

# A taste of travel

Perspectives from around the world  
*with Charis Charalambous*

Cambodia  
August 2013



Passion Creativity Growth

Take a journey with me ...

[www.withcharis.com](http://www.withcharis.com)

# Introduction

Inner dialogue, June 2013:

Voice 1: “You’ve already been to a long-distance destination this year (USA in March) and you’ve told yourself you are going to behave with your expenses and not travel far away from Cyprus during the summer vacations. Now, *just a few days* after your friend Louisa left Cyprus to volunteer in Cambodia you are thinking of buying a ticket to visit her? “

Voice 2: “*Emm ... having the chance to visit the largest temple complex in the world? Are you kidding me?! Hell, yeahhhh!!!!*”

A borrowed pdf version of the Cambodia Lonely Planet edition and 8 weeks later and off I went to my first backpacking experience, ever. In a developing, South-East Asian country. With a male travel companion I met through Couchsurfing. And some soap bubble liquid in my bag.

End result: I came back hungry for more!!

(Check out the last pages of this document to read The Good, the Bad and the Ugly elements, in other words, the things I personally enjoyed and the challenges I faced, of this trip!)



*Take a journey with me ...*

# Tuesday, August 6

Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi airport, the international hub for the flight to Cambodia, was very new and very modern; if it had been magically transformed into a millionaire walking down the street, then Cambodia's Phnom Penh airport would have been the poor beggar sitting at the corner and asking for some spare change. While landing into Phnom Penh, I could have sworn the pilot made a mistake and had taken us to Amsterdam instead. It was *that much* flooded.

The Belarusian tourist standing next to me at immigration control and waiting for a tourist visa seemed to have skipped doing his homework. The airport's immigration officer unnecessarily charged him the (higher) price of a business visa and, most likely, pocketed the difference.

The air was incredibly humid upon exiting the airport terminal. "Hey", I thought, "I'm an islander, I'll manage!". What my first-timer eyes and nose could not easily manage was what I experienced when I took my first tuk-tuk to get to the city center ...

I would call it **CRAZY**. Traffic. SUVs, motos, tuk-tuks, bicycles, all rolled into one. Polluted air. Filth, extreme poverty and chaos. Hundreds of cables hanging between street poles. Some images of people seemed 10 up to 100 times worse than the cases I had worked with in the Social Services in Cyprus. For example, I saw disabled persons lying helpless on the side of the road and naked children and infants playing on piles of garbage, unsupervised.

I had made sure to do some reading on the socio-political history of the country before the trip, so the question inevitably popped into my head after I landed: "If the Khmer Rouge wiped out the country's intellectuals and educated people in the late 1970's, then who became government after the KR fell?" [*Hm, same Prime Minister since the 1980's? Rich people driving incredibly expensive cars? Smells like abuse of power here ...!*]

The tuk-tuk drove me to the place where Louisa was staying. Seeing the trash in her landlord's front yard, I thought Louisa was either a superheroine and/or had become immune to filth. It was interesting, though, that the floors on the *inside* of the house were perfectly clean. What I did not expect during my first night in Phnom Penh was that I was also going to be given the "opportunity" to become "immune to filth".

We went for dinner at the excellent Friends restaurant; when we started eating, the rain also began. Three hours later, it was still raining in a downpour.

Problem No1: The water had gone up to about 30cm high, flooding the streets in front of the restaurant.

Problem No2: All the garbage in the world (that's how bad it seemed!) was free flowing in the flooded streets.

