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Crashing in Cambodia

By **JOE KEO**
The Tattoo

Roaring along on my uncle's red motorbike past coconut and banana trees, I blinked away the dry, red dust and headed straight for a little, wooden hut perched on the thick stilts that keep it safe when the monsoons come.

This is so cool, I thought.

Sometimes I caught glimpses of curious faces looking at me flying along on my Uncle Sakh's imported Honda Wave 110.

The thought of stopping was very far from my mind.

Back home in America, I never could have done this.

But I'd gone halfway around the world to Cambodia, where almost everything that is illegal back in the States is just fine.

On the fast lane toward an incredible adventure, I wasn't about to stop for anything or anyone ... unless something happened to get in my way.

And, wow, did something get in my way.

Let's just say one shouldn't be speeding down a dirt road in Klong Pursat at 75 miles an hour without a keen understanding that brakes were placed on motorbikes for a good reason.

America was about to make its mark in Cambodia and I was the one who was going to make it.

As soon as Uncle Sakh told me he'd teach me to ride one of the sleek motorbikes that his American relatives paid for, I hopped on one. My uncle climbed on the back.

I kick-started the engine and revved it.

My uncle said to take it nice and steady, but did I listen? No way.

I made great turns around the rice paddies and through the palm trees and down the path toward the bumpy, one-lane, pothole-filled, gravel and dirt route that served as the primary road.

I exited the woods near my great-grandmother's house and got on the main road, where tractors and cattle traveled from village to village selling and transporting goods.

Adrenaline flowed through my veins and my arms trembled with excitement as my hair blew out of control. The wind caught my hat and nearly ripped it off my neck.

As I neared the entrance back into my great-grandmother's house, I barely noticed my uncle's signal to turn. The thrill of it all had blocked my senses.

I somehow forgot the brakes and just missed falling into a steep pit of sharp bamboo and rock, instead slamming sideways into a television repair shop and knocking my head against the wood panels on the side of the hut.

My chest smashed against the handlebars and my uncle flew from the back of the bike and scraped his cheek on a coconut tree.

Lying on the ground, with the bike covering half my body above me, I felt dizzy and saw green and white. My elbow and leg foamed white from my cuts.

My Aunt Som, my sister Jeania, and my mom - who were coming back from the market - saw the crash.

While my aunt ran to us, all I heard was my mom crying hysterically.

They brought me to a nearby clinic where they treated my wounds with alcohol and bandaged them.

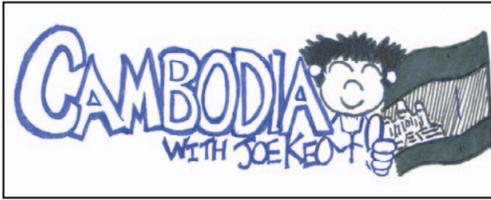
I fell asleep and awoke later to find myself on a wooden bed with people staring down at me. I was alive!

My Uncle Sakh sat beside me at the clinic, his cheek all puffy and bruised.

Even though I almost killed both of us, I looked at him and we started to laugh.

The trip of a lifetime

Lying on a wooden bed frame tending to motorcycle accident wounds wasn't something I expected when my parents informed my sister and me that we were going to take our summer family vacation to Cambodia.



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I can't say I wasn't worried about the trip. Heck, I'd never even flown before. To top it off, I knew nothing about Cambodia that would

give me enough comfort and courage to say I was glad to go.

My parents, natives of Cambodia, hadn't been back since they arrived on American soil almost 30 years ago. First and foremost, my folks wanted to return to their birthplace and see their elderly parents once again before it was too late. They also wanted to expose me and my sister to our heritage and also to help with a family project: building a decent house for my paternal grandparents.

Besides that, Cambodia is a Southeast Asian country that not a lot of people know much about, including me.

My parents told me about their life there. Their families were poor rice farmers, struggling every day to put food on the table.

Both of my parents went to school, but they were distracted with work and family problems, so they never made it past the equivalent of our



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primary school. Their main objective was just to survive.

My mom had to help raise five younger brothers by selling vegetables and bread. This still wasn't enough; it was never enough.

My dad told me that few places had running water and this made things worse. My parents and their families got sick from the tainted water without proper medical aid. My mom's baby brother died from malnutrition and lack of medicine.

My folks told me there's been only minor progress since they fled the country as teenagers.

In Cambodia, they said, life was still as they

left it - hard. As an American by birth, I never faced such tough times. I wasn't sure how I would tackle the situation if I had to, and I wasn't sure I was ready, either.

Packing up

A few days before we left, we went to stay at my grandmother's house in Providence, R.I., where we would be departing from the T.F. Green Airport. Here I prepared myself mentally for the trip. My maternal aunt and grandparents traveled to Cambodia two years ago and they talked to us about what to do and what to avoid.

From what my family told me, people in Cambodia will do anything in order to survive. I've heard stories of people getting their passports stolen - and then being blackmailed into paying a bundle to get them back. My relatives also said some people will steal their neighbor's dog, and kill it to sell as meat.

Right off the bat, I felt afraid and I wasn't even there yet.

I decided I wouldn't be flashing around my passport, and vowed to myself not to eat any meat that looked like it could have come from something other than a cow, a chicken or a pig.

In case I got sick, people told me to bring

Cambodian capital's airport, I saw a mess of tourists eager to embark on their vacations. But things weren't moving fast because the officials were unorganized and terribly sluggish.

The airport employees were Cambodian police who didn't look very friendly. With straight faces and strict eyes they ordered around the visitors like prisoners in a jailhouse.

My parents and little sister were trembling.

My dad's hands were shaking uncontrollably as he prepared to give one of the officers our passports and visa applications for him to approve.

