

A little realism online: Google adds Austin to Street View

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Google has brought its Street View map feature to Austin, allowing users to navigate around the city through a series of panoramic street-level photographs, showing everything from shops on South Congress Avenue to homes in Central Texas neighborhoods.

Austin is one of 14 cities Google added to its Street View service, which it debuted last year as an extension of its Google Maps feature.

The service now covers more than 40 cities, including some suburbs, plus Yosemite National Park. The photos allow users to feel as though they are actually driving around the streets of Austin, with 360-degree views from regular vantage points.

The photos don't show every house or building, and keen viewers will notice that many are several months old.

The feature is intended to help users virtually tour a city without leaving their homes. It's helpful for someone visiting a new city or who wants to see a new restaurant before driving there.

Marcellina Kampa, a manager for McGarrah/Jessee's Chaos design studio in Austin, said she's used Street View when visiting New York and when her son was away for summer camp.

But looking at a detailed image of her house Friday afternoon was a surreal experience.

"There's my house!" she said, laughing. "It's just so strange."

She noted that the photo had to have been taken on a Friday in early summer because the car parked out front belongs to her cleaning woman, who comes on that day, and the trees looked green.

"It's a really cool technology. I'm just amazed by it," Kampa said.

In some cases, the views are startlingly real, showing even the hair color of a driver inside a car.

Google spokeswoman Elaine Filadelfo said the company takes the photos using cars with roof-mounted cameras and Global Positioning System devices. The cars are identified with Google logos.

"The crews drive around through the streets and cities across the country," Filadelfo said. "The imagery is between a few months and a year old."

She said Google is more concerned with adding new cities with the Street View feature than updating current cities, so an image of your house taken last summer may stay there for a while.

Users can input addresses on Google maps and then click on Street View to use the feature. Dragging an arrow up or down a street shows more of what's there.

There have been some privacy concerns with Street View, with users complaining that Google's cameras are too intrusive.

Some users have complained that the Google cameras have been able to capture pictures of license plates on their cars or even pictures of them inside their homes.

There are entire Web sites that compile funny or startling images found with Google's Street View cameras.

"We take that very seriously," Filadelfo said. "With this feature, we only use imagery taken from public property that can be seen from walking down the street. We definitely abide by the laws."

In Austin's Street View, some vehicles had their license plate numbers blurred out.

Filadelfo added that Google has tools to report and remove inappropriate content. To report a problem, click on "Street View Help," then on "Report inappropriate image."

<http://maps.google.com/maps>

Courtesy of JB Goodwin