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Peeping Cam

Trend | Visit exotic locales, take lessons and even get yourself treated—all from your desktop. **Kavita Kukday** explores the world of connected webcams

The world is a small place indeed, and webcams are making it even smaller. These days it's no longer 'think webcams, think video chats'. Traditional uses such as keeping in touch with friends and family abroad via webcams are there of course. And there are far more imaginative uses of video chatting. For instance, Sonia Kapur, who lives in Mumbai, could break her fast the right way this *karwa chauth*, even though her husband was in California. How? She saw him on her webcam, performed the rites and broke her fast!

But using your webcam just for video chats is passé. It's time now you turn them into a window to the world. Log on to sites like OnlineCamera.com (www.onlinecamera.com) and Earth Cam (www.earthcam.com) and you will see a world made accessible through webcams connected online.

What can they do, you ask? Plenty! For instance, say you suddenly feel like going to Miami Beach, Tokyo or Paris, but don't have leave or money. OnlineCamera.com will take you there in a jiffy. Select the 'City and Roads' section under 'Categories' and cruise through the city you want, live! One caveat though: don't expect to be transformed into a matrix-like world here—these are only webcam feeds, remember?

You can go wild too.

For a quick visit to the zoo, try your luck at the National Zoo site, the biggest site of online zoos (nationalzoo.si.edu/animals/webcams). This site features streaming webcams (which means you cut out the eternal wait for new images to load) that observe cheetahs, flamingos, pandas and other animals.

If you'd rather see elephants, hyenas, ostriches and even exotic species such as klipspringers roaming free, you can do that courtesy National Geographic. It has live cameras placed at 'Pete's Pond' in Botswana, South Africa. You can view the video feeds at www.nationalgeographic.com/ngm/wildcamfrica. This is available online, round the clock!

Then there are people who have put their shops, homes or personal



Seattle-based Kevin Callahan offers guitar lessons over a webcam

cameras online (why, one wonders?). For instance, head over to www.asklepius.cz/webcam. Here you can see the payment desk at a pharmacy in the Czech Republic.

But all is not fun-and-games. There are 'utility' webcam feeds too, such as traffic cams. This is a brilliant idea to avoid traffic in metropolitan cities—no need for radio updates on the traffic situation. Instead, people abroad can just log in to traffic cam links on sites like Earth Cam and beat the traffic (don't you wish we had one at Tulsī Pipe road?)

Entrepreneurs are having a field day too. For instance, there is this gym at Indianapolis in the US that offers free as well as paid workout sessions online (www.thetrainingstationinc.com/AllCams.html).

Besides there are people who have capitalised on streaming video to provide coaching. Like Kevin Callahan in Seattle, USA, who teaches guitar to students from all over the world at www.kevincallahan.org/teaching.html. "What's really awesome is the multi-way conferencing where you can have up to four people in a single video chat conference, depending on your bandwidth. It's like a mini classroom. There are all sorts of exciting possibilities.

For instance, Clarice Assad, a pianist composer, and I have written music together in real time over Apple's iChatAV, using iSight cameras. And we are over 3,000 miles apart," says Callahan.

Back in India, there is this telemedicine wave. For instance, soon after the tsunami, the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) had brought the three hospitals in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands into its network with other super-specialty hospitals. Now there are plans to connect many more hospitals. This, ISRO says, will help diagnose, advice, treat and follow-up with a remote patients.

"Currently we have 39 telemedicine centres and in the last three years we have treated over 16,400 patients in India, Malaysia, Mauritius and Pakistan for free," says Devi Shetty, chairman of Narayana Hrudayalaya (www.hrudayalaya.com), a hospital that provides telemedicine.

Finally, these webcam sites also have mobile blogs, loads of search options and rather simple methods to add your own camera to the site. They also have a resource section that gives you free software like java plug-ins for viewing webcams, software that turns your webcam into surveillance camera and so on. So go ahead, log on and turn your webcam into a window to the world!

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