

ENJOYING MUSIC In Sarawak



Sway to the tunes from around the world at the three-day Rainforest World Music Festival. **BY PALLAVI PASRICHA; PHOTOGRAPHS BY BHARAT AGGARWAL**

Time for a confession: I hadn't heard of Kuching till I was told that I have to go there to attend this year's Rainforest World Music Festival. It surely sounded fun—but Kuching? Where is that or rather what is that? Google came to the rescue, and I realised that I was on my way to the capital of Malaysia's Sarawak state in the east, one hour by flight from Kuala Lumpur.

The name continued to intrigue me long after we touched down. Finally Joseph, our guide, explained it all and solved the mystery. Apparently, 'Kuching' means 'cat' in Malay language. 'The Cat City', as it is popularly known, has colourful statues all over the city and is even home to the world's first museum dedicated to the animal!

But it wasn't the cat that caught my fancy; it was the colourful structures spread across this small city. Just a short walk from Grand Margherita Hotel (my home for three days), located by the waterfront, I could see a montage of colours—a striking multi-storey car park in pink, yellow, blue and green, with a yellow building next to it and a red Chinese temple close by. Picture perfect.

So was the venue for the three-day music festival, the

Sarawak Cultural Village, about 45 minutes from Kuching. Located inside the lush Sarawak rainforest, with the tree-covered Mount Santubong on one side and the blue waters of the South China Sea on the other. The concerts were held by the lake inside the village where two open air stages were set up.

That evening, sitting by the Damai beach with a can of beer and a chicken hot dog,

I watched the sun go down. It was a spectacular sight. Not just the sunset, but watching it along with thousands of youngsters whose one common passion—music—brought them to the rainforest to listen to 20

bands from across the world belting out traditional and contemporary music. The performers came from countries as far flung as Mexico, Dominican Republic, Ireland, New Zealand, Latvia and, of course, Malaysia.

In a place like this slipping into the festive spirit was very easy. The performances started by 6 p.m. every evening and within minutes the crowd would start to groove, but, surprisingly, they were extremely well behaved! It brought back memories of the rock concerts I had attended in my college days. But here the girls were togged out in shortest of shorts and bikini

tops, and the guys, well they just went bare-chested! Very practical—with sizzling temperatures and almost 100 per cent humidity, it was like being in a sweat factory.

Braving the crowd, we managed to squeeze our way to the front when Victor Valdez Trio from Mexico was playing. We were barely a few feet away from them and it was the closest I had ever been to the stage. It was exhilarating.

In between the dancing, we got talking to some members of Malike Pathe Sow band from

Senegal. One of them casually told us, "Do you know we were supposed to be playing in this time slot, but we lost all our baggage in transit?" I was taken aback. For a band that had lost precious equipment AND their performance, they seemed pretty chilled out! But then I realise that is the spirit of Sarawak... great music in an enchanting forest makes you forget stress.

All the dancing and screaming made me hungry. We walked down to the food mart set up next to the lake.

Stalls were dishing out traditional Malay dishes: Sarawak Laksa (coconut broth with noodles, seafood and omelette) and Kolo Mee (dry noodles prepared with garlic and meat) home-cooked by the locals. In between the performances we downed several cans of beer along with

hot dogs, garlic bread and potato sticks. We left for Putrajaya the next morning and unfortunately missed the grand finale, which I was told later, was absolutely sensational. Maybe next time. Maybe next year! The 15th anniversary of this fabulous music festival.

DON'T MISS

- On one of the evenings of the festival go to the Damai beach to watch the sunset. After that you can sample local cuisine at the stalls set up next to the beach. Most of the locals bring home-cooked food and sell it there.
- Malaysia is famous for its national parks. Make a day trip to Bako National Park, the oldest in Sarawak. It is home to a number of animals including the proboscis monkey with a long nose, found only in Borneo Island. There are many trails you can follow, but the longest one is the Limau trail that ends on a beach.

1. Blue Canyon Boys from the US brought the house down
2. Sarawak laksa
3. Cat statues in Kuching
4. At Bako National Park, the oldest in Sarawak



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