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# The 'P' factor

By BART WALTERS



I never thought I'd be a Pattaya Guy. Five years in Bangkok ... three in Phuket ... I'd spent the majority of my Thailand days with my nose placed firmly upwind of skanky old Pattaya. Like many who've never even been to our little hamlet, my opinion was that Pattaya was one big festering neon distraction and "not really Thailand" somehow.

Fast forward five years (forgive me for not being overly forthcoming about the events that landed me here) and I can't imagine living anywhere else. The place has grown up and grown on me. Still I'm stunned and amazed by the never-ending hordes of tourists arriving daily. Is there any such thing as "low season" any more? What's more, the constantly changing Pattaya skyline is a testament to its attractiveness as a place to live.

So what is it? Why do people flock here in droves? What is Pattaya's Unique Selling Proposition (USP)? I

completely understand the attraction for tourists. Warm weather, cheap accommodations and a myriad of things to occupy your holiday time with. But why on Earth would anyone want to live here?

Perhaps to get to the root of this phenomenon, we should use the process of elimination by ruling out some of the obvious knee-jerk answers.

## Beach snob

Is it the beaches? Please! As an unrepentant beach snob, I can say without hesitation that nobody stays here to live and play on Pattaya's beaches. Although the water and the beach itself have been dramatically cleaned up in the past 10 years, they still don't rate enough eco-merits to be called a major attraction.

I live on Ban Amphur Beach, which, in my opinion, is the best all-around waterfront resting place in the area, but it certainly doesn't compare to where I lived in Phuket.

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The water of the Eastern Seaboard is great to be near, above or on, but definitely not in. If you're from Frankfurt or Moscow, I'm sure Jomtien Beach must look like the Riviera ... but I seriously doubt its ability to attract and captivate real expatriates for long.

Is it the entertainment? Ah-hem ... everyone knows what Pattaya's main form of entertainment is. Chrome-pole palaces, transvestite cabarets and the ubiquitous beer bars that seem to multiply by osmosis are what P-Titty is infamous for.

But listen to a lively conversation among Pattaya's expatriates and you'll hear most brag about how long it has been since they were on Walking Street. Walking on the wild side is only fun for a limited period. When it ceases to be taboo or unavailable it lets the thrill out of it somehow.

Those tourists reading this who are saying, "I could never get tired of that" ... trust me buddy ... you would. ☺

While it is true that recent years have seen a growth of real entertainment like major sporting events and concerts; nightlife venues still rule the roost here.

And since this is a tourist town, most entertainment is geared toward them. An expat wondering what to do on a Saturday night is not left with many choices other than rubbing elbows with a bunch of out-of-towners. Once you've gotten over the hoochie-coochie bars and played all the golf courses, the only thing entertaining about Pattaya may be that it's close to the Bangkok.

**High quality schools**

Yes, the weather is nice. Yes, the food is good. Yes, the housing is of a wide variety and reasonably priced. Yes, the hospitals are good and inexpensive. Yes, the international schools are high quality.

Yes, yes, yes there are a whole lot of good things one can say about Pattaya. But, do they really all add up to 800 unit condos selling out three months after launch?

Are all those people jamming our roads every weekend really coming here because of that? Is the real estate market in Pattaya the hottest in the region because people like the weather?

If you put 10 expats in a room and ask them why they live in Pattaya, some will attempt to list all the little things and add them up to a reason. More enlightened souls will just smile and say, "I don't know ... it's just a damned nice place to live".

**The 'easy' argument**

Or, more than likely, you'll hear the "easy" argument. "Hey man, it's easy to live here". But I know the reason those expats can't quite put their finger on. It's the intangible. It's the "X" factor. Or to be more accurate ... it's the "P" factor. It's Pattaya's People.

A few years ago I attended a conference sponsored by International Living, an American-based group dedicated to the expatriate ideal. A few hundred expats and expat wannabes gathered to chew the fat about what it meant to live in a country other than their own.

All the reasons we've mentioned



already were bandied about as major catalysts for expatriation.

Because the demographics of this group put them in an older age group, and because they were mostly Americans, the most prevalent decision-making factors were safety and affordable health care. Then one speaker made his presentation and pointed out that even the most idyllic paradise could become a palm tree prison without a healthy expat community.

Truer words were never spoken. Sooner or later, we all need someone to hang out and have a beer with. In my not-so-humble opinion, this is Pattaya's USP. There is simply no place on this planet that has a wider variety of people, expatriate and otherwise, than Pattaya. Every country, every race, every walk of life is represented.

**The people I encounter**

I pondered this idea for a while and tried to decide how best to represent it here in this article. If I just consider the people I encounter in one day, it is quite illustrative.

