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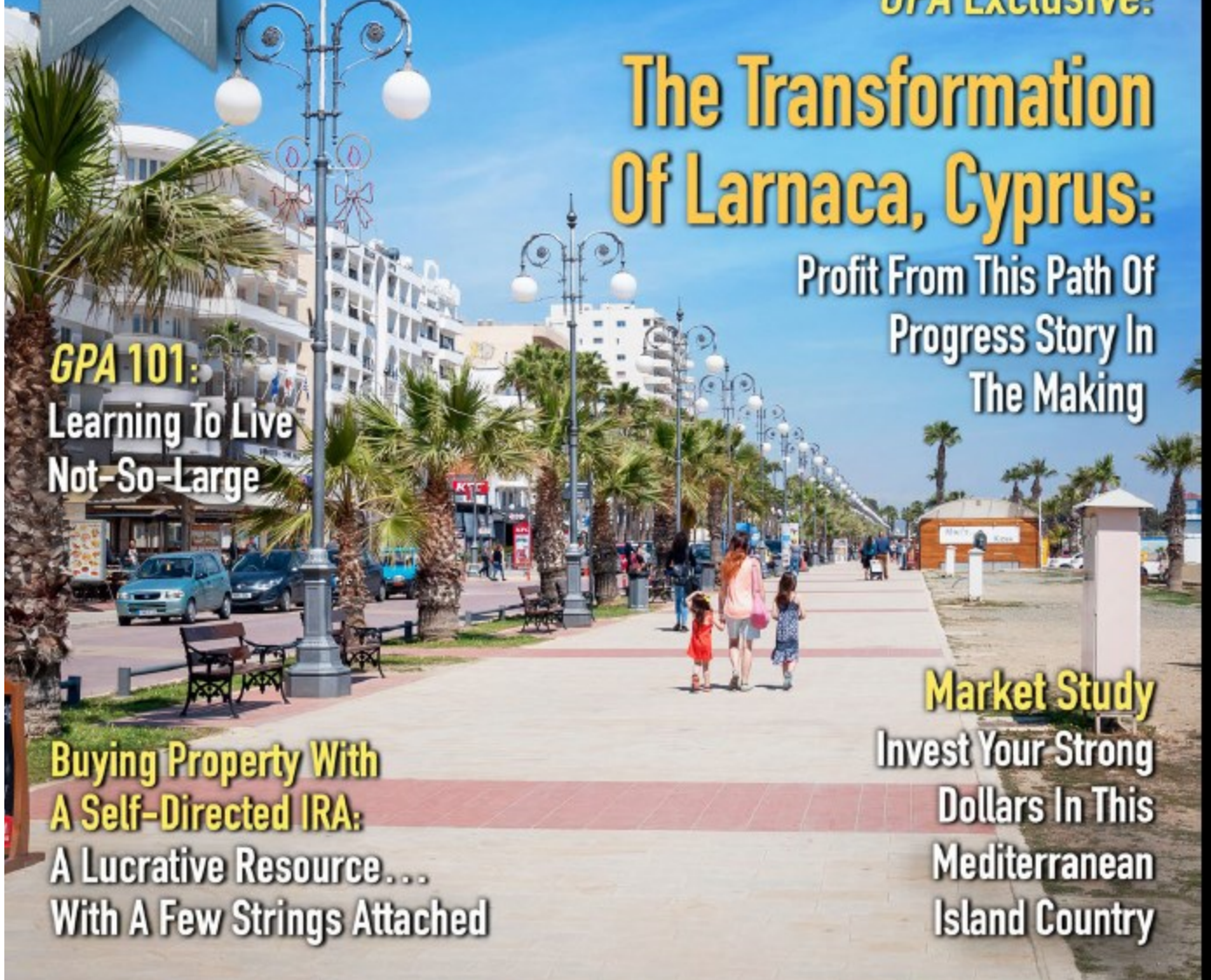
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Learning To Live
