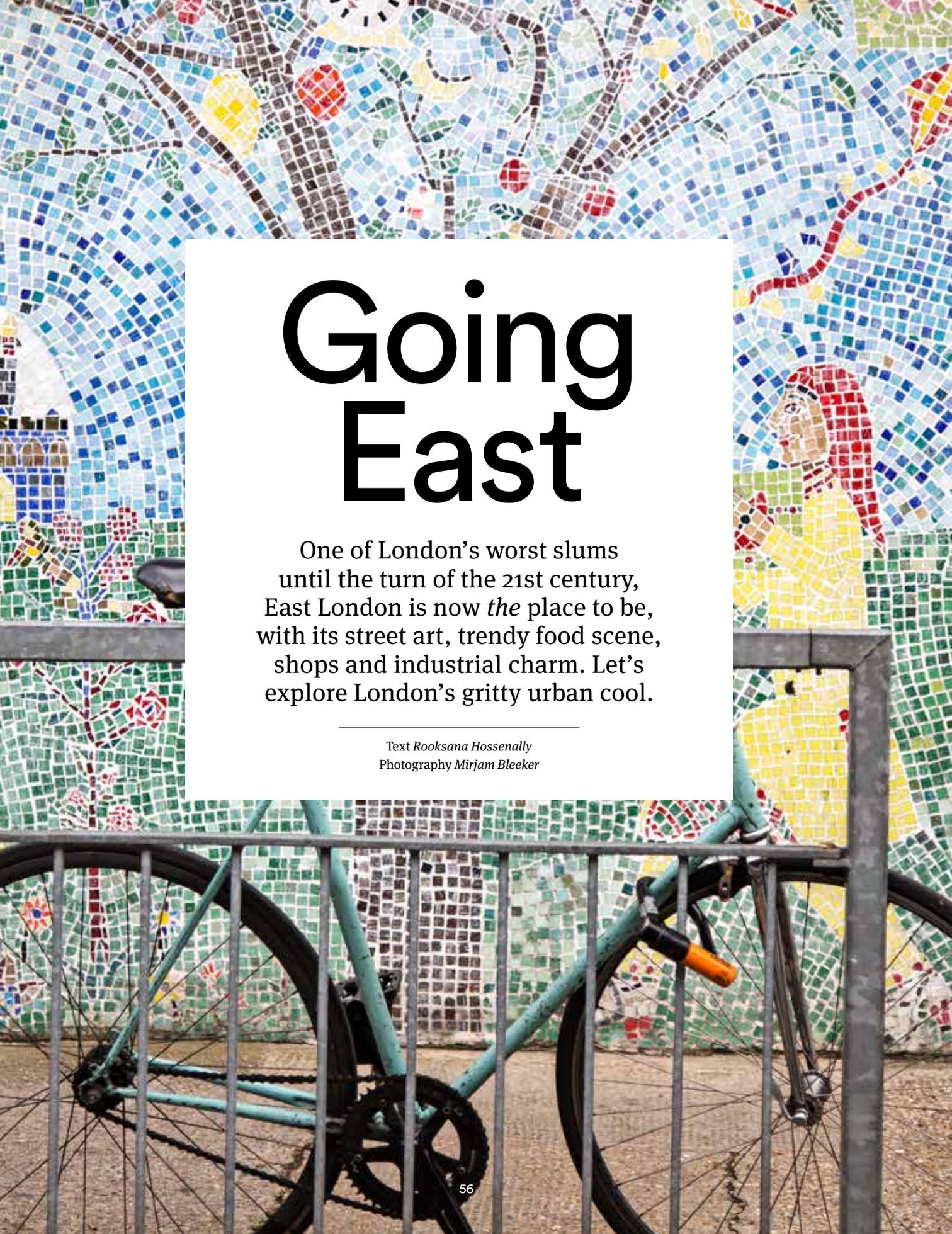


Going East

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.

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Photography Mirjam Bleeker



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 a poor area that belonged to the unemployed and criminals. 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, with a focus on the trendy highlights of the two most up-and-coming areas: Hackney and Tower Hamlets.

