the cache. "You're not doing anything wrong, but it could be perceived to be."

Players have hidden more than 130,000 caches spanning 213 countries, which is where the "geo" part of the name "geocache" comes in. Taking part in the sport is easy because the only equipment required is an Internet connection. A website called geocaching.com contains all the hidden caches worldwide in a searchable database, which generates a list of caches organized by country, state, postal code, or distance from a particular waypoint-a navigational term for a latitude and longitude co-ordinate.

With a few mouse clicks, players can read descriptions of how difficult the various cache hunts are, whether the cache is a few minutes from a parking lot, down a wheelchair-accessible path, or a five-hour hike up a snowy mountain. Once you've chosen a cache to hunt, you can either jot down the given waypoint and use a map and compass to guide you or download the waypoint into a handheld GPS receiver, costing \$100 or more, which will both point you in the right direction and tell you how far you still have to go.

The practice of stashing supplies in the bush and creating "'X' marks the spot" on a map is nothing new, but geocaching is revolutionary in its use of out-of-this-world technology to allow earth-based civilians to create a network of tactile, physical messages in public spaces. It gives them common goals and allows couples and families to spend time together in challenging activities. But geocaching is also revolutionary, perhaps for another reason: it gets geeks to go outdoors.

"Anything that gets geeks away from the keyboard and out into the daylight is a good thing," proclaims Bob Bunting, a local guru of geocaching.

Sitting in a New Westminster Boston Pizza booth at one of the periodic gatherings of local geocachers-known as an "event cache"-which has attracted Hillyer and many other locals, Bunting calls geocaching a navigationally and psychologically challenging game, which uses a highly sophisticated network of over two dozen Earth-orbiting satellites to assist players in finding the caches. The satellites, launched since 1989 by the United States Department of Defense, travel within one of six separate, orbital planes spanning the globe. Working with clock synchronization, a handheld GPS receiver decodes signals from any satellite within range and attempts to "trilaterate" its own location by translating into a measurement of distance the time between when a signal was sent and when it was received.

The caches can be anything from a rock cairn in the desert to a tree stump in the woods, concealing what usually amounts to a Tupperware container full of keychains, golf balls, expired Starbucks coupons, and strange plastic objects disdainfully referred to as "McToys." But don't start thinking it's all child's play, Bunting advises: the treasure is sometimes real.

"There's a group on the Island [known as 'KFWB'] that puts big money in their caches. Lots of money. Some people are just crazy about their caches. They've hidden about 200 or 300 caches. Rumour has it they've put over \$100,000 in caches. First find, five grand," Bunting says.

Bunting, who goes by the geocaching alias "MrGigabyte," and his partner Cathy Lewis, are a North Shore-based geocaching team who've found more than 1,400 caches and hidden 30. For them, one of the biggest treats of geocaching is finding hidden locations in the middle of cities, suburbs, and towns they might not otherwise visit.

"People that live in an area have little parks that they know about but they would like other people to experience them," Lewis says. "They put a cache there and now you've got people from all over coming to find that secret place-[a place with] historic things, beautiful views, hikes or trails that normally people wouldn't bother to go on or wouldn't hear about."

In the Lower Mainland as a whole, there are more than 200 physical caches on Cypress, Grouse, and Seymour mountains, in Deep Cove and up Indian Arm, in White Rock and Coquitlam, in historical sites in New Westminster, and hidden across central Burnaby. In Vancouver, 35 physical caches are hidden in public spaces including Stanley Park, Granville Island, Coal Harbour, False Creek, Wreck Beach, Jericho Beach, Southlands, and the UBC Endowment Lands-where Vancouver's first two caches were hidden.

Vancouver parks board commissioner Heather Deal already enjoys orienteering-a map-and-compass based sport-and is happy geocaching is a growing activity in city parks.

"I'm thrilled. I've already gone to the [geocaching] web page, and found a whole bunch I'm going to look for," she says. "It's almost like having somebody else run a recreation program for us in the park at no cost to us."

Although some of the sneakier caches around the Lower Mainland are stashed inside fake electrical boxes, decoy in-ground lawn sprinklers, and select golf balls strategically placed outside driving ranges, most caches are within parks and may be obvious to the discerning eye. As of yet, no Vancouver city park workers have come across hidden caches, and park policy isn't clear on what should be done with caches if they are discovered. Deal, however, isn't concerned.

"I can't see it being a problem," she says, "After all, stealth is part of the game. Frankly, anything that brings people into our parks makes me happy. The best parks are the ones that have lots of people in them, so if there's folks in there wandering around, learning the park and enjoying the park to find the secret stash, it sounds good to me."

Geocaching is also off the radar of the Vancouver Police Department. According to media liaison Const. Anne Drennan, the closest police have encountered to geocaching is a few complaints over the past decade reporting what turned out to be students running treasure hunt-related stunts. "It's certainly not anything that's causing us problems yet," says Drennan.

Geocachers in the U.S. have more regular encounters with the law-either because they unthinkingly hide a cache that looks like a bomb near an airport, rail line, highway overpass, government building, or school or

because they were cache-hunting at night in a suspicious location. Some have also found human remains while on a cache hunt.

While Lewis and Bunting have yet to have any problems in B.C., they sometimes run into hiccups caused indirectly by the low number of caches in the Lower Mainland. Since it's not unusual for local geocachers to find between four and 10 caches in one day, serious addicts often venture outside the Lower Mainland before their first year of geocaching is up. Washington State is both close and brimming with caches; unfortunately, the road to Seattle is often paved with confused border guards.

"We used to try to make up stories, like we're going down for a convention," Lewis says about their first trips to Washington to look for caches.

"...or hiking," Bunting adds.

