

Google goes places it has never gone before

November 11 2011, By Mark W. Smith

The Detroit Zoo's iconic polar bear exhibit is now just a click away.

Web users can now take a step-by-step virtual tour of one of Detroit's biggest attractions, along with sweeping images of the giraffe and gorilla habitats.

It's made possible by [Google Street View](#), long a source of wonder for the casual Web user at maps.google.com.

With its 3D-like panoramic imagery, Street View displays interactive images of cities in 360-degree detail.

A fleet of Google Street View cars gathered most of these images. A camera on top records the images and ties them to [location data](#) as the vehicle drives through a city.

But the use of a car left out wide swaths of the world, where motorized vehicles couldn't pass. Amusement parks, bike paths and shorelines were left out.

"So many of the most interesting spots in the world, cars can't go," says Google staff [mechanical engineer](#) Daniel Ratner. "But they're places that people want to see."

So Ratner and his team developed a tricycle to capture images in places with a tighter fit.

Google Street View made its biggest dump yet last week of imagery captured by Street View trikes, adding a couple hundred locations in 22 countries.

The Detroit Zoo and Oakland University are among those now online.

Google Maps visitors can also now tour landmarks such as the High Line park in Manhattan, a former freight train track which sits 30 feet above the streets.

The Detroit Zoo first reached out to Google's Street View team in 2009, says the zoo's systems administrator, Jody Harper.

Google's Street View Partner Program allows businesses to sign up for Street View. Google then works with some of the businesses to arrange for a visit and work out the logistics.

The Google Street View team recorded the Detroit Zoo over two sunny days in July, Harper says.

Google's trike was able to make it past all the zoo's exhibits except the lion habitat, which was under construction this summer, he says.

Despite worries about making the zoo visible for free online, officials decided having it would only increase interest.

"Ultimately it wasn't about what we want to hold back and what we want them to pay for," Harper says. "We want to show off how beautiful this zoo is."

To be sure, the experience is a bit limited.

Animals are often hard to see from the trike's position on pedestrian

pathways. Sometimes an animal can be seen along the path ahead, but as the trike gets closer, the animal recedes into its enclosure.

Viewers will notice, too, that the faces of people are blurred.

In parts of Europe with stricter privacy laws, blurring faces would be required, Ratner says. So to keep the capturing and formatting process the same across the globe, faces are blurred here too.

The Google team also uses a specially outfitted snowmobile to record snowscapes into Street View.

But even the trike can't get everywhere.

Peru's Machu Picchu, for example, is off limits because of its location atop a mountain ridge. But don't expect that to stay offline for long.

"We will be expanding what the trike is currently able to accomplish," Ratner says.

GOOGLE STREET VIEW HIGHLIGHTS

Google launched more than 200 locations in 22 countries with imagery from its Google Street View trike last week.

To access the Detroit Zoo's imagery, visit [google.com](https://www.google.com) target="_blank">maps.[google.com](https://www.google.com) and search for "Detroit Zoo." Then take the orange [Street View](#) man icon and drag it to the map.

Here are a few of the other highlights to search:

High Line Park, New York City

Sea World, Orlando

Kaganei Park, Tokyo

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Citation: Google goes places it has never gone before (2011, November 11) retrieved 19 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2011-11-google.html>

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