

# Making Friends and Living Large in Tropical Penang, Malaysia

By Kirsten Raccuia



**I**f it wasn't for the gorgeous view we might never eat at home," says Patti Jackson, 58.

"When I feel like cooking my husband Bob and I eat on the balcony while watching the sunset but it's actually cheaper to go out for dinner here in Penang...we have so many options within walking distance."

"Our favourite meals range from \$12 to \$60 for two people and we eat out routinely at nice restaurants for \$25," says Bob, 61. "My favourite haunts are Indian and Chinese. At my local Indian, Sri Ananda, I order the bright-red, succulent tandoori chicken (\$4.20). At my nearby noodle stall, I get Penang's most famous dish, *char kway teow* for only \$1.60. I've definitely broadened my food horizons."

Patti's equally happy having a coffee with friends at the nearby marina or reading a book at the pool. "I love this laidback island and am really happy we came here," says Patti. "Back home days were filled with work. Now I spend them on a healthy lifestyle and socialising; slow-paced island life suits me."

"Without a doubt, we are both more active here," says Bob. "The proof is in the five kilos we have both lost. Not only do we have more time to be active, we also have access to so much. I golf on the mainland as often as possible; it's just an hour away and only costs \$33 for 18 holes. When Patti isn't playing tennis, she's

attending the small group body-sculpt class (\$6.50) at the gym in our apartment complex. Or she can choose from free yoga, Zumba and aqua Zumba also in the gym there. Since moving to Penang our whole lifestyle has changed for the better."

The couple joined the Penang Sports Club to meet people and play tennis; a luxury they didn't get enough of back home. A lifetime membership is \$4,400 per couple but can be transferred to someone else if they ever move. The monthly fee is less than \$50 and they take full advantage of the clubs' offerings. "You can play tennis all day if you want and afterwards just sit on the perfectly manicured lawn and drink with your teammates," says Patti. "Everyone plays so they can drink afterward; I love the social aspect of life here."

There is also badminton, field hockey, soccer and cricket facilities as well as a hair salon, restaurant, pool, gym and a library. It's housed in an old colonial building from the 1930s so going there feels opulent, like stepping backward in time.

"Before moving to Penang we were so tired of working just to afford the things we had. We were slaves to our stuff: the cars, the house and beautiful backyard...our home owned us," says Patti. "Maintenance and the cost of keeping up our home was a vicious

**The old quarter of George Town, Penang's capital, is a vibrant, walkable place.**



*I love the social aspect of life here."*

cycle—work at the office, go home, work in your home, it never ends."

But it was the Global Financial Crisis that was the real wake-up call for Patti and Bob. "I felt there had to be a better

way," says Bob. "So I started looking at life overseas. "The more I found out, the more it became real for us...there actually was a possibility to live elsewhere...to live better."

In 2016, the couple attended an International Living conference which propelled them forward in their goal. "After that event we decided to check out Penang, Malaysia. It's a tropical island in an exotic part of the world that we knew nothing about and had never been to," says Bob. "We had already travelled to Ecuador a year earlier, so we felt we knew what South America was like. Penang would be an entirely different experience, so we had to go and see it for ourselves. It helps that English is widely spoken, it's way less expensive than home, it has an excellent visa program and it's a great base from which to explore Southeast Asia."

"We took a 10-day exploratory trip and I liked Penang enough to try it out long term, but I also knew that if I didn't end up loving it, we'd just go somewhere else," says Patti. We sold all of our stuff and moved here with a few suitcases and our dog, Mandy. We don't own anything so it's easy just to go somewhere else." But since the couple have their MM2H—a 10-year renewable visa—they can stay for as long as they want. They have no intention of going anywhere, other than to explore the new world around them.

They just got back from five days in Bangkok. "We did all the touristy stuff," says Bob. "The Grand Palace, Wat Pho, an Apsara dinner cruise along the Chao Phraya River and a four-hour spa treatment for \$125 per person."

