

Blue-sky thinking

Tamara Hinson meets the entrepreneurs blazing a new trail in Bangkok

The tiny long-tail boat chugs along Bangkok's Chao Phraya river, its slow speed and colourful keel making it the ideal subject for the camera-wielding tourists knocking back cheap towers of Chang beer at Asiatique, the riverfront market famous for its maze of souvenir stalls and open-air bars.

Soon, it's overtaken by a neon-lit party boat, whose wake bashes the smaller one from side to side. It's a fitting metaphor for a city in the midst of a huge transformation, much of which is centred on the riverside.

DESIGN DISTRICT

The Saphan Taksin BTS skytrain station, just metres from the Chao Phraya's banks, might

well be the closest to Asiatique, but it's also the ideal station for explorations of historic Charoen Krung Road, which runs parallel to the river and was Bangkok's first paved street.

In 2017, when the Thailand Creative and Design Centre opened its new headquarters here, the founders said they hoped the opening would transform the area into Bangkok's first creative district.

Today, the shophouse-filled side streets (known as sois) are home to the city's coolest galleries and restaurants, founded by creative types keen to inject this once-neglected neighbourhood with new life while paying homage to its past. Soi 30 is home to Warehouse 30,



You'll walk past an ancient shophouse selling som tum and the next place will sell alternators

which opened last year. Here, Bangkok's best independent boutiques and bars are tucked inside Second World War-era warehouses.

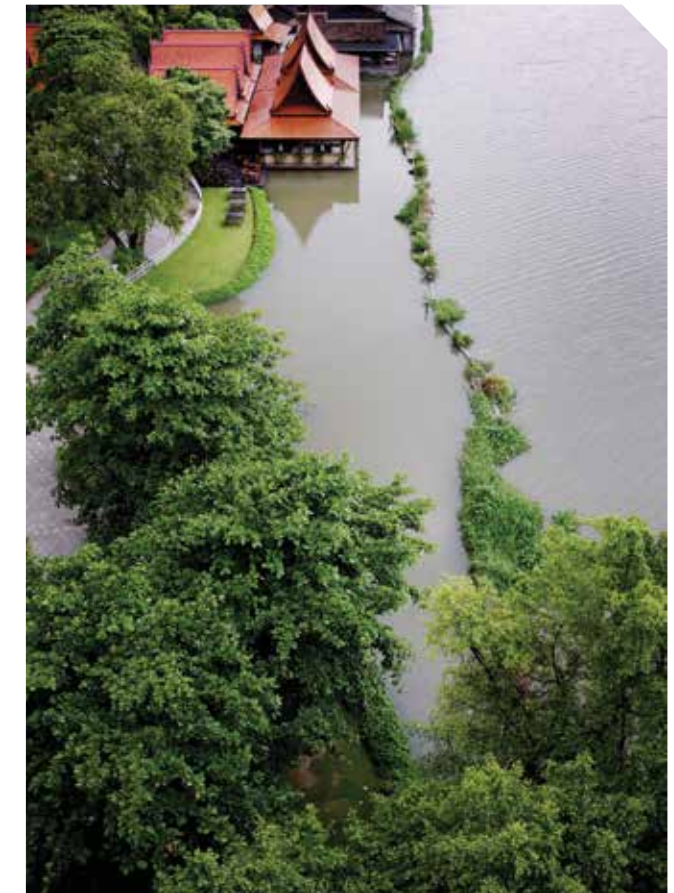
Wander along Soi 28 and you'll find Chet Adkins' legendary burger joint, Little Market, as well as the achingly cool Tropic City cocktail bar.

"It's so eclectic, as well as old," says Chet, when asked about the neighbourhood's appeal. "You'll walk past an ancient shophouse selling som tum and the next place will sell alternators. And there's so much cool stuff nearby – the Grand Palace is only 15 minutes away, but it's quieter than other areas and you've still got the river breeze."

THAI MINDED

In 2019, the best views of this historic neighbourhood – and Bangkok in general – will be from the Bangkok Observation Tower, which is set to tower over the district. When it's completed, this riverside monolith will be southeast Asia's tallest observation tower.





ASK THE EXPERTS



Andrew Turner,
head of trade sales,
Intrepid Travel

“My favourite way to experience Bangkok is to get away from the frenetic tourist spots and explore where the locals live. And I always try to visit Chinatown – the smells are amazing and it’s a chance to try delicious foods you’ve never heard of!”

Linh Farid, senior product manager for southeast Asia, Wendy Wu Tours

“Bangkok is the perfect mix of old and new. Whenever I visit, I absolutely must stop by the Chatuchak weekend market, which is full of beautiful Thai goods, as well as amazing food from all over Thailand.”

Also reshaping Bangkok’s skyline – and riverside – is Iconsiam, a mixed-use complex that opened to the public last month. It has a huge promenade area, a Heritage Museum, The Residences at Mandarin Oriental Bangkok and Apple’s first flagship store in Thailand.

