



Expatriate Nostalgia: Nostalgic Emotions among ‘Permanent Tourists’ in Pattaya, Thailand

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ABSTRACT

In a globalized world, the ability to travel and settle elsewhere than one’s native country is an opportunity open to still more people. Particularly with the rise of ‘retirement migration’ or ‘lifestyle migration’, increasing numbers of senior members move to foreign destinations in order to live the remaining parts of their lives. The reasons for leaving their home countries in the first place are diversified as are also their experiences upon arrival. However, nostalgia is an identifiable emotion among many expats or, in this article called ‘permanent tourists’, who may experience a longing for what they left behind. Based on a study in the city of Pattaya, Thailand, the author by way of informal meetings and conversations with Western expatriates explored their experiences of nostalgia as an everyday emotion relating to different parts of their lives and memories. The article shows how nostalgia is far from a one-dimensional emotional response to changing life-circumstances, but rather encompasses a variety of connotations, expressions and experiences.

KEYWORDS

Expatriates, Pattaya, nostalgia for one’s homeland, nostalgia for one’s past, nostalgia for the past of one’s present home

INTRODUCTION

It is probably no exaggeration to state that the city of Pattaya in Thailand has something of a mixed reputation. On the one hand, for thousands of tourists it is regarded as a popular destination because of its stretchy beaches, beautiful (and comparably cheap) hotels, numerous bars and restaurants and not least a flamboyant tourist and nightlife scene. On the other hand, however, Pattaya has for decades routinely been associated with a rampant sex industry attracting particularly male tourists from all over the world. In fact, since its development from a small fishing village in the 1950s to today's hustle and bustle of the expanding city, Pattaya has earned a rather dubious reputation captured by epithets such as the 'Sex Capital of the Southeast', 'Sin City' or the 'Las Vegas of Sex'.

The history of Pattaya as we know it today has been quite changeable, starting out with the fishing village being transformed into a retreat for American soldiers during the Vietnam War, then into a beachside haven for well-off inhabitants from the Bangkok area to the current influx of almost ten million tourists from around the world visiting the city every year. Pattaya is a place that since the 1970s has been associated with an illicit yet highly visible and accessible sex scene with multiple massage parlours, strip and sex clubs and street prostitution. There is thus an unmistakable 'territorial stigma' [1] attached to the city and not least to everyone who visits it or who lives there. There is a suspicion about their motives, intentions and actions that makes them the easy targets of prejudice and labelling.

True, there is a lot of sex in Pattaya – some of it rather openly advertised, but most of it is part of a discrete and clandestine underworld – making it difficult to mention the city without immediately afterwards turning to the topic of sex. Even though prostitution is officially illegal in Thailand, in practice it is tolerated and regulated, and Pattaya is one of the main areas for the buying and selling of sexual services in the country. It is by many, and not least in tabloid papers and journalistic reportage, regarded as a dirty city and sinful place catering for carnal pleasures and illicit activities [2]. A flashing neon sign in one of the most crowded streets in the city, the infamous Walking Street, thus boldly announces: 'Good guys go to heaven, bad guys go to Pattaya!'. Doubtlessly, Pattaya is a place that attracts many visitors exactly for its alluring promises of sexual adventure. But to anyone armed with more than just tabloid information, Pattaya is also known as a place where thousands of expatriates live their everyday lives in circumstances different but not necessarily radically diverging from those of so many other people who have decided to live their lives away from their native homeland – such as those living in the Spanish 'Sun Coast' area or in Florida's 'retirement paradise'. The vast majority of expats living permanently in Pattaya are Westerners (British, American, French, German, Scandinavians, Dutch, Belgian and so on) and male. The majority of these men are also in advanced middle age, close to or past retirement. The main reason

for this age-profile of the expat community is first and foremost that it is difficult to obtain a visa unless one has already retired or has official business to conduct in the country. A common sarcastic answer among many expats when asked why they live in Pattaya ('of all places') is that they are 'climate refugees' – they have fled the bad weather back home in order to live 'the good life' under the sun. This notion of 'the good life' is frequently being evoked when describing why Pattaya has gradually turned out to be the chosen place to live, the notion covering many different connotations and personal dreams.

Despite the many apparent commonalities, the expat experience in Pattaya is in fact quite diversified when it comes to lifestyle. There are those who frequent the countless bars or massage parlours on a regular basis, whereas others hardly ever set their feet there. There are those who stress the availability of sex and female company as one of the main reasons for moving to the city in the first place, whereas others hardly ever mention it. Some emphasize the favourable price level of 'all the good things in life' as their main motivation, whereas others regard such financial considerations as irrelevant. So work while living in the city, whereas others simply enjoy retirement. And so on. After all, Pattaya, like most other cities, means many and widely different things to different people, and the reasons why people decide to move and live there depend on a variety of individual push and pull factors.

Even though the exact size of the expatriate community in Pattaya is difficult to determine – not least because not everyone living there is officially registered with their address – a rough estimate of around 5.000-10.00 expats would probably not be far off.¹ As mentioned, Pattaya attracts visitors and residents from all over the world and as a permanent destination in particular caters for the senior population of retirees especially due to the favourable possibility of obtaining an extended retirement visa that is not available to everyone else. We now live in a globalized world in which what is called 'retirement tourism', 'residential tourism' or 'retirement migration' has become an option pursued by more people, particularly for those capable of affording a life of luxury abroad after retirement and who can transfer their pension payments and savings to sunnier destinations [3] [4]. There are many spots on the globe attracting such initiatives, often advertised under seductive newspaper or magazine headings of: 'The Best Places to Retire Abroad for Sun, Sea and Savings' or 'The 10 Best Beach Towns for Retirement'. Interestingly, Pattaya is hardly ever mentioned in such advertisements. Pattaya, it seems, particularly (though not exclusively) attract single men who want to live the remainder of their lives with all the promises this particular city holds in store for them. They have for all practical intents and purposes – by slightly twisting a term used by Polish-British sociologist Zygmunt Bauman [5] – become what could be called 'permanent tourists'. Bauman once metaphorically differentiated between so-called 'tourists' and 'vagabonds' in a world in which the means of mobility has become the most important source

