

Trekker puts Upstate on the map



MYKAL MCELDOWNEY/STAFF

Mac Stone, a Google Maps Street View Trekker, has been photographing some of the area's scenic spots, including Falls Park in Greenville, top.

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As he walked through Falls Park in the sweltering heat, Mac Stone lugged an awkward, 50-pound backpack supporting a robot-looking, bright green sphere holding 15 cameras.

He hopped from rock to rock along the banks of the Reedy River, and as sweat poured down, he climbed toward the base of the falls, tapped a few buttons on a cell phone, and the whiz-bang camera contraption went to work.

Soon, the whole world may have access to the same views of Falls Park that Greenville enjoys.

Thanks to Stone. And thanks to Google.

For years, Google has used cameras mounted on its Google Maps cars to shoot images for its popular Street View. Now the search engine giant is taking Street View to places its cars can't go.

Google chose Stone to become part of a pilot program to take the Google Trekker to locations in the Upstate and Lowcountry of South Carolina.

> ***"I'm going to places that we think define South Carolina but may be places that people don't know about."***
> **MAC STONE**

Stone can't say where he's been or where he's headed next, and he doesn't know which images Google will choose to use, but judging from the Instagram photos he posted, he's trekked the Swamp Rabbit Trail, Table Rock State Park and Jones Gap State Park.

Stone, a wildlife photographer and the executive director of Naturaland Trust, the Green-

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ville-based conservation group, put in an application on a whim eight months ago to become a Google Trekker.

He wanted to show the world the views he sees often as he hikes the mountains and trails — many of which are public land or protected through conservation, some through Naturaland Trust's involvement.

"I'm going to places that we think define South Carolina but may be places that people don't know about," Stone rested beneath a shade tree in Falls Park.

"These are places where when you get there you say, 'Holy cow, this looks like national park beauty,' but really it's our state parks and county parks and city parks."

Stone was one of a limited number of trekkers chosen for the program. Google was taking applications from all over the world. Some treks already online show the Grand Canyon, the Taj Mahal and the Great Barrier Reef.

"You have some of the most beautiful places in the world that are being trekked right now, and be on that," he said.

Google says online it's now taking applications from tourism boards, nonprofits, universities and research organizations to use the Trekker to collect imagery of hard-to-reach places.

In Falls Park, a man picnicking spotted Stone walking past and asked, "Is that for Google Maps?" A woman strolled by, looked up, kept walking and then did a double-take.

It's like that wherever Stone walks.

"It's strange when people don't stop and ask," he said.

The backpack has a pair of batteries and a cameras mounted on a rod extends from the backpack above Stone's head. It looks like a disco ball but provides 360-degree images.

"It takes a series of panoramas every two seconds," he said.

He then enters data into a cell phone that uses Bluetooth to connect with the Trekker to provide exact locations.

Stone said it would still be a few months before images show up on Google. When they do, it will put more of the Upstate on the map.

"I still have quite a few treks left to do, quite a lot of sweat left to give," he said.