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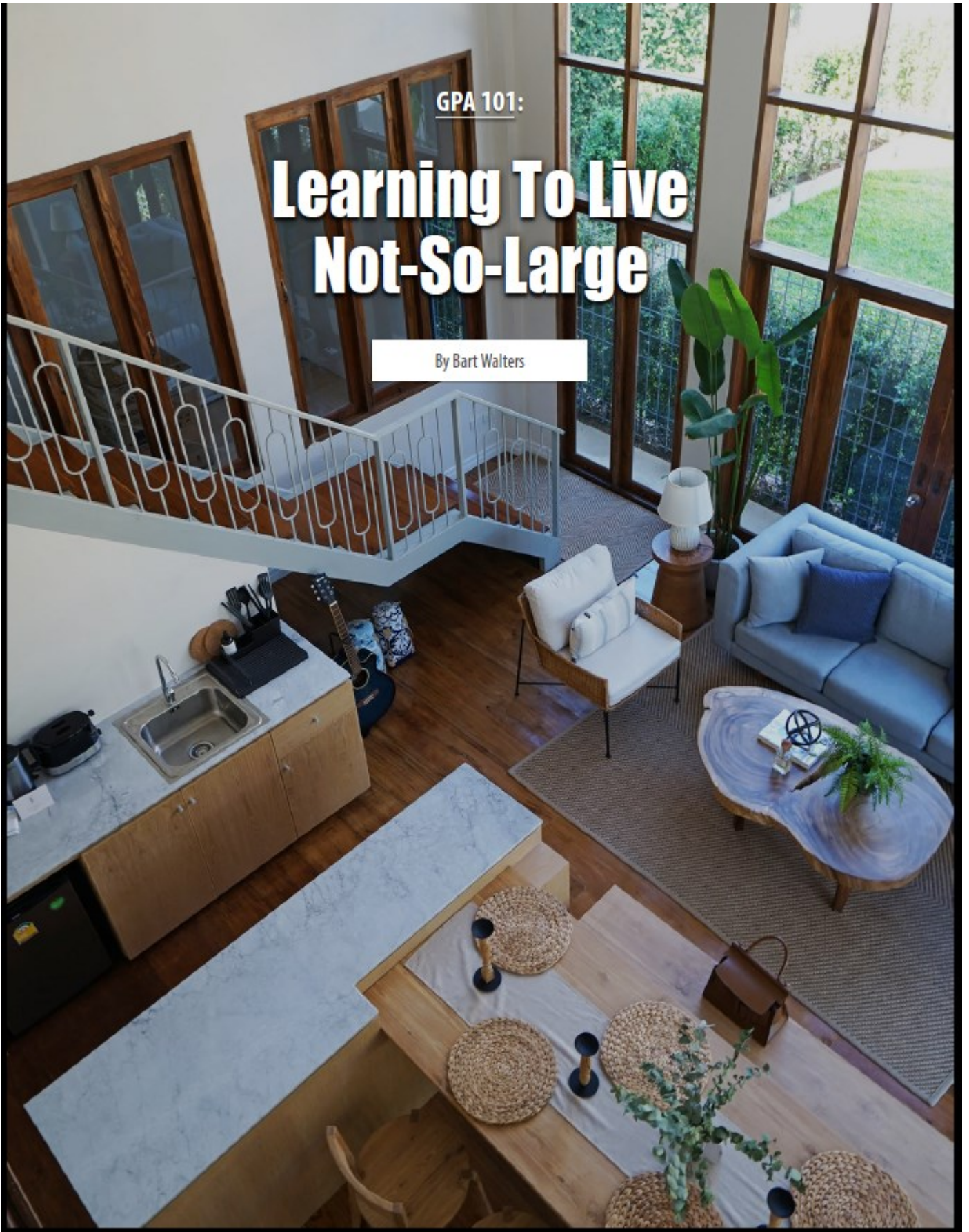
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GPA 101:

