

THE TATTOO

BRISTOL PRESS

MAKING A PERMANENT IMPRESSION SINCE 1994

VOLUME 9 No. 8

My vacation: wake up and smell the pig dung

Capital visions

That afternoon, we traveled through the overpopulated streets of Phnom Penh.

I saw markets there and here, vendors yelling, motorbikes and bicycles crowding the streets, people walking with raggedy clothes and pitching their products aloud.

Little children roamed the streets, doing their part to survive in this struggling nation by working their butts off to carry heavy goods and sell them.

The streets were an astonishing clutter of people, scooters and cars. At one busy intersection, I noticed a traffic officer standing in the middle of the chaos waving two batons, calm as could be.

This was the home of my parents and now I could see it with my own eyes.

But my eyes were getting too tired, so the driver found us an affordable hotel to stay for the night.

It was getting late and we were all hungry after the long plane ride. We decided to ask the driver to find us a good place to have dinner. As he drove us through the cluttered urban streets of Phnom Penh, I saw strange, unfriendly faces staring menacingly at our truck. Uneasy, I feared one of them would try to smash the windows and rob us.

Finally we arrived in a busy center. On the corner was an eatery that the driver said was satisfactory - all the good restaurants were too far from the hotel, he said.

As I stepped into the noodle shop, a swarm

of flies welcomed us. Waiters with filthy hands brought stained, dirty plates, bowls and silverware. A few minutes later another waiter came around with dust-covered glasses of water.

Another worker, trying to break a huge lump of ice, dropped it on the ground. After that, he picked up the pieces and put them in our glasses. I couldn't believe it. This was their customer service.

Six-inch pale green Gecko lizards crawled up and down the walls of the restaurant, making little noises as they crossed the cracks in the plaster.

It wasn't exactly fine dining.

We looked at each other with disgusted faces, ate a few bites and then left.

At moments like this I felt really, and I mean really, homesick.

The next morning we embarked on a nine-hour road trip to my final destination: my great grandma's house in a tiny hamlet in rural Cambodia, between Sisophon and Batdambang.

Countryside

For four weeks, I'd have to live without any American luxuries in the wilderness of the Cambodian countryside. My goal for those four weeks couldn't have been simpler: SURVIVAL!

After a long and tremendously rocky ride from Phnom Penh, we finally arrived in the village of Klong Pursat, where my great-grandmother lives.

Boy, was it different from my house back home in Connecticut. But it wasn't an old broken-down shack as I'd expected.

Her house, typical for the Cambodian countryside, sat atop stilts more than 12 feet high to prevent flooding during monsoon seasons. The living area was under the house, a room without walls. People hung out on two-tiered bamboo benches - at night, they served as beds for some - and talked about the rice crop and family news.

Upstairs, there was just one room that was enclosed. Otherwise, there were no doors on the house, which had just three walls. The front of the upper level, accessible by a set of sturdy wooden steps, was completely open. The large open room served as a kitchen, dining area, sitting room and sleeping space.

A car battery in the open room upstairs served as the power source for the house, providing juice for a television set, boom box and a long fluorescent light tube. Every time you finished using an appliance, you had to disconnect the wires to save energy. Once, I tried to hook up the TV and the battery acid leaked out and burned me.

My relatives left the light tube on while we were there, for safety, they said. When they don't have company, they use candles and oil lamps.

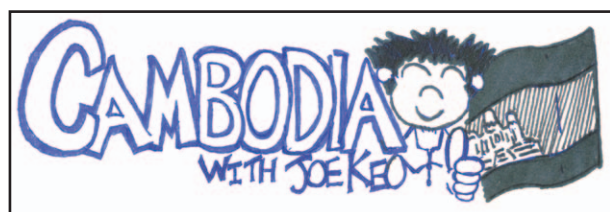
Beautiful coconut and banana trees and lots of other lush, exotic vegetation surrounded the house.

I learned there's nothing like a fresh, young, green coconut, tender and full of juice. Uncle Sakh frequently shimmied up the coconut trees and chopped a few coconuts with his machete for us to enjoy. The banana trees were short, producing tiny, sweet fruit. Pumelos, a sour citrus fruit, grew on the farm, too, as did man-sized stalks of sugarcane. I loved to chew on the spongy inside of the sweet sugarcane.

The earth on my great-grandmother's farm was dry and clay red. She grew long beans, lemon grass and other vegetables, herbs like ginger root and basil and elegant flowers. The air

was dry, but it reeked of farm animals, and of course I found later that it was a farm. Pigs squealed in the swamp behind the house. Roosters and chickens clucked about the farm and dogs barked and howled at us as we stepped off our taxi truck.

Things were going to get more complicated from now on.



Joe Keo / The Tattoo

A change of scenery

There I was, living the life in the wilderness of the Cambodian jungle. Getting off the long plane ride and finally setting foot on land took away much of my stress. The palm trees and cracked earth had begun to seem normal, and living on a farm had its perks. I could get food from the garden beside the house. Bathing in swamp water wasn't all that bad after all, but I did miss my showers back home in America.

