

# Google opens Amazon wilds to armchair explorers

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Google team members sail a boat with a 360-degree camera system mounted on a Trike on its top to record the "Street View for the Amazon" on the Negro River, in 2011. Google's free online map service on Wednesday began letting people explore portions of the Amazon Basin from the comfort of their homes.

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Pictures taken along the Rio Negro in Brazil last year using camera-

mounted three wheeled bicycles have been woven into Google Maps, allowing users to virtually venture on waterways and trails and in even villages.

"Take a virtual boat ride down the main section of the Rio Negro, and float up into the smaller tributaries where the forest is flooded," Google Street View Amazon project lead Karin Tuxen-Bettman said in a blog post.

"Enjoy a hike along an Amazon forest trail and see where Brazil nuts are harvested," she continued. "You can even see a forest critter if you look hard enough."

Map images included scenes from Tumbira, the largest community in the Rio Negro Reserve, and other communities along the river.

"We hope this Street View collection provides access to this special corner of the planet that many of us otherwise wouldn't have the chance to experience," Tuxen-Bettman said.

"We're thrilled to help everyone from researchers and scientists to armchair explorers around the world learn more about the Amazon and better understand how local communities there are working to preserve this unique environment for future generations."

"Trikes," the camera-mounted three wheelers typically used to capture street scenes for Google online maps, were launched in August from Tumbira in a first-ever project to let Internet users virtually explore the world's largest river, its wildlife and its communities.



A Google team member rides a Trike with a 360-degree camera system on it, to record the "Street View for the Amazon" in Tumbira Community, Amazonas State, in 2011. Google's free online map service on Wednesday began letting people explore portions of the Amazon Basin from the comfort of their homes.

The project was the brainchild of Amazonas Sustainable Foundation (FAS) which went to Google Earth with an ambitious vision of turning "Street View" into a river view in the lush and precious Amazon Basin.

"It is incredible," FAS project leader Gabriel Ribenboim told AFP as trikes went into action, one atop a boat and another pedaled on land.

"It is very important to show the world not only the environment and the way of life of the traditional population, but to sensitize the world to the challenges of climate change, deforestation and combating poverty."

Trikes have cameras that continuously snap images in every direction. The pictures are woven into Google Maps and Earth services so people can virtually peer about as if they were there.

Satellite positioning equipment on trikes pinpoints where images are gathered.

Members of a Google team taught FAS members and local residents how to use the trikes and a special tripod-mounted camera tailored for capturing inside of schools, community centers, and other public spaces.



View of a 360-degree camera system mounted on a Trike atop a boat by Google team members to record the "Street View for the Amazon" on the Negro River, around Tumbira Community, Amazonas State, in 2011. Google's free online map service on Wednesday began letting people explore portions of the Amazon Basin from the comfort of their homes.

The camera, with a fish-eye lens to take panoramic sky-to-ground images, was used to recreate walks along rain-forest trails.

"We want the world to see that the Amazon is not a place only with plants and animals," said FAS chief executive Virgilio Viana.

"It is also a place with people, and people who are not completely at odds with the current thinking of global sustainability."

FAS hopes that the Google project will not only entice people to experience the wonder of the Amazon in real life, but show that people can thrive in harmony with the rain forest.

"Deforestation is not the result of stupidity," Viana told AFP at the outset of the Google project. "It is an economic decision; so we have to make people earn money with the forest standing."

The goal of the project was to capture a 50-kilometer (30-mile) stretch of the Rio Negro, and along the way train a local team that will keep the imaging gear to broaden the mission.

"We want to create a digital mirror of the world, and this is an important place on the planet," Tuxen-Bettman told AFP as a trike made its maiden run.

"Eventually, maybe we will have the whole basin mapped," she said hopefully.

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