



TREASURE ISLAND

THOUSANDS OF REAL TREASURES ARE HIDDEN ACROSS SOUTH AFRICA. HERE'S HOW TO GO ABOUT FINDING THEM.

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Coordinates to a starting point, a secret message with a decryption key, and the peculiar instruction to bring a ladder were the only clues. The three treasure hunters set off on a 400km journey to a hidden location in the Southern Cape. A 4m-long fold-up ladder was the first item to go in the car, before any luggage.

“When we got there, we had to carry the ladder through a field and over a gorge,” says Jonker Fourie, a tourism marketer by day from Port Elizabeth who spends his weekends seeking treasure. “We got to the bridge described in one of the clues. There, we climbed up the ladder one by one and scrambled into a man hole under the bridge, with the shorter and older ones getting pushed and pulled up. We had to walk and climb through the insides of the length of the bridge, in the dark, to get to the other end.”

There, they found their prize: A box of trinkets with a ‘take one leave one’ policy that members of this treasure-hunting community strictly adhere to.

They’re called geocachers, and they spend their free time looking for treasures hidden by other members of the community. Currently, there are more than 14 000 of these finds scattered across South Africa.



ADVENTURE IS OUT THERE

For most treasure hunters, it's not about the prize, but the journey. Although some hunters make it big, like the hobbyist who uncovered gold jewellery worth R60 000 on Camps Bay beach, and another who found a diamond ring on Strand beach, most don't do it for the money.

Chris Twine, an air-traffic controller and hobbyist treasure hunter from Cape Town, says every hunt is worth it, even if you come back empty-handed. “It's not only about finding good treasure, but about the adventure – being outdoors, taking in the fresh air, and forgetting about the stresses of daily life.”

As opposed to geocaching, for which you only need a GPS or smartphone, hobbyists like Chris use metal-detecting equipment. He regularly heads out, detector in hand, and sweeps beaches, parks, footpaths and fields to see what he can find.

Others, like Capetonian entrepreneur Ralph Higgo, research sites in history books and on Google Earth before taking to the trail. For Ralph, it's a childhood dream come true and he goes whenever he gets a chance. “I've wanted to get involved in metal detecting since I was a kid and saw the adverts for metal-detecting machines on the back of *Archie* comic books. Now I go as often as I can! In fact, I'm trying to finish these questions quickly as it's low tide and I want to go hunt at Muizenberg beach.”

He's also after the adventure and solitude rather than the treasure but says helping people find lost items is always exhilarating, like the time he helped a woman locate a lost necklace her late brother had given her.

Geocachers spend their free time looking for treasures hidden by other members of the community.



CASHING IN

While hobbyists try to find the lost, geocaching is a worldwide game. A geocacher can place a cache (container) anywhere, share its existence and location at geocaching.com, and other community members then go after it. The loot isn't the purpose and most caches are filled with trinkets. But some geocachers have found expensive gift vouchers, bags of silver coins and gold watches. One lucky American geocacher even received keys to a brand-new Mini Cooper.

Bruce Pantland, who works in IT at a large financial institution in Johannesburg, started geocaching during lunch breaks in 2008 and has hidden a few caches of his own. “Some people just hide in arbitrary places for the sake of hiding, but most aim to bring people to a spot so they can learn or experience something.”

He hid a coin with a unique tracking code in one of his caches in 2012 and it's since made its way to several locations in the Free State and Western Cape through the hands of other geocachers.

Some of Jonker's favourite caches include a full-sized, custom-built Dr Who Tardis (time machine), in Noordhoek and a series of custom-made puzzle boxes in PE – just a few of his 2 560 finds since the bug bit in 2013. “But the greatest thing about geocaching is that it will always take you somewhere new,” he says.

And the hobbyists agree. Although his detecting has led to a successful business, he's still in it for the fun, says Chris.



While some detecting has led to successful businesses, for most it's about the fun.

"I started the forum treasurehunters.co.za to chat to other hobbyists a few years ago and saw a need for equipment. So I started metaldetecting.co.za to sell some, which led to ringseekers.com, where clients can contract the services of metal detectorists to locate lost items. Still, the best part of it all is getting out there – nothing but the road, ocean, metal detecting, fishing and camping. That big hoard of ancient silver or gold coins still eludes me, but it's always a pretty awesome exploit." ◉

THE STUFF OF LEGENDS

Thinking of going after the big ones? Here are three of the largest and most elusive treasures still up for grabs.



Treasure chest

A bout with cancer inspired author Forrest Fern to fill a chest with gold dust, gold coins, gold nuggets, Chinese jade carvings and a gold-and-emerald ring and hid it as a way to keep his memory alive. The chest is hidden in the Rocky Mountains in the US and clues to its location are in a poem in his auto-biographical book *The Thrill of the Chase*.



Golden owl

French author Max Valentin also hid treasure and published clues to its location in his book *Sur La Trace de La Chouette d'Or* (The Hunt for The Golden Owl). The treasure is a statuette of an owl that can be exchanged for the real prize – a large gold-and-silver sculpture of an owl, now in possession of the book's illustrator after the author's death in 2009.



Kruger millions

When the English invaded Pretoria in 1900, they found that Paul Kruger, then president of the ZAR, had already left the capital, along with £1.5 million in gold bars and coins. Although some believe this money was used to fund the rest of the war, other reports said it was buried somewhere in the Lowveld and many hunters are still on the trail today.