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GigaPans turn 'Where's Waldo?' into child's play

A gigapixel panorama shows a complete vista of West Vancouver from Ambleside Park, past the mouth of the Capilano River to Lion's Gate Bridge. Nov. 17, 2010. (CTV)

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A photographic technology developed for NASA for the exploration of Mars is giving photographers a new way to explore beautiful B.C. in a very big way.

The GigaPan is a robot-like camera attachment used to shoot dozens of images -- which are stitched together to make giant gigapixel panoramas that make "Where's Waldo?" look like child's play.

The pictures are stitched together in a virtual grid of eight rows by 32 columns.

Photographer Ronnie Miranda used the GigaPan at Prospect Point in Stanley Park to capture a complete vista of West Vancouver from Ambleside Park, past the mouth of the Capilano River to Lions Gate Bridge.

He says the best GigaPan panoramas are taken from a high vantage point, like from atop a building or mountain.

"And [you need to] have a really powerful lens to do all that," he told CTV News while snapping shots from a park viewpoint.

The panoramas Miranda creates are beautiful just the way they are, but if you **explore them online** you can zoom into the pictures and find small details like dogs playing in the water and people talking on their phones on a patio.

CTV reporter Peter Grainger was able to find a man enjoying some mid-autumn sunshine, but as you widen the shot, he just appears as a speck at the foot of the Lions Gate Bridge.

The technology was developed for NASA to use on its Mars Rovers to capture images of the planet's surface. But the software needed to digitally stitch the shots together was developed by David Lowe, a computer scientist at the University of B.C.

"He invented the algorithm, which is now used by many software companies to stitch images together," Miranda said.

GigaPans range in price from $400 to $1,000. It can be used with simple point-and-shoot digital cameras to high-end professional ones.

As the price comes down on the new technology, Miranda predicts these kinds of detailed photographs will be used in advertising, photojournalism, mapping and even archeology.

With a report from CTV British Columbia's Peter Grainger

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