Wonderful West Virginia Magazine

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Network of ADVENTURE

Geocachers hide dozens of treasure boxes throughout the lesser-traveled corners of West Virginia's state parks to encourage exploration.

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In May 2000, an Oregon man trekked into a wooded area of the Pacific Northwest carrying a black plastic bucket that contained a few videos and snacks, some books and software, a little cash, and a slingshot. He buried the bucket partway in the soil, partially obscured it with some tree litter from the forest floor, and left it. He later posted its coordinates in a forum online. Within three days, two individuals who read the post had already tracked it down and digitally logged their find. With that, geocaching was born, and it quickly developed into a global phenomenon that has engaged millions of players.

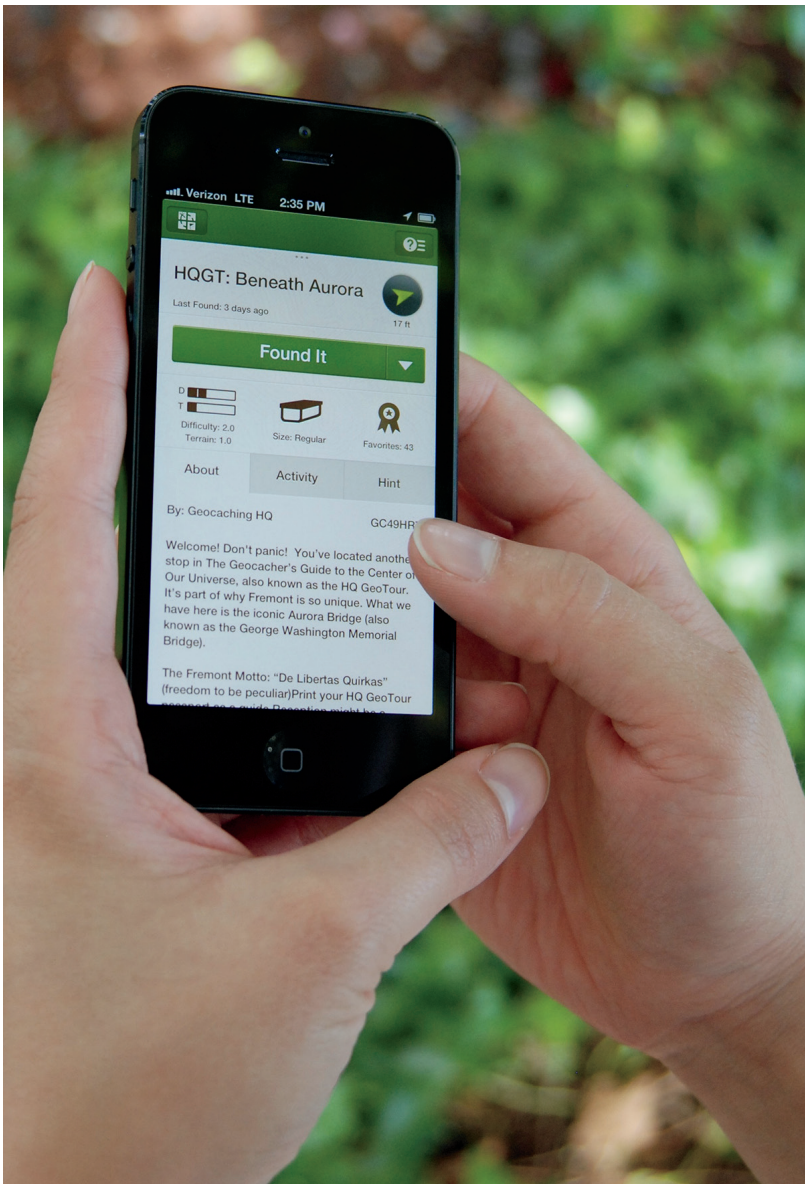
"It's like a treasure hunt," says Renee Fincham, park activity coordinator and naturalist at Cacapon Resort State Park in Berkeley Springs. "It opens up new places and experiences wherever you are. You never know what you'll come across, both in the cache and on the way to finding it."

A Primer

Geocaching combines modern technology and old-fashioned hide-and-seek with a strong dose of quirky creativity. It gives players an opportunity to explore, exercise, and spend time outdoors while working on mental challenges. As its name suggests, geocaching revolves around the discovery of homemade "caches," which usually consist of waterproof containers holding a few trinkets, as well as pens or pencils and logbooks. A player who creates a cache hides it in an inconspicuous yet publicly accessible location, then posts a listing for the cache location online so others can search for it. Often, a cache developer will include an encrypted hint with the post to increase players' chances for success while still providing a challenge.

When players go out caching, they generally search in advance for intriguing caches on websites like geocaching.com or similar phone apps, considering factors like location, terrain, difficulty level, availability of clues or added challenges, and ratings from other players. Once they choose a cache, or an area with multiple caches they want to explore, players head out into the real world to start searching. Cachers use GPS devices or navigation apps to hone in on the area of their quarry, then begin their visual search. Upon discovery of a cache, players may choose to take an item from the box in exchange for something of their own to leave behind, and they record their find in both the provided logbook and the cache's online journal. Anyone can build and hide a cache for others to discover, and anyone can search for existing caches and join the fun.

