A camera filmed as the camel and her guide trekked the desert.

Camel Cam

Take a ride with a camel that's mapping a desert.

By Sarah Rehman

When people are lost, they often turn to mapping services for help. Such services provide directions, as well as images of the routes people must take to reach their destination.

To capture these images, many mapping services use vehicles such as cars and bikes.

The vehicles are equipped with cameras, which film the streets as the vehicles move.

But what happens in deserts—where instead of streets, there are sand dunes? One mapping service thinks it has the answer: You get a camel to do the mapping for you!

Cruising Camel

Recently, Google Maps decided to map out the Liwa desert in the United Arab Emirates. But the company's vehicles were not capable of driving through the desert's shifting sands. So they hired a 10-year-old camel named Raffia for the job.

Why? Camels have been used to transport goods and people across deserts for thousands of years. Their long, strong legs allow them to move across difficult terrain, while their long lashes keep sand out of their eyes. In addition, camels have humps on their backs that store fat. When food runs out—as it often does when trekking across a vast desert—they use this fat for energy to keep going.

Collecting a World of Images

To map the Liwa desert, Raffia's human guide strapped a tall camera to the camel's back.

Then each morning, they would film the landscape as they walked. By the end of the trip, the camel's camera recorded tall sand dunes that reached 130 feet high, palm trees, and date farms tended by tribes who live in the desert.

This image of a desert oasis was taken by the camel.

Officials at Google were so pleased with the footage, they already began planning similar expeditions in nearby regions.

"Ideally, we want to capture all of the United Arab Emirates," said Joyce Baz, a spokesperson for the company. "There's so much culture and history and heritage here."

And now, with the help of an Internet connection, you can experience that culture as well!

Courtesy Google Maps