High-Tech Scavenger Hunts

By Nikki Gloudeman

Finders keepers-with an e-edge

History is rife with treasure-hunting protagonists, from real-life swashbuckling pirates to the fictional Indiana Jones. Today, these quests continue to fascinate—but the means have changed. Where seekers once relied on labyrinthine maps, oral clues and old books to find their way to the prize, today’s seekers are instead utilizing smart phones, apps and high-tech hand-held devices.

This is good news for meeting planners, as these modern treasure hunts provide a fun-filled, goal-oriented way to build camaraderie at functions. Two types in particular have left their mark in the industry: geocaching trails and app-based hunts.

Goin’ Geocaching

Geocaching is a treasure-hunt game that eschews archaic maps in favor of GPS-enabled devices to find hidden objects. The hunts are a popular recreational activity, and in recent years, savvy hotels have begun to incorporate the experience into team-building programs.

One such property is Chaminade Resort & Spa in Santa Cruz, Calif. The team-building-focused hotel, which provides everything from a ropes course to culinary experiences, also offers the Geocaching Team Adventure run by Synergy Learning Systems. Groups who participate navigate through mountainous trails to find items, or “caches,” worth varying dollar amounts based on the item’s distance from the starting point.

Sherrie Huneke, director of sales for the property, notes that in this context “multiple decisions have to be made, [including] what is the risk versus reward? How much time and energy should the team invest into a difficult goal? Is it better to go for the high revenue but riskier goals, or go for the lower revenue but easier goals?”
Employees from several companies, including HP, Global Foundries, McAfee, Autodesk and Carl Zeiss, have participated in Chaminade’s geocaching experience. When Lisa Grunwald, executive assistant for KLA Tencor, took 18 employees on the hunt in early October, she says it was one of the best team-building endeavors she’s ever experienced. “It gave everyone a chance to show their strengths and work as a unit,” she says. “Participants walked away with insights about themselves or someone on their team.”

Other hotels, too, have outfitted their properties with hidden caches. The Greenbrier in White Sulphur Springs, W. Va., for example, offers Guided GeoVentures, during which teams search for caches stashed in historic spots across the circa-1778 property.

There is also an assortment of destination-wide hunts endorsed by local CVBs. Several hotel and lodging partners are involved in the Amelia Island Tourist Development Council’s geo treasure hunt in Florida. Upon checking in at a participating property, groups receive an official entry form and are sent on their way to scout out caches at six local sites. Those who complete the challenge are entered into a giveaway for a free stay at a local hotel. (Visit geocacheamelia.com for more information.)

Similarly, groups who participate in the Decatur-Morgan County CVB’s geocaching hunt in Alabama can snag a prize once they’ve uncovered caches at seven chosen sites. A specially prepared passport, which outlines stops at the Princess Theatre for the Performing Arts, Carnegie Visual Arts Center and other popular attractions, can be picked up at the visitor center or downloaded from the CVB website, decaturcvb.org.

There’s an App for Hunts

Considering the reign of smart phones, it’s perhaps not surprising to learn that several hotels and destinations have also launched scavenger hunts that utilize iPads, iPhones, Android phones and other ubiquitous techie devices to engage attendees at events.

In September, for instance, the team-building company Wildly Different teamed up with the mobile-app company MobileXpeditions to debut unVAILed, an iPad-based hunt for Vail Cascade Resort & Spa’s incentive council in Colorado. Thirty participants divided into six teams were sent on a quest to uncover clues in a variety of locations across the area. Along the way, animated GIFs, music files, videos and other iPad bells and whistles were integrated to heighten the experience.

Jane Lipps, co-owner of Wildly Different and its sister organization, Masters of the Hunt, says the venture was such a success, the company has contracted to do something similar with a group of 1,200
people in Cancún, Mexico, in January 2013.

In November of last year, Thermopylae Sciences + Technology, a Google Enterprise Partner, debuted the GeoHunt mobile application at the GEOINT 2010 Symposium, the nation’s largest annual intelligence conference, in New Orleans. One of the features of the app was a virtual scavenger hunt that enabled participants to scan QR codes placed around exhibit halls, which then led them to destinations across the city.

The beauty of these hunts is that for all their high-tech features, the goal and benefits remain the same. “Geocaching is much more sophisticated and engaging through the use of technology. There is a steeper learning curve, which challenges and engages intelligent audiences,” says Chaminade’s Huneke. “Yet technology is only part of the activity. It requires good teamwork, commitment, planning, clear roles and goals, leadership and communication. And fun!”