"We absolutely loved the night bike ride with Grasshopper Tours," says Patti. We rode on small back streets I never would have gone down, but that made it more fun! All of the temples were lit up and we were able to see them up close with no one else around. We went to the flower market as well. I definitely recommend it to everyone—such a cool way to see the sights."

"We also went to Malacca with the tennis team from the Penang Sports Club for a Straits of Malacca sports tournament," says Patti. "The downtown area is so quaint and the riverwalk is so beautiful, especially at night when it's all lit up. In April, when our son visits, we are going to Chiang Mai to spend the day at the Elephant Nature Park and help bathe the resident elephants!" "The plan is to get all over Southeast Asia in the coming years," adds Bob.

The pair's apartment is in a resort-like complex complete with a private 4.5-acre waterpark. They have a bright, luxurious two-bedroom, two-bathroom unit with dark parquet floors. It's 127 square metres with a balcony overlooking the crescent-shaped beach and the Straits of Malacca.

"We have the view of the nearby fishing village with blue and red boats moored just off the beach and we watch cruise ships come in on their way to the port. We face northwest, so the sunsets always show off this glowing orange, red and yellow sky. When we are at home we are on the balcony all the time; we read and do our computer work there too," says Bob.

"At night we can hear the waves crashing on the rocks. For

## ENJOY A RICH SOCIAL LIFE IN PENANG

Every expat you talk to in Penang will tell you the same thing... there's so much going on. One of the best things about retirement here is that you could be busy every day of the week if you wanted to. Here's a taste...

The [Arts Society Penang](#) offers lectures on many topics as well as visits to culturally significant places on the island. Just last week they had talks on the Queen of Sheba and Discovering the Decorative Arts of the East.

The [Alliance Francaise](#) and the [Malaysian-German Society](#) are both non-for profit associations that are open to members of all nationalities. Alliance has free monthly movies and hosts dinners and potlucks open to everyone, not just members.

The Malaysian-German Society hosts a number of parties throughout the year but their most spectacular ones are the Maiball, a black-tie affair at the swanky E&O Hotel, and the more casual Oktoberfest complete with a Bavarian band.

A great way to start planning your outings is the [Penang Free Sheet](#) which can be found in restaurants and cafés around town. You can also sign up to have it emailed to you. This week alone has five pages of activities from open-mic sessions to guided nature walks in the rainforest at dusk.

If you're looking for fitness, the [Warrior Boot Camp](#) offers daily classes to whip you into shape.

Or with a more social aspect, the [Hash House Harriers/Harriets of Penang](#) is a running club that don't take themselves too seriously and enjoy a beer afterward.

Each Thursday That Little Wine Bar is a good place to mingle: for \$19 you get three glasses of wine and nibbles while meeting other wine lovers.

\$1,192 a month, the apartment came fully furnished in a Western style. It's only about five years old, complete with washer/dryer, oven, microwave and an electric stove. "We negotiated for a new king bed in the master and a new sofa in the living room. It's not extravagant but it is tastefully decorated," adds Patti.

"We spend about \$3,800 a month all up and that includes all the fun money. After our rent, the biggest expense is food. Groceries are about \$500 for the month and we spend about the same in going out to eat," says Bob. "All of our utilities, including TV and phone, only add up to \$215."

"I get a gel manicure and a pedicure every month and it's only \$46 for both. Getting my hair coloured is only \$88 and our housekeeper is only \$44 a month," adds Patti. "With all the money we are saving, we want to buy our dream catamaran and sail through the Greek Islands and the Caribbean, but first we need to learn how to sail!" ■

**Editor's Note:** Editor's Note: Kirsten Raccuia is *IL* Southeast Asia Correspondent and you can contact her directly by emailing [Southeastasia@internationalliving.com](mailto:Southeastasia@internationalliving.com).



# Jungle Adventures, World-Class Diving—the Best of Malaysian Borneo

By Kirsten Raccuia

**Y**ou know you're in for an adventure with a view like this...as the airplane descends you see turquoise water dotted with a handful of lush green islands, surrounded by reefs and bobbing fishing vessels. Houses on stilts fringe some of the islands. And this is just your first impression...once you land there's a lot more.

