

Anmol interlaced his long, narrow fingers together in front of his chest as if to beg. 'Can anyone come up here and draw a picture of India?' He asked. 'Do you guys know where you are? Did anyone look at a map?'

We met him with silence. We were too tired to feel embarrassed. We left Phnom Penh at eleven in the morning the previous day and did not arrive in Mumbai until 4:30 AM Cambodia time. After waiting a half hour to be picked up in a dark, stagnant airport parking garage, we piled into a bus and drove an additional twenty minutes off-site to a hotel, where we had four hours of sleep. In the morning, we made our way back on the bus for a six-hour drive toward Pune. I had an ear blockage from sticking my head out of the bus window into the musty, city streets. We were irritable and exhausted and not in the mood for a geography lesson.

My gap year cohorts ([link to gap year article](#)) and I were staying at the [Mahindra United World College of India](#) for a few days to learn about Bollywood filmmaking. We had been traveling for six months and, with the gap year program handling most, if not all, of our logistics, it became too easy to arrive in a new city and not know how we got there. Easy travel has a stigma, and that was apparent when I spoke about the program with backpackers and solo travelers along the way. Part of me thought this trip could be more significant if I were on my own. Another part of me knew that our travel sans logistics was a gift of freedom.

We met Anmol, a philosophy teacher at MUWC, upon arrival. He was strikingly handsome, with a strong jawline and sharp nose. His faint mustache melted into his dark complexion. He could make your head spin with remarkably relevant references that supported whatever point he was making. He pulled out details of historical events, like names and dates, as if the textbook page had opened right in front of him.

And though his intelligence was intimidating and, at times, pressuring, he came off gentle and good-hearted. The kind of person you'd love to invite over for dinner because you know they'd light up the room and carry the conversation.

My friend Benji was able to draw a half-decent outline of India. But, India is quite big. When it came to pinpointing exactly where we were, we simply had no idea. Anmol picked up a red dry-erase marker and looked out at us to make sure we were paying attention. 'You are here,' he said, as he made a red mark near the middle of India's west coast.

Anmol asked us about our recent travels. We told him we had just left Cambodia. He asked us about Angkor Wat and what we thought of it. He asked if we did any research before showing up and taking pictures of the old ruins. We said nothing. I felt the blood rush to my cheeks, and now I was embarrassed. Except for knowing when the temples were built and that, at some point, they were converted from Hindu to Buddhist temples, we didn't know anything.

'Did you wonder what the faces were all about at Angkor Thom? You must have some questions?' He asked.



I didn't remember the faces at all. The temples blurred together into one, grand tourist attraction. I became increasingly frustrated because I thought I did a good job getting to know Cambodia. I read Cambodia's Curse by Joel Brinkley. I walked through the Killing Fields audio tour with a sense of relief that I had a baseline knowledge of the Khmer Rouge, and instead of being shocked by new information, I could listen with intent and absorb the stories of those who experienced it. I had a keen understanding of the more important cultural differences, especially when it came to dress. It still felt like I had not done this right.

We stared blankly at him. Looking around the room, I saw half-open eyes and dead legs and limp shoulders.

‘The faces of Bayon epitomize the creativity and inflated ego of Cambodia’s most celebrated king. There are over 200 smiling faces built into the dozens of gothic towers.’ He said, animated. ‘It’s incredible because, unlike Angkor Wat, from a distance, it looks like rubbish. Only when you enter the temple can you see the art.’

He went on, eventually unveiling that he had never even been to Angkor Wat. He’d never been to Cambodia. And yet, there he stood, informing us about the brief history behind the most recent pictures on our iPhone camera rolls.

Anmol left us with this: How do you intend to differentiate between being a traveler and being a sightseer? What does it mean to be in a place? I didn’t walk away from the conversation with Anmol believing that travelers need to have encyclopedic knowledge about every city they travel to. I walked away with the notion that curiosity is essential and that, as foreigners, we owe it to the country we are in to pay closer attention. To know where you are on a map. To understand why there are faces. To take off your shoes, as if entering someone else’s home.