

The Outrageously High Cost of Living in Malaysia

By Patrick Schmidt

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People in Europe and America firmly believe that ex-patriates living in a so-called developing country, such as Malaysia, have an easy life-style because everything is so inexpensive. And if you look at certain statistics, this impression can only be confirmed. The average monthly wage of a Malaysian amounts to 500 Ringgits (DM 295), a Big Mac costs only 3.20 Ringgits (DM1.90) and a 10-km taxi ride in Kuala Lumpur (K.L.) is only 10 Ringgits (DM 5.90)

Extrapolating from these figures, you can come to the "reasonable and intelligent" conclusion that living costs are indeed low, which means any ex-patriate with a European or American salary would enjoy a relatively high standard of living.

But Malaysia (as well as other Asian countries) cannot be compartmentalized according to Western thought. For the above extrapolation has about as much validity as claiming spätzle is the national dish of the British. To put it simply, living in K.L., or any other capital in southeast Asia, is a prohibitively, expensive affair.

The reader is puzzled and probably now asking the question: how can life in a developing country be so costly, when basic living items are so cheap? The answer can be found in the ex-patriate life styles.

An ex-patriate has, by definition, left his homeland, which means he has given up his comfort in exchange for a higher salary and foreign adventure, a sort of self-imposed exile. But as compensation, all ex-patriates expect the "good life", such as they have seen in Hollywood films of the British colonial past. They imagine they will be living in a large, old-fashioned mansion with an enormous swimming pool, surrounded by servants and a chauffeur etc. In short, *la dolce vita*.

Unfortunately, these fantasies come into conflict with the real world which has changed considerably since the time the British left Malaysia in 1957. First of all, there are very few large mansions left, having mostly been demolished to make room for the high-rise buildings and condominiums seen all around K.L. The only type of housing that you find available is American-styled homes or condominiums, located in the so-called upper-class areas. Clever

home owners and real-estate agents, aware of ex-patriates' desire for a westernized and grandiose style of living, take full advantage of this situation and demand outrageous rents which are no reflection of what the property is really worth.

Translating this into real money, a simple 130 m² house, American-style, located in the city suburbs of K.L., without a swimming pool, costs between 8,000 to 12,000 Ringgits (DM 4,700 to 7,000) per month, utility costs not included. Should you wish for a swimming pool, then add another 2000 Ringgits. The unsuspecting ex-patriate is at first rendered speechless by these prices. Should you make a remark, such as "This is highway robbery", the housing agent will simply respond by pointing out that similar houses in Bangkok, Hong Kong or Singapore would cost twice as much. After having looked at 30 to 40 houses and finding there is no alternative, i.e. lower rents, the now shell-shocked ex-patriate pays these shameful prices

Adding insult to injury, a gardener is a luxury that only the super-rich can afford. To cut the lawn, he will charge RM 60 per house (DM 35), which is often no more than one hour of work. A gardener in Beverly Hills wouldn't dare charge so much! Should you have the courage to tell him you will pay a respectable RM 30, he will smile and in a very, self-assured manner tell you "no".

The high expenses are not just limited to housing. Should you have children, you will learn in no time that the privilege of educating them in Malaysia is more expensive than your most exclusive Swiss boarding schools. For example, the cost of sending one child to the German school in K.L. with no room and board is between DM 7,000 to DM 9,000 for one school year. The International School, offering the American syllabus, charges double the amount.

Another unexpected expense is food. If you don't want to eat Chinese rice or oily Malaysian vegetables every day, you can buy European food. There are many stores that gladly cater to the ex-patriate community with a variety of different Western foods. Real *Schwarzwälder Schinken* is a hit among the German community in K. L., but you pay twice the amount that you would normally pay in Stuttgart. And to enjoy a real German meal in an international hotel is an exceptional luxury. A simple *Bratwurst mit Kartoffelpurée* with *Apfelstrudel* as dessert and a beer will leave you DM 40 poorer.

An expense that is a necessity in order to keep one's sanity is the fee for joining a fancy country club. K.L. doesn't offer much in terms of leisure, or at least in the eyes of the ex-patriate. Consequently, you end up as a member of a country club, a relic of the British colonial past. The entry fee is a cool RM 25,000 (DM 15,000), plus a monthly fee for the family of about DM 400. There, especially at the weekends, you can meet other expatriates alongside the large luxurious swimming pool, sip on a beer and chit-chat your heart away

on how expensive life in Malaysia has become.

But the straw that breaks the camel's back is the purchase of an automobile. All self-respecting Germans feel an inborn obligation to drive the car that tells people they are from Germany. This means, the only choice a German has is a Mercedes-Benz. A BMW or an Audi will not do! However, since Malaysia is trying to build up a national automobile industry, all foreign makes are heavily taxed. So, the "cheapest" Mercedes, the *C-Klasse*, equipped with air-conditioning, which costs approximately DM 50,000 in Germany, is priced at DM 120,000 in Malaysia. It is at this moment that you start drinking double whiskies for breakfast to help you forget the financial nightmare you find yourself in.

In the end, you will realize that an ex-patriate family of four without any "chicki-micki" extravagances (i.e. no Mercedes, no swimming pool, no gardener, no ordering *Bratwurst* at a restaurant) needs at least DM 10,000 a month just to survive with a very simple life style. So, keep this in mind should you ever be offered a position in K.L.. Life for any ex-patriate in Malaysia is outrageously expensive.