



The origin of Kuching's cat connection is lost but the city's feline obsession is obvious.

Easy Living and Rents of \$760 in Malaysia's "Cat City"

Kirsten Raccuia

Kuching, the state capital of Sarawak on the island of Borneo, Malaysia, is a perfect paradox.

One minute you're surrounded by locals, listening to a band play traditional music along the waterfront, and the next you're ordering pizza in an air-conditioned shopping centre. It's exotic but as I discovered during my recent scouting trip there, it still has the creature comforts of home—an easy place to integrate as an expat.

"From the whiskey bar Drunk Monkey to the Granary Kitchen and Bar, there are plenty of places to meet other expats," says Kent Marshall, originally from Perth. "As soon as we met one expat, they introduced us to all their friends, so we had an immediate network of people who wanted to show us the ropes." During my stay there, I found both expats and locals were itching to share their inside scoop on how to make Kuching home. The two groups mix seamlessly. I think life is so much richer with that extraordinary blend of friends. "We live in a gated community that is primarily made up of locals and we were welcomed with open arms," says expat Kathy Richardson,

who's been living there for the last four years. "They made our move so easy right from the start."

The centre of Kuching is a walkable maze of narrow streets, interspersed with wide boulevards. Turn one corner and you'll find yourself staring at a bright red ornate Chinese temple, turn another and there's a metal water sculpture or a roundabout filled with cat sculptures.

It's known as the "Cat City," but no-one knows why for sure. Some believe that when the first Rajah of Sarawak, an Englishman named James Brook arrived in the area he pointed and asked what the settlement was called.

Mistakenly thinking he was pointing at a passing cat, a local told him it was called "Kucing," the Malay for cat.

Besides the thriving expat community, more than seven different indigenous groups live in Kuching. The Iban, or Sea Dayaks, are the largest group and are historically known for head hunting and their intricate body tattoos. The Bidayuh, or Land Dayaks, are mostly Christian and

the makers of the best local rice wine, *tuak*.

Wandering through the city, past trays of famous Sarawak peppercorns drying in the midday sun, it seemed like every street has a different vibe. Carpenter Street is a narrow hipster laneway, where you can visit the Black Bean Café and sip local Sarawak coffee grown by the indigenous tribes in the southern part of the region. India Street pedestrian walkway with its colourful canopy overhead, is where you'll find everything from shoes to spices. The Main Bazaar street along the riverfront is the best place to people watch and haggle for antiques.

There is no shortage of activities to choose from. On a rainy day, there are seven museums to stay dry in, including a textile museum, Chinese history, Islamic heritage and even a cat museum. And when the sun is shining, there are four golf courses in the area. Even the best one, Borneo Highlands Resort—designed by South Australian golf architect Neil Crafter—only costs \$68 for a round of 18 holes. Although it's a bustling city, Kuching is smack in the middle of national parks and nature reserves. Forty minutes south is the Semenggoh Wildlife Centre; it's one of the few places in the world where you can get close to orangutans without cages or walls. Go for the feedings twice a day to see the gentle beasts come out of the wilderness. As many of the natural habitats for orangutans are being stripped for palm oil plantations, you

may not want to wait to visit here.

If you are a nature lover, go caving in the Fairy and Wind Caves Nature Reserve; it's only an hour away from the city centre, but you'll feel like you are in a different

"Expats and locals mix seamlessly together in Kuching."

world. Bring a torch and prepare to see bats, birds and eerie-shaped stalagmites and stalactites. For major wildlife viewing go to Bako National Park—it's only a 35-minute drive from Kuching. It's the park to trek in to look for three types of monkeys including my favourite, the proboscis monkey. You'll also find wild boars and tons of birds. The park is nestled on the coast so you can hike in

the rainforest all day and then cool off in the ocean.

I lost count of how many shopping centres there are; the most modern ones have grocery stores inside, so shopping is an easy errand. Having a car isn't necessary unless you live further out of the city, even then, Uber is everywhere. I took a 48-minute Uber ride and it only cost me \$9.27, most of my rides were under \$3. Modern movie theatres are playing the latest Hollywood titles for \$4.68 per ticket. And the food is out of this world. I ate a large steaming bowl of laksa, Kuching's famous noodle soup full of prawns, chicken and egg soaked in a rich coconut milk broth for \$2.14.

