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Seek and You Might Find

More and more Savannahians are rediscovering the Coastal Empire with an activity that combines hiking, cross country racing, puzzle solving, treasure hunting and artistry. It's called letterboxing, and it's arguably the biggest import from Britain since Harry Potter.

The premise is simple: Someone hides a waterproof box which contains, at a minimum, a stamp (the more original, the better), an inepad, and a logbook. Participants find and decipher geographical clues as to where a letterbox is hidden. For beginners, a good place to look is www.letterboxing.org, which lists clues by state. Using hints from the Web site, the hunter, drives, hikes, swims or climbs (sometimes all of the above) to the letterbox and unearths it. The letterboxer then stamps the logbook with his personal stamp and stamps his own logbook with the stamp enclosed in the box. This way, the owner of the box has a record of visitors, and the hunter has a record of all the sites he's visited.

The difficulty of the clues depends on the mischievousness of the writer. One might give step-by-step directions (turn left at red barn, walk exactly 52 paces north, etc.) while another may require you to watch an Alfred Hitchcock movie, answer a series of trivia questions, then arrange the first letter of each answer into an anagram that reveals the final clue.

Letterboxing originated in 1854, when a walker left his calling card in a bottle near the banks of a pool near Dartmoor, England. Cards from subsequent travelers joined his, and soon other bottles began dotting the remotest parts of the English countryside. Letterboxing has been extremely popular in the UK for years, but only attracted American notice in 1998, after an article on the subject was published in Smithsonian magazine.

Community Web sites and forums indicate there are quite a few fans of letterboxing and its spin-off, geocaching, in the Savannah area, but their exact number is difficult to pin down. The treasure-seeking, clue-solving, cloak-and-dagger nature of this hobby compels enthusiasts to adopt "trail names" that keep their anonymity intact.

"Mark B.," who calls himself "the unofficial ambassador for letterboxing in Georgia," won't

reveal his real name, but does divulge that he's 32, lives in Stone Mountain, and works as an editor for an automobile catalog. "Mark" was introduced to letterboxing after a link popped up during an Internet search for another topic. The combination of artistic creativity, clue-solving, and health benefits of the hobby intrigued him. He devised a mushroom-shaped stamp as his signature, looked up a few clues on a letterboxing Web site, and headed outside. By the time he had located a couple of boxes he was hooked.

"I've met some really quality people doing this," he said. "I've gotten a lot of nice notes thanking me for bringing them to such a pretty place."

When he began searching for boxes in 2002, he said, only 15 were hidden throughout the state. Today, more than 95 have been planted by people who've caught the letterboxing bug, including three in Savannah and several more in nearby Hilton Head and Charleston. "Mark" claims to have found more than 40 boxes in Georgia and South Carolina, planted seven, and adopted six, including two in Savannah. He said the landscape of the Coastal Empire is excellent for hiking and unearthing treasures, and was surprised to find so few letterboxes when he visited a month ago.

"Deciphering the clues is tricky in itself," he said. "But eventually you find yourself in this scenic spot in the middle of nowhere. It's great."

Learn the Letterboxing lingo:

* Hitchhiker: a letterbox that is placed in another letterbox, and is moved from box to box as it is found.

* Mystery box: a letterbox with an unknown or very vague starting location, like "Georgia."

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

How to carve a stamp:

www.kurki15.com/tutorials/carving101/index.html

Online resource: www.letterboxing.org

An offshoot of letterboxing is geocaching, which uses a GPS unit to hone in on a box or "cache" using coordinates listed on sites such as www.geocaching.com. Instead of stamps, cachers take a treasure from a found cache, leave something in the cache, and write about the discovery in their logbooks. Common treasures include \$2 bills, unusual coins, small chil-

dren's toys, ornamental buttons, CDs or books.

"Penny" a Richmond Hill High School math teacher, watched a TV program about geocaching and was delighted to find a use for the GPS unit she had bought for her husband a while ago, but was now gathering dust in a closet. She found a nearby cache online, rounded up her family, and went hunting.

"Most geocaches aren't hidden near popular sites that lots of people visit," she said. "but they're beautiful and worth visiting just the same."

Penny heads outside with her GPS every chance she can, often accompanied by her Siberian husky, Chaos. The dog provides companionship and protection while Penny explores Savannah's more remote areas, and if a cache on her list is in a particularly dubious area, she commandeers her husband or son to escort her.

"Even if geocaching isn't their thing, they do it," she said. "Because they know I'm going either way."

Letterboxers and geocachers each have their own set of supporters and detractors—similar to the PC/Apple wars, only much more civil. For "Johann Panholtz," 33, both methods are equally appealing. Panholtz has found more than 700 boxes and caches since taking up the hobby a little over two years ago. Then he was deployed to Iraq two months ago to serve as an Operations Officer with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and his numbers have understandably stalled.

"The lure is finding places I never would have found on my own," he said. "I like the exercise. The thrill of the hunt. Learning where all the good parks are. Or aren't."

He's planted several caches and boxes in the Savannah area, and although he mostly hunts alone, he tries to include his wife and four children as much as possible.

"Kids need fresh air and exercise and the caches I take them to gives them both," he said. "I try to pick caches they might learn something from—near area parks, forts and marshes. It's a good, wholesome family activity," he said.

Learn the Geocaching lingo:

* Multi-caches: The first cache gives coordinates (or partial coordinates) to the next location, or multiple caches have hints to the final cache.

* Virtual caches: A cache is actually an existing landmark, such as a tombstone or statue. You have to answer a question from the landmark and let the "cache" owner know as proof that you were there.

Georgia's Geocachers Association:

www.ggaonline.org