

Google launches digital tour of Cambodia's Angkor Wat

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Built by King Suryavarman II in the 12th century, Angkor Wat is considered the largest Khmer temple complex in the world

Cambodia's Angkor Wat has been digitally mapped for the first time, allowing people to visit the World Heritage Site from the comfort of their armchair using Google Street View.

The project is part of a growing trend aimed at Internet users who might

otherwise never have the chance to visit the cultural and architectural wonders of the world.

Google took more than a million photos of Angkor—the result is 90,000 360-degree views of more than 100 temples.

Street View allows [web users](#) to zoom in on an area, and then explore.

"Recently we've done the Taj Mahal, the Grand Canyon, Mount Fuji," said Manik Gupta, project manager at Google Maps.

"But the scale of Angkor Wat is what makes this unprecedented," he told AFP at the project's launch on Thursday.

"It is such an iconic place, people say it is the eighth wonder of the world, and it gives you this incredible sense—look at every single small nook and cranny, you'll find art work."

The Angkor Archaeological Park contains the remains of the different capitals of the Khmer Empire, dating from the 9th to the 15th century.

Cars, trains and trekkers

To create the project Google used a new innovation called "Trekker".

Fifteen digital cameras are attached by a long pole to a backpack, and each one records a 75 million mega pixel photo every two and a half seconds.

By walking around the Angkor Wat temple complex, they are able to photograph areas that Google's Street View cars cannot reach.

"Street View launched in 2007, and since then we've amassed a huge

amount of experience. We've even used snow mobiles and trains, and Trekker is the latest tool," Gupta said.



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Google Maps was launched in 2005, followed by Street View two years later and more recently Google Art, which provides tours of major galleries and museums.

For the latest project, five local men were tasked with trekking around the temples for up to eight hours a day, to record what many people say is the eighth wonder of the world.

A huge amount of Cambodia's heritage was destroyed during the Khmer Rouge regime in the late 1970s.

"If there is a country where this is needed the most, it is Cambodia," said Amit Sood, Google's director of cultural heritage, which is trying to bring as many international cultural artifacts online as possible.

"There is so much about Cambodia that is not known in the west, because it was erased, but Cambodia has a very rich cultural heritage."

- Digitised museums booming -

About 4.2 million tourists visited Cambodia last year, a 17 percent increase on 2012, the majority of whom visited the temple complex.

Sood believes that by having Angkor Wat online for people to enjoy, it will encourage more people to come to see the real thing, like with art galleries.

"All digitised museums are experiencing unprecedented growth. Physical attendance is booming," Sood told AFP.

"There definitely isn't a negative effect."

But although Google offers a visual digital experience, allowing web users to spot things that would be easily missed by the naked eye, some visitors say that it could ruin the moment you see something for the first time.

"I wouldn't go see it on Google Street View before I went there," 21 year old Dutch backpacker Liesbeth Gerritsen told AFP in the shade of one of the long carved corridors at Angkor Wat.

"For me it is cooler to (come) and see it, and then look it up afterwards."

And travel experts believe nothing can truly replace experiencing

something on your own.

"I can't imagine that seeing pictures online or a 360 view as presented by Google Maps would be a real substitute for actually going there," said Tom Sturrock, a Bangkok-based travel editor and writer.

"The online experience is never going to be an adequate replacement for actually being there when the sun comes up at Angkor Wat."

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