Borneo is Asia's largest island. You can stay in a longhouse with the indigenous Dayak, take river trips to catch a glimpse of proboscis monkeys, spend time with orangutans, experience some of the best diving in the world and climb a sacred mountain—one of the highest in Asia.

Living in Penang means I'm less than three hours' flight from the sophisticated little city of Kota Kinabalu (KK), one of the gateways to Malaysian Borneo. I scored my return ticket for just \$97. The Malaysian capital, Kuala Lumpur, is even closer—and only \$75 return. But Borneo is easy to get to from outside Malaysia too. KK is connected with 11 international destinations including Australia.

While not Malaysia's most popular retirement spot, this city of around 600,000 has attracted some long-term expats, avid golfers, lovers of scuba diving and those looking for a quiet life amid nature. But for most people it makes more sense as part of a roving retirement or for a few weeks ticking items off the bucket list.

It's a walkable city if you don't mind the heat—daytime temperatures average 32 C. Otherwise Uber is everywhere and the cheapest way to get around. You'll never spend more than a few dollars getting around the city.

Skirted by the clear waters of the South China Sea and backed by mountains, the city lies on a narrow strip along the coast. You'll find modern shopping centres and a long waterfront promenade fronted by restaurants (including an Aussie barbecue place.)

While my husband Mark took off for the two-day climb of Mount Kinabalu I explored the city and nearby beaches.

A beautiful way to spend a couple of days is to go island hopping. The five islands within the Tunku Abdul Rahman National Park are all accessible by boat from the Jesselton Ferry Terminal right in the heart of town. It couldn't be simpler. Get an Uber over to the terminal, pick a boat operator from the dozen or so selling



The gateway to Malaysian Borneo, Kota Kinabalu is the perfect place for you to explore the wildlife, superb diving and luxury resorts of this part of the world.

tickets and figure out which islands to hop to. Depending on how much time you have you can choose up to three islands in one day or just spend the day lounging on one.

The islands rarely get crowded and the beaches are clean. Each of the five has different amenities, from Sulug—to Manukan island which has a hotel and a restaurant. The water is the kind of translucent blue that you can see your toenail polish in. Just standing there I could see massive schools of little fish darting around my waist.

If you're prepared you could easily spend a day at each. If you don't have snorkel gear, you can rent that from the boat operator. A ticket to one island is \$6.74, two islands is \$9.67 and three is \$12.60. A mask and snorkel are a mere \$2.93. It's also very affordable to charter a boat for the whole day, starting at \$78 for up to 12 people.

With Mark recovering from his two-day climb of Mount Kinabalu, we took a firefly tour in the mangroves. The guide had a special torch to entice thousands of fireflies towards us. The insects think the torch is the firefly queen and they are about to get their lucky date. It was as if someone decorated the mangroves with fairy lights. The trip ran us \$59 each with [Down Below Adventures](#).

The next day we planned to go diving with the same tour company as they are a five-star PADI (Professional Association of Diving Instructors) operator. If you are staying in KK for a month, you could easily spend half of it diving! And you can get certified at almost any level, including Divemaster. And if you're not a diver then snorkelling is also an option.

The Tunku Abdul Rahman National Park is minutes off the shore from KK and diving among these islands is an aquatic

*"The perfect place to spend a few days island hopping."*

paradise. The marine park has been protected since 1974 and the underwater world is teeming with colourful fish and coral. There are 49 dives sites to choose from within a 10-minute boat ride of each other, so you don't spend the whole day on the boat, just minutes. All three dives, including lunch and transportation, were only \$117 per person, a total bargain.

Back in town we did a spot of shopping at the Suria Sabah Shopping Centre in the heart of town and the Imago near the waterfront. Both have up-to-the-minute shopping, spas, a movie theatre playing the latest films (in English) and international supermarkets. Both the City Grocer and the Everrise grocery stores have imported creature comforts like Australian beef tenderloin and Australian wines.

