

Life in LAMORINDA

The Changing Face of Travel Agencies

By Jennifer Wake



With the introduction of online companies like Expedia and Orbitz.com, as well as the drastic reduction in travel agent commissions offered by airlines, today's successful travel agents must embrace technology in order to find their clients the best accommodations and the best deals.

The biggest myth, says Moraga Travel owner Doyle Litchfield, is that people can find cheaper tickets on the Internet. "We have had clients call us with a fare they've found on the Internet, and we very often can beat that price, and get them better times and connections," he said. "People have a huge number of choices on the Internet, but if they want valuable advice to try to sort out all of their various travel options, then they really need to talk with a qualified travel agent."

During the past 13 years, the number of accredited travel agencies has dropped from about 34,000 in 1994 to approximately 19,000 agencies today. Most of the surviv-

ing agencies now charge nominal fees for services, with many utilizing technology or acquiring other agencies as a way to expand their operations, says Orinda Travel president Alan Reader.



Last April, Anderson Travel merged with Orinda Travel, increasing its staff to include Anderson's five travel consultants as well as several independent contractors, some in different states, who each bring in their own clients away from the local area. Orinda Travel consultants can pose travel questions to more than 5,000 travel experts through an Internet chat room offered through their consortium,

Signature Travel Network, to find answers to tough questions when customizing a trip. "We have access to resources unavailable to the general public," Reader said.

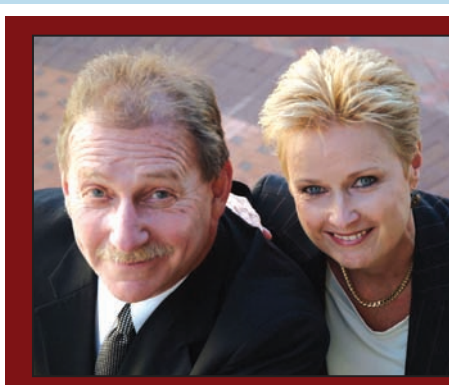
Both Reader and Litchfield agree that the Internet has been beneficial.

"We have so much information now at our fingertips and can access it over the Internet immediately, where in the past it was all in books or on paper," Litchfield said. "We can share the information on our website with our clients in order to help them to better understand what they want."

Clients can do in-depth research at agency Web sites such as www.orindatravel.com or www.moragatravel.com, or visit travel supplier sites to identifying things like golf accommodations, or tropical island locations before speaking with a consultant.

Reader describes travel agencies as consultative. "Having an understanding of the client, the travel counselor can make recommendations to customize a trip to meet your needs," he said. "Our consultants know what they are talking about because they've been there in most cases; there's nothing better than a personal recommendation."

"After clients give us a try and actually use our services," added Litchfield, "they completely understand the value."



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High Tech Treasure Hunting in Lamorinda

By Jennifer Wake



Jefferson, 6, and Jonny, 4, race to find the 'treasure' hidden at the corner of Lafayette park.

If you see people in Lamorinda wandering aimlessly in parks, digging through foliage on hiking trails, or perhaps on hands and knees under a park bench or near a lamp post, they may be on a new type of adventure: geocaching.

This new breed of high-tech treasure seekers, called geocachers (pronounced geo-cashers), use the technology of hand-held global positioning systems (GPS), which offer coordinates for the hunt, to find "caches" containing anything from paper log sheets stuffed in tiny 35 millimeter film canisters, to maps, toys and trinkets stashed in larger camouflage containers hidden throughout the world.

My family and I joined the geocaching community last summer on a trip to San Diego. It was on an exciting hike to a ridge in La Jolla overlooking the ocean where we found our first cache deep in some brush. Along with some small items, the black container had a map of Paris inside with a note asking to bring it to Oregon.

Some people use trackable tags (called travel bugs) on items in the cache that can be tracked online as it moves from cache to cache. Since geocache etiquette dictates that you can only remove something from the cache if you replace it with something else, we removed a toy whistle and replaced it with a tiny toy, leaving the map for others to find.

Last weekend, we headed out with our trusty GPS device in hand – a modest \$150 model – and some small trinkets in our pockets for the

caches, intent on finding caches in three separate locations throughout Lafayette: the BART parking lot, at the little park in front of the Squirrels Coffee Shop, and near the creek behind Chow.

Not long after starting our journey at the parking lot, we checked our longitude and latitude coordinates on our GPS and began walking east, up Deer Hill Road toward the target coordinates of the cache. Across the street from the Iraq War memorial crosses, we began searching through ivy near a tall tree (one of the hints about this specific cache which we found online on the geocaching Web site).

After about five minutes of searching, my 6-year-old son, Jeff, asked my husband, Dan, if the GPS was stuck, while my 4-year-old son, Jonny, began playing in the dirt. To Jonny, the treasure was found.

Another five minutes passed before we realized that either we stunk at geocaching, or the crack team of BART parking lot attendants had deposited our "cache" into the trash before we got there.

I was undaunted, however, and suggested we set off for the second cache, located in the southeast corner of the little park on Mt. Diablo Boulevard near the Squirrels Coffee Shop. The only thing we found was a 4-inch-long earthworm under the star jasmine.

"It's the treasure!" Jonny cried out, smiling up at me. I had to agree. It was an incredible worm.

We left the worm for future cachers to find and set out for cache number three, at the parking lot be-

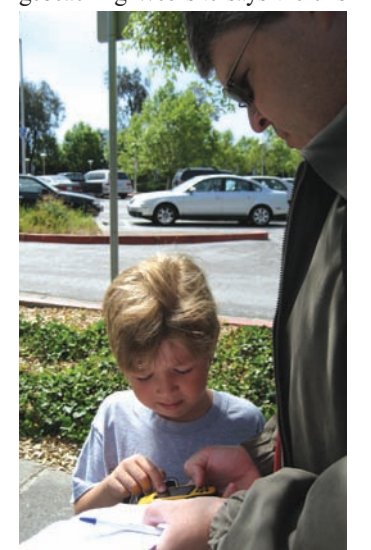
hind Chow restaurant. Crisscrossing back and forth, we came to realize that the specific coordinates for the cache would put us in the middle of the creek – and I had not brought my waders.

"What are we looking for again?" I asked Dan.

"It's a little black box . . . maybe. I didn't write it down," he said.

Realizing that our GPS coordinates only brought us within 20 feet of the cache, and we did not know what we were looking for anyway, we gave up on that hunt as well and headed to the Squirrels for some lunch.

We have not given up on geocaching, however, and plan more adventures this summer. The geocaching Web site says there is



Jefferson checks coordinates on hand-held GPS.

"an easy find" at the Moraga Commons and a "quick one" at Moraga Ridge, as well as three small caches near the theatres in Orinda, Moraga and Lafayette.

Although we are not the best geocachers, we learned that the fun is truly in the hunt and in being together. Besides, wherever we go, I am confident there will be dirt – and maybe even another worm for Jonny to find.

For more information about geocaching, how to hide and seek, and where to find a hand-held global positioning system, visit www.geocaching.com.

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