

Webcams to the world

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Do you sometimes wish you could see what was happening on the other side of the world, check the night scene in Times Square or see if astronauts really float inside the space shuttle?

By pointing your browser to the millions of web cameras - or webcams - plugged into the internet all over the planet, you can do that plus check the elephants in Africa, watch cuddly pandas in China, peep into the streets of Moscow and see a true French baker prepare his daily bread in Paris.

Such cameras, though not always reliable because of their varied locations, time differences and broadband connection speeds at both ends, give us a small window to the world.

Often, they are part of research projects or surveillance operations; others belong to companies counting on a nifty marketing tool to promote their product or travel destination. Sometimes they allow private citizens to show their families what life is like in their new country.

The latter was the motivation for Warren Frost, who wanted to make his mum feel closer to him in Sydney. He has four webcams in his Kirribilli unit ([sydney-webcam .com](http://sydney-webcam.com)) providing 24-hour images of the harbour, city skyline and the Harbour Bridge. Maintaining the cameras is a hobby for Frost, who enjoys knowing an average 1000 people view the images every day.

"It's especially popular in the US, UK and Germany. Initially, I only gave the website address to my mother but after a couple of months I noticed that other people were viewing the webcams. Google had crawled my site and added it to its search index. It was totally unintentional," Frost says.

No so for Ron Cosgrove and his wife, Becky, directors of a research project into paranormal activities in an abandoned US hospital (researchwebcam.net). The hospital has been closed for more than 30 years but has been the focus of intense curiosity. Cosgrove and his Oklahoma City Paranormal Research Group installed the cameras in 2004 to allow the public to help spot and categorise strange occurrences. The cameras refresh footage of corridors every 15 seconds and allow visitors to capture images they believe contain anomalies such as shadows, faces and lights. The hospital's physical location is kept secret to avoid vandalism.

"As you can well imagine, the vast majority of anomalies have a natural causation but then there are the few unexplainable events. It has been quite interesting," Cosgrove says. "If viewers find anything of interest they forward it to us for correlation with our data. So, in essence, they are themselves part of the research team and have become an unexpected asset to the project."

Senior lecturer Dr Linda Leung, of the University of Technology, Sydney's Institute for Interactive Media & Learning, says webcams appeal to people's curiosity and desire for evidence.

"There's that question that if a tree falls in the Amazon and no one hears or sees it, has it really happened? But what happens if you are able to see it?" she asks, while warning that live webcams also highlight the mundane qualities of watching something 24/7.

"It all feels the same in the end," she says.

We've compiled a list of sites with interesting webcams - with moving pictures or refreshed still images. Naturally, as with all web adventures, there is plenty of very questionable live content to be seen online. Often these are flagged as "adult webcams" but sometimes just their listing is confronting. Ensure any internet filters are up to date and any installed parental controls are working as they should if there are children around.

EarthCam Network
www.earthcam.com

This site belongs to a webcam software company that promotes the medium but is the most reliable aggregator of webcam links we found. Use the World Map facility to search for cameras at your favourite destinations or search by word, Top 10, Most Popular or Editor's Choice.

RTA NSW

www.rta.nsw.gov.au/trafficreports/index.html

Don't leave home or the office without checking these fixed cameras. See what the traffic is like on the M5 or M4 before going home, or the F3 before taking off for the weekend. Traffic reports are included, so there is no need to wait for the half-hourly radio broadcasts.

HMAS Perth Dive Wreck

www.hmasperth.com.au

The 133-metre guided missile destroyer was scuttled off Perth in 2001. These two cameras - one above, the other below water - allow divers to see the conditions before they set out for the day. Their friends and families can also see them at work.

NASA TV

<http://www.nasa.gov/multimedia/nasatv/index.html>

When it is not transmitting live from space, this site broadcasts interviews, news conferences and videos of various missions. It has three channels (Public, Media and Education) and the "What's On" tab details the daily broadcast schedule. Watch out for mission launches and landing coverage. Best watched at night (Australian time).

The Rocks, Sydney

http://therocks.com/sydney-Webcam_Rocks_Viewing.htm

The Sydney Harbour Foreshore Authority's two adjustable live webcams aim to show Sydney Harbour to the world. Use your mouse to control the camera's zooming and panning functions, but be patient: with more than one million hits a year, you'll probably need to wait your turn.

Australian Antarctic Division

www.aad.gov.au/asset/webcams/mawson/default.asp

Cameras in Mawson, Davis, Casey and Macquarie Island give visitors to this site a glimpse of researchers' life on the frozen continent. Images are refreshed every 10 minutes and arrive at your PC via a satellite link to the division's headquarters in Tasmania.

Surf conditions

www.surfit.com/surfit/display.asp?ss=5&id=72

Check your favourite break before you crawl out of bed in the morning. Click on the map to go to the beach of your choice around Australia, see the static images and read the reports.

Most boring

Watching paint dry may be as exciting as watching an apple grow, although the blossom is pretty (applecam.co.uk/index.html) - best viewed in the morning (Sydney time). This Dutch site (icepick.com) tracks every time Sparkey the cat eats, the fridge opens and the doorbell rings.

Other links

French bakery www.siteparc.fr/bonneau/Webcam.htm

Panda www.oiccam.com/webcams/index.html?/panda

Times Square www.earthcam.com/usa/newyork/timessquare

Moscow www.mdmbank.com/webcam