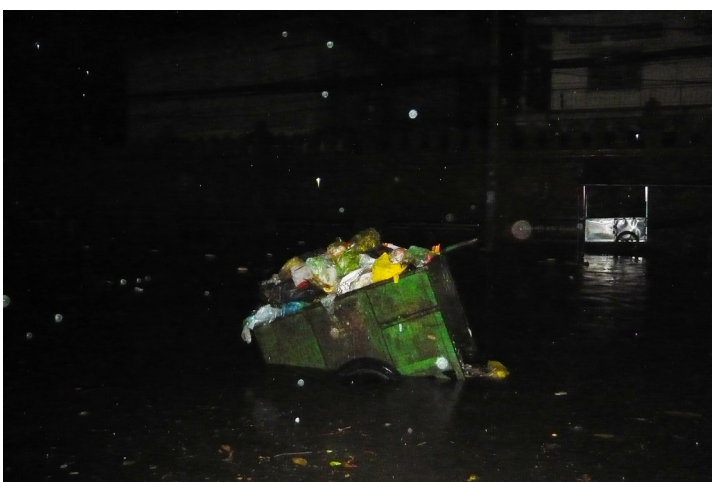
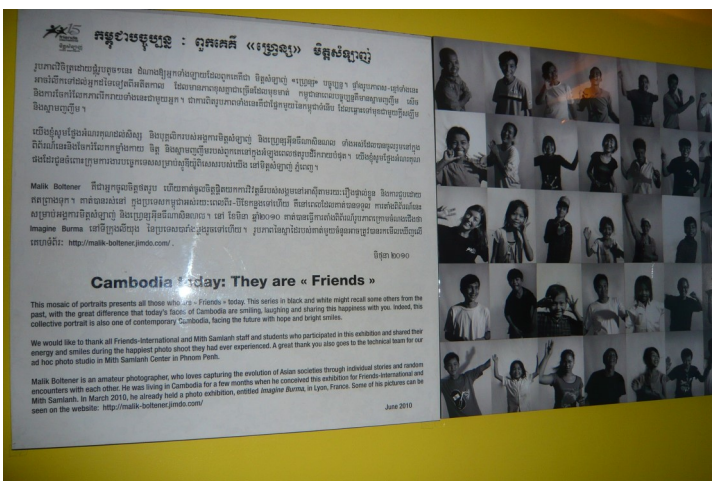
Problem No3: We had to walk 500 meters in the water to get to the tuk-tuk that was waiting for us on dry ground.

Problem No4: We had to devise some "shoes" for walking in the dirty water.

"How about wrapping our bare feet with plastic bags?", I proposed.

SURVIVOR CAMBODIA – lights, camera, action!!





Take a journey with me ...



# Wednesday, August 7

I took the morning bus to Siem Reap and saw more images of filth on the side of the road. Everyone seemed to have an extension of their house on the street that looked as if it was their “enterprise”. It had already made an impression on me that the houses in Phnom Penh had metal bars on the windows.

A little girl was singing in front of me on the bus; I reached out and gave her a sticker.

Looking outside the window, I spotted skinny cows, barefoot monks wearing orange robes and holding umbrellas in the same color, pagodas in the middle of nowhere and the complete absence of garbage collection. And then ... lush, green vegetation.

My first impression of Cambodia, in a nutshell, was land of corruption, filth, chaos, good food and natural beauty. And endless honking of horns by vehicles on the streets.

Mak-mak!

# Thursday, August 8

Siem Reap disappointed me upon arrival; I felt disgusted by the garbage I saw on the streets. However, the Angkor Temples, complemented by the fresh air of the forest, were a totally different game.

Prasat Kravan (with beautiful carvings inside its columns and wooden bird sculptures outside), Ta Nei (through a walk in the forest with beautiful butterflies along the way), Ta Prohm (the “Tomb Raider” temple – too touristy), Banteay Kdei, Sra Srang ablutions lake, Ta Som, Neak Poan (where its four pools were inaccessible due to a heavy downpour), East Mebon (with its elephant statues), Pre Rup (with a lovely view of it when approaching from Sra Srang) ... and that was just half of the map!

Many children were selling souvenirs when they should have been in school, trying to lure tourists into a game of Tic Tac Toe on the ground. “I win, you buy”, had said one little girl to my travel companion. It was clear that the tourist was seen as a goldmine; prices were increased four-fold or more for foreigners.





*Take a journey with me ...*



# Friday, August 9

My favorite image from the ones I took at the world-known Angkor Wat temple was not of its famous sunrise. Not even of its much-photographed monks with their orange umbrellas. Nor of the reflection of the temple in the puddles after the rain. It was of that little, white, delicate mushroom – which at first I thought was a flower – I had seen on one of the steps while going up the temple.

Whoever stole my Leica compact camera two days later got all those amazing images and videos on the memory card. *Damn!!* ☹️ Hopefully, the images stored in my brain will last until I'm old and wrinkly.

The walk up to Phnom Bakheng hill was coupled with more huge butterflies, which, unlike us, didn't seem to have an issue with the very hot weather. Then came the Angkor Thom complex, with temples such as Bayon (with its massive, smiling, carved Buddha faces) and Baphon.

