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Living among strangers and coconuts

Welcome to the final day of Joe Keo's Cambodia series, which started in yesterday's Press and took him from his home in Bristol to the remote villages where his parents grew up.

My parent's money paid for our overseas flight to Cambodia, but I never imagined it would become the hot topic of the entire trip.

Meeting so many relatives for the first time was overwhelming.

One side of my family seemed glad to see me and the other seemed more interested in what I'd brought for them.

That totally ticked me off. I'd never seen their faces ever in my entire life and all they did was look for charity.

It's sad to say that much of my family was more interested in seeing the face of Mr. Benjamin Franklin than the face of Joe Keo.

Anytime they had a chance to talk with any member of my family, including me, they would suggest that we buy them this and get them that.

I flew thousands of miles to see all of them and they treated me like an ATM machine.

We told them that our life isn't just luxury and money. We work hard, too.

The relatives from my mother's side were nice, but I couldn't be too sure of their true intentions, while relatives on dad's side were very serious and focused on what they could get out of my father.

Maybe my impressions of my relatives would be different if I spent more time with them, but all I can say is that first impressions last.

I put myself to the challenge to fly, for the first time ever, to see them and I got little from many of them. I expected more.

I knew they didn't have much to give, but I wanted them to be interested in me and my life - and not just my wallet.

Food

When I went to Cambodia, I brought a load of stuff.

I handed out Gummi Bears (yum!) to all my cousins. My two little girl cousins, Sinna and Sinnot, loved the teddy bear-shaped gelatin snack. They laughed and giggled before they bit off the bears' tiny heads.

I also brought along a bag of mint LifeSavers, which my guy cousins - Sokun, Sanon, and Som Nang - hated with a passion. They showed me their wry faces to let me know they disliked the spiciness of mint.

We all got along well and managed to communicate.

I was part of the family. My great aunt, Tao Korp (tao means "grandma") and her family (my uncles, aunts and some sort of cousins) were the people I stayed with for the majority of the trip. Even though their native tongue is Khmer, they also spoke Thai well. So I resorted to speaking in Thai because I was taught Thai before I was taught Khmer (don't ask me why, it's all my parents fault that I can't even speak my own tongue).

At the market

In Cambodia, I learned a drawback about shopping as an American, or going out in general: natives look at you funny. They never took their eyes off me. It was irritating.

Many of the natives looked like hardened criminals. They either have no teeth, some teeth, or just really bad dental plans. I was sometimes afraid to stray away from my family. Thoughts of being kidnapped or killed didn't fall too far from my mind.

I can't say I was ever at ease after my family back home warned me that people in Cambodia would do anything to survive: steal, loot, kill, kidnap or anything else in order to live.

Despite my fears, one of my family's favorite pastimes in Cambodia was shopping at the dozens of local markets available throughout the country and city.

Markets there are like America's open-tent flea markets. Hundreds of natives and foreigners from all over spend their money at the markets. Fabric, toys, cosmetics, shoes, stationary and tools - you name it, you'll find it somewhere at the markets. Products there are usually bootlegged - fake name-brand clothes or shoes, for instance - or bought from the black market.

Muddy and jammed with people, the markets reeked of trash because there were no garbage cans around and people simply threw their rubbish on the ground.

Vendors put their displays up on wooden frames to keep them clean. Tents and tarps served as roofs for the market stalls. Rain dripped through spots in the tarps, splashing unsuspecting customers.

Stands and shops were very close to each other and there was little walking space. Every

time I made a step or turned a corner I ran into someone and they would look at me like I was the devil.

Motorbikes scattered the market grounds. Vendors laid folded shirts on tables, hung toys from the tents, and organized perfumes and cosmetics in neat rows. Watches and jewelry stayed locked in glass cases.

Vendors' children ran around the marketplace, stirring up trouble. Babies cried, motorbikes beeped and sellers shouted at me, trying to be heard above the noise.

Money changers sat like sentries at the market entrance, waiting to change foreign money either into Cambodian riel or Thai baht.

There are no cash registers, only hand-held calculators. The

best part of markets is that you can bargain and get good deals as long as you are persistent and clever. Anyway, things are cheap.

The market itself was mostly under a tent, but other stores surrounded it. Nearby buildings housed jewelry and electronic shops. Mobile phone shops stood out the most, with their bright, oversized billboards.

Other billboards displayed advertisements for cigarettes and car batteries. Another pictured an attractive model washing her already-perfect hair with one of the best-smelling shampoos on the market (and no, it was not Herbal Essence).

I walked around and window shopped. Vendors are sometimes annoying. While one tried to persuade us to buy their products, another on the other side of me would pull my shirt and beg me to buy his goods.

After a while I got ticked off and just walked away to find someone who didn't bother his customers.

My attitude was that if I want something, I'll buy it, otherwise don't talk to me.

I searched in vain for soccer jerseys while my mom and sister looked for fabric to bring home to sew. My dad checked out souvenirs to decorate our home.

The intense heat made me sweat like a pig and, suddenly, sellers with fresh-squeezed, chilled juices caught my attention. But as tempt-

ing as the juices looked, I just wanted some water.

While I waited for my mom, sister, and aunt to finish their picky shopping ways, I sat around with my Uncle Sakh, looking at the bootlegged goods and marveling at the many different ways they could misspell Nike and Adidas.

I wanted a soccer jersey because that was sort of the trend in Southeast Asian culture. If you were stylin' with the latest soccer jersey, you were the man. Attractive Asian women dig a man with a soccer jersey.