of inequality. In Bauman's rendition, the 'tourists' are those who can travel voluntarily and who regard the world as their oyster, and they seek out experiences, pleasures and sensations because they can afford it and are welcomed with open arms (not least due to their spending capacity). At the other end of the continuum we find the 'vagabonds' which is a notion referring to those who are forced to travel or flee (refugees and immigrants), for whom life on the road is dangerous and who are not greeted anywhere with open arms. Both tourists and vagabonds are mobile, but for different reasons, through different routes and with different opportunities. One might, using this metaphorical vocabulary, describe the expats of Pattaya – and elsewhere – as 'permanent tourists', people who have decided to move away from what previously constituted 'home' in order to start a new and better life on foreign shores. They are not tourists arriving today and leaving again tomorrow, but they have permanently settled in a new place of their own choice [6].

In this article, we shall encounter and explore some of the experiences of nostalgia as found among Western expatriates living in Pattaya. The background for this specific interest in nostalgia was a study of everyday life and emotions in Pattaya that has been ongoing for a number of years. Within the past few years, however, the focus has specifically shifted towards an interest in nostalgic sentiments – not least because they were frequently voiced by the men I met and spoke to. As we shall see from the findings, nostalgia is not a one-dimensional experience, but rather relates to different aspects of the expat life and to the hopes and dreams (some dashed) associated with living far away from one's native homeland.

On 'Nostalgia'

Most people intuitively think they know what nostalgia is all about. However, the notion of 'nostalgia' in fact has a long and winded history. Originally, the notion was used as a descriptive term for a disease associated with homesickness (*Heimweh* in German). Back in the late 17th century, Swiss medical student Johannes Hofer coined the term 'nostalgia' to account for an ailment afflicting Swiss mercenaries stationed away from home and doing service in wars that removed them from their beloved homeland. To him, nostalgia was the longing for feeling at home or for returning to one's home (hence the combination of the *nostos* and the *algia* in the term, the aching or longing to return to home). According to Hofer's thesis, nostalgia was particularly triggered by confrontation with new and unfamiliar experiences such as the variety of the weather, foreign manners, diverse kinds of food 'and one might add six hundred other things' [7]. 'Nostalgia' was thus originally the medical term reserved for the experience of homesickness among soldiers being sent abroad to foreign countries to fight wars – an experience that according to Hofer's description was painful and causing psychological as

well as physical distress among its hapless victims, who, he suggested, could be offered medicine or rest in order to ease the pain. As I will show in the following, although nostalgia is no longer found as an entry in medical textbooks, the experience of longing for one's homeland is still an integral part of the nostalgic experience.

This spatial dimension, however, is merely one aspect of nostalgia – a notion encapsulating many different conceptual connotations and emotional and experiential complexities [8]. For example, within social research nostalgia has been described by way of two quite different stances. On the one hand, and perhaps particularly from within the ranks of political science or political sociology, nostalgia has been critically associated with and castigated for a certain backwardness, resistance to social change and an incessant but problematic search for the 'lost paradise' of the past [9] [10]. In this view, nostalgia – sometimes called 'restorative nostalgia' or 'retrotopia' – is regarded as a conservative, regressive and reactionary social force drawing people's attention away from their present concerns towards a longing for an often glorified and selectively remembered past. On the other hand, however, nostalgia has also, particularly within psychological and microsociological research, been praised for its 'feel good' triggers, its meaning-making capabilities and its important contribution to psychological and existential well-being [11] [12]. In this way, nostalgia is – and remains – an essentially contested emotion.

Moreover, nostalgia is not merely about a spatial dimension (as in missing 'home') but it is also a temporal feeling characterized with a longing for the past and a sense of loss of something that once was [13]. This is the case for nostalgia on the individual as well as collective level of analysis. However, within nostalgia research a useful distinction is sometimes drawn between 'personal nostalgia' and 'historical nostalgia' [14]. A historical nostalgia is most often a commonly or collectively shared longing for a historical past, real or imagined, and relates to 'the good old days', 'the glory of the past', 'the way it used to be' or a time before everything went wrong. This kind of nostalgia often serves as a hotbed for nationalist or reactionary sentiments glorifying and romanticizing the past. Contrary to this historical variant celebrating and longing for the collective past, a personal nostalgia – as is obvious from the name – is something pertaining to the individual's past, something that happened previously in one's life or is imagined to have done so. This may be a longing for a time when one felt happy, free, untroubled or in good health. Such fond memories of childhood and youth are the archetypal expressions of this kind of nostalgia. In either case, historical or personal, nostalgia relates to the past, and in this way nostalgia contains an important temporal dimension besides the aforementioned spatial dimension of homesickness or physical displacement.

Finally, it is also important to stress that nostalgia – and perhaps particularly the aforementioned personal variant of it – can serve many different concrete purposes in people’s lives. Psychological research has revealed many positive as well as more problematic sides to nostalgic emotions. For some nostalgia is a means for finding a sense of relief and serves as a source for reducing stress, for others it provides meaning and comfort in insecure and uncertain circumstances by remembering a less troubled time, for yet others the longing for the past may overshadow personal development and lead to stagnation or paralysis. The fact that nostalgia may impact people differently and that people pursue nostalgia for different reasons and with different outcomes testifies to the inherent complexity of the emotion. Basically, nostalgia is a ‘mixed emotion’, sometimes also referred to as a ‘bittersweet emotion’, because it on the one hand is a sweet reminder of something good and valuable, but on the other hand it is also characterized by the deep sense of loss and the painful longing for something that cannot be retrieved [15]. The sweetness and the bitterness thus go hand in hand. This inbuilt emotional tension is thus part and parcel of the nostalgic experience.