I wasn't ready to ruin my vacation so I stood my ground and did my best not to let these militants get to me.

Service was again slow as the officer working at immigration took his time to check passports. He only did so to annoy the visitors, who eventually would hand him a few American dollars and then he'd quickly stamp the paperwork and let them proceed.

My parents stubbornly handed the punk a five-dollar bill and he told us to go.

Things got even worse at baggage claim.

Hustling along with my family and two other relatives, we finished with our visas and immigration and rushed to find our luggage so we could hurry up and leave that hellhole of an airport.

At the baggage claim area, we got all our suitcases and bags, but something had gone wrong. When we left Rhode Island, our bags were all locked, but now the locks were missing and zippers and pockets had been opened.

Those damn Cambodian police broke into our luggage and took our valuables.

One of my relatives had her money stolen (luckily it was Cambodian currency, which only amounted to a few dollars in U.S. money). Some of my mom's new clothes had gone missing.

We were all frustrated, but anxious to get out of the place.

We got luggage carts and prepared to leave, until a policeman came over to offer his unwanted assistance. My dad said no, but he persisted, so we went along with it.

As he took our luggage in circles he finally took us to the exit, where he then asked for money for his help. So my dad handed the lowlife a couple of bucks, just to get rid of the stupid pest.

Finally, we got out of the airport and entered the welcoming and pickup area.

My aunt from my mom's side and grandmother from my dad's side had come to get us.

As I walked out, I saw a mob of screaming and curious onlookers waiting to see if I was one of their visiting guests. But I knew who I was looking for.

Then I saw their faces, my aunt and grandmother were being squeezed and tossed around like rag dolls by the horde.

A gang of my cousins and uncles rushed to get our luggage and tossed it into a truck they rented for the day to bring us home. At first I thought they were thieves that came to steal our bags and were loading it into their getaway car.

Then my aunt guided me quickly towards the Nissan pickup truck. As I headed for the truck, a herd of beggars (they looked like escaped convicts) came up to me and pleaded for cash. I just looked away and prepared to defend myself.

Luckily I got in the car, so I didn't have to unleash my inner rage. I might not know karate, but I know 'KARazy'!

My mom, sister, grandma, cousin and I sat inside the pickup, while the rest (including my poor dad) sat outside on top of the luggage. The thing was packed.

When everybody was onboard, the driver and his caddie (drivers there have a partner to assist in transporting people) hopped in and revved the truck. We were off.

So long, Pochentong Airport!

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About the series



TODAY: Journey to Cambodia with 15-year-old Joe Keo, pictured above at his Bristol home this month, for an eye-opening look at his family's troubled homeland.

TUESDAY: Touring ruins, trying to shop in a country market, and an emotional farewell.

To write this four-page series for *The Tattoo*, Keo - a sophomore at Bristol Eastern High School - relied on notes, pictures and cartoons from a four-week family trip to Cambodia last July. Keo's story appears on A8 and A9 of today's *Press* and on D5 and D6 of tomorrow's paper. It is also permanently available online at *The Tattoo's* web site: www.ReadTheTattoo.com.

Written by teens and advised by veteran reporters Jackie Majerus and Steve Collins, who volunteer their time for the group, *The Tattoo* appears on occasional Mondays in the *Press*.

along American medicine instead of depending on Cambodian drugs.

My folks told me that since I'm an American tourist, Cambodians will assume I have money and try to take advantage of me. They instructed me to keep a low profile and do my best to fit in.

I knew that could be tough since I'm husky, unlike the mostly-skinny native Cambodians. I also walk different and I have a mustache. Cambodian youths don't grow facial hair until they reach their twenties.

My parents also advised me not to speak in public places like the markets because it's easier for the vendors to pick out a foreigner when they hear them speak in a foreign tongue.

When one vendor finds out that you're a foreigner, the rest of the marketplace will soon hear about it and that leads to trouble. Suddenly, everybody wants your business - but nobody will give you a break on the price.

Well that wasn't much to remember, right? Are you kidding me? This was crazy. I couldn't remember all this.

The night before we left, we had a farewell barbecue with family and friends to celebrate the privilege we had of going to Cambodia.

The mood was happy-go-lucky, but inside I felt nervous and excited - much more nervous than excited. I worried about how I would fit in. How would I manage? The questions nagged me and I had a hard time falling asleep.

When I woke up, it was already time to load the bags in the back of my dad's Pathfinder. Some of my relatives decided to come with us to the airport to say their farewells. The automatic doors of the airport terminal opened and I dragged my belongings into the building. This was it, the beginning of my trip.

I expected the worst, but I hoped for the best.

Arrival

Stepping off the airplane at Pochentong International Airport in Phnom Penh, Kingdom of Cambodia after days of tedious travel should have been a relief for me.

But I soon found much more stressful situations in store.

As I entered the arrival terminal of the



Cambodia facts

Location: Southeastern Asia, bordering the Gulf of Thailand, between Thailand, Vietnam, and Laos

Area: slightly smaller than Oklahoma

Population: about 12.8 million

Life expectancy: 57 years

Religion: Theravada Buddhist 95 percent; other 5 percent

Government: multiparty democracy under a constitutional monarchy established in September 1993

Climate: tropical; rainy, monsoon season (May to November); dry season (December to April); little seasonal temperature variation

Terrain: mostly low, flat plains; mountains in southwest and north

Natural resources: timber, gemstones, some iron ore, manganese, phosphates, hydropower potential

Source: CIA World Factbook

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The best teen journalism in America. For questions, comments or to join, contact advisors Steve Collins and Jackie Majerus at 523-9632.