

The Sarawak Rainforest World Music Festival



John Clewley discovers music in the jungle on the island of Borneo

Here in a wooden Iban longhouse, where a percussion workshop with drums from three continents is pounding away, the rainforest's chattering, clicking soundtrack blends seamlessly into the mix. Welcome to Sarawak, home of the jungle groove.

Since 1998, the annual three-day Rainforest World Music Festival has been held on the Santubong Peninsula in Sarawak, on the north-western shore of the island of Borneo. Malaysia's largest state boasts some of the world's oldest rainforest and the state capital Kuching, which means 'cat' in Malay, is a slow-paced, tranquil city that seems to have avoided the hustle and bustle of so many of South-East Asia's urban hubs.

The festival was originally the brainchild of Canadian multi-instrumentalist Randy Raine-Reusch, who brought his experience of the Winnipeg Folk Festival to Sarawak after being attracted by the variety of music produced by the state's 27 different ethnic groups, including the Iban and Orang Ulu. After helping set up the basic structure, he wisely took a backseat and let the local community take over. And they have done so admirably. The festival is growing year by year according to the organising committee chairman Haji Mohd Tuah Jais. He notes that last year's attendance of 17,000 over the three days was almost double that of the previous year, with a mixture of locals, expatriates and foreign visitors.



TOP: *The Sarawak Cultural Village Bedok Ensemble*
ABOVE: *Sapé player, Lan E-Tuyang (Sarawak Tourism Board)*

The festival site, located 33km from Kuching, is staggeringly beautiful. Framed by the lush, jungle-clad Mount Santubong and two beaches, the festival is held at the

If you're planning a trip to the festival, Malaysia Airlines (www.malaysiaairlines.com) offers various packages. Accommodation is best located at one of the resorts on the peninsula, Santubong or Damai. Kuching is a delightful, tranquil city, with a fascinating anthropological museum and, for feline lovers, a cat museum. There is plenty for visitors around Sarawak before and after the festival. Various national parks can be visited from Bintulu and Miri. For more details about this year's festival check out www.rainforestmusic-borneo.com, and for ethnic music conference details contact Ms Zariah at zaba@sarawak.com.my



Sarawak Cultural Village: a circle of longhouses from different ethnic groups that surrounds a lake, giving the impression that you are in a giant, green amphitheatre. The main festival stage was actually on the lake for several years but as the event has expanded, so the stage has been relocated against the forested mountain, greatly improving the sound quality. At night, the musicians perform against a backdrop of illuminated forest.

The festival has begun to attract some big names from overseas, like Tarika, Setona, Badenya Les Frères Coulibaly, Omar Pene and Super Diamano, Rajery, Ensemble Kaboul and Huun Huur Tu. Regional bands from neighbouring countries, like Indonesia's Samba Sunda, are also invited, as are many of the troupes and ensembles from Sarawak's indigenous groups, which open each evening's show, led by the Sarawak Cultural Village Bedok Ensemble, the Bisayah Gong Orchestra and Lang E-Tuyang. The latter band showcases the *sapé*, the Orang Ulu 'boat lute' that has become Sarawak's best-known traditional instrument. Player and *sapé*-maker Matthew Ngau Jau hosts visitors at his *sapé* workshop after the festival, while local virtuoso Jerry Kamin experiments with an electrified *sapé*.

Festival director Yeoh Jun Lin says that although the evening shows are tremendous fun, with people dancing and having a good time, the soul of the festival is in the daytime workshops. Bands, she says, are selected with this in mind.

Each workshop is held in a longhouse on the site. Those featuring jam sessions by percussionists are always packed, as are local dance classes, which include bamboo stick dancing (miss a beat and it does your ankles in). Intriguing titles like 'String Rojak – Exotic

Instruments Unite!' (*rojak* means a mixed salad in Malay) whet the appetite for unusual fusions. Other sessions look at the connections between musicians, such as the one last year that featured Madagascar's Tarika and Indonesia's Krakatau exploring their common musical heritage. And relationships

often surprisingly developed in the workshops emerge later on stage, as with Shooglenifty's outstanding "acid croft, heavy metal, throat singing thrash" with the Mongolian band, Boerte, a couple of years ago.

In between workshops, the festival also showcases local traditional arts and crafts, with many stalls and demonstrations around the site. You can buy a legally cultivated carnivorous pitcher plant or have an Iban tattoo done on your legs (the Iban idea is that you get a tattoo done when you go on a trip, so if you meet an Iban covered in tattoos, you know they have travelled far and wide). The atmosphere might be hot and steamy but everyone is laid-back and friendly and you can mingle and chat with the musicians.

Jun Lin says that the festival has encouraged many of Sarawak's tribal groups to use the venue to perform to wider audiences. They also benefit from exposure to music from other cultures. To develop this further, last year an international conference on ethnic music was organised, with the aim of popularising ethnic music globally. This year's conference will be held



TOP: *The Sarawak Cultural Village* (John Clewley)

ABOVE: *A workshop held in one of the longhouses* (Sarawak Tourism Board)

on July 6-7 just prior to the festival, with the theme of 'Rhythms of Communities', featuring academics from the US, Thailand, New Zealand and Malaysia.

This year's festival line-up features Malian *n'goni*-player and sampler Issa Bagayogo, Samba Sunda from Indonesia, Black Umfolosi from Zimbabwe, the Afro-Indian Gujarati band Sidi Goma, Sicily's Tammorra, *forro* from Brazil's Silverio Pessoa, North Indian minstrels Baul-Bishwa, and the Doghouse Skiffle Group from the UK.

The Rainforest World Music Festival is not one of those huge, impersonal events; despite growing rapidly, it still retains its low-key charm. Just being in the beautiful natural environment of Sarawak is an exotic thrill in itself – the music is a bonus: a three-day jungle soundtrack. |

For general tourism details see www.sarawaktourism.com

This year's Sarawak Rainforest World Music Festival runs between July 9-11 2004