Eyes in skies on Havana

Satellite site adds images and a link where exiles can register land claims.

By Madeline Baró Diaz
Miami Bureau
Posted May 25 2007

Havana is a forbidden destination for most Americans, but a Web site is offering bird's-eye and close-up views of the historic city -- plus a way for Cuban exiles to stake claims to their lost homes.

TerraFly, an online program at www.terrafly.com, for years has made it possible to navigate the world through the use of satellite images. With a few clicks, visitors can experience a virtual flight over the geographic areas of their choice. In eight years it has grown to become the biggest publicly accessible geographic database in the world, logging more than 10,000 visitors a day.

Now TerraFly is extending its reach, adding to its database high-resolution pictures of buildings in Havana. So far, the database has photographs of 1,000 buildings taken with GPS cameras that mark the coordinates where the pictures were taken.

"Our goal is to photograph every building in Havana," said Naphtali David Rishe, director of the NASA Regional Applications Center at Florida International University in Miami and head of the TerraFly project.

Some of the Havana photos, taken in December by two Cuban-Americans visiting family on the island, are going on display today as part of the "Havana Today in Images" exhibit hosted by Miami-Dade College at the Tower Theater Gallery, 1508 SW Eighth St., Miami. The exhibit runs through June 3.

As an added feature for some Cuban exiles, if anyone surfing the TerraFly site sees a building that used to belong to them, they can click on a link to register their claim. The link will take them to an affidavit TerraFly site sees a building that used to belong to them, they can click on a link to register their claim. The link will take them to an affidavit extending its reach, adding to its database high-resolution pictures of buildings in Havana. So far, the database has photographs of 1,000 buildings taken with GPS cameras that mark the coordinates where the pictures were taken.

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homes seized by the government and redistributed should not be returned to their original owners.

"From a purely pragmatic point of view and a timing view, I think this is not the time to be focusing on potential claims," he said. "You're giving fuel to the fire of Cuban governmental propaganda."

Freyre, 57, came to the United States as a child. His former family home in the Miramar section of Havana is now Cuba's Institute for Research into Citrus and Fruit Trees. Fidel Castro's older brother, Ramón, has an office there.

Freyre said although he disagrees with TerraFly's methods, a system must be established at some point to resolve claims such as that of his family.

"Is this something that needs to be dealt with? Absolutely," he said. "The question is when and how ... the scenario is complex."

Rishe said the overall aim of the project is to add to the TerraFly database, which also contains GPS photographs of parts of Miami-Dade, and possibly lay the groundwork for the restoration of historic buildings in Havana. Many of the colonial structures have peeling paint, missing balconies and other signs of deterioration.

"Some of these images show how beautiful the architecture of Havana is," he said. "Many of them show how this beautiful architecture has been neglected."

TerraFly was launched in 1999 with satellite and aerial images provided by the U.S. government. The idea was to find a way to make the images available to the public, Rishe said. Today, TerraFly combines the images with geographic, Census, property, real estate and other data.

Rishe hopes the Havana exhibition at the Tower Theater Gallery will attract a sponsor to underwrite TerraFly's ambitious quest to document all of Havana in photographs. Some of the 30 or so images on display are satellite maps of the city and some are high-quality pictures turned into posters several feet high.

"This is a teaser," Rishe said. "This could be of great value."

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