That's the straightforward introduction, but it doesn't convey the wonderfully eccentric flavor of the game. Geocachers have a vocabulary and set of mannerisms all their own when they're on the hunt. For example, "When you're geocaching, you have to watch out for Muggles," says geocacher and Parkersburg native Roxanne Sutton, using the community's Harry Potter-co-opted term for non-geocachers. "You don't want to ruin integrity of a cache, so you have to act very inconspicuous—or very official, like you're supposed to poke around in weird places." Other caching-specific terms include travel bugs and geocoins, two common finds inside caches that feature tracking codes so players can follow the journeys of items they've helped pass along.



Each cache has an online listing that provides GPS coordinates to give players a starting point for their search, which many cachers now access in the field on their smartphones.

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Joining the Game in West Virginia

Fortunately for West Virginians, players have planted geocaches all over the state, and many of them can be found right alongside or just off of easily accessible trails, so it's easy to get started. Geocachers have hidden more than 100 of these prized troves across two dozen state parks in West Virginia, and by seeking them out, visitors often discover sides of the parks they otherwise may have never experienced.

Additionally, West Virginia state park officials require approval for geocaches sited within their boundaries, which helps to ensure that cache developers don't unintentionally draw traffic over ecologically sensitive or unsafe areas. This also increases visitor awareness about available geocaches.

In Coopers Rock State Forest, geocachers have placed 11 caches. Forest Superintendent Adam McKeown and

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Moncove Lake State Park currently only has one geocache, but Superintendent Holly Morris hopes to hear from more interested players to create and hide new caches and make the park a destination for the game.

Geocaching is a great source of adventure and fun for hikers young and old. Trails and hikes can take visitors around some of the state's most beautiful scenery while they enjoy good old-fashioned treasure hunts.

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CARLA WITT FORD

COURTESY OF JULIE MCQUADE

In Pipestem Resort State Park, Lake Shore Trail follows the edge of of Long Branch Lake and provides beautiful views of the water from the trees. Visitors can enjoy geocaching opportunities on nearly every trail in the park.

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his staff regularly check each one to ensure their safe and smart locations and to make sure the caches don't contain potentially offensive materials. "When we check and approve a new cache, we take a Smokey the Bear coin and put that in," McKeown says, adding that he gets an application for a new cache at least once a month. For those wishing to find the forest's current caches, McKeown advises searchers to take the scenic Ravens Rock Trail. In addition to having several geocaches within easy access, the trail leads to Ravens Rock overlook, which gives hikers a top-notch view of the Cheat River Canyon.

Cacapon Resort State Park also lists 11 caches on the state website, and Renee Fincham highlights the Cacapon-Oriskany Sandstone Earthcache, an educational type of geocache providing earth science lessons, near the entrance to the park as a can't-miss sight. "It's an outcropping of white sandstone that lets you see the ridge here, and people always talk about that one," Fincham says. For a scenic hike that offers multiple caches, she suggests the Overlook Trail as well as the fire road near the ridgeline, although the road closes from October to April. Many of Cacapon Resort State Park's caches have been placed in relatively high elevations, adding a bit of a challenge to visitors' quests.

In Pipestem Resort State Park near the state's southern boundary, Park Naturalist Julie McQuade has placed four caches herself and welcomes park visitors to apply to add their own. She notes that nearly every trail in the park has a cache near it, and while each has its own beauty, she's especially partial to the County Line Trail, which brings geocachers in range of the County Line cache. "As you walk, you pass a waterfall and get to go in the gorge," McQuade says. "It's a little steeper than the others and more difficult, but it's a beautiful cache."

Because searching for hidden caches may involve unexpected encounters with wildlife, McQuade also advises all geocachers to wear proper closed-toe footwear and to use caution when moving rocks.

History buffs, photographers, and anyone who enjoys a scenic view will want to visit Carnifex Ferry Battlefield State Park and the popular Patterson Trail, which currently hosts three active caches and also provides three memorable overlooks above the Gauley River.

Finally, if you're up for a longer adventure, the North Bend Rail Trail near Parkersburg offers plenty of variety, with 13 tunnels and 36 bridges along its 72-mile route. One hidden cache can be found a few miles from Parkersburg, but explorers with the time and stamina to go the distance can find a second, two-part cache at the other end, almost the entire way to Clarksburg.

"A good geocache adventure should introduce you to something new," says Roxanne Sutton, who has also geocached in other states. "The state parks in West Virginia are particularly well-suited for this—they have so many scenic waterfalls and cottages and forests, and cachers get really creative in taking advantage of their surroundings. I've seen things like a deer antler drilled out where someone put a small tube in there and stuck the whole thing in a log. The diversity of natural features in these parks and the range of where things could be makes finding the caches so interesting."

MORE GEOCACHES

Take a look at the full list of current geocaches in West Virginia state parks at *www.wvstateparks.com/recreation/geocache.htm#exist*, and visit *www.wvstateparks.com/recreation/geocache.pdf* to apply to place a cache of your own.