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Johanna Seltz - Globe Correspondent | August 05, 2016

What's she doing on the beach with that weird thing on her back?



Christina Balzotti, a Connecticut College student interning at Save the Harbor/Save the Bay, wears a Google Trekker backpack as she walks along Wollaston Beach taking pictures of the beach for Google Maps.

Christina Balzotti is spending her summer striding along the water's edge of nearly 20 miles of state-owned beaches in Boston Harbor with a 50-pound pack on her back connected to a helmet-like ball towering over her head — and looking more than a little like an alien as she takes 360-degree photos of the shoreline for Google Maps.

She walks briskly and with purpose, helping to document the public waterfront and generate interest in its care and preservation as a student intern with Save the Harbor/Save the Bay, a nonprofit with a self-explanatory name.

Balzotti's beach trek also has generated stares and some interesting comments -- like the one from the state trooper at Quincy's Wollaston Beach

who wondered whether she was wielding a fancy Pokemon GO catcher, or from the woman at Revere Beach who asked, "Does that shoot people?"

For the record: no, and no.

The "Trekker" apparatus on Balzotti's back shoots photos -- one every 2.5 seconds -- with 15 lenses, each facing in a different direction. The digital footage goes to Google, where engineers piece it together to produce the panoramic views that Google Maps has been making from car-mounted cameras of street scenes since 2007.

Google introduced the Trekker, a non-car version of the camera system, in 2012 to capture scenes off the vehicular track, starting with the Grand Canyon. And for the last two years, the company

has been loaning the equipment to nonprofit groups with local expertise.

"Our mission is to organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful," said Google spokeswoman Liz Schwab. "If you boil that down a little bit and think of mapping, the world is too large to ever map it ourselves. This is a way to cover more places."

The more exotic locales photographed by Trekker crews so far include the Canadian Arctic and Viking ruins in Greenland, as well as a zipline tour of the Amazon rainforest in Brazil.

The Trekker images also include mountains in Spain, the pilgrimage route of Kumano Kodo in Japan, and the harbor of Sydney, Australia.

Local places include the Charles River, Boston Common and Public Garden, Old North Church, and Granary Burying Ground.

And by the end of this summer, the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation-managed beaches of Greater Boston will join the digitally recorded scenes -- courtesy of Balzotti and Save the Harbor/Save the Bay.

The beaches include Wollaston in Quincy, Nantasket in Hull, and beaches in Dorchester, East Boston, Lynn, Nahant, Revere, South Boston, Winthrop, and Spectacle Island.

Schwab said Save the Harbor/Save the Bay was a perfect fit for the program because “they have a clear passion for the subject area, a proven track record, a clear mission to restore and protect the assets we have here in the region.”

Bruce Berman, spokesman for the 30-year-old advocacy organization, said his group hopes the project “will let the public in on one of the Boston Harbor region’s best-kept secrets: There are 19 miles of terrific public beaches from Nahant to Nantasket for the more than two million residents who live within a short ride or drive from the coast.”

“Unlike traditional photographs, which are static, the images we are capturing with the Google Trekker are interactive, immersive, and totally engaging,” he added.

On a sunny Wednesday in July, Balzotti and her fellow intern Jenny Barrack met in the parking lot of a CVS across from Wollaston Beach to record that beach for the Google Maps project. Both are 21-year-old students at Connecticut College, and this is their ninth beach in three weeks with the Trekker.

Balzotti is 5 feet 2 inches tall and trim, a lacrosse player who ran 3 miles at her Duxbury home before heading to work that day. She’s wearing shorts, a tank top, and sneakers, and her long dark hair is pulled back in a ponytail to avoid it from blowing in front of the camera lenses.

Together Balzotti and Barrack lug the Trekker from the back of their car, where it is taking up most of the space.

The backpack part of the contraption is covered in the light blue Google Earth wallpaper, as is the long neck above it, which supports a bright green ball

that looks like a cross between a soccer ball and a helmet. Its 15 lenses peer out from openings around the circumference.

Barrack hoists the 4-foot-tall Trekker onto Balzotti’s back and helps her strap it into place. She leans back a little to keep from toppling over.

“It’s kind of a two-person job,” Balzotti said. “I tried it by myself once. It was kind of tough.” For those who have seen the movie, “Wild,” picture Reese Witherspoon attempting to put on a massive camping backpack for the first time.

Balzotti boots up the electronics with her cellphone and then stops at the edge of Quincy Shore Drive so Berman can snap a picture of her with a Pokemon character from the Pokemon GO game. It’s a “Magikarp” and he is very excited. “This is going to go viral,” he said.

A state trooper on a motorcycle stops, more out of curiosity than concern, and stops traffic so Balzotti and Barrack can cross to the beach. And then Balzotti is off.

Barrack runs ahead, staying about 150 feet in front to keep from being in the picture.

“I answer people’s questions,” she said. “Christina likes to plow through.”

It’s low tide, and 45 minutes later Balzotti has walked the entire 2-mile beach, with only a few stares from people lying on the sand.

Bea Cunningham glances up from her regular morning beach walk, but doesn’t stop. “It looked like some kind of camera; I could see the lenses,” she said later. “I thought it was a school project.”

Rachel Spencer of Dorchester looks up from her phone as she

sunbathes. She speculates that Balzotti is carrying “extra heavy weights, for exercise.”

Jay MacRitchie of nearby Squantum, another walker, guesses correctly. “I thought it was maybe some kind of Google Earth,” he said.

Balzotti and Barrack said they’ve mostly been received with curiosity and enthusiasm. On a few occasions, they said, children have followed and “tried to get on television.”

When they were doing Spectacle Island, the women had a close call.

“We were at the top of the North Drumlin [of the island] and we could see this big thunderstorm coming in,” Barrack said. “The Trekker is not supposed to get wet, so we had to sprint to avoid it. We made it to the boat. Barely.”

“It’s a pretty not-normal summer internship for a college student,” Balzotti said, gratefully. “It was a lot of fun, and we saw how enthusiastic people are about their beaches.”

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