WL 506

West Virginia University
EXTENSION SERVICE

Exploring West Virginia Through Geocaching

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Geocaching is for young and old, history buffs, adventure seekers, and everyone in between. It can be a fun family pastime or a club activity.

Geocaching

Geocaching is a modern-day treasure hunt that requires the use of a hand-held global positioning system (GPS) unit or smartphone to find hidden containers called caches. Participants, called geocachers, are given GPS coordinates of hidden caches. Then, they try to find the cache using the coordinates and additional clues. Geocaching can be done as an individual activity, as a group event, or as a family outing. Several themed geocaches are organized into geotrails.

Using a hand-held GPS

GPS units are used to help people easily navigate from one point to another. Hand-held GPS units can be used to navigate to a waypoint, which is a specific location defined by a set of coordinates. A waypoint may be referred to as a landmark on some GPS units.

The GPS unit's user manual will explain how to enter coordinates directly from a computer using an interface cable, and/or how to enter the coordinates manually. Once the waypoint or coordinates have been entered, the hand-held unit will display a map with an arrow directing the person where to go. A hand-held unit will typically get a person within 10 feet of the actual waypoint.

Most smartphones have the ability to download a GPS application (referred to as app), which would allow the person to use their phone as their hand-held GPS unit.

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How to begin geocaching

It is free to register an account and user profile with *www.geocaching.com*. Once registered, a geocacher can search for hidden caches within an area by typing in a zip code or location.

Getting started requires eight steps:

1. Register for a free basic membership.
2. Visit the "Hide & Seek a Cache" page.
3. Enter your postal code and click "Search."
4. Choose a geocache from the list and click on the name.
5. Enter the coordinates into your GPS device.
6. Use your GPS device to find the hidden geocache.
7. Sign the log book and return the geocache to its original location.
8. Share your geocaching stories and photos online.

The coordinates get the geocacher within 10 feet of the hidden cache. Hidden caches can be the size of a small plastic container to the size of a tube of lip balm. Size and difficulty level are listed on the geocaching website. Depending on the size of the cache, it might contain various small inexpensive items called "swag."

If it is a microcache, it may simply contain a sheet of rolled paper for geocachers to sign their handle name and date the cache was found.

Geocaching opportunities in West Virginia

There are more than 5,000 geocaches in West Virginia, and many are hidden near historical locations, state parks, or places often unnoticed. The West Virginia Department of Education and the Arts operates the Explore WV program, which encourages people to explore.

A new series of themed geocaches, called a Geocoin challenge, highlights historic Civil War sites. It is called the West Virginia Civil War Geotrail. There are 150 Civil War markers throughout the state indicated by the Civil War Trails logo, and 75 of those sites were selected to be included in the Civil War Geotrail. More information about the challenge can be found at *http://www.civilwargeotrail.wv.gov*.

Through this geotrail challenge, participants find Civil War Trails geocaches hidden in historically significant locations. The state has been divided into five zones, and geocachers must find those caches, log those finds, and work towards finding enough caches in each zone to earn a commemorative coin from each zone. If a geocacher earns a coin from all five zones, the five pieces fit together to make the state of West Virginia. While hunting for these caches, participants can also learn more about West Virginia history.

Geocaching in West Virginia state parks and forests

Most of West Virginia's state parks and forests have at least one geocache hidden within the park. You can find a complete listing of state parks and the geocaches hidden within them at *http://www.wvstateparks.com/recreation/geocache.htm*.

2013

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