And Preah Khan temple, which was much more impressive than Ta Prohm. It became obvious to me that trees *could walk* in real life and not just in the Lord of the Rings trilogy. How else could they have actually *stepped over* and engulfed those huge temple walls??!!!







*Take a journey with me ...*





*Take a journey with me ...*



# Saturday, August 10

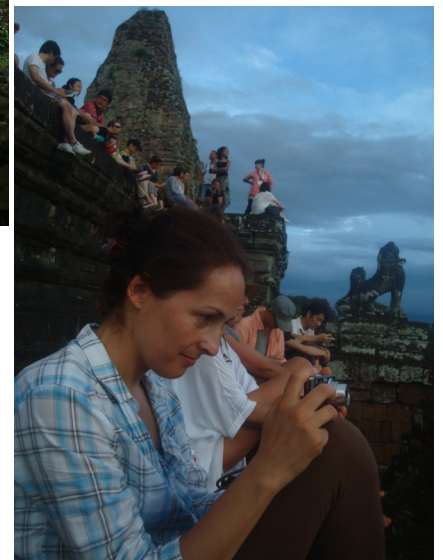
Your name: ហង់ស

In the morning, we climbed the exhausting 600+ steps of the Phnom Bok hill. We allowed the Khmer soldier to escort us around the temple ruins (not that we had another option, anyway) and enjoyed the great views of the valley.

We then descended, entered the humble but beautiful pagoda at the bottom of the hill and met the old, toothless lady there. We also spoke to her family members living close by. I felt fortunate that the teenage girl of the family wrote my name in my notebook in Khmer letters. [With 74 characters, the Khmer alphabet is the longest in the world!]

Later in the day, we checked out the sunset view from the top terrace of Pre Rup temple, with rainbows and the lightning of a thunderstorm entertaining us from a distance.

*Hey, who's blowing soap bubbles up here?! 🤔*



*Take a journey with me ...*



# Sunday, August 11 - Monday, August 12

Between trying to figure out who stole my camera on the way to the northern border with Thailand, going for a report to the small village's (Sra Em) police station and stopping by the local orphanage to hand out some stickers as gifts for the children, the visit to the contested Preah Vihear temple, to check out the views of the Cambodian lowland from a height of 600+ meters, did not disappoint. Neither did the random minivan full of joyful Japanese tourists for the return to Siem Reap.

The loss of my camera meant I had to use my Nokia phone, an X3-02 model with significantly fewer capabilities, for capturing images.







*Take a journey with me ...*



# Tuesday, August 13

If the 8-hour boat trip to Battambang through the Tonle Sap lake, with views of daily life on the water – living, commerce, schooling, fishing – did anything for me, it was to confirm that I was visiting a dirty but colorful country. And if the dinner at one of the French-colonial architecture restaurants in Battambang did anything for me, it was to confirm that Fish Amok, the local delicacy, *rocked*!

At the same time, it was peculiar to see locals throwing their paper napkins or food scraps on the floor of that restaurant, as well as in other dining establishments, while they were eating.



*Take a journey with me ...*





*Take a journey with me ...*



# Wednesday, August 14

We returned to Phnom Penh and took some time to observe daily life, check out the riverfront, see the parks and pagodas and converse with a talkative monk.