After this initial (and far from exhaustive) clarification of some dimensions of nostalgia, let us now turn to the study of feelings of nostalgia amongst Western expatriates in Pattaya.

The Study

There is already a lot of research conducted on Western tourism in and migration to Thailand as well as increasingly also on the migration of Thai people (primarily women) to the West [16]. Perhaps for obvious reasons, a substantial part of the existing social research conducted on commercial tourism in Thailand (and particularly on life in Pattaya) has concentrated on its more seedy sides such as the sex industry and the human tragedies associated with prostitution, drug and alcohol abuse as well as the high prevalence of suicide among the expat community (earning Pattaya the name as ‘the suicide capital of the South East’). Particularly the research literature on sex tourism and the prostitution industry has since the 1980s been quite extensive [17], and this area of research continues to attract attention [18] [19] [20], particularly with a critical perspective on the exploitation of local women and the perpetuation of ‘Western’, ‘white’ or ‘masculine’ privileges [21] [22] [23]. However, research specifically devoted to expat life in Pattaya in itself is very limited, which is in fact quite surprising taking into account that the city offers a golden opportunity obtaining knowledge and insight for understanding the experiences of expatriate life. Many studies of expat communities around the world – sometimes referred to as ‘retirement migration’, ‘lifestyle migration’, ‘residential tourism or ‘international retirement migration’ – have concentrated on some of the more ‘obvious’ locations such as the sunny coasts of Spain and France, southern Florida

or other exotic destinations catering particularly for the affluent segment of retirees. In comparison, the large international expat community in Thailand and particularly in Pattaya – besides some pioneering studies by Erik Cohen [24] [25] [26] – has remained relatively under-researched (see, however, [27] [28] [29] [30]).

The background for my interest in studying nostalgia among expats was quite coincidental. Firstly, I did my first visit to Thailand as a tourist some ten years ago, and prior to that had never thought about the expat community down there. By seeing the many men who had decided to live their lives in Pattaya suddenly made me aware that there was something sociologically interesting at stake. My first short visit to Pattaya thus resulted in an interest in understanding the various pushes and pulls leading men from the Western world to Pattaya in order to live their lives and to study how they organize and contemplate their everyday lives. Hence during the past 7-8 years I have visited Pattaya a few times every year, each time mingling with and talking to members of the expat community in bars and elsewhere and in this way gaining some perspective on their lives. Second, in recent years I have been editing a few research volumes on nostalgia [31] [32] that in many ways contributed to re-orienting my interest in the men in Pattaya to focussing on their nostalgic thoughts and feelings, not least because many of the men to whom I have spoken expressed nostalgic sentiments. So my perspective during my past few visits from 2017-2020 was primarily on nostalgia as an everyday experience among the expats.

The study conducted was highly explorative, impressionistic and qualitative in its attempt to understand expats' thoughts and ideas about everyday life in general and nostalgia in particular. The explorative nature of the study meant that the main concern was to tease out knowledge about feelings of nostalgia by asking questions like: how, when, where and why do you feel nostalgic? Canadian sociologist Erving Goffman [33] once stated that in order to do participant observation that gets to the core of what people do and think, one needs to subject oneself to the same living conditions as the people one studies in order to obtain a deeper and more adequate understanding of their lives. In order to do so properly, I would have had to move permanently to Pattaya and live my life there for an extended period of time. This, however, was not an option. Instead I visited the place as often as possible (at least twice every year), getting to know people, coming on friendly terms with some of them and also communicating on email or via Skype with a few of them whenever I was back home in Denmark.

One way to describe the methodological considerations behind the study would be: free-wheeling, snowballing and coincidental meetings. First of all, the study grew out of a personal curiosity about the life these under-researched men lived. There was therefore no set research agenda or some structured research design as such apart from getting to know and

talk to these expats about their everyday lives and experiences. Second, in order to find interesting people to talk to – and men who had experiences to share – I often used a snowballing strategy, asking one person to introduce me to another and in this way getting to talk to as many men as possible in the short period of time available during my visits that normally lasted a fortnight. Finally, mostly I did not plan formal interviews or meetings ahead, although this did sometimes happen, but instead sought out the hotspots of expat everyday life such as bars, cafés, restaurants and massage parlours. My approach was thus one of informal ‘conversational interviewing’ or ‘strategic conversations’ [34] [35] with a specific focus on nostalgic experiences. Some of my conversations took place whilst having foot massage next to an expat with whom I struck a conversation, other times we planned to meet up in a bar from a drink, yet other times the meeting was purely coincidental as when starting a conversation in a shopping mall or in a local food market. My sampling strategy was thus one of coincidence and convenience, making contact whenever the opportunity arose and sometimes meeting up several times with the same men, often also without a specific research purpose. Conversations lasted from around half an hour to a few hours of informal talk.

The main method used for obtaining information and collecting stories was quite simply everyday conversation, meeting up with the expats – planned or coincidentally – in bars, massage parlours, coffee shops or in other locations. In the following, the expats have been appropriately anonymised with pseudonyms (although many of them willingly agreed to share their real names and stories), leaving only information about nationality and approximate age. Besides these conversations, I also read internet posts and blogs from expats living in Thailand (or *farangs* as they are sometimes referred to in Thai) sharing their experiences and worries. Moreover, I read some of the obligatory booklets about expat life in Thailand (such as Stephen Leather’s *Private Dancer*, Iain Corness’s *Farang* and Neil Hutchison’s *Money Number One*) and I consulted the daily local newspapers in order to glean stories relevant to my topic of interest. This provided me with some background knowledge and hints as to what would be relevant topics of conversation and gave me an idea of what the expats thought and cared about also regarding nostalgia. For example, on a webpage for Thai expats I came across the following elegant observation on nostalgia: ‘Most expats are familiar with nostalgia. Sometimes it comes to us gently; other times it hits us hard. And though we can usually identify the feeling as a bittersweet longing for a time gone by, the triggers and details are deeply personal’ [36].

