

SARAWAK SWAYS

to the Rhythms

The head hunters have long gone, but Sarawak, “where adventure lives”, still has wonderful beaches, remote tribal villages, rare primates, exotic hornbills, amazing plant life and of course the rainforest to house them all, writes **Mike Smith**.

I was on a Malaysian Airlines flight to Kuching, the capital of Sarawak recollecting my first trip to Borneo over 25 years ago. I remember clearly the blackened skulls hanging above us in the longhouse; being taught to hunt with a blow pipe by a heavily tattooed Iban and watching thousands of bats leaving their cave in Mulu national park. What a great holiday that was!

This trip promised to be special too. I was attending the inaugural Borneo World Music Expo in Kuching and the 16th Rainforest World Music Festival hosted at the Sarawak Cultural Village in Santubong.

First I would spend a couple of days sightseeing in Kuching, a small city, easily explored on foot.

Kuching – Cat City

Kuching is popularly referred to as “cat city” after the Malay

word kucing which means cat and sure enough the first point of interest after stepping out of my hotel was a statue of cats with a group of tourists posing by it.

A few minutes later I reached the Waterfront a 1 km pedestrian area along the Sarawak River which is the place to stroll, meet people or simply hang out. There are pleasant views over the water to DUN (State Assembly Building) and the Istana and the traditional trambang boats act as river taxis. Slightly away from the river the old Court House complex, white square tower and the ornately decorated Tua Pek Kong Temple are attractive historical buildings. I treated myself to dinner at the lovely James Brooke Café where another cat statue dominates the garden and period furniture, books and ornaments adorn the dining area.

After a lie in the next morning I explored the old back streets of Kuching. There were two or three good antique galleries to browse in with tribal iron wood and bone carvings dominating the selections, various craftsmen at work and an assortment of souvenir shops, travel agents and eating places but I preferred the waterfront.

Taking a 50 cent ferry across the river on a trambang I wandered through friendly kampongs stopping to snack on roti canai and spicy gravy and chat with the fish mongers.



The Kuching skyline and a small fishing fleet caught my attention on the opposite bank as I returned to lunch at the Court House Restaurant. The Sarawak Museum was well worth a brief visit and has a fascinating collection of wooden figurines.

Borneo World Music Expo

At the Pullman Hotel I registered for the Borneo World Music Expo which, under the guidance of consultant music industry guru Gerald Seligman, brought in 20 international concert and festival programmers to network, participate in workshops and share ideas with local and Asian artists. Opening the expo Datuk Rashid Khan CEO of Sarawak Tourism Board explained that “holding the event in conjunction with the Rainforest World Music Festival would help Sarawak climb the value chain from leisure based events to that of business tourism events”

The intimate nature of the expo ensured great access to the musicians who showcased their works onstage and chatted about their dreams over meals.

The Beach Beckons

After an enjoyable 4days in Kuching it was time to head for the beach. I checked into the Damai Beach Resort, only a stone’s throw away from the Sarawak Cultural





Village the setting for the Rainforest World Music Festival (RWMF). The Sarawak Cultural Village is a living museum offering an introduction to local culture and lifestyles including full scale replica buildings of the various ethnic groups.

My room was in a chalet a few meters from the beach. Taking an afternoon paddle in the warm sea water I disturbed a 1.5 meter Malay water monitor lizard which scuttled into the rocks for shelter. I'm not sure who was more startled!

The RWMF is unique in that festival attendees can get up really close to the musicians at workshops and jamming sessions during the afternoon, in traditional longhouses, before the main performances on stage at night. As many of the performers stayed at the resort there were also opportunities to interact during meals, over drinks and by the pool. Everyone was there for a good time and with a total of 21 bands from Asia, Australia,

Europe, North and South America and South Africa it was a truly global line up.

A taste of things to come began on Friday afternoon when 9 assorted workshops took place. These included learning songs and dances of Iran with Mohsen Sharifian and the Lian Band, a percussion demonstration and a jamming session on stringed instruments such as banjo, pipa, sape and mandolin. Great fun, entertaining and educational!

Let the Music Begin!

On a warm sultry Friday night surrounded by rainforest the Rainforest World Music Festival began to the haunting sounds of tribal chants to bless the festival followed by traditional Sarawak welcoming music played by Juk Wan Emang on nose flute and Lan E Tuyang playing the iconic instrument of the RWMF, the sape (Sarawak's version of the guitar). Rhythm in Bronze a band playing traditional Malay gongs and gamelans with contemporary compositions increased the tempo but the crowd really got into the groove when French group Chet Nuneta's performed. Nunukul Yuggera a traditional Aborigine song and dance troupe enthralled the audience as they explained their unique lifestyle, religion and legends with a 15 year old youth outstanding on the didgeridoo. Kila finished the first night on a very high note and had the revellers dancing non stop as they performed Irish melodies with Dee Armstrong on electric violin and Ronan O Snodaigh playing bodhran leading from the front with style and verve.

A Nose Flute!

I had the pleasure of having breakfast with 71 year old Juk Wan Emang the next morning. He has seven children but none of them has shown any interest in the nose flute and with only two





remaining players in his village he fears the future of the instrument is bleak. He willingly posed for photos by the sea and I was honoured to be given one of his bamboo flutes. A happier story was told by Matthew Ngau Jau of Lan E Tuyang who said that the RWMF had made the sape popular and it was now played widely again. A grant for RM 50,000 from Petronas to continue promoting the instrument and Sarawak culture will help secure its future.

Workshops again attracted good crowds with Irish, Australian and African dance and music lessons being very popular. Wandering the festival grounds I bought souvenirs at the craft fair which had a good selection of ceramics, beads, batiks and clothing from small cottage industries. I skipped the tattoo stations but did grab a plate of satay and an ice cold beer.

New Friends

Taking a rest before the evening performances I enjoyed wine and whisky watching the sun set over the sea with new media friends David, Errol and Helen and Jon Bertrand of the Pine Leaf Boys who told us of his life as a cowboy before getting into Cajun and Creole music and being nominated for Grammy awards.

It's Time to Rock


The Saturday evening performers played to a full house and Dizu Plaatjoes and the Ibuyambo Ensemble got the crowd rocking when they took to the stage with their unusual hand made string and percussion instruments. The painted warriors and beautiful dancers from South Africa owned the stage and boy could those ladies shake their bodies! Move over Shakira! The Pine Leaf Boys kept things going and the Croatia band Kries brought the evening to a climax with their powerful, mesmerizing rock music. A wonderful evening!

Sunday continued with more action including the



dramatic music and theatre of Palsande:Korean Performing Arts group. The acrobatics and dance were unbelievable. Full of energy and incredible timing I got tired just watching them! The audience loved them and it was a tough act to follow but Habadekuk from Denmark succeeded with powerful horns, fiddles and songs that kept the crowd on their feet, clapping along to the music and shouting for more.

Finally the fans departed the scene – happy, some a little worse for wear and soaked in sweat. The weather had been kind but some complained they missed the mud and rain of previous years. A successful 16th festival organised by the approachable Dato Rashid Khan and his team had come to an end.

I'm no longer a Rainforest World Music Festival newbie and hope to return soon. I loved the location, music and new friends. Kuching is a very nice, small city with enough to keep one occupied for a few days and is a good gateway to explore Sarawak's treasured nature parks. 

Hotels:

Kuching

The Pullman

www.pullmankuching.com

Damai

Damai Beach Resort

damai beachresort.com

Airline:

Malaysia Airlines flies from Singapore to Kuching on a regular basis

Coordinator:

Sarawak Tourism Board