Google Maps Camera-toting teams map US beaches

August 15 2013, by Melissa Nelson-Gabriel

Gregg Matthews fancies himself a lumbering Star Wars character of sorts as he treks along a popular Florida beach. He wears stout hiking sandals on the squishy sand and uses ski poles for balance as he shoulders a 40-pound (18-kilogram) backpack, a blue-orb with 15 cameras extending over his head.

"It attracts a lot of attention," Matthews laughed about all of his gear, while trotting along Panama City Beach.

Matthews and his trekking partner, Chris Officer, are contracted through Visit Florida, the state's tourism agency, to gather images for Google Maps. All told, they have already walked more than 200 miles (320 kilometers) of Florida beachfront, each logging up to 7.5 miles (12 kilometers) a day with the camera orb. Each camera on the orb takes a shot every 2.5 seconds as they walk.

Their quest: to create panoramic views to place online of every Florida beach—similar to the [internet giant](#)'s Street View—which has taken photos of everything from ordinary homes and businesses to world-famous landmarks like the Eiffel Tower and the Empire State building.

Visit Florida has partnered with Google in the effort to map all 825 miles (1,327 kilometers) of Florida's beaches. And for good reason: tourism is Florida's top industry, accounting for 91.4 million visitors last year and $71.8 billion in spending that employed more than 1 million in the state.

The project began in late July when Matthews and Officer began walking from the Alabama-Florida border. After mapping Florida Panhandle beaches, they will hopscotch over to Florida's Atlantic coast and move south. Eventually, another camera team will take over, curling past Miami's South Beach and other hotspots aiming to finish the project sometime in November.

Google has a similar project with mappers trekking the trails of the Grand Canyon. But the Florida project is the first large-scale beach mapping project.

The mapping teams were contracted through Visit Florida. Agency spokeswoman Kathy Torian said the project is entirely funded with public money and Visit Florida budgeted $126,000 for a private contractor to oversee the production of images to be sent to Google.

The mappers are paid a straight fee of $27 per mile, but no expenses, she said, with the walkers covering all of their own transportation and accommodations. The only money Google will pay is $1,000 at the end to buy images from the state, she said.

For Matthews, $27 a mile is worth it. And he's even shed 15 pounds (6.8 kilograms) in the first three weeks alone.

"It is enough to cover expenses but mostly it is fun and probably cheaper than a gym for me," Matthews told inquisitive sunbathers as he passed them on his Panama City Beach walk.

The project could be a boon for beach towns around Florida in their competition to draw tourists from other states and countries.

Susan Estler, vice president of marketing for the Panama City Beach Convention and Visitors Bureau, said Google's beach view will let

potential visitors see the clear turquoise waters and gleaming white sand—an enticement to any and all to check out the scene in person.

But Matthews said it is the people who will never set foot on a Florida beach that he thinks about the most when he is out walking.

"I enjoyed most the desolate stretches of unpopulated islands where literally all I heard for hours was waves and birds," he said. "This is a way to bring those experiences to people who for whatever reason—health, money, whatever—will never be able to get here."

Matthews and Officer have seen dolphins frolicking, sea turtles, sting rays, even alligators. On a remote bird-sanctuary beach, a shore bird even dive-bombed the Google cameras.

Already, the duo has trekked past thousands of vacationers splashing in warm Gulf waters or relaxing on powdery white beaches in such destinations as Pensacola, Destin and Panama City. "I've had a couple of people offer me a beer. Unfortunately, I don't take it because I'm kind of in the middle of a workout," Officer said.

The men trade off carrying the camera pack—usually, one will take the morning shift and the other the afternoon. Their heft includes a battery pack that provides up to six hours of power for the cameras.

Pictures, once taken, are uploaded to camera hard drives. When the photos are eventually posted—probably next spring—online viewers will be able to see panoramic images from any spot the teams walked.

"It is pretty ground breaking. It is really cool to know that our work is going to contribute to people being able to see different beaches all over the world," Officer said.

Citation: Google Maps Camera-toting teams map US beaches (2013, August 15) retrieved 28 April 2024 from https://phys.org/news/2013-08-google-camera-toting-teams-beaches.html