In the explorative study I conducted in Pattaya, nostalgia primarily referred to the personal kind (rather than to the aforementioned historical variant) as the knowledge obtained came from conversations with individuals asked to reflect on their own lives and their own feelings of nostalgia. In the remainder of this article, I will based on this study of Western

expats living in the city of Pattaya describe some of their experiences of nostalgia in order to show how personal nostalgia is in fact quite a diversified feeling.

Expat Nostalgia – Variations on a Theme

As mentioned, when I first started out my visits to Pattaya, nostalgia was in fact not my primary concern. I wanted to investigate and understand everyday life and emotions in general among expats, not least because I was curious about how one could live permanently in this in many ways ‘stigmatised city’. I talked with many of the expats about a variety of topics entirely unrelated to nostalgia such as everyday routines, love life, money, family, health, social life, community and so on. But as I began writing on a few volumes on nostalgia, I suddenly realized a connection there and began more systematically to inquire about topics and themes relating to nostalgia. I soon discovered that many of the expats had stories and sentiments to share that suddenly made nostalgia the most natural topic of conversation. During my subsequent visits to Pattaya, I gradually became aware that nostalgia thrived there, although the word in itself was not used very often or unprovoked (but, again, how many people use ‘nostalgia’ in everyday conversation?). However, watching the unfolding of everyday life and listening to expat conversations, nostalgia was definitely there beneath the surface and between the lines. Derek, an English bar owner in his late sixties, who had lived in Pattaya for the past five years and was the proprietor of a well-known bar and guesthouse in central Pattaya told me: ‘If you’re looking for nostalgia, you’ve come to the right place!’. He went on to tell me that the bar scene in the city was divided in two sections. One section was orientated towards the tourists coming and going and wanting to hear all the new music and drink the latest fancy and comparatively expensive cocktails. These places were hardly ever frequented by the ‘permanent tourists’ (the expats) who preferred the other scene mentioned by Derek: one catering for the nostalgia of the expats. This latter bar scene was less expensive, predominantly played old time music from the past (60s, 70s and 80s music), held karaoke nights and in general sought to create an atmosphere of homeliness for its regular customers. This bar scene was located relatively far from the hustle and bustle of the Walking Street – the (in)famous bar and club street near the beach of Pattaya. By playing old time music, providing familiar dishes for different nationalities, keeping newspapers from back home, showing televised football games and other types of sport on the screen, this would be the place to find many of the expats.

My conversations with the men quickly revealed that their ideas about nostalgia were not entirely similar. In other words, there were many different faces of nostalgia, many different ‘takes’ on it and different ways of verbalizing it. Some rejected being nostalgic at all (one expat, for example, telling me that ‘you’ve got the wrong guy’ when I asked about

homesickness and nostalgia), but most admitted that nostalgia was somehow a driving force in some of their decisions, in their everyday doings and in their feelings about their past and present lives. In the following, I have selected three general themes - 'Nostalgia for One's Homeland', 'Nostalgia for One's Youth and 'Nostalgia for the Past of One's Present Home' – as illustrations of how nostalgia was perceived, experienced and described by some of the expats I met.

Nostalgia for One's Homeland

A common thread running through many of the conversations was the fact that the expats had moved to Pattaya in order to pursue the dream of what was often referred to as 'the good life'. The notion of 'the good life' covered many different angles, dreams and aspirations: living a comfortable and carefree life, living a life with the possibility of meeting the 'one and only' or having access to multiple different (and younger) sexual partners, living a life of luxury despite not having a lot of money, living a life that allows one to go out to eat and drink on a daily basis, living a life in the sun, living a life without loneliness and marginalization, and so on. All in all, the phrase 'the good life' meant different things to different men and sometimes many of the aforementioned dimensions of it coincided in one and the same dream that to many of them had now finally materialized. The vast majority of the men I met regarded their lives in Pattaya as more happy, more relaxing and more fulfilling than the lives they had left behind in their respective home countries. During my conversations, I quickly noticed how it was a typical, almost automatic or ritual, remark that life was 'so much better now than before' when they lived in their own countries, sometimes even so blatantly expressed that I started to wonder if this was a sort of defence mechanism or denial strategy. As I later realized, some of the men struggled with various problems that overshadowed their ability to fully live out their dream.

There were many different paths leading to Pattaya, many different push and pull factors involved in why these men had moved to the city in the first place. Some were running towards something (a hope or a dream of a better or more fulfilling life), whereas others were running away from something (bad decisions, divorce, crime, unemployment, loneliness, etc.). However, despite the fact that most of the men I spoke to had voluntarily – and often after long and hard considerations, periods of tergiversation and extensive planning – decided to move permanently to Pattaya, not everything had necessarily panned out well for all. Some had found what they were looking for and lived happy and fulfilling lives, others had a string of sad stories behind them of alcohol abuse, money loss and romantic entanglements (prior to moving to Pattaya and sometimes continued whenever arriving there), yet others had no option to move back even if they wanted to due to ties cut to family and friends, financial prob-

