

**4. Describe a problem you've solved or a problem you'd like to solve. It can be an intellectual challenge, a research query, an ethical dilemma - anything that is of personal importance, no matter the scale. Explain its significance to you and what steps you took or could be taken to identify a solution.**

“How many bags will you be checking today, ma'am?” “None.” “Zero? And the rest of your party?” “None of the five of us will be checking any luggage.”

Standing at the ticket counter, I reflected on a moment six months earlier. Seated at the dinner table, my family discussed where my friends were choosing to spend their spring break. While my peers ventured domestically, my soul called for an experience abroad. I mentioned this as I passed the salt, and my mother jokingly said, “If you come up with an affordable proposal, we’ll listen.” To me, this was no joke. How was I going to finance any type of overseas journey on limited funds and make it meaningful?

Later, at 2 AM, I stared at a world map posted on my wall, dotted with pins on countries for future explorations. I wanted to see Asia, but immediately eliminated costly countries like Singapore and Japan. I zeroed in on Southeast Asia, interested by the Indo-Chinese history and Buddhist influence. I knew Cambodia was the place to go; it had it all: history, culture, diversity, ancient temples, big cities, and beautiful countryside.

Picking Cambodia was the easiest part. My analysis estimated that for a family of five, we would have to live on a total of fifty dollars a day given our budget. I did hours of research. I determined where frequent flyer miles would be the most effective, organized a three week itinerary, booked a homestay through Airbnb, borrowed a Lonely Planet travel guide, emailed a family friend who had written a book on Cambodia, and sought advice from seasoned travelers on TripAdvisor. “You must try the fried tarantula!”- maybe not the best advice. My eyes blurred from the excessive strain of staring at daily KAYAK airfare alerts.

My family wasn't surprised by my ambitious endeavor. They were on the sidelines rooting for my success. After all, Cambodia certainly wouldn't be our first third world country. So, I decided to put us to the test and asked my family to accept the “no baggage challenge.”

We were limited to one small backpack each. Three outfits and one pair of shoes for three weeks. My twin brother who wears the same clothes repeatedly had no problem with this. My little brother would be perfectly content with his Winnie the Pooh and my old camera (which had 317 photos of street cats by the end of the trip.) My mom, on the other hand, had trouble parting with her hair straightener. (There's a chance it embarked on the voyage with us.) Eliminating the distraction of unnecessary belongings gave us the freedom to have a more authentic experience.

This inherited obsession to travel has seeped into my career plans. I have long wanted to pursue a career in Foreign Affairs. Therefore, my third and final challenge was to meet the US Ambassador to Cambodia. I browsed through the Embassy website and found that email addresses were top secret. I sent fifteen blind copy emails to every address combination I could think of. Fourteen bounced back. The very next day, to my complete astonishment, Ambassador William Heidt replied and booked an appointment with me in Phnom Penh. In person, he explained how finding common value between countries leads to collaborative diplomatic relations and can change the course of history. This experience solidified my drive to explore the International Relations field.

Reading about the Khmer Rouge in my history textbook is profoundly different from the emotional experience of walking through the killing fields and listening to our taxi driver sharing the tragedy of his murdered family members.

Cultural exploration brings me into a different dimension of empathy and connection to all mankind. Each interaction with a person's belief system or perspective has made me realize our common humanity. Kindness, compassion, appreciation, and a quest to understand, need no translator.