London's Silicon Valley

On the first day of my trip, I'm in Shoreditch – an inner city district of the historic East End, and the part of Hackney that was made famous by the BBC series *Eastenders*. 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

Shoreditch also stands out for its creative use of space

assistant at Material, a well-curated boutique selling stationery and books on Rivington Street. "Nowadays, it's more of a place you come to for drinks and dinner after work, especially when you work on Old Street, 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, yet poor, artists, who flocked to the neighbourhood, dreaming of a better future as successful painters, writers or sculptors. But today, its main street, Old Street, is crowded with 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 hasn't 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 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 added to the Victorian warehouse's roof 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.



Right (clockwise from top left): outside Origin Coffee Roasters (65 Charlotte Road); East London is awash with street art; the trendy Ace Hotel; hip stores sell the finest wares in the East End.



Places to shop & visit

Labour and Wait

A quirky, independently-owned boutique selling well-made and often hand-crafted household wares and clothes.
labourandwait.co.uk
 85 Redchurch Street

Blitz Vintage Store

A two-storey Victorian warehouse crammed with vintage apparel and homewares close to bustling Brick Lane.
blitzlondon.co.uk
 55-59 Hanbury Street

Rough Trade

One of two London shops, this is an emporium of music with an extensive stock of vinyl records of all genres. Also includes a café and a venue for live music.
roughtrade.com
 The Old Truman Brewery,
 91 Brick Lane

The School Yard & Netil Market

Offshoots of Broadway Market along Westfield Gate in London Fields, these markets offer street food as well as artisan stalls selling a range of wares, from upcycled lamps to handmade jewellery.
[facebook.com/NetilMarket](https://www.facebook.com/NetilMarket)
 13-23 Westgate Street

Places to eat

The Breakfast Club

One of several outposts, the Hoxton Square restaurant has an easy-going cheerful American diner feel. It serves up a broad menu, ranging from fresh juices to burritos and all-day English breakfasts.
thebreakfastclubcafes.com
 2-4 Rufus Street

Tramshed

Celebrity chef Mark Hix's steak and chicken restaurant in an old tram-generator building has caused a storm, and not just for the food. Check out its huge Damien Hirst installation of a bullock and rooster preserved in an aquarium of formaldehyde.
hixrestaurants.co.uk
 32 Rivington Street

Rochelle Canteen

Tucked away inside a former school's bike shed, this light and bright little restaurant serves hearty homemade fare and is a perfect place for a quiet, cosy lunch or dinner.
arnoldandhenderson.com
 Rochelle School, Arnold Circus

Places to stay

Ace Hotel

The London outpost of the New York hotel chain, this pinnacle of cool in Shoreditch is tethered to a coffee shop-cum-bar and a stylish restaurant. Most of its 258 minimalist rooms come with views of the London skyline.
acehotel.com/london
 100 Shoreditch High Street

Batty Langley's

A five-star boutique hotel with rooms full of Georgian character (think four-poster beds and plush silks). Located just around the corner from Old Spitalfields Market, it's a cosy (and recent) addition to the local hotel scene.
battylangleys.com
 12 Folgate Street

The Boundary

A stylish luxury boutique hotel tailored to design aficionados. It also boasts a dreamy rooftop terrace bar and grill restaurant lined with citrus trees.
boundary.london
 2-4 Boundary Street

As I stroll around Shoreditch, 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 cheap 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, just off 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.

Melting pot

I head over to Brick Lane. A cultural crossroads of communities long gone, 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 there, it later became home to a variety of immigrants moving to London for a better life, including an influx of wealthy French-silk weavers due to its proximity to Spitalfields >



Left page (clockwise from top left): Columbia Road Flower Market; the East London flagship store of shoe brand Fiorentini + Baker, located in a former button factory (49 Rivington Street); enjoying the sun by the water's edge; the illustrated mural by John Kilburn at Origin Coffee Roasters.

market. 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, the world of art is also a major attraction, with several independent venues such as the pioneering Whitechapel Gallery at the end of Brick Lane drawing in locals and visitors alike. Bringing

Brick Lane's street signs were even translated into Bengali

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-blasters 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 industrial 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 which features British-Indian artist Anish Kapoor's sinewy red tower – punctuates the horizon, along with Here East, a centre of trendy independent shops and restaurants, which are soon set to open.

London



Jasmijn Evans/Art Associates

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

- 1 Broadway Market
- 2 Ace Hotel Shoreditch
- 3 Old Street
- 4 Village Underground
- 5 Labour and Wait
- 6 Whitechapel Gallery
- 7 The White Building
- 8 Columbia Road Flower Market
- 9 Tramshed

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 also happens to be London's 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 bold colours and such urban 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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