lems or a fear of returning home as a ‘failure’. Despite – and sometimes due to – such setbacks and problems, most were adamant to stay in Pattaya no matter what. They did not see any alternatives or had decided that there was no turning back. For example, Neil (mid-forties) from the northeast of England, who had lived in Thailand without a valid visa for a few years and who had been in trouble with the authorities back home resulting in his decision to leave, told me: ‘Even a bad day in Pattaya is better than a good day in [anonymised city name]’. To him there was no alternative. Some also denied feeling nostalgic about their home countries and on the contrary expressed their relief of having left what they regarded as increasingly untenable conditions regarding, for example, immigration policies, gender equality or other political and social issues back home. Norwegian man Kjetil (mid-sixties), who had only lived in Pattaya for a few years after voluntary retirement – and who had visited the city many times as a tourist prior to his decision to make the permanent move and who, in his own words, had ‘fallen in love with the place at first sight’ – stated: ‘You know what, I don’t miss Norway or Scandinavia and I will *never* go back, not even if I get sick. Everything has gone wrong in my country over the past 20-30 years so I am not nostalgic about Norway. I can miss the landscape and special dishes but I don’t miss Norway as such’. As I have explained elsewhere, there were thus some frequently heard quasi-political utterances among some of the expats about the reason for leaving their home country and living their lives as far away as possible [37].

Common to many of the men I met was that they – no matter how successful their relocation to Pattaya had otherwise been – still missed the ‘old country’. Even though they were initially reluctant to use the notion of ‘nostalgia’ or recognize it as pertaining to their own feelings and emotions – something that often changed throughout our talks – several expressed that they missed ‘back home’ and frequently contemplated if they had made the right choice to move, whereas others were determined that they would never return home, feeling that they had now finally found what they were looking for in life. But the homesickness so characteristic of nostalgia when the concept was first proposed, as mentioned earlier, was nevertheless something that either momentarily or more chronically afflicted their thoughts and memories. Especially around Christmas time and other national holidays would the sense of longing for home get stronger. This was reported by Joe, a 69 year-old man from the southeast of England: ‘I admit that during Christmas I miss ‘old England’ (gesturing the inverted commas with his fingers). But the few times I’ve actually gone back to celebrate Christmas since I moved here, I’ve been sad to see that it’s not really what I missed. You see, the country I left is no longer what I miss’. Joe also told me that Christmas in Pattaya was not really the ‘real thing’, even though most bars, restaurants and shops went to great lengths to celebrate Christmas for the expats (keeping the Christmas and New Year’s decorations up

well beyond the duration of the holiday season). Compared to the Christmases of his past, it was experienced as an artificial sensation but, as he stated, it was better than no Christmas at all. Others expressed similar sentiments; this strange mixture of longing for traditions from ‘back home’ coupled with the fear of disappointment when actually going back home. Many mentioned that the only thing they never seemed to miss from back home (where ever that was) was the weather. But they missed the traditions, the food, their friends and families and a sense of belonging that to many was difficult to re-create in Pattaya, not least because of the city’s mix of nationalities and its strange ‘defiance of history’, as one expat had aptly called it.

It was often described how the bar for many of the expats was an important place – in everyday life as well as during celebrations – in order to keep connected not only with Pattaya-based friends, but also with a feeling of ‘homeliness’ or ‘nostalgia’ related to the country they had left behind. Many of the men (however not all) frequented bars that have a national ring to it: the Irish would seek out Irish pubs, the Brits English pubs, Germans German bars, Australians Aussie bars, Danes Danish bars and so on. Here one would find the national newspapers, national television programs, a selection of national dishes and drinks as well as fellow countrymen to talk to. To many of the men the bar was a ‘home away from home’ or an ‘extended living room’ in two different sets of meaning: a home away from the condominium/house they rented or owned somewhere in the city of Pattaya, but also a home away from their home country – a place to remind them about life before moving away. But even though Pattaya hosts hundreds of such ‘national bars’, to most it seemed as if these places were only regarded as poor but necessary substitutes for the ‘real thing’ – the local pub back in their street or neighbourhood ‘back home’. Nevertheless, they would frequent their ‘national bars’ in order to drink beer, eat food and read the news from back home, and to many the visit to the bar would be not only routine but also one of the social high-points of the day or the week.

To some of the men I talked to, the routine of going to their ‘national bar’ would serve as an important everyday distraction and for warding off feelings of loneliness and a sense of social isolation. It was something that most seemed to look forward to, not least because such bar visits held the promise of conversation, reminiscence and a sense of community. For example, retired English schoolteacher John (early seventies) from the London area had lived in Pattaya for the better part of the last decade. He poignantly stated: ‘On any given day, Pattaya can be heaven or it can be hell’. He told me that he was often struck by feelings of mild depression and a lack of meaning in life. John also insisted that he often felt lonely and said that ‘nostalgia is my friend when I feel lonely’. John, being an avid supporter of a London-based football team, noted how the bar to him was a sort of social life-line as he – even this far

away from his country – would find solace in the company of equal-minded countrymen and football supporters: ‘I often plan my nights out in advance from reading what the week’s game schedule looks like’, he told me, and having something to look forward to was important in his life.

Nostalgia for One’s Youth

Many of the men I met and spoke to had already retired from active work life – some many years ago, others more recently. Most of them enjoyed life and the freedom to socialize, play golf, go drinking and generally living a relaxed lifestyle with good food and quite a lot of free time to enjoy with friends. Although many were in quite good shape, not least for their age and lifestyle, others were plagued by serious health problems, and I often heard the words ‘cancer’, ‘diabetes’ and ‘heart problems’ mentioned whenever talking to them about health and illness. Despite sometimes quite substantial physical limitations due to either recent surgery or prolonged illness, many of the men I met and saw insisted on the importance of going out and having a few drinks. One of my informants used the phrase ‘disability parade’ to describe the daily repeated ritual of elderly foreign men showing up in the streets and bars around late afternoon, because some of them were overweight and visibly had difficulties walking, others were in wheelchairs, and yet others had to be driven to the entrance of their local bar by motorcycle taxis or sitting on the back of their wife’s or girlfriend’s bike. A frequent topic of discussion was therefore also private healthcare insurance and where to get the best treatment or where to buy the cheapest medication (for example Viagra or Cialis for impotence problems) if it was not covered by one’s insurance. Pattaya hosts several private hospitals and clinics so conversations about where to go with whatever problem one might have could often be heard around the tables. Obviously, not all the men I met were in a bad shape or had medical problems, but for many a sedentary lifestyle with more smoking and alcohol consumption and more fatty food than what was medically advised had a significant impact on how well they were coping with old age.