Learning To Live Not-So-Large

By Bart Walters



If you've never lived in another country, you might think apartments, condos, and houses come in the same sizes they do in North America. Maybe you assume that you could move from your three-bedroom, two-bathroom property in suburban Illinois, or your 700-square-foot apartment in Sacramento and find similar lodging in any moderately developed country. A lot of Americans think everybody enjoys a similar scale of living space. I've got news for you: North Americans live pretty large.

When I first moved to Thailand, I realized everything was just bigger in North America. Compared to almost every other country in the world, we live in cavernous spaces. In Germany, the average house size is 108 square meters. In Italy, it's 81 square meters. In the U.K., it's 76 square meters. In China, it's 62 square meters.

The average home size in the United States is 201 square meters.

I had been living in a three-bedroom, three-bathroom rambling two-story house in Florida. I also had a beach condo that was exactly the same size. I had two, two-car garages storing junk I didn't need. I had two luxurious dining tables I had never eaten a meal on. And I had two formal living rooms casually wasting space and collecting dust.

In Thailand, I started out living on the big island of Phuket in a big three-bedroom house with a pool, just like back home. But after a few months, I could feel how wasteful it was. I didn't have a family. I didn't need all that room. It was a frivolous expense.

Trust me, I didn't come to this conclusion on my own. It was more like the will of Thai society. Thai people and expats alike look upon a single man living in a giant house all alone as an ignorant waste of resources. To Thai people, there is no greater fool than a man who is foolish with money. Eventually, I was shamed into scaling down.

Then I moved to Bangkok and got introduced to apartment living and condo shopping. I went looking for a one-bedroom bachelor pad like I had as a young dude. But the size of the place I had in my North

American mind was just not available in Bangkok. I looked at dozens of properties. Everything seemed to be too small or included too many bedrooms.

Finally, my agent found a distressed unit in a really good building within walking distance to the Skytrain. The previous owner was attempting to renovate and only got as far as the demolition before he ran out of money. I could buy what was basically a bare shell for half its market value. The buildout would be up to me. It wasn't nearly as big as I wanted, but the deal was just too good.

So, there I stood, in the middle of my 67-square-meter concrete box. It seemed huge when it was empty, but simple math told me it was much smaller than I was accustomed to. I knew I would need to be very space conscious with my design for the buildout. I went to the massive Kinokuniya Bookstore at Siam Paragon to buy some books on interior design. I came home with a book about yachts. I figured nobody gets the most out of space than interior designers on million-dollar boats.

The ideas I incorporated from the yacht design book worked like a charm. I learned doors that need to swing open create a huge amount of dead space, so every interior door in my new place was designed to slide away into a hidden pocket. The wardrobe and master bathroom were configured to need no door at all but still retain privacy. The granite kitchen counter was extended to create a dining table and workstation together. It was an ergonomic masterpiece, and with a whole wall of city view windows, the place seemed huge.

I've lived in big houses that weren't nearly as comfortable. Within a year, I had scaled down from 200-plus square meters to just 67. I felt like a fat guy who just lost a hundred pounds.

Over the years, I've owned several one-bedroom condos of various sizes in Thailand. For me, the perfect size is between 75 and 80 square meters with 1.5 bathrooms. But if I go looking for something that size now, I won't find it in any new buildings.

Condos constructed during the last 10 years have all scaled the floorspace down significantly to keep entry-level prices low. In my 12-year-old building at



Jomtien Beach, the one-bedroom units are 85 square meters. In the new building next door, they jam two bedrooms and two bathrooms into 60 square meters. In my building, the studios are 52 square meters. In the building next door, studios are 30 square meters or roughly the size of a decent hotel room. I've seen new studios advertised that were 24 square meters. That's more like a room at Motel 6 (not a place you'd want to get stuck during a pandemic).

If buying a brand-new condo is something you are interested in, be on the lookout for some sleight-of-hand when you visit the swanky showrooms of new projects.

