Going East

One of London’s worst slums until the turn of the 21st century, East London is now the place to be, with its street art, trendy food scene, shops and industrial charm. Let’s explore London’s gritty urban cool.
The first cars of the day pass by, and the first rays of sunlight peep through the dark grey blinds of my hotel room. I draw them up and see a dozen cranes snap into action, getting to work on the new skyscrapers that will grace the horizon. An overground train zips across the elevated line between two redbrick buildings and above the sleepy streets. Punctuated by shiny glass, steel and cement, the urban tangle of East London can seem very daunting to the first-time visitor.

From the late 19th century, the east part of London became overcrowded and was known as one of London’s worst slums that suffered from severe impoverishment and crime. But now, it has been transformed into an impressive maze of street art, lush with bars, restaurants, food markets, boutiques and offices. East London’s metamorphosis really took off after the extension of the train network for the 2012 Olympic Games, making the area suddenly more easily accessible.

Spanning from the Tower of London, north to Stoke Newington, east to the Docklands business district, and south to Camberwell, it’s the area north of the River Thames that’s been drawing the crowds, eager to see the renewal that has taken place. Join us on our voyage of discovery as we explore the East of London, with a focus on the trendy highlights of the two trendy and must-visit areas Hackney and Tower Hamlets.

Creative use of space
On the first day of my trip, I’m in Shoreditch, an inner city district of the historic East End, which is part of the Hackney area. I’m admiring the view from my room at the minimalist-design Ace Hotel, looking at a giant industrial concept store with a darkened coffee lounge, peppered with nomad freelancers on laptops. It is a paragon of what those from other parts of the city refer to as ‘very East London’, when it comes to its industrial look. “I remember when Shoreditch used to be at the cutting-edge of the art scene, with lots of arty collectives and creative independent shops,” says the sales assistant at Material, a well-curated boutique selling stationery and books on Rivington Street. “Now, it’s a place you come to for drinks and dinner after work, especially when you work in the Old Street neighbourhhood, which has become London’s Silicon Valley.”

And she’s right, a lot has changed here, especially since the late 1990s. With its cheaper housing, this area used to be ideal not only for the working class but also for budding artists on tight budgets, who flocked to the place, dreaming of a future as successful painters, writers or sculptors. But today, Old Street houses many young web-technology companies and creative agencies. Rent is staggeringly high, pushing the artist community further out to the slowly developing southeast pockets of Peckham and Camberwell. But, fortunately, the ghost of its artistic past has not left Shoreditch entirely. Its streets are awash with artworks by the likes of American street artist and illustrator Shepard Fairey, Belgian graffiti artist Roa, and British artist Phlegm’s quirky dreamscapes.

Shoreditch also stands out for its creative use of space. Take Village Underground, for instance, a cultural centre and ecological project which is characterised by its train carriages and shipping containers that have been put on the roof of a Victorian warehouse and are used as creative studios. Furthermore, the neighbourhood has a very dynamic hotel scene; you’ll find some of East London’s best boutique hotels here, along with the first European Nobu Hotel, The Curtains Hotel and a CitizenM, which is due to open this year.

Previous pages from left to right: colourful murals brighten up the streets; taking some time out on Broadway Market.

Left page (clockwise from top left): bagels and more at Café Columbia (138 Columbia Road); lunch at The Towpath Cafe (36 De Beauvoir Cres); a little green respite from the hectic streets; inside the Ace Hotel.
As I stroll around Storethich, passing the imposing 1930s Tea Building – a former bacon factory for the Allied Foods’ Lipton brand and now a hub of creative activity – I arrive at one of my favourite places: Redchurch Street. Lined by terraced housing, this once shabby thoroughfare is now a hipster’s paradise, with more glorious street art, as well as vintage stores, stylish boutiques and independently-owned shops. I drop by Labour and Wait, a quirky and beautiful store offering mostly handmade household wares inside an old Truman Brewery pub wrapped by a wave of forest green tiles.

For Labour and Wait owner Simon Watkins, Redchurch Street has retained its unique feel, community atmosphere and indie shops. But gentrification risks are starting to take their toll, endangering the independent entrepreneurial spirit. “The challenge now is to maintain this atmosphere as some larger brands have set their sights on the area and are beginning to move in,” he says. “This means that rents are rising, and slowly becoming too expensive for small businesses.”

Numerous Truman Brewery signs crown the area’s buildings; like a trail to a vanished world, they lead to The Old Truman Brewery, with its towering red chimney on Brick Lane. Dating back to the late 1600s, it was once home to London’s largest brewery; today, it houses a hive of creative businesses, cultural venues, independent shops, galleries, markets, bars and restaurants.