To many of the men, the gradual recognition and realization of old age and its accompanying problems and limitations also influenced the way they experienced and verbalized nostalgia. For example, Irishman Paul in his early seventies and proprietor of a local Irish pub had lived in Pattaya since the late 1990s and in his own words had seen so many different ‘human tragedies’ since his first arrival. He stated: ‘I don’t think I am a nostalgic really, but I know many people down here who are. You need to remember that many of us down here are old guys who no longer have the power [here referring to ‘power’ in the sense often used in Pattaya of being virile and sexually functioning, by showing an underarm raised in the air as a phallic symbol] and they miss their youth and when they could go out and go on all night

with the ladies. Impotence is a bad thing down here, you know. Why do you think you can buy Viagra or Cialis everywhere down here? It's for us, the old guys'. Even though there was often some joking about being old and restricted in the ability to living the (sex) life available to the younger men, there was also a certain detectable sense of regret and longing, and it was obvious that there were both pros and cons with being an old age pensioner in Pattaya as compared to back home. For example, on the pro side, there was no stigma attached to having much younger female company as this was a common phenomenon in the city, and it was not frowned upon to visit the massage parlour also if the services requested were of a more intimate character. So to see older men accompanied by considerably younger women is definitely not an uncommon sight in Pattaya – and actually it was this sight that initially sparked my sociological interest in understanding what was at stake here. Although I talked to many expats who told me that they had no interest whatsoever in the local Thai women or in the availability of sexual services, they admitted that to many people they knew it was the definitive magnet when deciding to move here. Gary, a man from Wales in his late sixties whom I met outside a bar in Jomtien south of Pattaya – and who had only lived in the city for a short period of time – confided in me with a sly wink with one eye by asking the rhetorical question: 'Why would anyone chose to live here of all places, were it not for all the young women?'. He went on to say that he now regretted not moving to Pattaya earlier when he was younger and fitter to enjoy all the temptations, but he had had to wait until retirement.

However, there were, as mentioned, also some downsides to getting old in Pattaya that particularly related to health, women, loss of stamina and the memories of 'the wild life' that one could practice when younger. A German man, Hans, I spoke to in his late sixties or early seventies memorably called Pattaya an 'old man's paradise' but also said that he was daily reminded of all the things he could no longer do or enjoy: drinking until the early morning hours, going out with many different ladies and being physical active. To him, Pattaya was a nostalgic but also a painful reminder of his own advancing vulnerability and mortality. He was daily made aware that he was no longer the same man as when he had moved to the city now more than a decade ago. A similar experience was expressed by Avram, a man in his early seventies from Israel who had lived in Pattaya for the past five years and had opened a massage shop with a fellow countryman: 'If only I had discovered this city 30 years ago when I was younger and could have enjoyed it all more (mentioning women, the nightlife and the sexy massages). Now I am too old. For me it is only about having a quiet life and making enough money to stay here'. These expressions of regret and of remembering the younger years of physical attractiveness, stamina and a better health situation were quite common, and even though some carried on living 'the wild life' even well into seniority, many others real-

ized that there was more to life as a pensioner, and they now found comfort and pleasure in other aspects and activities of everyday life in Pattaya than previously.

In this way, living in Pattaya is for some ‘permanent tourists’ an ambivalent, bitter-sweet experience – an innate bittersweetness so characteristic of nostalgia. On the one hand, Pattaya is to some a painful reminder of the things that are no longer possible for them due to old age or illness. On the other hand, however, I have also often heard men in their sixties and seventies (or even older) particularly stressing that Pattaya is the only place they know of where it is still possible to live a life with much younger women and with the nightlife scene that they still cherish – and with no stigma attached to it. Many have stated that exactly the fact that there are no questions, no condemning looks and no judgements, as would be the case ‘back home’, makes many of the problems of life in Pattaya worthwhile.

Nostalgia for the Past of One’s Present Home

During my nights out and conversations with expats I discovered that there was frequent talking not only about the distant past when they themselves were younger and lived elsewhere (‘back home’) but also of the more recent past, especially among the expats who had lived in Pattaya for a long time and had earlier enjoyed a more frivolous and active life in the city than now. There were many funny stories, many almost mythical tales about people and places in the city and a lot of bragging when talking about ‘the old days’ of Pattaya. It occurred to me that in many of the stories told particularly by experienced expats there was mentioning of the ‘old’ or ‘past’ Pattaya on the one hand and then the ‘new’ Pattaya of the present time on the other. It seemed as if there was an unmistakable nostalgia about this ‘old Pattaya’ as compared to its present incarnation.

Particularly throughout the past decade or so, the city of Pattaya has undergone some quite dramatic transformations, visible not least in the ascending skyline of the Beach Road area, in the construction of several gigantic shopping malls around the city, in the demolition of the old colonial buildings and shabby homes of poor Thai people to make room for brand new hotel chains and condominium skyscrapers, and in the expansion of the city’s perimeter along the coastline in northern and southern direction. In fact, Pattaya has continuously been subject to changes ever since it was a small fishing community of a few hundred local families in the 1940 and 1950s and then in the coming decades was transformed into the tourist magnet of today (the first major hotel opened in the city in 1965 and, as mentioned, in the late 1960s American servicemen began to frequent the place during the Vietnam War). Many of the expats I spoke to had arrived in Pattaya since the turn of the millennium, and many told me with some undeniable regret about their feelings about what they had witnessed since their arrival.