After my mom and aunt finished their shopping, they sadly told me that the only soccer jerseys that I could find would be in Polpiet, a large market city on the border of Thailand and Cambodia.

I wasn't about to drive all that way just to buy a jersey, so I asked my mom if we could head back to my great-grandmother's place.

It was getting a little bit dark and the evening was cool. We headed to the watch vendor stand where my Uncle Sakh was standing guard over our motorbikes.

I hopped on the back of my uncle's bike. My mom and sister doubled on my aunt's bike. We rode off and got on our main route home, passing little restaurants and motorbike repair shops on the way.

The sky darkened and I knew I was in for some rain. Luckily we pulled into the house before the first drop of rain fell.

All that window shopping in the city took a

lot out of me. I bathed and headed to the wooden paneled floors in the open living room, my usual sleeping spot, and fell asleep.

Summer in Cambodia

Life on a farm was starting to grow on me. There was no need to ride a bicycle to the nearby market. Most of the meats and vegetables we needed could be found right at home.



Joe Keo / The Tattoo

A front view of the home of Joe Keo's maternal great-aunt Tao Song's home in rural Cambodia

- and I'd be laughing.

I couldn't play any of my CDs in Cambodia because my relatives only had a retro cassette player.

But I enjoyed their many tapes of classical Cambodian and Thai melodies. I just laid back and did my best to decipher the lyrics, which was always fun.

In Cambodia, all I had to do at night was look up at the moon with its vibrant glow. I had no curfew and no appointments to fret about among the mellow confines of coconut and banana trees.

I missed the Captain America and Batman posters on my wall, but at my great-grandmother's house, there weren't even many walls, never mind posters.

At times I felt ready to pack up and return home, back to Connecticut where I would actually have an address.

But Bristol was thousands of miles and many hours away from the jungles of Cambodia.

Wooden floors would just have to do until I could hop on a plane back to America.

Instead of waking to my digital alarm clock, I would wake up to the sound of a rooster.

Saying goodbye

As our month came to a close, everyone did their best to say their goodbyes.

The time I spent in Cambodia was incredible, something I can't forget.

Even though I almost killed myself, I would definitely miss this place. Back home, I can't go to the backyard and grab a banana or a coconut anymore. The only coconuts I'll see are the ones in the fresh produce section of the Super Stop and Shop.

The day before we headed back to Pochentong Airport in Phnom Penh, I sat on the floor organizing my bags and folding my clothes. My mom and dad struggled to stuff all our oversized souvenirs in their suitcases.

My cousins gathered around my sister and I as we threw all our loose belongings into our empty bag pockets.

I talked to them and recalled everything we did together, from crashing into a television repair hut to playing soccer on a rice paddy. We laughed and joked.

It felt like home, comfortable and secure.

Night fell and everyone was set. The whole family gathered in the living room of my great-grandmother's house. We turned on the tube and watched a movie.

I was too tired to stay up. All I could think about was how to say goodbye.

At times tears collected in my eyes. I wasn't ready to leave and thought I could have done more during my visit.

Unfortunately, my plane ticket didn't comply with my wishes.

I woke up early, a little after 4 or 5 in the morning. My parents had already bathed and were walking about the farm, probably trying to take in all they could of their homeland before leaving. My sister was still sleeping.

I washed up while my aunt cooked food to bring along for the ride.

When the whole family was finally awake, we heard the roar of a truck from a little way down the road. It was our ride.

My Uncle Sakh, who came with us to the airport, helped the driver's caddy throw the luggage in the back.

I said my goodbyes to all my cousins. I gave long and heartfelt hugs to my great-grandmother and great-aunt. Surprisingly, I didn't cry - but I wanted to.

The truck doors slammed and locked, the driver threw it into reverse and we rumbled away from the farm.

I waved goodbye from inside the car. We were off, with the next stop in Phnom Penh. After a short rest there, we were on our way on a long plane ride back to our American small town life in Bristol.

From the air I looked down from the plane and waved at the rice paddies.

Goodbye, Cambodia.

Hopefully, I'll set foot there again.



Joe Keo / The Tattoo

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I was a bit of a bulky American when I went, but I came back a little bit slimmer due to the extreme heat and the rice I ate.

I missed the fun of having friends around, but my cousins made me feel at home.

They brought me out back to the swamp to go frog catching and fishing, I have to admit, my sister was better at it than I was. She was more willing to wade into the muck to catch her prey.

I spent most of my time reading "Watership Down," my summer reading assignment, while swinging in the huge hammock under the house.

When I wasn't reading, I'd help pump water from the swamp into the bathtub - that was the water supply - and sometimes I would help pick herbs and vegetable in my great-grandmother's garden.

My great-grandmother, Yaih Doiyt, is in her late eighties or early nineties (people don't pay much attention to age in Cambodia) and yet she was up and about the house gardening and housekeeping every day.

Things were simple and rules were stretched to the point of functional anarchy.

The whole vibe of the place was calm and easy - a far cry from my life back home in Bristol, where all I know is malls and asphalt.

I missed home, of course, especially my friends, my house and my bed. Sleeping on hardwood panels inside a mosquito net isn't what I would call restful.

But in the Cambodian countryside, I could actually look up at the stars at night without

About the series

MONDAY: Journey to Cambodia with 15-year-old Joe Keo, for an eye-opening look at his family's troubled homeland. Pages A8 and A9.

TODAY: Touring ruins, trying to shop in a country market, and an emotional farewell. Pages D5 and D6.

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. 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*.

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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.