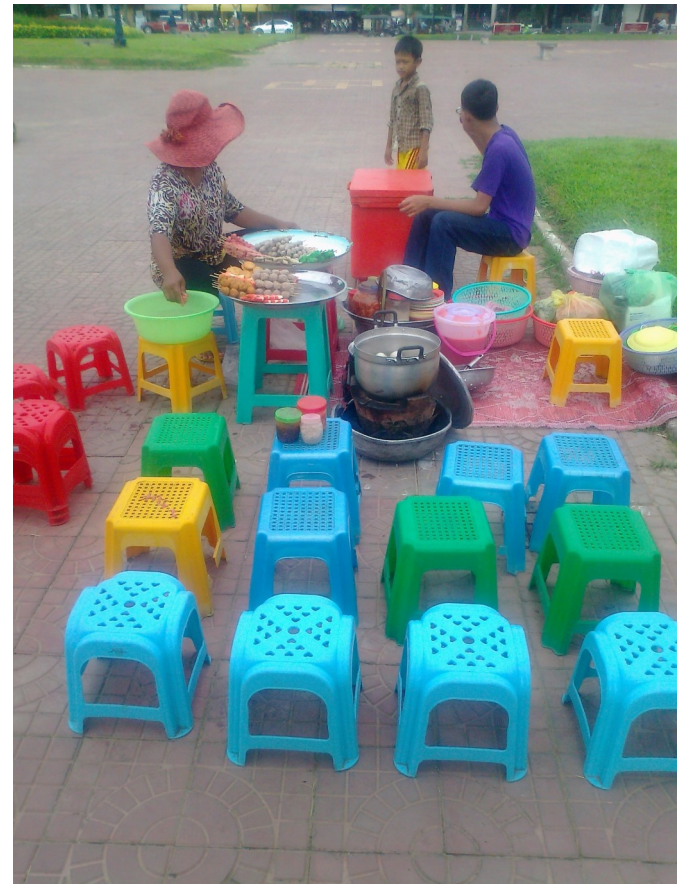
It made an impression on me during the trip that, despite the number of Buddhist monks we had seen, the general population created small ritual areas practically everywhere (e.g. replicas of pagodas standing on wooden posts, with candles for lighting, even on isolated beaches), but didn't seem particularly religious or spiritual, nor geared towards self-development.

I had seen several locals, especially men, laying on hammocks for many hours of the day (which gave me the impression of them not working enough) and women walking around in public in what seemed like their pyjamas (which gave me the impression that their appearance was not a priority for them).



*Take a journey with me ...*





*Take a journey with me ...*





*Take a journey with me ...*



# Thursday, August 15

The travel itinerary I had prepared also included the south of the country, the coastline and a feeling of tropical paradise.

The morning bus brought us to the coastal town of Kep and then a boat to Tiny Koh Tonsay island, with bungalow accommodation and a bar that sold “Cock-Tails, Gin Tonic, Mojito/Majito” and KEAN orange juice all the way from Cyprus.





# Friday, August 16

We returned to the mainland and took a disturbingly dusty ride with a tuk-tuk from Kep's crab market to Kampot, which paid back the inconvenience with its quiet riverfront life.



*Take a journey with me ...*



# Saturday, August 17 - Monday August 19

A stacked-up van took us to “upscale” Sihanoukville for the boat to beautiful Koh Rong island. While I was swimming there one afternoon, a man passed by me, sitting on the funniest hand-made floating device: a chair made of white Styrofoam pieces.

Koh Rong was perfect for walks along the beach, mountain hikes and grilled fish dinners, during which we met Italian traveler Michele. The three of us shared a boat ride to Koh Rong Samloem (to explore the beaches there), with a boat captain that knew how to maneuver around *seriously BIG* waves during the return!





# Tuesday, August 20-Wednesday, August 21

A cold, noisy and very smelly sleeper bus took us from Sihanoukville to Phnom Penh, where I discovered, in the morning, that my money had been stolen from my small backpack during the ride. ☹️

From there, we headed East to Kratie, with another loaded, shared minivan, where every centimeter of space counted. Kratie provided sunset views on the riverfront, hundreds of geckos on the walls of the guesthouse (as if it was Gecko Headquarters), visits to Wat Sombok hill and Wat Kandal pagoda, and a boat ride to see the Irrawaddy dolphins in the Mekong river.





# Thursday, August 22

A “double-loaded” minivan – this time with live chicken, a couple of which fell off on the road at some point! – towards Sen Monorom offered the opportunity to meet fellow European travelers going the same direction. *“Two Germans, two Spaniards, one British and a dozen chicken...” it could very well become a good joke!*

The green hills surrounding Sen Monorom looked like they were copy-pasted from the French countryside. The difference was that the French countryside did not offer a Wat Kromom pagoda and, there, the chance to learn some Khmer words from young locals eager to practice their English.

In general, English skills were very limited in the local population, while many persons also seemed illiterate, unable to read a map or give directions.