As mentioned earlier, the expat men I talked to told me that they had moved to Pattaya for a number of different reasons: the weather, the women, the prices, the nightlife, the freedom, the comforts of life in general, in order to restart life, etc. It was a common trend to many testimonies that they would here be able to afford a lifestyle – for example, going out to restaurants and bars almost on a daily basis – that would be unachievable to many of them back home when living off a basic pension. When confronted with the question why they had moved to Pattaya, they would respond either with a ‘why not?’ or ‘why do you think?’ (often accompanied with a smile or a wink), thereby signalling that the reason was too obvious to verbalize directly. Some told me that compared to their lives back in their home countries, Pattaya offered a new start, a golden opportunity or a last option to find love or happiness. For others, however, it was a chance to get away from problems ‘back home’. Not all the reasons for moving seemed voluntary (some told me that life ‘back home’ was unliveable or too complicated), but most had planned and saved up money for quite some time, calculating what kind of lifestyle would be affordable and available with their respective funds and pensions. As mentioned earlier, the notion of ‘the good life’ was frequently uttered during conversations, and many stated that they had now finally discovered or found ‘the good life’ after a long hard wait, but dark clouds were gathering for some of the men – they were running out of money and were unable to maintain the lifestyle they had become accustomed to. Their money were spent much quicker than imagined or planned. To them there was trouble in paradise and they were trying to contemplate how to make ends meet by cutting either down on their expenses (particularly the luxury of going out all the time) or, as some did, by agreeing to teach English classes (if possible) at the local language schools. The worst defeat would be to move back home – especially with no money. To some, problems also arose over being denied extensions of their visas due to the Thai authorities’ tightening of visa rules for foreigners, thus forcing some expats to live illegally in the country, some even ending up homeless [38].

For some, life in Pattaya was not just about experiencing troubles in paradise – for them it was rather about a paradise lost. As mentioned, it was not uncommon to hear expats share stories about ‘Old Pattaya’, referring to the Pattaya of yesterday, a few decades ago or more when they first arrived there. On one of the sites dedicated to Pattaya expat communication, I found an entry stating that ‘a lot of old-timers talk about it [the city] with a nostalgia for how Pattaya used to be before it became so popular’. This was also my impression from my talks with the men. Many of them would lament the development of the city, and only few seemed positive about the many new initiatives, the influx of mass tourism and the concomitant spreading of chain stores and international commercial brands. Pattaya has within half a decade almost doubled its areal size, not least because big corporations have invested in major

condominium and hotel developments in the southern and northern parts of the city. The co-siness and soul of the city, I was told, was gone. For example, Dave, Englishman, (late sixties), who has lived in Pattaya for sixteen years, told me: ‘They [referring to local authorities, real-estate investors and tourists] are destroying this city. Money has ruined it all. When I first came here, it was a haven. Now it has been turned into a circus for tourists’. Dave believed that the appetite for making big and quick money was behind the construction of the many gigantic shopping malls, condominium towers and hotel chains that previously were not a common sight in the city. Pattaya, he believed, was being exploited by local and international investors and he speculated that within a few years, everything associated with ‘Old Pattaya’ would no longer be visible. The classic pothole streets, the small shabby street bars and the homely atmosphere were being replaced with high-tech constructions and multiple-storey discotheques and pool halls – that would often go bankrupt within a few years thus leaving empty spaces and unused areas within the city.

According to some of the expats, this gradual transformation of the cityscape was supported by the now widespread use of mobile phones, which had changed patterns of interaction and communication among people, something for the better, other things for the worse. For example, another Englishman, Mark (early seventies) from the Midlands, recalled when he had first moved to Thailand (first Bangkok and then later Pattaya) some twenty years ago: ‘When I first came here in the late 1990s, there were no cell phones and the Thai ladies would pay attention to you and work hard to show their interest. Today, they all sit with their bloody phones and don’t care about what’s going on ... They even call you all the time if they have your number, so never give your number ... Technology has destroyed a lot of the intimacy here. You see the same going on in Bangkok, Phuket and [Koh] Samui’. Mark, having personally witnessed the many changes taking place in Thailand throughout the past two decades, saw Pattaya as a city that was almost entirely transformed from when he had first arrived. Most of the old narrow and bumpy streets had disappeared, most of the dilapidated buildings had been demolished and the influx of mass tourism had also changed the entire atmosphere and charm of the place. Even though he had considered moving back to the United Kingdom several times, he decided that he was, after all, better off in Pattaya. Mark was married to a Thai woman and had gotten accustomed to the lifestyle and weather, and most of his friends were now other expats. There was really nothing to go back to anymore. He said that he somehow felt stuck – but that is was not the worst place in the world to be stuck in despite the many recent changes in and of the city. Another expat, American Nate (late sixties) who had lived in Pattaya for seven years, told me how the dating and sex scene had also been impacted by the increasing use of information technology and that instead of picking up female company in the bars or streets as previously, most appointments were now made on

websites such as Thai Friendly and Thai Cupid or on chat apps. In his view, this had made it all more ‘clinical’ and ‘commercial’ and less ‘adventurous’. The thrill of scoring and dating was no longer the same.

