

Star weekender

Diver's Log  
**Bidong's time to shine**



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Travel  
**To Russia with love**



Russia is a place with notorious communist connotations, right? Suspicious people, austere outlook, terrible food? But some things you have to see for yourself.

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Travel  
**A perfect getaway**

Hawaii proves to be a great holiday spot, boasting culture, gorgeous scenery and plenty of activities.

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Movies  
**Total eclipse of the heart**

The latest instalment in *The Twilight Saga* raises the stake with some bloody (but bloodless) action. But it is the romance that still points the way.

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Edric Ong (right) and the Sarawakian products under his EO label.



**Edric Ong is helping the traditional arts and crafts of Sarawak get noticed and flourish.**



# Putting his spin on tradition

Stories by **JOLEEN LUNJEW**  
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**W**alk along Kuching's Main Bazaar, and you'll be amazed at the thriving businesses selling Sarawakian arts and crafts. A major player in keeping the arts alive can be found among these shops, tucked away on the first floor in an art gallery.

The gallery is called Artrageously Ramsay Ong (opposite the Waterfront Chinese Museum) and it's where Sarawakian designer Edric Ong, 40-something, showcases his products to the world under the label EO.

Ong's involvement with the various native communities in Sarawak began in his younger days when his father, then director of Inland Fisheries, used to bring him along to the interiors to meet with the longhouse folks. Motivated by a desire to preserve and revive traditional Sarawak arts and crafts, he has been working with Sarawakian weavers and craftsmen since 1985.

The largest community he works with are the Iban *pua kumbu* weavers from beyond the Kapit region, especially from Rumah Garie, a longhouse in Ulu Kapit. Others include an Iban community that makes sleeping mats and woodcarvings, Bidayuh bamboo carvers, Penan rattan furniture makers and Lun Bawang basket and hat makers from

Ba'Kelalan.

Ong's specialty is marrying tradition with the modern, giving a creative twist to traditional styles.

"The key is innovation. We need to keep tradition alive by making it relevant for contemporary use," he says. "Take the Ba'Kelalan hatbox, for instance. Not many people would wear the hat, so we have to adapt traditional skills to make contemporary products."

In the same manner, Ong has designed accessories and home products such as cushions, handbags, aprons, food covers and mittens. Under the EO label, Ong focuses on eco-textiles like silk, ikat, natural dye, back-strap loom weaving, wood block, scarves, stoles and wraps inspired by Sarawakian ethnic designs and motifs. Most of them are hand-woven, hand-painted or hand-printed with natural colours.

"Our line is very green as we champion natural fibres and dyes. Most of our ingredients are derived from Sarawak's rainforest, the same ingredients used by the ancestors," explains Ong.

Brown is derived from noni roots, yellow from marigolds, red from a type of tree bark, peach from annatto seeds and indigo from a type of leaf.

"There is an amazing range of colour possibilities. It's always exciting experimenting

with various sources to produce different results. We want to promote the usage of natural dyes as it can become a source of income for the community as well. They can grow the products that can be processed into powder for easier application."

Ong's works has earned him the Unesco Asean Craft Seal of Excellence and the prestigious Japanese "G" Mark award from the Japan Industrial Design Promotion Organisation.

His biggest success story has to be the revival and sustainability of the *pua kumbu*, which besides winning many Unesco awards, has enabled the Iban weavers to be recognised at an international level through trade and exhibition fairs.

"Most designer-entrepreneurs will only promote their products. The talented craftspeople remain hidden. Our weavers travel with us to exhibitions all around the world such as America, Australia, Japan, Korea, UK and Europe. It is nice for the textile community to be able to meet and recognise the artists behind the work," says Ong, who has authored two books on the subject as well as the definitive coffee-table book titled *Sarawak Style*.

He adds that the *pua kumbu* has become very famous among textile communities all over the world.

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