

Notes from the Road: Somewhere in the Middle of Thailand

The morning I was supposed to leave for two months, I was sitting cross-legged on my bedroom floor with an overwhelming sense of uncertainty. It seemed inevitable that everything - and everyone - would change while I was gone. I tried to tell myself that it would be okay to lament while my world kept chugging along without me, but that I wasn't supposed to be afraid of any change that might occur. Generally, it seems like there's a consensus that change is a good thing.

Now, curled up on a bus on the way from Siem Reap to Bangkok, I'm scared to come back home. I'm supposed to be different, but what if I come home to the same thoughts I've always had? I've been thinking a lot about why we travel. It's not to shove our way through crowds in order to get instagram-worthy pictures in ancient temples. It's not to ogle at locals, buy trinkets that were made the next country over in a sweatshop, or ignore begging children because they're supposed to be in school instead of in the street.

Maybe we do it because we're selfish and curious - we want to see how other people live, sometimes if only to affirm that we don't have it that bad back home or less cynically, to finally appreciate all that we do have. Safety, a roof over our heads, food security. Plans for movie nights and dinners and plane tickets and pictures on our walls of the places we want to see - we get to choose all of that, if we want. I never know how to appreciate that, how to appropriately wield my privilege. It seems wrong to celebrate my freedom in countries that can't do the same. But I guess I left because I wanted to let the world teach me.

And it has - I learned by strapping my sandals tight to my feet so I wouldn't slip while climbing to the top of a small karst mountain in Laos. I felt it when I helped a 16 year old girl learn English by translating whenever she pointed at the ceiling or the door or my frizzy, curled hair. Or any time the congested cities fell away, replaced by skinny palm trees so impossibly tall they looked ready to fall with the slightest breeze and green, green rice fields dotted with the bobbing heads of farmers and the deep, dark caves explored by flashlight and the fervent, rushing waterfalls we chased with friends we just met but felt like we'd known forever.

That's how I choose to live. I don't want to know another way. I spend so much of my life waking up to the same off-white plaster ceiling. I want all kinds of ceilings. And sometimes I want none

at all so the first thing I see in the morning is something no man could make - the tops of trees reaching towards the sky or a shrouded mountain or the wide, wide ocean.

I've already done so much in my life. I swam in frigid waters in Iceland, watched bears in Yellowstone, ventured into old churches in Italy, kayaked into sea caves in California, snowshoed across a frozen lake in Colorado...

But...I don't really know what that means. What's it matter that I got to know the world - and myself - a bit better if I never do anything about it? Right now all of that, everything I've done, belongs to me. I am the sole beneficiary of my extraordinary life. Am I supposed to widen that circle? Am I supposed to do anything with what I've learned, or should I fold neatly back into my spot in the world?

So, I still don't know why I travel. I still don't know how to tactfully navigate my privilege. But if there's a better place than a rickety bus on a dirt road in southeast Asia to ponder these things, I'd love to go there next.