A common design trick is the use of large tiles on the floor of show units to make the space seem bigger. The most common size I've seen is 60x60 cm tiles. If they are laid to run diagonally, the illusion is even more effective. Home shoppers can turn this trick around and use the tiles to count up, multiply, and figure exactly how big the floor space is. Your eye may get fooled, but the math doesn't lie.

Another technique developers use to create the sensation of space is undersized furniture. A queen-sized bed instead of a king in the master bedroom. A

three-cushion sofa that is only 170 cm long. When your eyes focus on the furniture, you equate it to pieces you are familiar with that are much larger. When I worked with a furniture factory in Pattaya, I found out they produce lines specifically for condo showrooms. They call it "the dollhouse collection." These are nice pieces built 30% smaller than what they sell in their showrooms. (You can use the same tile counting technique to measure the size of furniture sitting on the floor.)

Mirrors always make a place look more spacious. Bathrooms with no rugs or towels will look bigger as well. A townhouse with stairs may have extra-steep, narrow steps to save space. All these tone-on-tone, white-gray-taupe paint schemes in the models are designed to create a mirage of wide-open space.

Expat buyers can easily get frustrated. They know they need to adjust to a smaller space, but deceptive showrooms blur their judgment about how liveable a place really is. The truth is, you simply don't know what "too small" is until you discover it firsthand. Every tenured expat I know has a story about an awful place they used to live.

In my opinion, making a bad decision on living space is avoidable with the following techniques...

1. Use Serviced Apartments

Try renting and living in several different-sized serviced apartments. I'm not sure if the whole serviced apartment idea ever got traction in America, but in Thailand (and most of Southeast Asia) it is a very viable living option. In every major metro area of Thailand, you'll find a great selection of fully furnished apartments for rent by the month, with no long-term obligations or deposit requirements. From five-star luxury to budget studios, there's a serviced apartment to fit your lifestyle.

While I was building out my first condo, I lived in several serviced apartments in Bangkok. I've seen them as large as five bedrooms and as small as hotel rooms. The 50-square-meter, one-bedroom apartment I had near On Nut Skytrain station was perfect. I recommend you use serviced apartments to help determine what size of living space is best for you. Then you can rent a long-term place and get a better deal, or buy your own with confidence.

2. Look at Older Buildings

As it seems like the trend of smaller and smaller units is going to continue, I recommend focusing your search on older buildings that are well-maintained. You'll be more comfortable and get more bang for your buck. What's more, you can employ the only principle I remember from my freshman Economics class: "We value that which is rare." Even slightly more spacious units are hard to find and, should you become a landlord, these appeal to a more upscale rental pool.

3. Design Your Own Space

Buying a "bare shell" is also a great way to circumvent the size problem. You could buy more than one unit adjacent to each other and build them out as one big place. You could also apply some of my yacht designer principles and maximize a smaller space. Many brand-new developments will offer bare shell units at a discount. If you find an older unit that needs a complete remodel, it's almost as good as a bare shell. In the end, the demolition costs are minimal, and you get to implement your own design.

The market has matured over the past 20 years, so a wider range of home sizes is available everywhere in Thailand. Make no mistake, if you want a 300-square-meter rambling penthouse, they are available in a number of locations. If you want a rockstar mansion with a guitar-shaped swimming pool... I know a guy. But the majority of expats I know don't come to Thailand simply to continue their old lifestyle in a new place. Most of them want to simplify their lives and make the most of their time in this wonderful country. That's hard to do when you're all wrapped up in maintaining a huge property.

Should you make the trip to Thailand and find yourself looking for a place, keep a few things in mind.

- Real estate is measured in meters, not feet... get used to it.
- How liveable a place might be will depend almost as much on the design as it does the floor space.
- You're used to living large in America... extra-large. 🏠

About The Author

Bart Walters is an American expat who has lived in Thailand for over 20 years. He's been active in real estate development and has written dozens of articles and essays about living and doing business in Thailand. Bart has also been a teacher at a major university in Bangkok and recently published his first book titled "Sunset Vertigo," a collection of short stories about expat life in Southeast Asia.