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Wat Arun by Chao Phraya River in the 1960s. Much of old Bangkok that once enchanted foreigners has disappeared underneath mushrooming encrustations of steel and concrete. Photos: Getty Images, Tibor Krausz

The vanishing horizon

Long-term Bangkok-based expats recall when the Thai capital was a low-cost paradise and no structure was higher than a temple's stupa. All that they knew has now gone

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Dean Barrett, an American mystery writer, sits in an English-style tavern that is one of his remaining old haunts in Bangkok, sipping a black Russian as he ponders the curious quirks of fate. "My story is very simple," says Barrett, a lanky 78-year-old with a pert moustache and a mischievous smile. "I love Chinese culture and history. But I'm sitting here and not at some American university as a professor."

The reason is that, in 1965, the Connecticut native enlisted in the US Army so he could learn Mandarin at a military-run language institute in California. "Having trained me as a translator for a year, the army put me on a plane to Bangkok," he says. "All I knew was that it was in Southeast Asia."

No sooner had Barrett, at 23, landed in the Thai capital in 1966 than his plan to devote himself to China studies began to unravel. "I got off the plane and saw a Thai woman for the first time, and that was the end of the great China scholar I wanted to be," he says with a laugh.

Barrett served as head of a local team for the Army Security Agency, the US military's signals intelligence branch, as part of a top secret surveillance operation. His task involved listening in on Chinese troops via antennas erected near Bangkok's old international airport as Chinese leader Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) got under way that year.

"It was mostly crazy stuff, like one unit telling another: 'We're more loyal to Mao than you are.' They were fighting each other. It was amazing bull," he says.

It wasn't the clandestine work that captivated him, though, but life in a spirited, exotic city with its freewheeling atmosphere. A bonus was the friendliness of women who saw consorting with American servicemen as their ticket out of poverty.



The former barracks for US soldiers in Bangkok languishes unused and neglected; Dean Barrett is an American novelist and Vietnam war veteran.



Our barracks had five floors and our colonel's office was on the top ... I see across the city

DEAN BARRETT, AUTHOR AND FORMER AMERICAN SERVICEMAN

Another plus was Bangkok itself, with its old-world charm still intact. Hugging the banks of the Chao Phraya River sprawled quaint communities with zig-zagging alleys. The riverfront was home to weathered embankments, rickety piers and hulking silos.

Here and there, paddies, orchards and grazing grounds interspersed an urban landscape. Many locals, including some of Barrett's sweethearts during fleeting romances, lived in simple wooden huts on stilts with mosquito nets. "You were still in old Asia here back then," he recalls.

There wasn't a tall building in sight to diminish the horizon and reduce the city's skyline to today's straggly thicket of towering high-rises. Only the spires of Buddhist temples rose above the landscape.

"Our barracks had five floors and our colonel's office was on the top. I could look out from there and see across the city," Barrett remembers. "There were only three lifts in the whole town."

That laid-back tropical town of around 2.5 million inhabitants, as Bangkok was then, is no more. As the city's population has expanded to some 11 million and grown to the size of London at nearly 1,600 sq km, much of old Bangkok, which enchanted foreigners such as Barrett, has disappeared underneath mushrooming encrustations of steel and concrete.

Hundreds of skyscrapers crowd the city, several rising above 300 metres. Many towering structures have been completed in the past few years and many more are under construction. Neighbourhoods of traditional dwellings and family-run shop-houses have largely given way to modern shopping malls, office towers and condominiums.

Few cities have changed so much and so fast as Bangkok, according to Colin Hastings, an Englishman and another long-term expat who, too, was 23 when he arrived in Thailand in 1974.

"When I got here, Bangkok was still tiny," he says. "In my lifetime, the skyline has changed dramatically. The city has become this massive forest of tall buildings."

Hastings, a native of London, wound up staying in Thailand the way many other long-term expats have done – by chance. A budding journalist working on Fleet Street, he set out that year with friends on an overland hippie trail from England to Australia. Thailand was meant to be a mere way station en route after sojourns in Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. "Thailand was completely different from anything else I had

seen before," recalls Hastings, 69, who publishes a long-running expat lifestyle magazine called *The Big Chilli*.

"I felt I had stumbled upon a magical kingdom. You would not believe how beautiful and unspoilt Phuket was back then," he adds, referring to the southern Thai resort island that is now heavily developed.

In this exotic land, he could lose himself in Bangkok's burgeoning nightlife scene, and hang out at the city's bars, clubs and sporting venues patronised by members of a close-knit expat community consisting mostly of Americans and Britons.

To Hastings, it felt like being shipwrecked in paradise. "You were really isolated out here," he says. "To get in touch with anyone back home, you had to write aerogrammes [air letters]. When you picked up a phone to make a local call, you had to wait for a line. It could take ages."

Foreigners with limited means lived on a shoestring and still felt spoiled. "You could get a bowl of noodles for three or five baht," Hastings says. "A very nice breakfast cost a [US] dollar. A beer cost 50 [US] cents."

On cost-of-living indices in Southeast Asia today, Bangkok



When I got here, Bangkok was still tiny ... the city has become this massive forest of tall buildings

COLIN HASTINGS

Skyscrapers dominate the skyline in a part of Bangkok.



ranks as the second-priciest city, after Singapore.

"Life in Thailand, for most Americans here now, is significantly more expensive than a similar life would be in, say, Dallas or Miami," argues Jake Needham, a lawyer turned novelist from Houston, Texas, who has made Bangkok his home for 30 years.

For old-timers in the Thai capital, going down memory lane

under construction. "We've gone from a big office to a smaller office to a room about as big as a table," says the Englishman, who now works out of another old building down a small cul-de-sac nearby.

Barrett, who spent nearly two decades in the '70s and '80s living and working in Hong Kong while returning to Bangkok frequently, has seen almost all his old haunts in the Thai capital disappear. The most galling for him has been the loss of Washington Square, a time-worn entertainment venue popular with Vietnam war veterans that had bars with names including Texas Lone Star Saloon. It was closed down years ago and a luxury mall is rising in its stead.

Barrett was working on a mystery series featuring a hard-boiled American detective based in Washington Square, but he managed only two books. "There was going to be a third, but my detective lived above Texas Lone Star Saloon so his whole world was suddenly gone," he fumes.

One old edifice of his own world has endured, however: his army barracks. Arranged in a horseshoe shape around a courtyard, the three nondescript '50s-style flat buildings, once repurposed to house American soldiers like him, languish unused and neglected in a compound flanked by lofty modern hotels and condominiums in northern Bangkok.

The ground is littered with dead leaves and other detritus. In the courtyard, where a basketball court and a swimming pool stood, there are improvised vegetable plots with greens growing in car tyres packed with soil.

The vacant interiors of the old low-rises, which were revamped into love motels after the Americans left, are covered in thick grime. An eerie air of decay haunts them. The Thai caretaker, whom Barrett befriended in the 1960s, still lives here, but he is sickly and bedridden inside his gloomy home.

Barrett clambers up to a top-floor balcony from where he used to gaze out to an inviting panorama. His view is blocked by towering constructions in a teeming metropolis.

"I have deep memories of this place," he says. "I'm glad it's still here."