From my conversations, it was thus obvious that there was a certain feeling of loss and apprehension among many of the expats who had witnessed and experienced the most recent changes in and of Pattaya – changes that were often regarded as changes for the worse. They felt that they themselves – and more generally the expat community – were paying the price for the incessant commercialization process that had swept across the city, changing its infrastructure, appearance and atmosphere. This development has also had its impact in the ‘market situation’ of many expats with prices going up on housing, food and fun, coupled with the exchange rate between the Thai bath and most Western currencies (in which their savings are placed and pensions paid) turning gradually more and more unfavourable. I clearly sensed a feeling of nostalgic mourning for the ‘Old Pattaya’ – the city before it turned into a magnet for mass tourism and large-scale commercial interests. It was almost as if the city had lost its virginity.

Conclusion

As this article has aspired to show, albeit based on a somewhat limited and non-representative data material, nostalgia is not a simple or straightforward emotion. The article has shown that experiences and feelings of nostalgia among Western expatriates living in Pattaya, Thailand, are varied and relate to different aspects of life. As my conversations with some of the expats illustrated, nostalgia is an emotion that is familiar to many of them, but this strange feeling of nostalgia, however, was far from one-dimensional. Rather, my conversations with the expats have shown how nostalgia comes in many different guises depending on the focus of one’s memories and recollections. To some nostalgia referred to missing the country and the life they left behind when moving permanently to Pattaya – but also to some ambivalences. Some were glad they had finally decided to move away from a life that was often regarded as unfulfilling, unhappy and lonely, whereas other missed their friends, families and past routines. To others nostalgia clearly did not relate specifically to homesickness but rather to a sense of lost youth, physical ability, vitality and opportunity. What they seemed to miss was rather a time in their lives when their health, financial or social situation was better than now. To them, nostalgia was thus not primarily a spatial/geographical feeling of homesickness, but rather a temporal emotion relating to the time that has passed in their own lives, which seemed irretrievable. Finally, nostalgia was also expressed as the dashed hope for the place one was now living in. Several of the men I spoke to described how Pattaya itself – their new ‘home away from home’ – had gradually and relentlessly been trans-

formed into something increasingly undesirable. Their nostalgia was for the 'Old Pattaya' before the era of mass tourism, before Pattaya was discovered by everybody else, before everything was commercialised and hence became increasingly expensive. They were lamenting the loss of the 'golden era' of the city. Their nostalgia was for the pothole streets, the local bar scene and the carefree life.

On a more general level, then, this study has shown that nostalgia is not necessarily an abstract or political emotion, as is sometimes the case when nostalgia is described in research on nostalgia, but that it can be a very concrete and everyday feeling: the fond recollection of times and places past and for my informants nostalgia was thus a very tangible companion, especially when sadness set in or problems arose relating to deteriorating health, loneliness, mental problems, economic insecurity, ruined romances and so on. Their nostalgia was not necessarily sentimental, but in it they seemed to find something good and valuable in the remembrance of past experiences that to them provide comfort and joy. Many of the men I talked to were aware that their choice of residence (Pattaya) to many outsiders was regarded as controversial. As mentioned earlier, in the general public Pattaya is surrounded by a territorial stigma, even by people who have never visited the place themselves. To the expats, however, Pattaya was mostly seen as a place of opportunities and as the fulfilment of their needs and desires. Many said that they would recommend the city any day to friends. To them, Pattaya was simply in their bloodstream. Austrian informant Dirk in his mid-sixties, who had lived in the city on and off for the past 15 years, summarized this feeling by saying: 'Pattaya is a city that you'll never forget'. Earlier in this article, I quoted an informant, who stated that Pattaya was the right place if one wanted to search for and study nostalgia. During my last visit to the city in January 2020, I met Andy from the United States (early sixties), who had lived in Pattaya for only one year after selling his business back home. He agreed that Pattaya was a good place to study nostalgia, but not a good place to be a nostalgic: 'Pattaya is not a good place for nostalgics. This is why people drink themselves to death down here or jump from a rooftop. It's always in the newspaper. This is a city without a past, without a history, a city living only in the present, and no one thinks about the future'. To him, Pattaya was a dangerous place for nostalgics, because it constantly, and particularly on a rainy day, reminded them of what they had left behind – and perhaps also that there was no turning back. This goes to show how Pattaya – perhaps like most other places – evokes opposite feelings of nostalgia, some of which can create meaning and maintain a life, whilst others may destroy it.

So next time you visit Pattaya, there is good reason to consider the fact that the place is not just a haven for the frivolous nightlife scene or the sexual escapades of visiting tourists as it is otherwise often depicted as by the tabloid media, it is also the home for a large expat

community going about its daily business in the shadow of nostalgia. It is indeed a place that contains many inner ambivalences and paradoxes, a place of angels and demons alike, and it is a place that evokes widely opposite emotional responses. Ultimately, however, it is a place in which feelings of nostalgia thrive and provide meaning for many of those ‘permanent tourists’ who have decided to live their lives there.

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Notes

¹ I have previously, and apparently quite erroneously – based on some available surveys – mentioned the number of 100.000+ expats living in Pattaya [37, p. 222]. Subsequently, during my latest visit to the city, I have been informed by people living in the area that this number must be grossly exaggerated, and that the expat community in the greater Pattaya area (including the nearby city of Rayong) is perhaps closer to 5.000-10.000 expats. This latter number is also verified by a recent story in *Pattaya Mail* from June 1st 2020 ('Pattaya Expats Settle Down for the Long Haul') estimating the number of retired expats to 4.000. This number, however, has been disputed by other people with local knowledge with whom I spoke, stating that the actual expat population is much higher than this. In fact, the population of Pattaya differs greatly depending on the source. An official 2019 census calculated the total population to approximately 120.000, the majority being of Thai decent. However, the problem is that migrant workers from neighbouring countries and expatriates are not included in this census. Seemingly, these numbers need to be taken and used with a pinch of salt.