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Geocaching: Hunting for treasure across northern Michigan

by Kim Schneider | Press News Service

Monday June 23, 2008, 2:30 AM



Photo by Kim Schneider

Visitor Chris Schneider feeds a hungry sheep at Pond Hill Farm in Harbor Springs, a stop along a geocaching trail in northern Michigan.

HARBOR SPRINGS -- We're a little more than a mile into our first geocaching adventure in northern Michigan, and we already have fallen off course.

It isn't the GPS unit that's the problem: it's Pond Hill Farm and its temptingly scenic spread of organic gardens and pastures. There are farm animals you can feed and shelves stocked floor to ceiling with treasures such as dilly asparagus, fresh basil marinara sauce and double-chocolate coated peanuts.

My 17-year-old son and his friend laugh as sheep jockey for position along the barn fence to slurp down the 3-for-\$1 buckets of food. And we get waylaid again as they discover the squash rockets and compete to reach the farthest target first.

But we're on no timetable. In fact, this family adventure weekend later will be remembered more for the detours than our hunting success -- whether the "hunt" of the moment is for a hidden prize, wildlife or lost golf balls.

Geocaching provided the perfect course from which to veer. It's an activity invented in 2000, and it has been picking up steam across Northern Michigan and worldwide. The high-tech adventure basically involves finding coordinates for hidden treasures on the Internet, seeking them out through hand-held GPS units, then replacing found treasure with trinkets of your own and writing in the provided logbook. The craze is so popular

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in this part of the state there are more than 1,300 public geocaches in the Traverse City area alone, according to the city's convention and visitor's bureau.

This year, Holiday Vacation Rentals has added a new twist. Anyone who rents one of its 100-plus vacation homes or condominiums -- most in the Boyne City and Harbor Springs area -- can follow a private geocache route that has elements of a scavenger hunt thrown in. They provide the GPS unit, along with mapped routes that take you from clue to clue and eventually to the "treasure."

Owner Alan Hammond came up with the idea as a way to help families explore the best the region has to offer and build memories along the way. Family members of any age can participate, he says, and it's a good teamwork builder.

We test the theory at his Tunnel of Trees geocache route -- a combination 20-mile drive-and-hike adventure. But with 7.2 miles still to go to our first clue, we experience our first GPS unit malfunction. "Weak signal," the thing reads. "Need direct vision of sky." This, we realize, could be a problem given the route is named for the tree canopy that pretty much blocks the sky.

We pay close attention when we do get a signal, following the pre-programmed GPS unit to each clue. We memorize the word we find in a grove of birch trees in an old cemetery, then move on to other hints that help pinpoint the treasure and also test our communal knowledge of tree types (is that a *White Pine*?) and teach us interesting tidbits about the area's rich history.

When we find the cache, we take a prize. Most fun is reading the logbook and recording our experience. We mention our bald eagle sighting and recommend yet another detour, this to the Good Hart General Store for the to-die-for fresh donuts doughnuts.

From Cross Village, where this route ends, adventurers can head further north into Wilderness State Park. Subsequent hunts follow a dune climb, a Sturgeon Bay beach and a section of the North Country Trail. All are notable for wildlife viewing. All the routes are notable for the wildlife among amid them; by weekend's end, our count would include 24 deer and two porcupines.

Golf, bike anyone?

Our golf balls were more challenging to find.

Since offbeat adventure was the weekend's loose activity theme, a stop at Boyne Highlands in Harbor Springs was part of the itinerary. Come summer, chairlifts haul mountain bikes to the top of the mountain so families can ride down via natural trails or freestyle courses recommended only for the most daring. But the newest summer fun twist is the chance to play par-3 golf around midnight under the night skiing lights.



Photo by Kim Schneider

The hand-held GPS unit can only be counted on to get you within 50 feet of the target; the rest of the search is up to you. Here, a family searches for a geocaching clue in the Island View Cemetery north of Harbor Springs, Mich.



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While our scores would have improved with some supplemental lighting, the experience couldn't have been better. A couple of bats flitted passed, and crickets chirped in the background. What we didn't see much was people, a good thing since we would have held things up in a search for balls rendered invisible anywhere off the fairway (and sometimes on).



Photo by Kim Schneider

Jason Wagner glides through the Boyne Highlands woods near Harbor Springs in northern Michigan on a section of an advanced mountain biking park that he helped design.

There is a thrill in having no clue where you're driving the ball, particularly on holes like 7, where there's a fancy chalet sitting behind the green. Hitting into the lights, and/or into fields of puffy (golf ball-sized) white dandelions posed a particular challenge.

We made up our own rules. The object was no longer about reaching the hole in the fewest shots but about not losing the ball. We aimed for the sand trap and enjoyed the journey.

If you go

Up North adventure

Lodging: Holiday Vacation Rentals offer houses and condominium units for rent by the week or for shorter stays, with many suitable for multi-family groups. Info: holidayvacationrental.com, (231) 242-0730

Geocache: Find a public geocache at geocaching.com.

Boyne: Boyne Highlands' summer chairlift rides are free for guests, \$5 for non-guests, with or without a bike; the Cuff Links course is free to guests and \$15 non-guests. Info: boyne.com; (800) 462-6963.

Information: For general visitors information, go to boynecountry.com.

-- Contact Kim Schneider at kschneider@boothmichigan.com.

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