

Geocaching - Get the kids out and about using a GPS

Often we all find ourselves at a loose end trying to think up something to engage the kids. So how about something that will get them begging you to take them outside exploring while they learn skills like maths, geography, science, geology and cartography? Sounds too good to be true? Welcome to the world of Geo-Caching.



The sport (if that's the correct term) is a modern spin on the classic game of treasure hunts, that we've all played at one time or another. However, in the modern version individuals from all over the world have hidden secret caches all over planet. Presently, over 620,000 items have been hidden away worldwide and they're all being tracked through various geocaching websites. Plus, best of all, it's free.

So, how does it work? First to get started you'll need to get yourself a GPS receiver. These retail for as little as €100 for a basic model, which is all that's really required. Many new phones and PDA's also come with a GPS functionality built-in these days – so you may already have one. You'll then need to register with one of a number of geo-caching websites, for example (www.geocaching.com) and once registered you'll be able to pick a cache located near to where you live. You'll then be given the co-ordinates to enter into your GPS along with some clues. Some cache pages also indicate if the site is pushchair/wheelchair friendly.

So, sounds easy! Getting to the cache itself may be easy, however even a very good GPS will often get you no closer than 5m to the cache itself. From that point on you'll require the clues and your own guile and cunning to help you locate it. (Could it be in a crack in the tree? Under a stone? In a hollow in the ground?)

So, what's in the cache? Caches are as varied as the people who hide them. Generally, they range in size from something as small as a 35mm film canister right up to a large plastic box. Inside there may be nothing more than a piece of paper for you to log your name and date and time on, right up to a number of varied items, such as badges or mugs,



etc. The items in the cache may often be removed as a memento, however if you do take something the custom is to leave an item in exchange. When finished return the container to its original location making sure it's well hidden to stop casual passer bys (known as "muggles" within geo-caching circles) from stumbling across it.

Logging the find. Once you have found the cache, the geo-cache website can be updated to let everyone know that you found it and to thank the site owner for going to the trouble of creating it in the first place. Very soon your profile will have a



list of all the caches you have visited and you may even have some nice memories of trips to far-flung places.

www.geocachingireland.com is a website dedicated to geocaching in Ireland. Donnacha McCartan helps maintain the website and in his words "Geocaching gives the kids a real sense of adventure and is a great way to introduce the kids to the outdoors. Geocaching in Ireland has grown significantly since I started back 8 years ago, when there was just two in Ireland, now there is about 1400 active caches on the entire island. There are new users coming online everyday. Many people use it as a holiday tool – you know all the great locations where you live but this gives you an insight into unfamiliar areas and all the great secret locations. We have recently adopted the 'Leave No Trace' ethos (www.leavenotraceireland.org) and encourage cachers to have, and teach their kids, respect for the environment – if there's an existing path – use it – don't create a new one."

Hopefully, a few successful trips will have the kids hooked, you can start to think about creating your own local geo-caches. Remember to create them in local beauty spots, or nice locations off the beaten tracks, so people can share your knowledge of your local area. There are rules you should follow when placing a cache such as never place them on private land or in any way that will affect the flora and fauna of an area, for example hiding a cache in a rabbit hole. See links from our website for further guidelines.



As always, ensure that you take adequate protection from the weather when venturing into the great outdoors and ensure that you notify someone of where you are going and when you expect to return. See our website (www.4kids.ie) for further details and links to useful sites to find out loads more about geocaching and where to buy your GPS unit.

Written by Michael Ryan, father of Max age 7, and twin boys Andrew and Ben age 5.