

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

See the whole world from home

Last week, a group of Pottstown High School students had a fabulous time visiting Italy, led by social studies teacher David Caldwell. Few experiences are more valuable for our young people than traveling abroad.

But what if you don't have the money?

Thanks to Google Earth and its ground-level cousin, Street View, you can tour 40 countries all over the globe from the privacy of your own home. Anyone with a computer can download it free.

Google Earth provides seamless color satellite imagery of the entire planet, and Street View shows ground-level images along myriad city streets and country roads (so far, more than 5 million miles, if you have the time).

I visited Europe frequently in the late 1990s, but I'm unlikely to go back. It's much easier, faster, and far less expensive to use Google Earth.

As a tourist, there are three ways to see a town: you can drive down the streets, which means you only get momentary glimpses of the buildings and landscapes; you can walk, which allows you to pause at any point and soak in the scenery, but dramatically limits your mobility; or you can ride a bicycle as an imperfect compromise.

With Street View, you can meander down virtually any street in most countries. At any point of your virtual tour, you can zoom up hundreds or thousands of feet above the city to get a comprehensive aerial perspective.

Looking down from above, you can measure the dimensions of any street, lot, or building, and draw a path from one place to another and measure exactly how far it is.

Back at ground level, you can also look around from a better vantage point in Street View than in person, because the panoramic cameras mounted on Google cars are perched 8 feet above the street.

In the space of one afternoon, you can ramble down a quiet country lane in southern France, check out the beach views in Rio de Janeiro, or elbow your way down a crowded Hong Kong street.

Street View also helps us experience – and learn from – the world's most beautiful streets. Twenty years ago, urban designer Allan Jacobs wrote a widely acclaimed book, "Great Streets," which examines 150 of the world's most attractive streets – from Market Street in San Francisco to Kurfurstendamm in Berlin to Motomachi in Yokohama – and explains why they are so appealing.

Until Street View came along, it could take a lifetime of travel to see them all. Now most are viewable on a computer screen, and you can easily compare them to find common elements. (For example, most great streets are shaded by large canopy trees.)

Yes, there's nothing like visiting places in person. But Google Earth puts the world within reach of almost everyone, shows us diverse ways to arrange our communities, and entices us to broaden our horizons.



Commentary by
Tom Hylton



POTTSTOWN HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS recently visited Florence, above, one of the world's most beautiful cities, as part of a tour of Italy. They enjoyed a memorable and fabulous learning experience. But if you can't go in person, Google Earth and Street View are a great way to see the world.