Changes are afoot downtown, too. Thai hospitality brand Dusit International has unveiled plans for its first millennial-friendly Asai Hotels brand, which will open at the famous Chatuchak Market early next year.

Last year saw the opening of Thailand’s first Park Hyatt (rooms from £240 per night), set above the Central Embassy mall in Phloen Chit, near the start of Sukhumvit Road. There are 222 rooms, a beautiful, three-storey Penthouse Bar and Grill, and a spectacular infinity pool.

Southeast Asia’s first Waldorf Astoria (rooms from £302 per night) opened in late August at the nearby Ratchaprasong intersection, and June saw the opening of the 50-room Akira Tas Sukhumvit (rooms from £95 per

night), the world’s first hotel to avoid all single-use plastics. Guests receive steel water bottles to use during their stays, toiletries come in celadon pots and bin liners are biodegradable.

EATING OUT

Bangkok’s food scene has never looked more appealing, either. Its first *Michelin Guide* launched in late 2017, but the best restaurants aren’t always the ones with the most stars.

Thonburi’s ChangChui market, which opened in June 2017 near the Wat Arun temple, is home to Insects in the Backyard, the world’s first insect-based fine-dining restaurant. Owner and chef Thitiwat Tantragarn spent years researching the benefits of an insect-based diet.

“Four crickets contain as much calcium as a glass of milk,” he tells me before I tuck into my six-course tasting menu. It’s strangely delicious, although I’d recommend keeping a toothpick to hand. The giant water beetle ravioli with saffron sauce is delicious and I also love the decor, which includes

a giant Venus flytrap.

Equally quirky is family-friendly May’s Garden House, which opened in June and is already a hit with younger visitors. The first restaurant to be licensed by Tokyo-based animation house Studio Ghibli, this beautiful city centre cafe’s inspiration is the forest-dwelling creatures from the studio’s biggest hit, *My Neighbor Totoro*. Expect main courses served on plates shaped like Totoro’s furry belly, spherical desserts resembling the lovable Susuwatari (sootball) creatures and stained-glass windows featuring the film’s other characters.

And then there’s Gaggan, near Lumpini Park, the world-renowned restaurant famous for its tasting menu made up of 25 bite-sized courses, each represented on the menu by nothing but an emoji. I’d recommend booking early – despite the restaurant receiving around 500 requests for reservations every day, founder Gaggan Anand announced last year he’s shutting up shop in 2020.

But what if you’re feeling guilty about the calories? Thanks to plans for more cycling lanes, growing numbers

ABOVE LEFT:
May’s Garden House

ABOVE:
Park Hyatt Bangkok

ABOVE RIGHT:
Eco-cultural destination Sampran Riverside



The giant water beetle ravioli with saffron sauce is delicious and I love the decor, which includes a giant Venus flytrap

are saddling up, and a great way to pedal off all that food is Asian Trails’ new night-time bike ride, during which you’ll enjoy a pedal-powered exploration of the capital’s oldest neighbourhoods.
asiantrails.travel/thailand

OUTSIDE THE CITY

If Bangkok’s bustle gets too much, consider a day trip to the enormous Sampran Riverside, a 28-hectare eco-cultural destination opened in 1962. It’s located in Nakhon Pathom province, an hour’s drive from Bangkok.

There are two accommodation types to choose from: a 160-room hotel and traditional Thai houses made of teak.

The venue also houses six meeting rooms of varying sizes, a spa and a fitness centre. Visitors can tour the organic farm, cruise down the river, sign up for cookery classes and learn about local handicrafts.

I visited at the weekend during the popular farmers’ market, when local farmers come to sell their wares – whether it’s handwoven baskets or the bananas, which are snaffled out of my hand by a curious water buffalo during a wander around the farm.

The site will be extended early next year with the opening of Patom Organic Village. Highlights will include workshops focusing on local crafts and herbal products, as well as a new village store.

But don’t fritter away all your baht, because a certain Bangkok hotel recently brought out a very special souvenir. Licensed by Hasbro, ‘Monopoly – Siam Kempinski Hotel Bangkok Edition’ was released in August and is available to guests who book one of the hotel’s suites for two consecutive nights. My own dusty, moth-eaten Monopoly set suddenly looks rather boring. **TV**

Sample product

Travel 2 can offer three nights’ room-only in a four-star hotel in Bangkok, and eight nights at the four-star Patong Merlin Hotel in Phuket (B&B) from £949 including flights with Thai Airways. Valid May 7 to June 24, 2019.
travel2.com

Premier Holidays offers a 14-night package with four nights at the Rembrandt Hotel in Bangkok, three at Elephant Hills and seven in Khao Lak from £1,499, based on two sharing and travelling in May or June. Transfers and flights included.
trade.premierholidays.co.uk

Thai Airways flies twice a day from Heathrow to Bangkok, from £551 return for bookings between December 15 and February 28, travel between January and June (excluding April).
thaiairways.com



LEFT:
Tropic City