

Google building off-road map for hikers

By Jame Sturz, *Outside*

Last summer, Google launched a unique program in which it loans out backpack versions of its car-mounted Street View cameras, called Trekkers, to intrepid explorers. It's an ingenious idea: put these devices in the hands of the people who know a trail, river, or stretch of wilderness best, and let them map it out.

Last August, the first loaner was taken to Hawaii's Big Island, where Rob Pacheco, cofounder of outfitter Hawaiian Forest and Trail, was charged with mapping the island's most important and accessible trails. Street View product manager Evan Rapoport says he chose Hawaii from "tens of thousands" of applications because of its ecological diversity, visual lushness, focus on preservation, and accessibility. "It's a place where people go, but it's also a place they dream of going," he says.

On Nov. 25, 2013, I joined Pacheco for his final day of mapping the 116,000-acre Kahuku section of Hawaii Volcanoes National Park. We hiked past koa and ohia lehua trees, lava flows, and a 400-foot-deep pit crater. (Rangers were still talking about how a mouflon had recently tumbled into it.) The unit, which came with a 32-ounce Nalgene that dangled from one side at hip-level, was wired to a Galaxy Nexus, housed in a near-indestructible case that dangled from the other. The phone served as the pack's controller, letting users tap in their manner of travel, with options including everything from canoe, to dogsled, to horseback. It also streamed a checkerboard of images across its screen as we hiked. Then the GPS-stamped, 360-degree pictures were saved to an ejectable, 480-gigabyte SSD disk.

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