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I am fortunate enough to have a business and make a living in Pattaya. When I got up this morning, I had a nice chat with my neighbour on the way down in the elevator; a young Italian guy teaching at Asian University here for seven years.

When I got to work, the morning planning meeting included me, my French-speaking Swiss partner, my Belgian graphic designer and my production manager, a French Canadian 18 years in Thailand.

Later, the Cannuck and I cruised over to visit a client. Our customer, Sven, a Swedish Australian who is a helicopter mechanic working in Malaysia, greeted us with a cup of coffee and a hearty G'Day!

Upon on returning to the office, I had a meeting with a German property developer, an Indian/Malaysian hotel owner and a retired Englishman renovating his condo.

**Excellent dinner**

Later in the afternoon I met with my Dutch friend (a former nightclub owner turned real estate agent) as he showed a condo I had for sale to a nice old couple from the Ukraine. That evening I enjoyed an excellent dinner of authentic Spanish paella while catching up with my friend Martin, an authentic Spaniard and excellent chef who has lived here for about a hundred years. It is the only time I get to practice the Spanish I learned in high school.

In one 12-hour period I managed to go around the world and never left Chonburi Province. On any given day, one might hear more than a dozen languages, sample a dozen different cuisines and see signs in a dozen different alphabets. They call New York City "the melting pot", but it's got nothing on Pattaya.

To meet people from that many different countries back in the US, I'd have to be working for the United Nations or Disney World. What's more, I deal with, on a daily basis, people from places I've never heard of or ever thought I'd meet, let alone do business with.

Last month I was invited to dinner by the publishers of a Russian magazine. It was, to say the least, a surreal experience. They

📍 They picked me up in a big SUV with a Thai driver. Since I was the only one who spoke Thai, the gracious Russian couple gave directions in Russian to our interpreter. She, in turn, gave them to me with, not only an American accent, but with a southern drawl. It seems Elena (a Ukrainian) has an American boyfriend from South Carolina teaching her bad grammar. Lucky for us all, I'm a redneck too and understood her perfectly. For two hours I learned about Russian cuisine, history and cinema. Trust me folks; that just don't happen in Orlando.

**Living globalisation**

This week we had two American clients come into town. They starred in awe as we conducted business meetings in three languages with them. They were even more impressed when our French-, English- and Thai-speaking factory manager went through a Thai translator to communicate with a visiting delegation from Beijing. Some people throw the buzzword "globalisation" around like they know what it means. I live it every day!

But, like I said ... I'm fortunate enough to work here. It only makes sense that I'd meet a lot of interesting people every day.

How about my friends? Are the folks I choose to hang out with even remotely as interesting?

As I scroll through my Blackberry I find Don, my longest tenured friend here in Pattaya. Don is a Canadian who translates Japanese documents for a living. He spends his time between here and Tokyo.

He's an old Asia hand with more stories than Stephen King. Having a beer or coffee with him is always the highlight of my week.

Then there's Chris, an American mercenary, working in and out of Afghanistan. You want to hear some good stories ... he's got 'em.

**Real estate mogul**

There's Heiner, a local real estate mogul and just about the friendliest German you are likely to meet. There's Jan, the body-building Dutchman who is also in real estate. Lester, a retired American software salesman and embassy warden; my friend for 13 years.

Mike, a retired investment banker



from Italy. Stephen, an oil rig engineer from Trinidad. Terry, a merchant marine from Norway. Uli, a German working for a big car company to support seven kids.

Andy, a filthy rich English real estate tycoon who plays bass in a local blues band. The list of colorful, interesting and friendly people goes on and on.

Not only do I have a long list of old friends, but new prospects get off the airplane every day. Some of them live here. Some of them come in and out of town for extended stays. We stay in touch, take care of each other and are never at a loss for words.

The speaker I heard at that conference on expatriate life over a decade ago was right. A paradise without a bustling expat community is no paradise at all. I do not get homesick. I do not wish I lived somewhere else.

So, it's endlessly interesting and you are never without a drinking buddy. Is that really what the "P" factor is all about? Stay here a while and you'll know the answer. There are some really special people that make Pattaya

a unique place to live. People even an old dude like me can look up to.

Take my long-time friend Lewis Underwood for example. "Woody" as he is known here in Pattaya is the President of The Jesters, a local motorcycle club. Woody has lived in Thailand forever it seems.

**Sustainable fish farms**

He began as an old fashioned American tree-hugging Peace Corps volunteer and grew into something extraordinary. He lived in Nepal for nearly 12 years teaching desperately poor farmers how to operate sustainable fish farms. He even wrote a manual for incoming Peace Corps volunteers on the Nepalese language.

When government conditions dictated he move, Woody came to Thailand and he never missed a compassionate beat. Some 13 years ago Woody became the president of The Jesters.

The Jesters aren't your average leather and hair MC. Altogether they hail from a dozen countries and include everyone from oil riggers to mega millionaires.

