



From left: The rooftop cocktail bar at Oneday Wallflowers, in Bangkok's Creative District, is a popular local hangout; a water taxi crossing the Chao Phraya River.

Rising on the River

In the neighborhoods along Bangkok's iconic Chao Phraya, a new generation of artists, designers, and chefs have created some of the Thai capital's most exciting places to visit. *By Rachna Sachasinh*

ASK ANYONE WHO, like me, grew up in Bangkok in the 1970s, and they'll tell you about suffering through interminable weddings at a riverside hotel in Bangrak, one of the Thai capital's oldest districts. In those days, status-obsessed locals would shuffle over to Charoen Krung Road, Bangrak's main drag, elbowing through steamy markets and stalls selling *jok*, or Chinese rice porridge, to submit to an eternity of long-winded wedding toasts.

My father, however, had better ideas. He and I would show up, make our rounds politely, then decamp to the nearby Oriental hotel, now the **Mandarin Oriental** (*mandarin*

oriental.com; doubles from \$420), his old friend Nelson in tow. Over cocktails, the men would hatch outlandish plans. They dreamed of launching Bangkok's first yoga studio, and a hospital-themed aperitif bar called the Pulse. My father, a physician, and Nelson, a flaneur who dressed in crisp linen suits, had no business sense, and when they did eventually put their schemes in motion, both immediately flopped.

If they'd only waited a few decades, their ideas might have gone down better. Because today, Bangrak is the epicenter of Bangkok's Creative District, a trio of neighborhoods populated by artists, designers, chefs, and musicians. Lured by low rents and a postindustrial aesthetic, these upstart entrepreneurs are renovating shop-houses and using them to reinvent *izakaya* food, say, or experiment with artisanal spirits. Young and edgy, the Creative District has become the city's must-visit destination.

Although the Creative District is anchored in Bangrak, it includes neighboring Talat Noi as well as Yaowarat, Bangkok's effervescent Chinatown—all historic communities straddling the Charoen Krung →

corridor. Each borders the Chao Phraya River, and has roots in the river trading that was, in previous centuries, a mainstay of the Thai economy. This was where merchant ships from the Far East, Europe, and the Americas made landfall in the Siamese kingdom; Bangrak was home to the city's first European quarter. You'll see this multicultural legacy in the area's range of architectural styles and its mix of Hindu and Buddhist temples, mosques, Chinese shrines, and churches.

"I remember coming here for weddings and scuba gear," jewelry artist and Bangkok native Atty Tantivit told me as I browsed at **Atta Gallery** (attagallery.com), her contemporary jewelry store, which sits in a courtyard close to the Mandarin Oriental. Tantivit, who holds a master's in marine policy, decided 15 years ago to trade her scuba mask for jewelers' goggles. When the time came to open a boutique, she decided against fashionable Sukhumvit and settled in Bangrak instead. "Back then, it seemed like the boonies," she recalled. "Today, this is the best spot to be."

Lured by low rents and a postindustrial aesthetic, upstart entrepreneurs are making the Creative District a must-visit destination.



It's hard to pinpoint exactly when the evolution of the Creative District began. Some say it started around 2012, with the opening of an influential art space named **Speedy Grandma** (fb.com/speedygrandma). That was quickly followed by the music venue **SoulBar** (fb.com/livesoulbarbangkok) and fashionable bars like the gin-focused **Teens of Thailand** (fb.com/teensofthailand).

Then, in 2016, the organizers of the BukRuk Urban Arts Festival zeroed in on Charoen Krung and commissioned a number of new works of street art, adding to the area's design credentials. A year later, the art institute **Thailand Creative & Design Center** (web.tcdc.or.th) moved into the 1940 Grand Postal Building, and Bangkok's first-ever Michelin Guide listed several spots in the neighborhood, including trailblazing Thai-fusion restaurant **80/20** (fb.com/8020bkk; entrées \$7–\$22), noodle house **Baan Phadthai** (baanphadthai.com; entrées \$4–\$8), and Cantonese specialist **Sanyod** (sanyodrestaurant.com; entrées \$5–\$16).

On the other side of the river, the Creative District is gradually expanding into Khlong San, where →

From left: Jua, one of many fashionable restaurants in the Creative District; live music in the second-floor bar of the FooJohn Building, a converted shop-house in Chinatown.





From left: A florist at work in Oneday Wallflowers; orecchiette with uni and salmon roe at Jua, where an *izakaya* fusion menu and cutting-edge interiors have made it one of the Creative District's hottest tables.

architect Duangrit Bunnag opened the **Jam Factory** (fb.com/thejamfactorybangkok), a complex of cafés and lifestyle stores arranged around a tree-lined courtyard. More recently, **Lhong 1919** (fb.com/lhong1919) took a 19th-century warehouse and repurposed it as a group of galleries, eateries, and boutiques selling everything from leather goods to homewares.

One recent afternoon, Tantivit and I took a walk around the Creative District together. Ducking into the *sois*, or narrow lanes, between Charoen Krung and the river, we ran into the newly opened **Warehouse 30** (fb.com/thewarehouse30), a phalanx of World War II-era warehouses lined with stylish shops. We downed shots of passion-fruit and green-apple juice at the pocket-size Real & Raw, then headed over to **P. Tendercool** (ptendercool.com), where we ogled modern furniture handmade from vintage opium beds and Ming dynasty floorboards.

On Charoen Krung's Soi 28, we admired the patchwork of venues: **Tropic City** (fb.com/tropiccity.bkk), a Swedish duo's take on Caribbean rum and other spirits; **Black Pig Tattoo** (fb.com/blackpigtattoo), part art studio, part tattoo parlor; and **Jua** (juabkk.com; *entrées* \$9–\$12), an homage to the street food of Osaka, Japan. I told Tantivit about my father's creative failures, and we agreed he was well ahead of his time. A yoga studio and pulse-quickening aperitifs would definitely fit with the neighborhoods' current incarnation. ✕

Rachna Sachasinh is a writer living in Chiang Mai, Thailand, and a regular contributor to Travel + Leisure's Southeast Asia edition.

MORE SPOTS TO EXPLORE IN BANGKOK'S CREATIVE DISTRICT

HOTELS

Baan 2459 A romantic Sino-European colonial bungalow with a striking garden café. baan2459.com; doubles from \$175.

Capella Bangkok Opening this fall, this contemporary 101-room hotel promises to be an exciting addition to the Chao Phraya riverfront. capella.bangkok.com; doubles from \$500.

RESTAURANTS & BARS

Asia Today Inventive cocktails made with herbal infusions from the far corners of Siam. fb.com/asiatodaybar.

Ba Hao Humble home recipes including duck wontons and braised pork. ba-hao.com; *entrées* \$7–\$8.

FooJohn Building Three restaurants are arranged across the three stories of this atmospheric Chinatown shop-house, where live music events are also often held. fb.com/fojohnbkk.

SHOPS

Aoon Ceramicist Nattawan Charuwatcharoen's raw, ethereal pieces crafted from local clay are complemented by an excellent on-site café. fb.com/aoonpottery.

Oneday Wallflowers A fashionable, frond-filled florist with a hit cocktail bar on its roof. fb.com/onedaywallflowers.

