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Touring the Kingdom of Cambodia

By **JOE KEO**
The Tattoo

Cambodia isn't all rice paddies and dirt. It does have some eye-catching cities and a few mesmerizing tourist attractions.

Phnom Penh, the capital, is like New York City minus the tall buildings and put it into a blender with rice and noodles. Mix it all together you get your typical Southeast Asian city.

Street carts roam the filthy streets selling ice-cold, churned *ca rem* (ice cream in Cambodian) and *bahn bao* (a fist-sized dumpling filled with a tasty filling native to most of Southeast Asia).

Fruits and vegetables stands block the entrances into cell phone shops. Motorbike washers and shoe shiners go around asking people if they want their services.

The daily traffic includes the sounds of cars, scooters and bicycle pedals.

Be careful while walking, look both ways, and listen for a honk, or you may come face to face with an angry cyclist on his way to make a few bucks.

Have you heard of Burger King? Well there's something similar to it, called Mondo Burger, with the same great beef patty (or at least I think it's beef) and good old cheese.

Cheese is sparse in Cambodia. Some people have never heard of it.

Fast food joints include pizza and soup noodles (my favorite). The smell of grease burning and the scent of last month's hamburger buns fill the air.

Shops have signs touting things "Hip Hop Wear," "Future Fashions," or "Popular Brands."

Billboards and street signs are in English, but they also had French and Cambodian translations below. Cigarette and beer ads clutter the view of the sky.

Surprisingly, I even saw an electronics shop with music CDs, DVDs, VCDs, TVs, stereos, PC games, and video games. This was heaven, just like the cities back home in America.

In the suburban Siem Reap, universities and royal establishments stood on either side of its beautiful paved roads. High-tech traffic lights counted down to the next color light and controlled the mild traffic.

Sleek motorbikes and attractive sedans ruled the streets and sidewalks were filled with school kids.

Scattered about the many lively and green parks were basketball and volleyball courts. Soccer fields were bountiful about the city (unlike the rice paddies where I had to play soccer barefoot).

Fancy hotels and statues stood out. Water fountains that shoot out a spring of fresh clear water are placed in front of one of the most opulent hotel resorts in Cambodia, the Sofitel.

French tourists in tour buses stopped here and there, blocking local traffic and causing trouble. Some sounded confused as they mumbled in their French accents and others walked around with artificial tans and sunburns.

The people in the city were friendlier and the markets more manageable. There was no hassling and I got some good deals on some hot steamy rice.

Near Siem Reap is the ancient city of Angkor.

This is where the Angkor Ruins lie. Built by ancient Indian monarchs many centuries ago in honor of the Hindu god

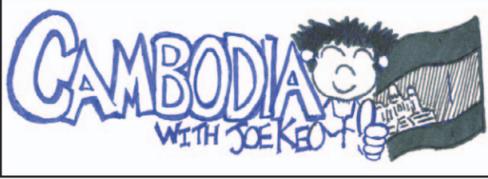
Vishnu, it remains a beautiful and magnificent sight. It's said to be the largest religious monument ever built.

With hundreds and hundreds of scattered temples, it covers such a vast area that it has become Cambodia's national park.

Angkor Wat is its biggest and most famous temple. Its many towers soar against the country sky.

After centuries of ancient warfare between the Thai, Laotian and neighboring empires, the ruins have suffered much damage. But many have been restored and rebuilt.

Only recently has the Cambodian government



Joe Keo / The Tattoo



Photo courtesy of the Keo family

Joe Keo stands in the corridor of the Angkor Wat ruin in Siem Reap, Cambodia

unlike the scorching heat below.

It's as though the ancient Hindu gods were fanning their heavenly hands at the temples. The view from up high was unbelievable.

I could see the main roads that connect the major cities and the many rice paddies of the area. Rain forests and mountains covered the surrounding land.

I was in a trance and my heart was beating fast.

I left a note on a Wrigley's Doublemint gum wrapper I had in my pocket and placed it underneath a stone atop a half-broken ruin. It read: "Joe Keo and Family July 2002 Cambodia."

Hopefully it's still there. If it isn't, I have videotaped proof that I left it there.

At the temple of Angkor Wat were elaborate and long walls of exquisite and detailed bas-reliefs (carving reliefs from stone) telling stories of the Hindu god Vishnu. Many sculptures of snakes and goddesses and other Hindu deities and monarchs decorated the temples.

Beggars stood near statues asking for money and children acted as tour guides, expecting some payment for their simple spoken words. It made me feel bad to ignore them, but I remembered that I can't help everyone.

The Bayon was also an attraction. The huge faces of Buddha carved into the stone temple walls just take your breath away.

This type of art and beauty wasn't done in modern times with high-tech machines, but instead by ancient slaves thousands and thousands of years ago.

Nearby Angkor Thum (meaning "Great" or "Big Angkor") was awesome.

I had fun walking through these ancient ruins that I had admired in postcards back home.

There are so many *prasat* or temples and monuments throughout the ancient city that I only got to see a handful. Seeing all of Angkor is said to take a month or more.

I wished I had that much time, but I got sleepy after awhile.

Now a Buddhist pilgrimage and tourist attraction, it's kept under constant watch and tight security.

Since pieces of the ruins can go for a lot on the black market, police and guards are on strict patrols throughout the area, and some even hold guns.

If you are planning to visit Cambodia anytime soon, check out Siem Reap and the Angkor Ruins, or cruise the streets of Phnom Penh on the back of a motorbike.

You'll see poverty-stricken areas, but you'll also see some of the most beautiful sights in the world.



Photo courtesy of the Keo family

Chhleat Bun Keo, Joe's mother, far left, at a smaller tower within the Angkor Wat ruins.

put a full task force on the job to conserve the age-old wonders.

Thousands of tourists from as far as Japan, China, France, India and Russia come to Cambodia to see this great achievement in ancient architecture.

When I climbed to the ancient Phnom Bakeng - Hindu cosmology says this temple on a hill represents the center of the world - I was blown away.

I thought to myself how lucky I was to have the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to be there indulging in my culture.

The path was rugged and steep. There were elephants that would bring you up, but I decided that I would get more of a workout hiking up myself.

At the top, the winds are comforting and cool,



Cambodia online

For more information on Cambodia, you can check out these web sites:

Cambodian Embassy
<http://www.embassy.org/cambodia/>

Lonely Planet Guide
http://www.lonelyplanet.com/destinations/south_east_asia/cambodia/

Library of Congress
<http://memory.loc.gov/frd/cs/khtoc.html>

Cambodia Post newspaper
<http://www.cambodiajournal.com/>

Cambodia Information Center
<http://www.cambodia.org/>



About the author

Since joining *The Tattoo* in November 2001, Joe Keo has written many news stories, drawn a pile of cartoons and even snapped some photographs.

Keo, a 15-year-old sophomore at Bristol Eastern High School, said he enjoys learning new ways to write, "the fun atmosphere" of *The Tattoo* "and the many strange personalities I meet."

He's already won an honorable mention in the Scholastic Press Forum's journalism contest for a cartoon about John Walker Lindh, the American Taliban.

At left, Keo is pictured in the ruins of Angkor Wat last July.

The Tattoo, in its 10th year, has an extensive web site - at www.ReadTheTattoo.com - that includes all of Keo's work, including this series on Cambodia.



Photo courtesy of the Keo family

Joe Keo and his aunt, Meng Som, sit on the steps of one of the towers of the Angkor Wat ruin during a family sight-seeing jaunt last July.