

A NEW WAY TO EXPERIENCE YOSEMITE: GEOCACHING

People come to Yosemite from all over the world to hike, paint, climb, photograph, ski . . . the list is almost endless. Now there's a new activity taking place in the park – and you probably don't even know it.

This new adventure game is called “geocaching.” Although it bears some similarity to orienteering, geocaching is less than five years old. Despite the game's relative youth, the primary gathering place for its players (www.geocaching.com) reports that there are already caches in more than 200 countries.

Geocaching is sometimes described as a “high-tech treasure hunt.” In the basic game, one person hides a small container filled with prizes and posts its geographic coordinates (latitude and longitude) on the Internet. When a player wants to look for a cache, he or she enters its coordinates into a handheld Global Positioning System (GPS) receiver and then uses the GPS readouts to zero in on the cache location. (A few intrepid souls search for caches using only a compass and maps.) Players prove they've found the site by signing a log in the cache. They also might leave appropriate objects, or trade for one of the items left by the original cache placer or other finders.

Sounds simple, doesn't it? Not always! Sometimes you have to solve a puzzle to determine the coordinates, or find information at one place that helps you determine the final location. Even when you do have the correct coordinates, the cache container may be very tiny. Or it may be disguised as something else, such as a piece of wood, a sprinkler, or a rock.

Sometimes the terrain in which the cache is hidden requires specialized skills such as technical climbing or SCUBA diving. However, there are also plenty of easy caches available, which makes geocaching a wonderful family activity.

On lands managed by the National Park Service and some other agencies, a variation on the basic game known as “virtual geocaching” is used. (Even in areas that don't demand virtual caches, the sport's rules prohibit placing a cache in a way that would require any destructive activity such as digging.)

Virtual geocaching means that instead of a physical container, you're looking for a place of particular historical or natural interest. At the time this article was written, the virtual caches in Yosemite covered such topics as the story of Joseph LeConte, high-water marks of the 1997 flood, the importance of El Capitan and Camp 4

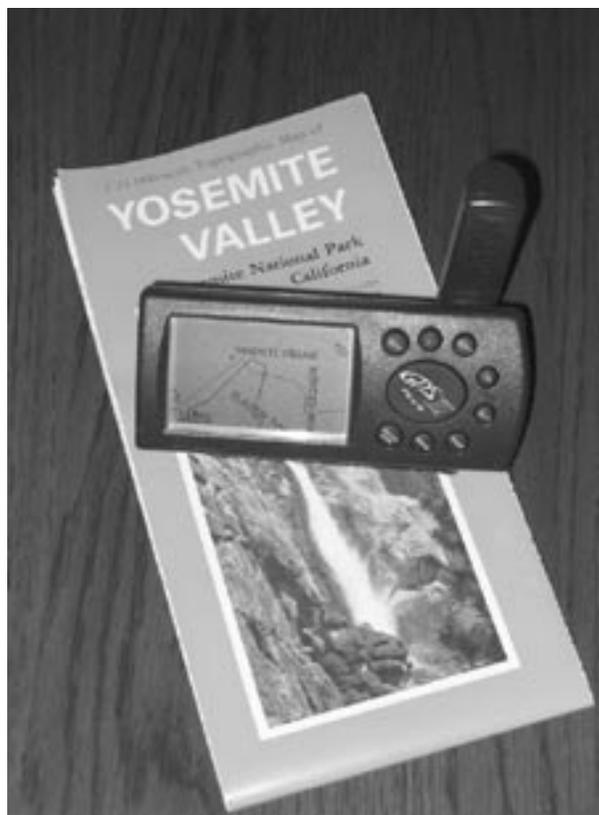
in rock-climbing history, and overlooked geological features in Yosemite Valley.

Because there's no log in a virtual cache, the cache owner must devise another way for people to prove that they've completed the challenge. The two most common methods are taking a photo of yourself at the appointed site, or responding to questions, the answers to which can only be found at the proper location.

Geocaching is a natural complement to other activities at Yosemite because many hikers already carry GPS receivers. Ben Thomas, who lives in Belmont, California, bought a GPS unit after briefly getting lost in the Mono Basin a couple of years ago.

“It turned out I was only off by 100 feet, but I decided a GPS would be a good thing to carry. Within the week, I found there was a game in which you could log having been in places – and I do like going places! Many geocaches are like travel suggestions from a friend.”

