

Live (stream) from South Florida! Popular webcams showcase seaports, marinas, beaches

By Johnny Diaz, Jan 25, 2016

Smile, South Florida, you're on cam!

From our beaches to lighthouses to seaports, high-definition webcams are everywhere these days, providing live streams that locals and out-of-towners can view on their computers, smartphones and other devices.

These snapshots of regular everyday life are becoming a source of entertainment for people who increasingly do everything online. Viewers range from out-of-state folks who want to marvel at the sandy shorelines to local office workers looking to escape cubicle life. There also are the cruise-ship fans who enjoy keeping tabs on their favorites and surfers eager to monitor beach conditions. "It's really like watching TV on the Internet," said Lou Gndt, co-founder of PTZtv.com, a Fort Lauderdale-based company that has 20 webcam locations globally. "It's a window into an area that people can see and hear. We have live sound with a lot of the cams ... It's entertainment."

The company, which he started with David Balmforth, has six webcam locations in South Florida, including at the Hyatt Regency Pier Sixty-Six and Courtyard by Marriott Fort Lauderdale Beach. Its most popular live stream? The one from Port Everglades.

"It has a big following," Gndt said of the port camera, which records the live broadcast and makes it available for sale.

Webcams have become marketing tools for South Florida tourism groups.

Discover the Palm Beaches, the county's tourism bureau, has a page (palmbeachfl.com/beachcam) featuring various webcams of popular areas such as the Boca Raton Inlet and the Jupiter Inlet.

According to the Greater Fort Lauderdale Convention & Visitors

Bureau, its webcam page is the most visited link on sunny.org and the most shared link that tourism officials post on social media. The page features links to webcams throughout Broward County.

"The live beach cams' authentic, un-retouched, natural beauty is a draw, especially in the cold winter months up North, or in the hot land-locked areas in summer," said Nicki E. Grossman, president and CEO of the Greater Fort Lauderdale Convention & Visitors Bureau, in an email.

Part of the draw is the high-definition footage.

"To see things live is very compelling for people," said Brian Cury, CEO and founder of EarthCam Inc., a live webcam network that broadcasts from sites including the beaches behind The Breakers in Palm Beach and Miami's Biscayne Bay.

The New Jersey-based EarthCam this month added a camera to the Lauderdale Marina at 15th Street Fisheries in Fort Lauderdale, capturing images of boats embarking or docking. The 17th Street Causeway bridge can be seen in the background.

"It feels like you are standing on the dock and overlooking the pier," Cury said. "Some folks, unfortunately, are house-bound and don't get chance to travel. A lot of times, [viewers are] folks who have been there before and want to revisit it."

Last year during the North's winter, Chris Korab, 62, of Cleveland, Ohio, began logging on each morning to look at Pompano Beach's sunny shoreline.

"It was kind of a slice of heaven on earth. Here we are in 10 feet of snow, and it was beautiful to see the surf and the sand and the sun," said Korab, whose sister, Phyllis Korab, works in Pompano Beach.

Now the live stream has become part of her morning routine along with her coffee.

"When you do live in a cold weather climate, visiting the webcam is like a mini-vacation," she said. "It's really nice to see a different picture."

The city of Pompano Beach installed its webcam 12 feet high above, facing north from the fishing pier, in July 2014. The camera angle shows the rushing waves, a lifeguard stand and the Hillsboro Inlet Lighthouse looming in the distance.

The city's beachfront cam draws 20,000 views a month to the city's website, said Sandra King, a spokeswoman for Pompano Beach. It is so popular, she said, that she receives calls and emails whenever the camera is temporarily down or blurry from rain.

"If it goes down, we get so many people that write in and complain how horrible it is, that the webcam is down and it sure better be up soon," King said. "We will go out and clean the lens pretty regularly."

She said privacy issues have not been a concern.

While beachgoers are visible in the shot, the webcam doesn't get close enough to discern faces, she said.

"I didn't want to get too close up to people," King said. "It's not recording. It's just a webcam that points out the shoreline."

Both Cury and Gndt noted that many people are aware of the camera locations and seek them out.

"All the cruise ship captains, they know us and they will wave to us," Gndt said. "We are very respectful of people's privacy rights. We don't zoom in close enough where you would be able to see if anything was going on."

At least one marketing analyst believes the interest in webcams reflects how people like to explore online.

"The trend today is for people to do everything online," said Kimberly Taylor, an associate professor of marketing at Florida International University.

"People research and buy products online, read reviews of businesses posted on apps by other customers, and learn things by watching video clips and tutorials. So I believe these webcams fit in well with how today's consumer, particularly the younger ones, makes their purchasing decisions..."

"They live online, and they do love video."

Ray Orozco, 52, keeps a list of webcams on his smartphone so he can check out surf conditions. He starts with local beach cams on Surfline.com and Surfguru.com and works his way up from South Beach, Dania Beach, Deerfield Beach to Delray Beach and points farther north.

"You can get a nice little report visually of what's happening where," said Orozco, a Miami attorney. "You just click and there it is. It saves a lot of time and a lot of aggravation ... They are a godsend."



The views have proven popularity. The camera draws 20,000 views a month to the city's website, said Sandra King, a spokeswoman for Pompano Beach. The top 10 visitors tend to be a mix of South Floridians, Canadians and New Yorkers.