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Navigation Apps and The Shifting Frontiers of Soft Power [1]

Long before smartphones became our second brains and navigation apps took over our sense of direction, I was a young fellow trying to find the British Council office on a foggy London morning. I was new to the city with no sense of direction, no smartphone in hand, no Google Maps or Waze, no glowing blue dot to guide me. As a visitor in an unfamiliar place, I did what felt completely natural: I stopped, looked around, and asked a local for help.

A well-dressed British gentleman paused, smiled, and not only gave me directions, but he also offered to walk with me part of the way. As we navigated the winding streets, we spoke. He asked where I was from, what brought me to London, what I thought of the city so far. That little kind gesture and a short conversation became my first real connection to the place, a moment that shaped how I saw not just the city, but the culture that welcomed me in.

Had I relied on GPS that morning, I might have arrived sooner, but I would've lost the human connection that helped me find something far more meaningful.

It's a kind of moment that feels increasingly rare today. Technology, in its relentless quest to solve problems, solved one of the oldest ones we've had: the fear of being lost. These AI-powered travel apps can now take us from point A to B with astonishing accuracy. Every restaurant, bus stop, or hidden alley is only a few taps away. We no longer need to rely on street signs or locals. Our smartphone screens know more than any passerby ever could.

As we became better at navigating space because of access to advanced information and communication technologies, we lost something vital: the art of navigating people, cultures, and the human connections that shape our understanding, ideas, and values.

Before GPS and smart devices, finding your way through an unfamiliar city required more than just reading signs, it required interaction. You had to ask someone. You had to make an eye contact, gesture, listen, and trust. These were small acts of interpersonal diplomacy, the kind that governments spend millions trying to replicate through formal programs. Today, tourists arrive, navigate seamlessly, and leave without ever needing to ask for help, let alone share a story.

As someone who has traveled across continents and cultures, I've noticed this shift unfold in every corner of the world whether wandering the alleys of old Dubai or navigating the metro in Washington, D.C. It doesn't seem to matter where I go anymore: people look down at their screens, not around at each other. The question that once sparked connection, "Excuse me, can you help me find this place?" has been replaced by silent swipes and robotic directions. The universal language of getting lost and seeking help is slowly disappearing, and with it, a quiet but profound kind of human exchange. These small, informal encounters between a traveler and a taxi driver, a student and a street vendor helped bridge cultures. They sparked curiosity, built mutual understanding, and revealed hospitality not as a policy, but as a deeply

human instinct. In their simplicity, these moments exemplify the essence of soft power: the ability of a country to influence others not through coercion or wealth, but through attraction, culture, and human connection. They shape how nations are perceived not through official messaging, but through the warmth and authenticity of everyday people.

Today, public diplomats are more connected to global events than ever before with real-time updates, virtual conferences, and digital diplomacy. And yet paradoxically, they seem less connected to one another, more distant, despite the digital closeness. In diplomatic circles, we often talk about “public diplomacy” efforts by governments to build goodwill abroad. This usually takes the form of scholarships, cultural exchanges, or strategic communications. But long before any ambassador drafted a speech or a government launched a campaign, diplomacy happened face to face. On sidewalks. In markets. Over directions.

Now, many travelers can visit a country and glide through its most iconic sites without ever speaking to a local. They photograph the landmarks. They rate the restaurants. But they don’t talk. They don’t ask. They don’t engage.

And it shows that convenience is not the same as connection. This is not an argument against technology. Navigation apps have made travel safer and more accessible for millions. They reduce anxiety, prevent missteps, and help us make the most of our time. But their rise has come with a cost, one we don’t often acknowledge. Technology has streamlined the experience of movement. But in doing so, it has smoothed out the friction where human interaction once happened. It has privatized what was once a shared moment of vulnerability and trust.

We don’t need to abandon digital tools. But we should be mindful of what they’ve replaced and what they can never replicate. Ask anyway. Even if you know the way, ask someone. Not because you’re lost, but because you’re curious. Because you want to hear how a local describes the place they live. Because you’re willing to be seen, and to see others. Educators, cultural programs, and travel initiatives should remember that real diplomacy doesn’t only happen in embassies or conferences. It happens in unplanned, low-stakes moments of contact if we allow them to.

We don’t just travel to see places. We travel to meet people to make meaning, to go beyond the surface, and to glimpse what lies beneath the cultural iceberg. So, on a recent trip to Dubai, I decided to run a small experiment with myself. I turned off my smartphone GPS. No pre-planned route. Just me, wandering through the labyrinthine alleys of old Dubai (pictured above), intentionally getting lost. What I found was remarkable.

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Without a screen to consult, I looked up, really looked. The alleyways echoed with a

symphony of languages: Hindi, Arabic, Swahili, Urdu, Tagalog. Spice shops spilled cardamom and cinnamon into the air. Shopkeepers from across the globe stood in their doorways, curious and kind. I asked for directions and received not just answers, but stories. A Pakistani merchant told me how his grandfather first came to the Emirates. An Emirati elder explained the architecture of the wind towers. A Somali tea seller taught me how to say “thank you” in his Arabic dialect.

These were not just exchanges, they were encounters. Cultural contact zones. Snapshots of public diplomacy, not from a podium or an embassy, but from the mouth of a back alley. And none of it would have happened if I’d stayed tethered to my digital device.

I believe that in our pursuit of convenience, we’ve unintentionally sacrificed one of the most enriching parts of travel: the unscripted, face-to-face connection. As a global traveler and a believer in the quiet power of everyday diplomacy, I argue that we need to reclaim the value of being just a little lost. Because in that vulnerability in that moment of asking, listening, and responding lies something more lasting than directions: the human connection that reminds us we share more than just a map.

Once, while talking to a friend, Logan Rogue, who serves in national security, he shared an inspiring story that stayed with me. During his deployment in Afghanistan, he chose a different approach to understanding the environment around him. Instead of staying behind barricades or relying solely on official channels, he spent time walking through the streets in casual clothes, sometimes in flip-flops, blending in not as a soldier, but as a guest in town. He played with children kicking a ball through dusty alleyways. He stopped to chat with shopkeepers, sipped tea with elders, and listened more than he spoke. Over time, he built trust not through rank or formal strategy, but through his ability to connect, to listen, to laugh, to create personal, human bonds in a way no AI-driven technology ever could.

Years later, when he reflects on his time there, it’s not the intelligence briefings or classified reports that linger in his memory. It’s the street-level conversations with his “Baba” the affectionate nickname he gave the elderly man who pulled fresh bread straight from a clay oven just for him. It’s the laughter of the children playing in the dust, the fragrant swirl of spices in the market, the quiet wisdom shared in tea-stained cups by locals who had seen generations come and go. He doesn’t recall these moments through screens or satellite feeds; he carries them in memory. “These,” he once told me, “Are the coordinates no digital map can give you.”

In a world increasingly obsessed with technology and AI-driven tools, that kind of grounded, face-to-face connection feels like it’s quietly slipping away from how we communicate not just locally, but as a global society. The screens may have made us faster, but somewhere along the way, they made us quieter too.