Rental prices are low. A three-bedroom, fully furnished apartment in the city centre, overlooking the river can be found starting at \$764. But move 15 minutes out of the city and you can get a two-storey terrace house with five bedrooms for only \$550. Like most things in Kuching, word of mouth is everything, so get there, meet some people, and you'll be privy to a lot of insider tips, especially when it comes to real estate.

What surprised me most about Kuching, besides the hipster bars and cafés, was the variety and quality of the restaurants. Malaysia is a food-centric country and Kuching didn't disappoint. I ate at a Tapas restaurant called Pincho Loco, helmed by a Spanish chef. We had four dishes and two beers and the bill was \$26. Their sister restaurant called Zinc was also divine. Four of us feasted on squid ink paella, charred octopus—so tender I cut it with a spoon—and a cheese plate for \$45.23. Eating at Zinc was an all-night affair—we started talking with some locals who invited us to join their table and conversation and before we knew it was nearly 1 a.m. Owned by a local man and his French wife, it was a major highlight of our Kuching food experience.

Kuching is a charming town and very eclectic. There is a modern, up-and-coming hipster vibe to it, but the backdrop is traditional with its art, museums and indigenous tribes. It's the fascinating blend of old and new that makes it so unique. For me, Kuching offers the best of both worlds, modern yet traditional, on the rise but deeply rooted in its historical past, surrounded by nature yet full of high-rises. ■

SARAWAK'S VISA REQUIREMENTS

If you're considering applying for the Malaysia My 2nd Home (MM2H) visa program in Sarawak—the state which Kuching is capital of—the financial qualifying

requirements are much lower than the rest of the country. But there are a number of conditions that might impede your Sarawak visa program application and renewal process.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN SMM2H AND MM2H

Sarawak	Peninsular Malaysia
You must be 50 or older.	Can be any age.
Monthly income of RM10,000 (\$3,327) for married couples or RM7,000 (\$2,329) for single applicants; OR Open a fixed deposit account of RM150,000 (\$49,900) for married couples or RM100,000 (\$33,270) for a single applicant.	If below 50, must have liquid assets: minimum of RM500,000 (\$166,333) and offshore income of RM10,000 (\$3,327) per month. Must also open a fixed deposit account of RM300,000 (\$99,846). Over 50, must show proof of liquid assets worth RM350,000 (\$116,400) and offshore income of RM10,000 (\$3,327) per month. Open a fixed deposit account of RM150,000 (\$49,900) after approval.
You are not allowed to work without written permission from the State Government or participate in activities that are considered sensitive to the local people like charities, NGO's and festival related events	You are allowed to work 20 hours per month, depending on the work, and being granted written approval from the MM2H authorities.
Your sponsor can't be an agent, or an organisation with ties to the land authority, the tourism authority or a government hospital. Your sponsor must also sign a personal bond vouching for you.	Applicant doesn't need a sponsor. You can apply for it yourself (in person), or use an agent to act as a sponsor.
Can live anywhere in Malaysia.	Can live anywhere in Malaysia, except Sarawak.
You cannot own land, but you can buy a house and lease the land. You are limited to buying in Kuching, Miri and Sibü.	You can buy freehold land, although there are exceptions.
Can withdraw RM90,000 (\$29,900) as a couple, RM40,000 (\$13,300) as an individual for approved expenses relating to the purchase of a house, car, and education of children or for medical purposes. Must maintain RM60,000 (\$19,960) in account.	Can withdraw part of the fixed deposit in the second year onwards: RM50,000 (\$16,630) for 50+ years old and RM150,000 (\$49,900) for those under 50, for approved expenses. Must maintain a balance of RM100,000 (\$33,270) (50+) / RM150,000 (\$49,900) (below 50) until termination of the MM2H.
To renew your visa you have to be living in the state of Sarawak.	You can renew your visa from any state (except Sarawak and Sabah)