"But now we tell them the truth: 'We're geocaching,'" says Lewis. "And they'd go 'huh?' But we figured the more of them [border guards] that knew about it, the better it would be for other geocachers."

The pair's cache-hunting technique has been honed to a science, with Bunting keen on the technical aspects of GPS gadgetry, and Lewis adept at using her intuition to locate a cleverly stashed cache. Because GPS is only accurate at pointing out a location to within 30 metres-15 at best-technology can get you quickly into the general vicinity of the cache, but you need to rely on psychology to find it.

"Basically, it [the GPS] gets you to the area. Lots of people say you should just put away your GPS and use your common sense-your geosense as they call it," Lewis says.

Alison Meynert and Colin Richardson, who go by the online team alias "LeadMagnet," are a young Yaletown-based couple who discovered geocaching after receiving a GPS unit for Christmas over a year ago.

"It's a bit of an addiction at this point. You find your first clue and you're hooked," Meynert says.

Meynert, an SFU masters student in bioinformatics, and Richardson, an iron-ring wearing computer engineer, quickly embraced geocaching as a way to spend time together and get a break from the indoors.

"You wouldn't think it, but a lot of people who are in engineering and computer science-people who like technology-a lot of these people really like being outside, too. There's a lot more overlap than you might think," Meynert says.

"There's this huge stereotype of the engineer as this skinny little geeky guy, completely pale, sitting at his computer 'tappety, tappety, tappety,'" she says, mimicking fingers on a keyboard, "and it's completely not true. And you see that so many people out there geocaching are in complete defiance of that stereotype."

"It's definitely a family thing too," says Richardson. "The outdoorsy crowd and the geek crowd. It's a melding. If I could say... Venn diagram!"

Meynert once staged an elaborate multi-stage cache for Richardson. She hid a number of clues around False Creek, and he had to find each location and collect a letter. Each letter was part of the name of the restaurant she was taking him to that night for his birthday.

Caches are increasingly developing a tradition as romantic gestures. A famous cache near Prospect Point was given the online waypoint alias "WYMMN," which stood for "Will You Marry Me, Nardine?"

"This guy put together a cache with the engagement ring in it for his girlfriend, and gave her the coordinates and she had to go find it. After she found it, they made it into a regular geocache," Meynert says.

Meynert and Richardson have taken their bikes out on sunny days to cache-hunt around Stanley Park, but have also enjoyed romantic night-time caching around waterfronts like Ambleside Park.

Geocaching isn't necessarily best when done as a couple. Richardson has a lot of fun late at night, on his own, feeling like he's "on some little secret sneaky mission," while Meynert has often gone on her own weekday afternoon expeditions to relieve stress.

"I'm a student, so sometimes I'll go out on my own during the day when I really need a break," she says. "It's relaxing, it's fun, it's totally distracting. It's wonderful. You have a goal and there's something tangible you get out of it-you get another notch on your geocaching stick."

Meynert and Richardson have a running joke that when she engages in these private cache hunts, she's really stealing the caches and hoarding them in her closet.

"He just had this really bad mental image of a closet full of geocaches and me with my big smile. 'I found them, my precious caches,'" she jokes, in a mock Lord of the Rings' Gollum-like voice.

Stolen caches are no laughing matter for aficionados of the sport. Caches are regularly being taken "offline" due to trail washouts, high tides, land redevelopment, or even "muggles:" the geocaching name for clueless members of the public and borrowed from J.K. Rowling's term in her Harry Potter books for "non-magic people."

"When a cache is 'muggled' it means that a non-geocacher has found it and taken it," Meynert says.

And as a result of frequent mugging, finding a cache in a populated area such as downtown Vancouver more than a couple of years old is remarkable. The oldest cache in the sport is only five years old, and its location is marked by a plaque in Portland, Ore.

"On May 1, year 2000, [former U.S. president] Bill Clinton signed a congressional order to remove what's called 'selective availability,'" Bunting says. "That was scrambling of the GPS signals that pretty much made it impossible [as a civilian] to get reliable location with a consumer grade GPS within 100 metres. Up to that point, it [GPS] was virtually useless."

The next day, a now-retired computer programmer named Dave Ulmer reportedly hid a logbook, a can of beans, mapping software, \$5 in cash,

and a slingshot in a location just outside of Portland. He posted the GPS coordinates of the location to the newsgroup sci.geo.satellite-nav and challenged anyone to find his "GPS stash."

To his surprise, the very next day, Vancouver, Wash. resident Mike Teague found the cache and logged his find online. Teague kept a "stash" website, posting the logs from the newsgroup for several months, but eventually passed the job on to a Seattle-based friend, Jeremy Irish, who now runs the geocaching.com forum and database in its current popular-and more accessible-incarnation.

Back at the geocache gathering in New Westminster, where over 50 geocachers, their spouses, and families have shown up to swap stories and swag, Frank Hillyer describes the people he's met in the sport.

"People who are young at heart really enjoy geocaching for some reason," says Hillyer. "The sense of adventure, I believe, keeps people young. People get too stressed out about life and just can't find the enjoyment in something like this. They have more important things to do-like vacuum the carpet."

Although the idea of adults wading through muck, snow, and rain while looking for little containers of trinkets seems silly, geocachers say once you get out on your own cache hunt, you start to discover the real hidden booty: time spent with loved ones, in the outdoors, working together for a common goal, the thrill of a secret trail or a hidden view; and the benefit of an ever-expanding community of players, online and real-time, who enjoy creating fun for others. The real treasure, according to committed geocachers, isn't the soggy plastic container full of McToys or the cash prizes, but the journey.

"The thrill is not in finding it," says Bunting, in summing up the sport. "The thrill is getting there-the chase. Reminds me of something else," he says, glancing slyly at his partner Lewis. "Finding it is sort of a bonus."

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