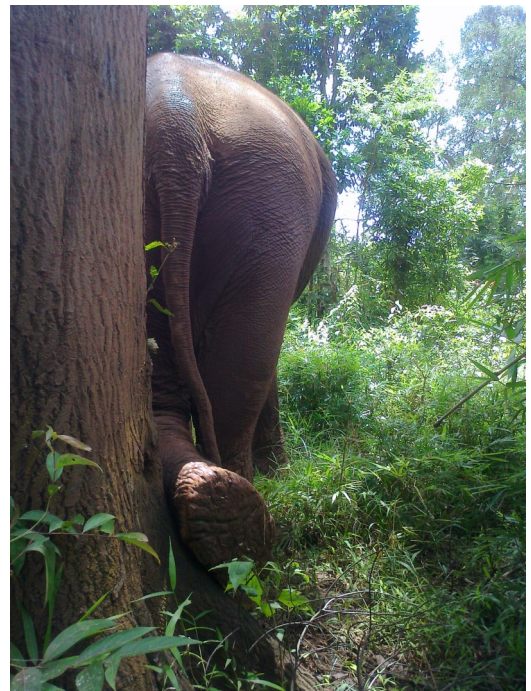




# Friday, August 23

To fulfill part of my “help support the planet” obligations, the whole day was devoted to the Elephant Valley Project ([www.elephantvalleyproject.org](http://www.elephantvalleyproject.org)), which was formed with the mission to rescue and support maltreated elephants from neighboring farms, while at the same time supporting local farmers so that they would allow the adoption of their elephants by the project.

It was great to see the elephants being able to roam free and chainless in their natural habitat, and to help grow some of the tons of food they need by volunteering in the project’s banana fields. A dirty job that felt really good (except for that bite from a red ant, which hurt *a lot!*).



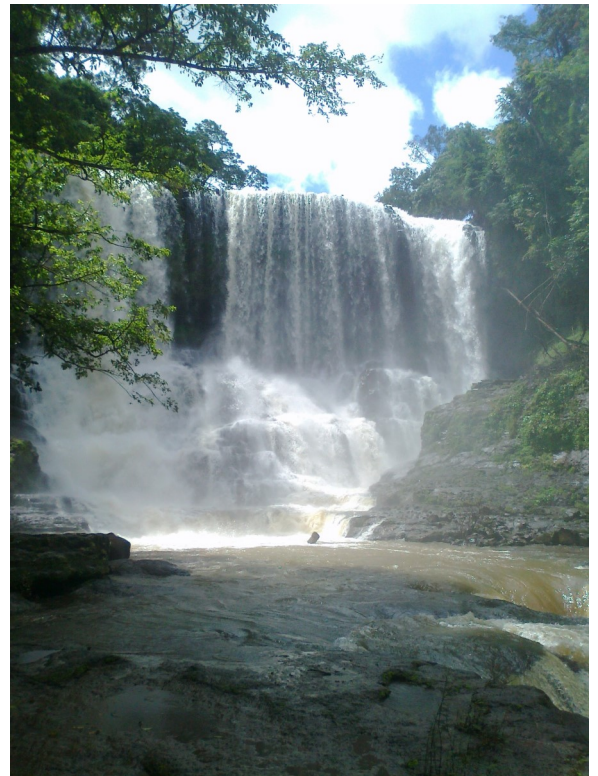
*Take a journey with me ...*



# Saturday, August 24

The Bou Sra waterfalls, were not of the Iguazu category nor of the Niagara category. They didn't even claim to be. The atmosphere there was still magical – I just stood in front of them and allowed the mist do the rest. The descent and ascent of the steep wooden ladder, to access the falls, was a great way to exercise my legs.

What I missed in Bou Sra village during the day was an encounter with the indigenous Bunong people, who practice animism and whose traditional costumes seem Polynesian.



*Take a journey with me ...*



# Sunday, August 25

We went back to Phnom Penh with a “deluxe” minivan (i.e. a properly spaced and clean minivan) for the last night before departure and a couple of more things I had left to do. One of them was to visit the Tourist Police office for a bribed report on my stolen camera (since I could not find a reliable translator at the police station in Sra Em), so that I could claim reimbursement from my travel insurance.

My friend Claudio had advised me before the trip: “Go to Kandal market”. I did. The food in the local stalls was, as in other places, very tasty. The market wasn’t lacking in surreal images, either – try jumping, head-less frogs squashed on top of each other in a metal pan or pork heads swarmed by flies. *Yikes!*

A 90-minute traditional Khmer massage in one of the local spas and I was ready for the return to Cyprus. The impressive lightning in the distance during take-off was Cambodia waving goodbye ...