After a back-breaking first night on my great-grandmother's wooden floor, I was ready for a refreshing shower to rejuvenate myself.

Unfortunately my mind was still stuck in America - I forgot they didn't have running water.

At my great-grandmother's house, taking a shower means pumping river and swamp water into a huge cement tub and using a pail to bathe. To my surprise, the water was clear and free of the little creatures that I feared might join me in my bath. And happily, they had a bar of soap and very nice-smelling shampoo.

The big tub was enclosed in a good-sized outhouse that also included a toilet. Toilets in the countryside don't come with a flush handle or siphon jets. After using the toilet, you have to wash and scrape everything down into the hole until it's nice and clean. Luckily, I didn't have to use banana leaves because they actually had toilet paper.

Playing around

Recreation isn't a big thing in the wilderness of Cambodia.

Palm trees and rocks scattered most of the land, but I was in a rebellious mood the day I managed to hop on my Uncle Sakh's motorbike.

After I smashed into the television repair hut, word got around quickly.

People from all around were telling each other, "An American boy crashed on a motorcycle in all bloody and broke his legs and arm!"

Fortunately, I wasn't so bad off. But everybody came over to assist me to the reception area under my great-aunt's house where I rested on the bamboo platform.

Following Cambodian tradition, all the elderly people tied white thread around my wrists to ensure that no more pain would be inflicted upon my body and soul - at least until the thread wore out and fell off.

That day, my wrists had a bunch of threads wrapped around them. Today, just one thread remains.

After that experience, I tried to calm down a



Joe Keo / The Tattoo

An average Cambodian countryside home. Joe Keo's uncle Loong Gone lives here.

little more.

I turned to football, or soccer, as Americans call it. I asked my mom to buy a ball from the *thylat* (a Thai word for market), but I forgot to specify the type of ball so she mistakenly got me a volleyball instead.

How can you be disappointed with that? It's Cambodia! The key to surviving there is to make the best of what you have.

So I tossed aside the net, dropped the ball on the ground and started kicking it around with my cousins Kun, Som Nang and Sanon.

The World Cup had ended a few months earlier and I was in the mood for some football. I may be on husky side, but I'm a closet soccer fan.

My three cousins were all on one team: The Kingdom of Cambodia versus the one man American.

I tried to act like a pro by dribbling the ball

back and forth with my feet, but I stumbled and tripped like a fool.

Still, I was surprisingly able to hang onto the ball. I lifted the ball lightly in the air with my left foot and kicked it with my right. It flew under my cousin's legs and straight between the pair of coconut trees that served as the goal.

Score!

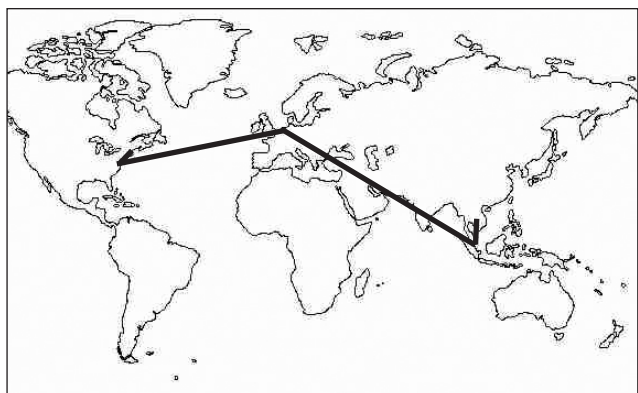
America: 1. Cambodia: 0.

After a long and sweaty game, my cousins whooped my butt by scoring multiple goals with their athletic bicycle kicks into and off my face.

