

Our Surprising New Life in English-Speaking, Tropical Penang

By Kirsten Raccuia



“You are crazy! You can’t leave Chicago. You have two successful businesses here. What will you do for money? That’s so risky!”

That was the “support” my husband Mark and I were offered when we announced that we were moving to Penang, Malaysia.

It was true. We did have two successful businesses. Mark owned a commercial real estate company that sold gas stations nationally and I owned a women’s wholesale clothing showroom. We had a beautiful condo downtown, great friends and family close by... everything that dreams are made of, right?

Well, not for us. For us, life in Chicago was what *some* people dreamed of having. Mark and I wanted more...more adventure, more travel, more trips of a lifetime. We wanted to squeeze the juice out of life while we could.

But we also wanted less. Less “stuff,” less predictability, less routine, less of the grueling hours at work. We are young—I am 40 and Mark is 49—and we both felt that we were on a hamster wheel to nowhere. Sure, we had everything we needed, but that’s because

we worked hard for it. We didn’t want to wait until we were 65 to start the life of *our* dreams and to travel the world. So we did the *crazy* thing and sold everything to move across the world.

We originally thought that somewhere on the beaches of Costa Rica made sense. We loved it there. It’s a lot closer, it’s the same time zone as Chicago, our family and friends could hop on a plane and be there in a few hours, and we could get home quickly.

I had no thoughts of moving to Penang or to Southeast Asia at all. To be honest, it wasn’t even on my radar. Mark wanted to visit some friends in Asia and thought Penang sounded cool, so we decided to check it out. I had no intention of going there for anything other than a few days’ vacation. Little did I know that each day we were in Penang was one more day we were unsure about Costa Rica.

Why the sudden change of heart? It’s simple: Penang checked all our boxes and some we never realized we had until we got there. One of the biggest benefits is that almost everyone speaks English.

The attractive colonial heritage of Penang, Malaysia, is only one reason expats are drawn there.



Penang has an incredibly vibrant expat scene.”

(Penang was ruled by the British until 1957.)

Then there's the climate. Chicago's seasons are very extreme, and we were tired of shoveling massive heaps of snow all winter long. In Penang

there is pretty much only one season and it's hot and humid, all day every day, unless it rains. When the rains come, they remind you that you are living on a tropical island, with furious storms and incredible lightning shows that truly mesmerize.

And the low cost of living means our money goes much further, allowing us to travel and explore. Penang is a perfect hub for exploring Southeast Asia. It has an international airport that makes it remarkably easy to pop over to Cambodia, Hong Kong, or Thailand for the weekend or to travel even farther to Burma, Bali, and Vietnam. One of our first adventures was actually a road trip to Thailand. Since then we have been to Cambodia, Japan, and back to Thailand. (So many islands to discover!)

You don't need to leave Penang to explore. There is an amazingly rich history here. George Town is the city on Penang and its core is a UNESCO World Heritage site, with Chinese shop houses, colonial mansions, Indian sari stores, jewelers, and more.

It's a bustling city that's modern, yet it embraces its traditions and Old-World charm. You can visit tradesmen whose families have passed down their specific trade for generations, and then go next door to the latest coffee shop catering to trendy backpackers and locals. The UNESCO status prevents the destruction of historic buildings and encourages restoration. It's like stepping back in time, yet with access to modern First-World comforts. There are nice restaurants and bars, great little boutiques, and there is even an amazing art scene.

Then there is the food. Penang is known for its street food and has been touted by everyone from *The Wall Street Journal* to Anthony Bourdain as a top food destination. It's a mix of Malay, Chinese, and Indian foods that have been passed down for generations. Best of all, the food is super cheap. You can eat any meal for less than \$5 per person unless you add beer and wine, which can range from \$4 to \$7 a bottle or glass. Many locals don't even outfit their kitchens because it's cheaper to eat out than to cook.

We found an incredibly vibrant expat scene. There is always some sort of social gathering. You can listen to a live jazz band one night and the next day go to a flea market to find antiques. It's all here. There's even a "Welcome to Penang Expo" once a year for all the newbies, as well as for anyone else who wants to shop locally and learn about some of the cool, new things Penang has to offer. There is a certain camaraderie here among the expats. It's as if they want to make the transition easier for you, since they've already been through it. Our first month here I met over 70 women just from going to lunches and fundraisers. Our social calendars are filled to the brim, far more so than in Chicago.

Costa Rica would have been the simple beach life that we always loved while on vacation. However, after being in Penang and seeing all it has to offer, we came to the conclusion that beach life in Costa Rica would be just too simple for us at this stage in our lives. We need more than what a sleepy beach town can provide.

We spend only three weeks in Penang before moving here.

HOW TO LIVE THE HIGH LIFE FOR A FRACTION OF THE U.S. COST

We knew living in Penang would be cheap compared to living in Chicago. But it's really meant that we can live a high-quality lifestyle. For example, it feels ridiculous not to have a cleaning lady come once a week when it costs \$5 an hour.

We live in a secure high-rise on the side of a hill, with a view of the city lights and the ocean. It's fully furnished, with three bedrooms and three bathrooms, and comes with two parking spaces. It even includes the use of a huge infinity pool and a small gym.

Our apartment could easily be transported to Chicago and be among the modern, downtown condos along the lakefront. But it would cost \$3,000 a month...not the \$800 we pay here.

The electric bills cost between \$18 and \$45 monthly, depending on how much A/C we use. Water is less than \$2 per month, and we use propane to cook. A canister costs about \$8 and can last anywhere from six months to a year, depending on how much you cook. Our Internet, which is admittedly slow, is about \$50 a month. All our monthly utilities here combined are less than one gas bill in a Chicago winter.

Living on a perpetually hot and humid tropical island is dreamy, but for me, exercising outside isn't, so I joined a gym. Even though we have a small gym in our building, I'm more motivated if I have classes to take part in—plus, it's a great way to meet people. It's more modern than the gym I belonged to in Chicago and has a lot more to offer. My membership includes everything from Zumba and belly-dancing classes to TRX and Pilates for \$26 a month. I've made a bunch of local friends there, as well.

Our grocery bill is less than \$300 a month. I go to the local market every few days to get my eggs, chicken, and pork, as well as any fruit and veggies we need. At the market, you not only mix with the locals, but you can also ask for cooking advice, learn about what that crazy, green, spikey fruit is, and sit down for a hearty Penang breakfast of noodles or curry for about \$2.

For the most part, everything in the market is locally grown and raised. There are big chain grocery stores here, but I prefer to get as much as I can from the locals. Chicken and pork are about \$1 to \$3 a pound, depending on the cut. I usually arrive back with a few enormous bags of fresh veggies and tropical fruit, all for under \$5. In Chicago, that's about what a mango would cost.

However, as the days went on and we were exploring this little island, we realized it and its multicultural people had the heart and soul of an entire continent.

Penang has the best of both worlds: all the Western amenities that make us feel like we're at home, with just the right amount of adventure. You can be in the middle of a jungle watching monkeys interact in the morning, and then clean yourself up and go out for a night on the town. The possibilities are endless. That fusion is what makes Penang a beautifully quirky place to live. ■