Thomas has now created his own cache to honor a world-famous Yosemite campground. “My Camp 4



A GPS receiver and a sense of adventure are all you need to start geocaching in Yosemite.





PHOTO COURTESY OF PATTY WINTER.

John Winslow checks his GPS readings at the LeConte Memorial for a two-stage virtual geocache called "Geo Joe's Traveling Show."

geocache commemorates fond memories of camping in the valley during high school and college. It's my way of sharing a place with geo-friends."

San Diego resident Don Endicott and his family are frequent visitors to Yosemite and have devised four virtual caches in the park. Endicott echoes the sentiments of many geocachers when he says he enjoys "the pleasure of seeing new and often very special places, even in my own community. There is also the challenge, of course."

"If I can combine a physical challenge such as running up a mountain that features a remarkable view – which I tend to do frequently anyway – with the thrill of a treasure hunt, it's an easy activity to become addicted to. These days, I receive numerous emails from other cachers who report they started on their own adventures after being inspired by some of my logs to explore more of our beautiful country. So I get added satisfaction from promoting outdoors adventure and preservation."

Endicott has a particular motivation for the caches he creates. "I really enjoy sharing special spots of my own with other cachers. I like to research the history or other significant aspects of the sites I choose, and spice up the cache descriptions with this information so visitors learn while they play."

Yosemite provides Endicott with a perfect place for that combination of fun and education. "I'm convinced Yosemite is the most beautiful place on this earth. My

first visit, as a 13-year-old in 1963, was a family camping trip in Curry Village. Many years later, my wife and I spent our honeymoon in the Valley, and we have been taking our two children (now ages 18 and 13) to Yosemite since they were barely able to walk."

"After years of hiking, running, ski touring, skiing at Badger Pass, and tubing and kayaking in the Merced River, I wanted to give something back by way of sharing awareness of my personal favorite sites with others who might otherwise only have visited the better known locations."

For example, Endicott's "100 Year Flood" cache was inspired by the signs marking the high-water levels of the 1997 flood. "We were in the valley over Christmas break the year of that storm, and happened to leave just as the rains were hitting. On a subsequent trip to Yosemite, I noticed the signs were nicely positioned to mark out a 'heart of the valley' walking tour."

"I had the idea to lay out a virtual multicache circuit that would provide a wonderful sampling of valley



PHOTO COURTESY OF PATTY WINTER.

A visit to a classic Yosemite Falls viewing area can also lead a geocacher one step closer to completing a virtual cache.

scenes, provide a little history, and showcase evidence of the unbelievable natural event that occurred that January. The cache also seemed to provide a good excuse for future visitors to get out of their cars and see, hear,



PHOTO COURTESY OF PATTY WINTER.

Most people pass by this unassuming hill in Yosemite Valley without even noticing it, but a virtual geocache reveals its fascinating history.

and breathe Yosemite in a way they could always remember. And from their logs, I could be there again, too!”

Another of Endicott’s virtual caches is more challenging physically, but it takes finders back to the time when stagecoaches traveled to Yosemite. “For years,” he explains, “I had gone by the Tunnel View trailhead of the Pohono Trail. After reviewing my maps and personal library of books featuring old photos of Yosemite, I wanted to search for several of the historic Inspiration Points.”

“From the topographic maps I had uploaded to my GPS receiver, I noticed one day that I was close to a feature referred to as Fort Monroe. I swung by and discovered this beautiful and rarely visited location. I knew I had to place a virtual in the area as an enticement to walk back in time to long-ago popular viewpoints. To leave behind the hubbub of the village—if only for a day—and experience Yosemite up close and personal.”

Those of us who visit the magnificent region that is Yosemite are always interested in finding ways to experience the park more fully. For many people, geocaching brings that new perspective on the park. Maybe for you, too?

HOW DID GEOCACHING GET STARTED?

Geocaching began after the U.S. Department of Defense determined that it no longer needed an electronic “fuzzing” signal (called selective availability) that was making civilian and commercial GPS receivers less precise. On May 1, 2000, President Bill Clinton signed an order to stop the use of selective availability. Two days later, an appreciative GPS user hid a container of prizes near Portland, Oregon and posted its coordinates to a GPS users’ group on the Internet. Within days, two people had found the cache, and the “GPS Stash Hunt” – now usually called geocaching – was off and running.

Patty Winter is a freelance writer in the San Francisco Bay Area. She’s also the owner of the virtual geocache, “Stories in the Rocks: Yosemite Valley Geology.” For more information about geocaching, visit www.geocaching.com.