Google takes its maps to hiking, biking trails

The idea is to log locations unavailable by automobile

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MOUNTAIN VIEW, Calif. — Meet the Google trike.

It's the sequel, of sorts, to the Google Maps-mobile, a specially rigged car with an antenna, GPS and camera that snaps 360-degree images of neighborhoods for display in the "Street View" section of Google Maps.

Now Google Maps is expanding to biking and hiking trails. A Google employee on a tricycle rides around to snap the same wide-area views.

"Much of the world is inaccessible to the car," says Daniel Ratner, a Google senior engineer who designed the trike. "We want to get access to places people find important."

The project just got underway. So far, only a bike trail in Monterey, Calif., is up and running. Google has cyclists out now in California, Italy and the United Kingdom. The company says to look for hiking and biking images from those locations over the summer — along with shots from U.S. theme parks. Google won't say which ones.

Google Maps is the top online map program, with 149 million visitors worldwide in April, up 49 percent from the prior April, according to Web tracker ComScore Media Metrix.

Rivals No. 2 MapQuest and Yahoo Maps were down 11 percent and 15 percent respectively, says ComScore.

To access Google's Street View, you click on the icon of the little yellow man at the top of the Maps screen, and drag it to the location you want to see.

The U.S. audience has mostly embraced Street View, currently offered in nine countries. But Google hopes to find a better reaction to the trike project than it met with Street View's recent expansion into Europe and Asia. Officials and citizens in Greece, the United Kingdom and Japan complained loudly about invasion of privacy over the project.

Stephen Chau, a product manager for Google Maps, says that what the Google cars picked up photographically was no different from what any tourist would see on vacation.

"We show images that are taken from public streets," he says. Chau says the complaints about the product are minimal considering its usage, and many people just have an initial misunderstanding. "We have tools to automatically blur faces, if they show up, and license plates."

Danny Sullivan, editor of Search Engine Land, said the addition of biking and hiking trails to Street View is a smooth marketing move. "I see Google saying, 'You're freaked out by Street View, well, look at this. What's not to like about biking and hiking trails?' It makes the whole project now seem warm and fuzzy."

Meanwhile, what's next? Street View images from boats?

"Don't laugh, we've actually gotten various inquiries from people who operate boats," Chau says.