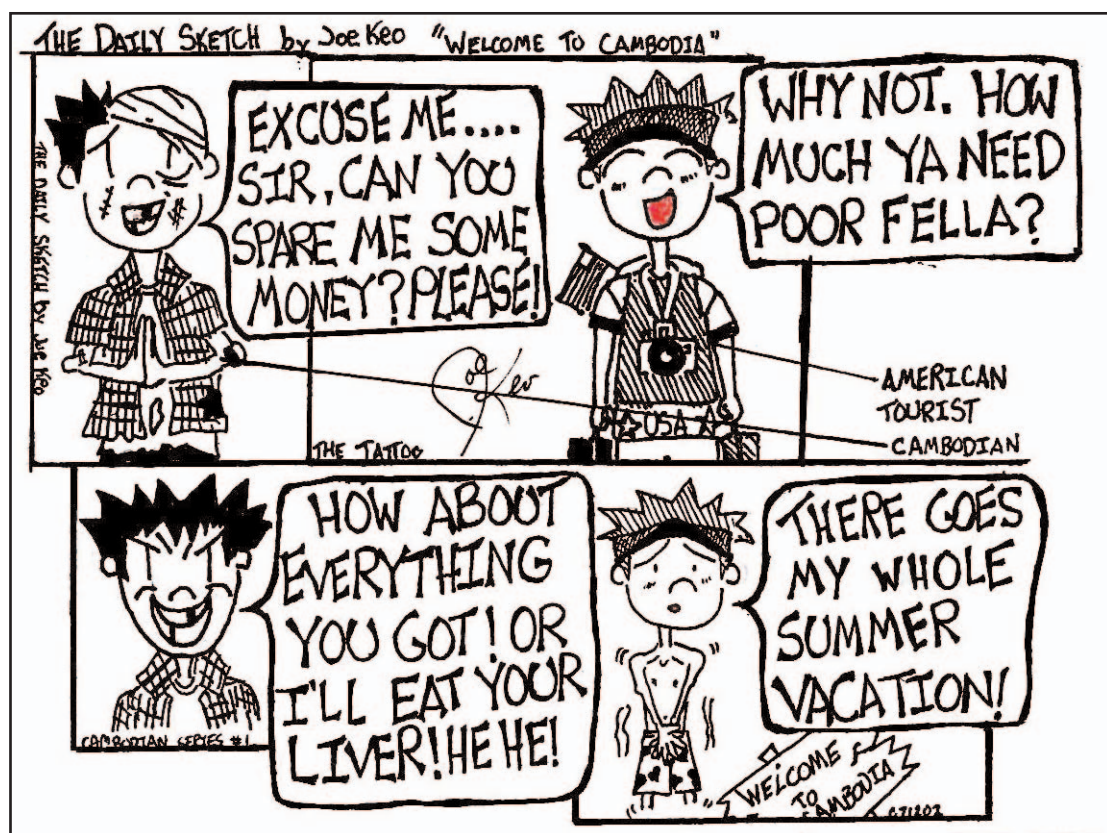
I was beat and reeked of sweat, so I threw in the towel and headed for the outhouse to take a nice, tropical, warm bath.

I missed cold water.

Tomorrow: Keo's Cambodian journey continues on page D5 and D6.



Joe Keo's route from Connecticut to Cambodia



Joe Keo / The Tattoo

Escaping terror, finding freedom

By JOE KEO
The Tattoo

Both my parents are native Cambodians, born into struggling, impoverished families. As children of poor farmers, their family's main sources of income were harvesting rice for others or making and selling their own food.

They lived on farms and raised cattle, pigs, and chickens. When times were rough they had to sell their livestock, which helped them in the short term, but hurt them in the long run.

They had a tough time walking through the markets, trying to sell homemade bread, sandwiches and homegrown fruits and vegetables because not everyone trusted the quality of the food and sometimes customers got sick from the poorly handled refreshments.

Life was hard, but things got even worse with the rise of the Khmer Rouge. The Khmer Rouge was a Communist regime interested in "purifying" Cambodia and ridding it of foreign influence.

My parents are Cambodian, but they know and speak Thai as well - and the Khmer Rouge killed anyone who spoke any other than their native Khmer (the Cambodian language).

Soldiers raided villages and killed countless innocent people. My grandparents couldn't stay where they were - they were terri-

fied they'd become victims of the genocidal Khmer Rouge - so their only choice was to take their children and flee to the border with Thailand.

Hundreds of thousands of peo-

ple who couldn't get away were massacred.

My folks wanted a less chaotic

A nation's tortured history

A former French colony that won its independence after World War II, Cambodia dissolved during a five-year struggle in the early 1970s that ended when the Communist Khmer Rouge forces captured the capital, Phnom Penh.

The Khmer Rouge ordered the evacuation of all cities and towns, killing more than 1 million people in the process.

A 1978 Vietnamese invasion drove the Khmer Rouge into the countryside and touched off 13 years of fighting, during which hundreds of thousands fled to refugee camps across the border in Thailand.

About 150,000 Cambodians ultimately settled in the United States, according to statistics from the U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement.

A United Nations-sponsored election in 1993 began to restore order in Cambodia and the Khmer Rouge have largely vanished. Since 1998, a coalition government has brought stability to the country.

life and thought they might find it in America, a place they saw as a land of opportunities.

In the States, sponsorship programs for Cambodian refugees were on the rise, with Americans, usually church groups, bringing individuals and families here.

In my family, not everyone immigrated together - everyone came over at different times. When one got settled in America, he or she would help bring other family

members over.

My dad, my uncle Out Keo and their sister, my aunt Mean Yout, came here together in 1980, leaving their parents, three brothers and a sister behind in Cambodia. The rest of my dad's side never had the opportunity to come over.

My mother was sponsored a few years later by her aunt, who lived in Providence, R.I. My maternal grandparents and all of my mom's siblings were able to escape the civil conflicts of Cambodia.

For both my parents and many Cambodian-Americans, the route of immigration began in the Thai camps and stopped in the Philippines before reaching America.

Here, as they struggled to understand the culture, they found each other, married, and had me. A couple years later, my sister Jeania came along.

Now we are settled in the suburbs of Bristol, living a good life. I'm a sophomore, attending Bristol Eastern High School, and doing well. My parents work normal factory jobs and provide for us.

I'm grateful to my mom and dad. They've been through hell and back. They worked hard to get to the blue-collar life of Bristol from the slums of poverty-stricken Cambodia.

I'm living the life they never had - an American life, with one foot still set in my Cambodian culture.

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