



Roads Scholar Educational Adventures in Our Own Backyard

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Letterboxing: A Real-life Treasure Hunt that is Fun for the Whole Family

Did you ever dream of finding a treasure map and searching for the hidden booty? Or how about being a detective and using a series of clues to solve a mystery? Letterboxing, a fun outdoor activity that combines art and orienteering skills, is the next best thing.

Here's how it works: Someone hides a waterproof box in a scenic, remote, or interesting location. Inside the box is a log book and a rubber stamp (preferably a hand-carved stamp that is descriptive of the site). There may be other goodies or gifts placed in the box as well.

The person who hides the box then writes a series of clues for hunters. Sometimes the clues are very straightforward, and other times they are trickier. Often they will involve some sort of navigational skills such as reading a map, using a compass, or pacing (counting the number of steps). The clues sometimes refer to specific trees, bushes, or landforms, so some knowledge of geology and local vegetation is helpful.

The hunter carries a pen or pencil, his or her personal stamp, and a logbook. When the hunter finds the box, he or she stamps the logbook in the box, perhaps adding a personal note, and then uses the stamp in the box to stamp his or her own logbook.

A popular variation on the letterboxing theme is geocaching. The two are similar in that both involve following clues to a hidden "treasure." The differences are that geocaching clues generally require the use of a Global Positioning System (GPS). Also, instead of the reciprocal stamping involved in letterboxing, in geocaching you take an item from the box and leave another item in return.

I'd never heard of letterboxing or geocaching, and was intrigued when a friend told me about this new phenomena. "But be careful," she warned. "It's like eating potato chips. Once you start, you won't be able to stop."

I went on-line at www.letterboxing.org and was amazed to find that there were several letterboxes hidden at sites not far from our house. I asked my 8-year-old daughter Mariah if she'd like to give it a try and she was game. We chose a nearby location that looked like it wouldn't be too hard.

In the end, the whole family came along, including Grandma and a family friend. We set out on a beautiful sunny afternoon. The clues soon led us to a trailhead, which we followed as it took us up and over a few low hills. Now, according to the clues, we were to look for a place where the trail curved sharply to the right.

I was a little overeager. "Look here," I said, "it's curving a little right here."

From this point, the clues indicated that we should walk about 50 steps in the direction of 80 degrees (from magnetic north). It is always important to remember to be respectful of the environment. It isn't necessary to dig deep or move piles of rocks or vegetation. If you follow the clues correctly, they will take you right to the site. Once you're in the correct spot, the box should be pretty easy to locate.

Mariah quickly recovered the letterbox. "Ta-da!" She held her prize aloft. We took time to read the entries of the people who came before us. One mentioned enjoying the hike on New Year's Day. Another was an out-of-town visitor who thanked the owner of the letterbox for showing him such a beautiful spot.

Most letterboxers use a personal stamp that they have made. Creating the stamp is part of the art, and it serves as your letterboxing signature. We'd been anxious to get started, so for now we had only a purchased stamp. When we stamped the logbook, we noted that this was our very first letterbox! I have a feeling, though, that it won't be our last. As we hiked out, everyone was already talking about where we'd find our next letterbox. So I guess my friend was right. Letterboxing *is* like eating potato chips—just a whole lot healthier!

Tune-up Your Mind

Look for these books and related materials:

Journey into the Desert by John Brown (Oxford University Press)

The Letterboxer's Companion by Randy Hall (Globe Pequot Press)

New Explorer's Guide to Maps and Compasses by Percy W. Blandford (TAB Books)

Rubber Stamp Carving: Techniques, Designs, & Projects by Luann Udell (Lark books)

Discovery Detours

Orienteering Practice

Practice your compass skills with an on-line game. Visit www.letterboxing.org and click on the "Kids" link.

Make a Personal Stamp

It is a point of honor among letterboxers to carve their own personal stamp. The book, *Rubber Stamp Carving: Techniques, Designs, & Projects* by Luann Udell (Lark books) is a great reference. A of this writing it has gone out of print, however, we do still have a few copies in stock at CRIZMAC, 1642 N. Alvernon Way in Tucson. You might want to give us a call at (520) 323-8555 to make sure we still have them before you make a trip to our store. The letterboxing website also has some wonderful, kid-friendly ideas for making stamps, including a very creative idea using foam shoe pads! Visit www.letterboxing.org, click on the "kids" link, and then one of the two "stamp" links.

If you go...

Ask an adult to help you with your search. Visit the letterboxing website at www.letterboxing.org and print out the clues for the letterbox you want to search for. You shouldn't have trouble finding one. There are currently some 36 letterboxes hidden in and around Tucson and over 150 in the State of Arizona (with of course, many, many more throughout the United States and even in other countries).

Next, assemble your supplies.

You will need:

- a stamp (you can use a purchased stamp, as we did, for your first outing. If you decide to continue letterboxing, you'll want to make your own stamp)
- an ink pad
- a compass
- sturdy walking shoes and outdoor attire
- a copy of the clues.
- a pen or pencil

Follow the clues to your treasure!

If you enjoy hunting for letterboxes, you might want to consider hiding a letterbox yourself. Click on this link: <http://www.letterboxing.org/faq/faq.html#007> for instructions on how to assemble a box, hide it, and write the clues.

Fuel for Thought

Did you know...

Letterboxing got its start in 1854 in Dartmoor, England, when a Victorian gentleman named James Perrott Chagford put his personal calling card in a bottle and hid it on the banks of Cranmere Pool. He included a note encouraging other people who found the bottle to do the same. The idea caught on, although modern letterboxes contain a journal and a rubber stamp, rather than calling cards. There are still more letterboxes in Dartmoor (which is now a national park) than probably anywhere else in the world. The idea took hold in the United States after an April, 1998 article in *Smithsonian Magazine* about Dartmoor letterboxing. Groups and individuals in the United States began hiding letterboxes and publishing clues. There are now more than 2,500 letterboxes hidden around the United States.

Think Tank

Discussion questions for the whole family to consider:

There are many variations in Letterboxing and Geocaching. For instance, some people put a disposable camera in the box and ask that all who find it take a picture of themselves. There are also what's known as "hitchhiker" boxes. These are boxes placed inside other boxes that are moved from box to box as they are found. A "cuckoo clue" is a clue to another letterbox that moves from box to box by the last person who found it. Many other variations are possible. Can you think of any you'd like to try? Maybe you can start a new trend!

For the Mouse-bound

www.letterboxing.org

www.letterboxing.com

www.geocaching.com

<http://members.aol.com/Letterboxr/carving.html>

Wheels Are Turning

Parents and Caregivers: These activities can help your child meet Arizona's educational standards. The standards addressed here include:

1AV-R1. Recognize that the visual arts are a form of communication. (K)

1AV-F1. Select and use subjects, themes and symbols in works of art. (Grades 1-3)

1AV-E2. Demonstrate increasing technical ability and skill to complete visual arts assignments. (Grades 4-8)

3SS-R1. Demonstrate understanding of the concept of location, with emphasis on determining the relative location of objects. (K)

3SS-F1. Construct and interpret maps and other geographic tools. (Grades 1-3)

3SS-E1. Demonstrate understanding of the physical and human features that define places and regions in