Imported goods are more expensive, but the affordability of local produce more than makes up for it. For the freshest local produce, chicken and seafood go to the morning market at The Waterfront. This is where the chefs, locals and expats do their daily shopping. You'll get bags of local produce for only a few dollars, chicken for \$2.88/kg and tons of fish.

The seafood area is one of the nicest I've seen and the variety is astounding. From clams and prawns to blowfish; all caught a few hours ago. It doesn't get fresher than that. There is an entire prawn aisle with piles of the different coloured crustaceans priced from \$4.34 per kilo and up. Pick out some prawns to take home and cook or even better, do as the locals do and just walk upstairs to the food stalls and they will cook your fresh catch for a few dollars. no clean up necessary!

The sunsets in KK are the most vivid I've ever seen. Head to the waterfront to have a cocktail and watch the sun fade into the sea. Make sure you stop for a foot massage. What's better than relaxing with a cocktail in hand, staring out to the horizon and getting

a foot rub? Stay for dinner and you'll have plenty of options: Italian, Thai, Malaysian, even an Irish Pub. One of the best Italian restaurants in town, Gusto's, makes a killer thin-crust pizza for \$8.79. It's helmed by an Italian chef, is very authentic and comes with views to die for.

If you're in the mood for seafood, there are a few top-notch local places to go where you can walk up to the tanks and pick out your dinner. Welcome Seafood is a massive, chaotic affair where you might have to share a table with strangers, who will inevitably tell you what's good to eat there, you should listen; Malaysians know food. Mark and I got succulent butter prawns and hotter-than-hades chilli scallops, a vibrant plate of local greens and a heaping plate of fried rice for \$29.

KK is a place that caters to travellers; short-term leases are available. Of course, the best way to do it is to get there and start talking to locals and expats, but if you need to arrange it before you arrive, there are a few websites to guide you.

I found a 100-square-metre, three-bedroom unit, 20 minutes from the centre of town for \$587 a month. It's fully furnished, has two bathrooms, an open kitchen and a balcony. An Uber into town will only cost a few dollars so staying a bit out of the city won't be a problem. See: *Longtermlettings.com*.

The Colonnades Condos are fully serviced three-bedroom modern apartments only eight minutes' drive from the waterfront. For \$764 a month you'll have use of the gym and pool and a weekly housekeeping and laundry service. See: *Promenadeapartment.com*.

Another great option is to find something on AirBnB. Many owners give discounts, some up to 60%, for renting more than 28 days and once you put in the dates, they will automatically apply the discount. If there isn't already a discount for a monthly rental, contact the owner and negotiate for a month.

No trip to KK would be complete without a visit to the Sepilok Orangutan Rehabilitation Centre. Flying is the easiest and quickest way to get there. There are roundtrip flights from KK to Sandakan on Air Asia and Malaysia Airlines (only 40 minutes) starting at \$40 and they begin as early as 6 a.m. and return as late as 8 p.m.

The apes are free to roam as they please and are usually in the wild until feeding time at 10 a.m. and 3 p.m. They are fed a monotonous diet of bananas and milk to encourage them to forage for their food. You'll also see long-tailed macaques that try to steal their bananas. There are no cages or walls, but you must respect their space. Avoid going on the weekends if possible. And stick around for a while after the feeding; sometimes stragglers come a little late to the party and you might just have them all to yourself.

You can also head next door to the Bornean Sun Bear Conservation Centre. There are 43 sun bears in sizeable outdoor enclosures. The staff are very passionate about the conservation of these little bears. Ask one of the staff members how to spot a bear and where to look for them and they'll gladly give you some pointers. In the rain, the orangutans tend to hide, but that is when the sun bears come out to play, so use the weather as a guide and go between the two centres.

The entrance fee to Sepilok is \$8 and there is a \$3 fee for bringing your camera in. The entrance to the sun bears is \$9.35 and it is open all day for you to wander at your leisure. ■

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Colourful and artistic, Kota Kinabalu is a laidback and easygoing city of around 600,000.