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Melting pot
Brick Lane is a cultural crossroads of long-gone communities, and this bustling street and its surroundings make up one of London’s most fascinating areas. Named after the 15th-century brick manufacturers who set up shop here, it later became home to a wide variety of immigrants moving to London for a better life, including an influx of wealthy French silk weavers.
One of the few vestiges of this golden era, in fact, is Fournier Street’s tall Georgian terraced housing from the 1720s. Formerly called Church Street, it was named after the Methodist Church on the corner, which was turned into a synagogue in the late 1890s and then a mosque in the 1970s, reinforcing this area’s carousel of cultures.

The neighbourhood was also home to Irish and Jewish communities, but after they moved out the area went into decline. In the late 1880s, it became the playground of the enigmatic killer Jack the Ripper, who captivated the world’s imagination. Later on, during the 1970s, a large Bangladeshi community moved in and the area came to be called ‘Banglatown’. Brick Lane’s street signs were even translated into Bengali, which, along with the parade of iconic curry houses (this is the place to go for a lip-smacking curry), are part of the area’s heritage. All these multicultural elements were mixed together and have resulted in the melting pot that Brick Lane has now become.

Located at the end of Fournier Street is Old Spitalfields Market, a covered market in the former Spitalfields parish, which is partly located in the East End. Stallholders have been unpacking their wares here for more than 350 years. A wholesale meat, fruit and vegetable market until the 1980s, it now sells all sorts, from neoprene clothing to antique trinkets piled high on trestle tables. “The market’s changed a lot these past few years with the big chains moving in,” says stallholder Mark, who’s been setting up his treasure trove of vintage items here for almost ten years. “But there’s something that keeps pulling me back here; maybe it’s the atmosphere, maybe it’s the history.”

Under the glint of the city’s glass and steel buildings, it’s hard to tell that centuries of history have unravelled here: from the Old Artillery (training) Ground set up by King Henry VIII, to a huge medieval mass burial site, which was discovered in the 1990s during building works. On a more contemporary note, art is also an attraction here, with several independent venues such as the pioneering Whitechapel Gallery at the end of Brick Lane drawing in locals and visitors alike. Bringing international art to the people since 1901, the gallery has premiered world-class artists such as Jackson Pollock, Frida Kahlo and Sophie Calle in Britain, as well as Pablo Picasso’s masterpiece painting Guernica in 1939.

**Unpolished charm**

Day two. After soaking up the morning calm at the tiny Towpath Café on the banks of Regent’s Canal, I walk to Broadway Market, the street running through the heart of Hackney. I see a plethora of food stalls serving up a wide range of mouth-watering dishes, from hot paella to well-filled gourmet pastrami sandwiches, all set against a backdrop of chatter and music; even the surrounding pubs and restaurants are packed with hungry brunch seekers. Around the corner is the quieter Schoolyard Market, where people eat barbecued beef burgers to the sound of reggae streaming from an 1980s ghetto-blaster plastered in faded stickers.

Once I’ve refuelled, I take the train from London Fields to Hackney Wick to experience an area that is still in the early stages of gentrification. 20 minutes later, I find myself in a completely different world of unpolished industrial London charm. Disused factory buildings and warehouses covered in bold graffiti and street art pull into sight. On one side of the barge-sprinkled River Lea, the Olympic Park – which was built for the 2012 Games and features British-Indian artist Anish Kapoor’s sinewy red ArcelorMittal Orbit Tower – punctuates the horizon, along with Here East, a centre of trendy independent shops and restaurants, which will soon open.
On the other side of the river, locals enjoy a quiet drink at the handful of bars with terraces at the water’s edge, such as the one at The White Building (Queen’s Yard, White Post Lane), which is an exciting centre for art, technology and sustainability. People soak up the summer sun as I wander through the deserted streets. The sound of wheels rolling on the nearby skate ramp echoes around me, and the shuttered shops and pubs give the area a bygone feel. With the hip new Here East centre in the making, I take in the sights almost nostalgically.

**Eclectic energy**

It’s Sunday, my last day visiting East London. Following an action-packed weekend, I’m ready for some downtime. Coffee in hand, I amble through the Sunday Columbia Road Flower Market in the borough of Tower Hamlets. A swell of people and the fragrance of flowers flood the narrow street, and despite the chaos, there’s something strangely soothing about being surrounded by a sea of colours and market frenzy. It’s an oasis of flowers and foliage.

With its mix of picturesque parks, canals, bustling markets and industrial architecture, East London is, to me, the most eclectic part of the city. Working-class history collides with contemporary cool; look carefully though and you’ll see that its centuries’-old ghosts are still very much alive, giving East London its magnetic soul. And despite the effects of gentrification and the jungle of skyscrapers proliferating close by, the northeastern section has managed to retain its original unpolished urban verve. It still draws crowds from across the globe who come here just to revel in East London’s unparalleled energy; an energy that transcends time and shows no sign of being brushed away any time soon – no matter how many shiny new buildings crop up.

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**Right page:** getting a taste of Italy in East London at Campania Gastronomia (23 Ezra Street), where legs of ham hang from the ceilings and a table heaves with delicious antipasti.

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