They live to achieve only two goals: 1) ride their Harleys; 2) raise money for disadvantaged Thai kids.

Through their Jesters' "Care For Kids" programme they have raised millions and millions of baht for more than a decade. The money helps to do everything from building schools to documenting orphan kids' nationalities so they can go to school and get free health care.

**Relentless front man**

Woody has served as a relentless front man for this ever-so-important charity since its inception.

In my opinion, Woody is what an expat should be. He is deeply engrained in the social fabric, with a Thai wife and a lovely daughter in school. Just about every move he makes goes towards ensuring that Pattaya is a better place to live.

And, he's not the only Pattayan to draw inspiration from. My friend Vlad Golar (pictured) is another. Vlad is an eclectic mix of Serbian/Latvian who hails from, of all places, Australia. Doing business in this 📍

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country for nearly 30 years, he now owns and operates a distributorship from the Italian coffee company Mokador.

Stop by his shop on Thappraya Road any time and you are likely to end up in a rousing conversation with Vlad. Just entering his seventh decade on this planet, he still finds time to play tennis just about every day and recently won an over-60s surfing competition in Australia. Pop into Shenanigans on certain nights and catch him and his band cranking out pop hits from the '60s, '70s and '80s.

**Positive attitude**

During the past couple years Vlad has gained even more admiration from our close knit group of far flung friends by battling cancer on more than one occasion. His positive attitude and never-give-in approach to life are an inspiration to us all.

And of course there is my business partner Luc Parietti. His story is what expatriate dreams are made of. Luc grew up in Lausanne, Switzerland eventually working for his father as a stone mason.

Apparently carving headstones and bird baths wasn't Luc's idea of "the good life", so he struck out at a very young age and became a dive instructor; first in Egypt and then in Phuket.

The sun-drenched beaches and easy lifestyle of Thailand got under Luc's skin right away and he quickly adapted by learning English and ridiculously fluent Thai.

Back in 1999, Luc switched horses again and got into the furniture business with an old established shop here in Pattaya. Roll time forward to now and Luc has taken over and built that business into the premier furniture manufacturing and interior design firm in the region employing nearly 100 Thais.

Euro Design Furniture now commands control over the lion's share of the local market and has recently expanded to Hua Hin, Phuket, Bangkok and is grabbing an ever increasing share of the export market.

He, too, has dug in deep into Thai society with a Thai wife and adorable son who at the tender age of five can kick his father's butt at video games



in three different languages. Luc is a shining testament to the fact moving to tropical paradise like Pattaya isn't just for retirees. Luc proves that anyone with intellect and drive can make quite a nice life here; even a stone mason/dive instructor from Switzerland.

**Flock south**

As a native of the US state of Florida, I have seen my share of snowbirds. That's what we call people who uproot themselves from land-locked cold climates and flock south like migratory birds.

They come for the sunshine and the lifestyle. What many of them soon realise is you can't just golf and fish all day the rest of your life. And even those two honorable hobbies aren't much fun without some good friends to do it with.

Sadly, I've seen a whole lot of folks who come to Florida just waiting to die in the sunshine. Unless you are an anti-social shut-in, this will never happen to you in Pattaya.

What makes Pattaya so unique

is that there aren't just retirees here; there's a little bit of everything. There are people who came to start a second, or even third, life. There are people from somewhere else who work entirely somewhere else who choose to relax and play here. There are people who have lived here for decades and have businesses and families here. There are people who just got here and are wide-eyed with wonder.

**Rash statement**

Earlier in this article I made the rash statement that nobody would come to Pattaya just for the entertainment, but now I'm going to recant ... or to be more accurate ... refine what I said. Just because Pattaya is not known for world class entertainment doesn't mean it's boring. What we do have are world class people. Not everything is great in Pattaya, but we do have everything.

Now I'm going to use a word you rarely hear associated with Pattaya ... culture. No, there aren't any fine art museums or ballet companies; and I don't think I've ever heard of anyone attending the Pattaya Opera or Orchestra. But, I've learned more about different cultures here than anywhere in my previous life, and I've lived in some pretty cool places.

**Understanding cricket**

Before I came to Pattaya, I'd never been to a polo match, understood what cricket is all about or even heard of the French game Pentaque.

I'd never met a real Israeli, Kiwi or Corsican. My ideas about colonial empires, world history and my country's role in global politics have all been altered forever. When I moved to this crazy place, I got my ID card as a World Citizen.

And, when I step back and take in the big picture, I realise that our location has little or nothing to do with it.

If you picked this expatriate community up and set them down on a desert island, it would instantly become a great place to be.

And, not because of the beaches, the food or the weather ... because of the "P" factor.

**Bart Walters**  
Pattayan to the core

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