# The Good (what I enjoyed)

The amazing colors – in nature, in clothes, on boats, on houses.

*The impressive temples, especially the not-so-touristy ones. Specifically, the huge trees engulfing the temple ruins, carvings on the temple walls, the incredible dimensions of the temples, the views in Preah Vihear (on the border with Thailand).*

The food; delicious tastes (including street food) and low prices! Coconut juice, dried durian fruit, coconut muffins, great fish amok, fruit I tried for the first time (e.g. mangostine), mango shakes, baguette sandwiches, grilled meats, fried bananas, tons of rice dishes!

*The water bottles with a handle for easy carrying.*

The good weather and how it matched our traveling plans (thunderstorms mostly during the night, sunny on the coast).

*The new friends/acquaintances; good people, helpful chats, great company. I felt sad for British guy Lou who suffered a (manageable) motorbike accident.*

The itinerary I had prepared and which included the west, north, centre, south and east of the country.

*Blowing soap bubbles from up high on the temples.*

The life on the lake and rivers – floating villages, fishing practices, dolphins.

*The beautiful butterflies, multicolored and huge!*

The sounds of the jungle in the East of the country.

*The absence of very serious health concerns.*

Trying the “bum gun”!

*The hiking/walking/climbing opportunities; I moved that ass around a lot!*

The friends from Cyprus (Louisa and Sophie) and their help.

*The “tropical paradise” feeling of the islands.*

The adventurous return from Koh Rong Samloem to Koh Rong; what a great boat driver!

*Learning some words in Khmer and being better able to bargain.*

The children that engaged with us with honesty and their excitement with the stickers I gave them.

*The French colonial architecture.*

***The Good, continued ....***

***Take a journey with me ...***



# The Good (continued)

The relaxed/quiet atmosphere of the countryside.

*The opportunity to experience surreal images and behaviors.*

Improving my skills of eating with chopsticks.

*Visiting the children at the orphanage in Sra Em village.*

Meeting the elephants and volunteering in the banana plantation of the Elephant Valley project.

*The Bou Sra waterfalls.*

The opportunity to step out of my comfort zone and have a breaking-into experience in South-East Asia and the developing world in general.

*Getting an appetite for more global travel.*

The pagodas, especially the one on Phnom Bok hill.

*The nice images of life in the rice fields.*

First time experiencing and coping with a big backpack.

*The fresh air of the countryside.*

The most impressive hand-made floating device in Koh Rong.

*The professional massage in Phnom Penh.*

Having drinks and playing Jenga with friends at a bar in Siem Reap.

The Japanese group on the return from Preah Vihear.

Exploring the islands.

The Indian ocean seashell collection.

The opportunity to converse with a monk.

Experiencing the evening storm in Kratie and the lightnings in general.

The sunrise colors in Angkor Wat, Kampot and Koh Rong.

The sunset in Koh Rong while swimming, in Kratie, during the return to Sihanoukville, in Sra Em, on Koh Tonsay.

The view of rainbows from Pre Rup temple.

The repeated “One dollar!” of local sellers and “mak-mak!” horn sounds



# The Bad (challenges I faced)

Mosquitoes, ants and other insects.

*Not being able to communicate with the Khmer in English (which deprived of opportunities for deeper interaction and connection).*

The red dust and air pollution.

*The garbage everywhere.*

The traffic chaos in Phnom Penh.

*The governmental corruption (airport immigration, tourist police).*

The annoying tuk-tuk and moto drivers.

*Having to bargain for almost everything.*

The constipation I suffered throughout the trip (too much rice!).

*The barking dogs at night.*

The heavy weight of the backpack for long walking distances.

*The mafia boss in Sen Monorom who wanted more money for the crammed van that took us there.*

The bad road quality.

*The three aggressive female managers of a guesthouse in Kratie.*

The long transport times and delays.

*The loaded minivans.*

The bad smells (e.g. of “dead cat”).

*The smelly and slimy tap water in hostels.*

Having to be constantly on the move to see the country as much as possible.

*The sore butt from sitting down too long on buses, vans, motos* .

The non-stop karaoke.

*The children used for labor or being out and about unsupervised when they should have been in school.*

The dirty toilets.

*Being bitten by a big red ant.*

# The Ugly (biggest challenges)

The loss of my camera and money

The loss of my photos and videos from the first 5 days of the trip

*Take a journey with me ...*