

A WALKING TOUR THROUGH BANGKOK'S CHAOTIC CHINATOWN

by Greg Jorgensen for CNNGo.com

BANGKOK'S CHINATOWN



Bangkok's Chinatown (aka Yaowarat) is similar to many other Chinatowns around the world, but its long history, proximity to the motherland and crazy energy have given it a style all its own.

Before we start touring, a quick, dirty history. Chinese immigrants originally settled on the present site of the Grand Palace. When construction on the palace started in 1782, they moved downriver to what is now Chinatown. Originally clustered around a single narrow road (which we'll get to in a bit), the community grew but retained its own culture and traditions even as Bangkok exploded around it.

The best way to see Chinatown in all its chaotic glory? On foot, baby! Just in time for Chinese New Year, we've weeded out the duds and put together this perfectly feasible walking tour of Chinatown. But we're not going to lie to you -- it's no walk in the park. walking tour of Chinatown. But we're not going to lie to you. It's no walk in the park.

Starting point

Begin at the Hualumphong MRT (subway) station, where you should leave via exit 1. Continue forward, across the bridge and take your second left on Thanon Mittaphap, aka Thanon Tri Mit. Down here on the right-hand side is Wat Traimit.

Stop 1: Wat Traimit and Chalemphrakiat Gate

Inside the magnificent new temple is the famed Golden Buddha, which sat ignored for centuries until workmen dropped what they thought was a plain old five-ton, 13th century image of Buddha in the 1950s, cracking the plaster and revealing the solid gold statue underneath. It's so cool we even mentioned it in our list of 50 reasons why Bangkok is the greatest city in the world.

Out of the temple turning right you'll see the giant red Royal Jubilee Gate -- in Thai called "Chalemphrakiat" -- built in 1999 to symbolize the prosperity of Thai and Chinese cultures under His Majesty the King. If you cross the street here (be careful!) and turn right, you should be walking up Thanon Yaowarat, the heart of Chinatown.

Stop 2: Tian Fa Hospital

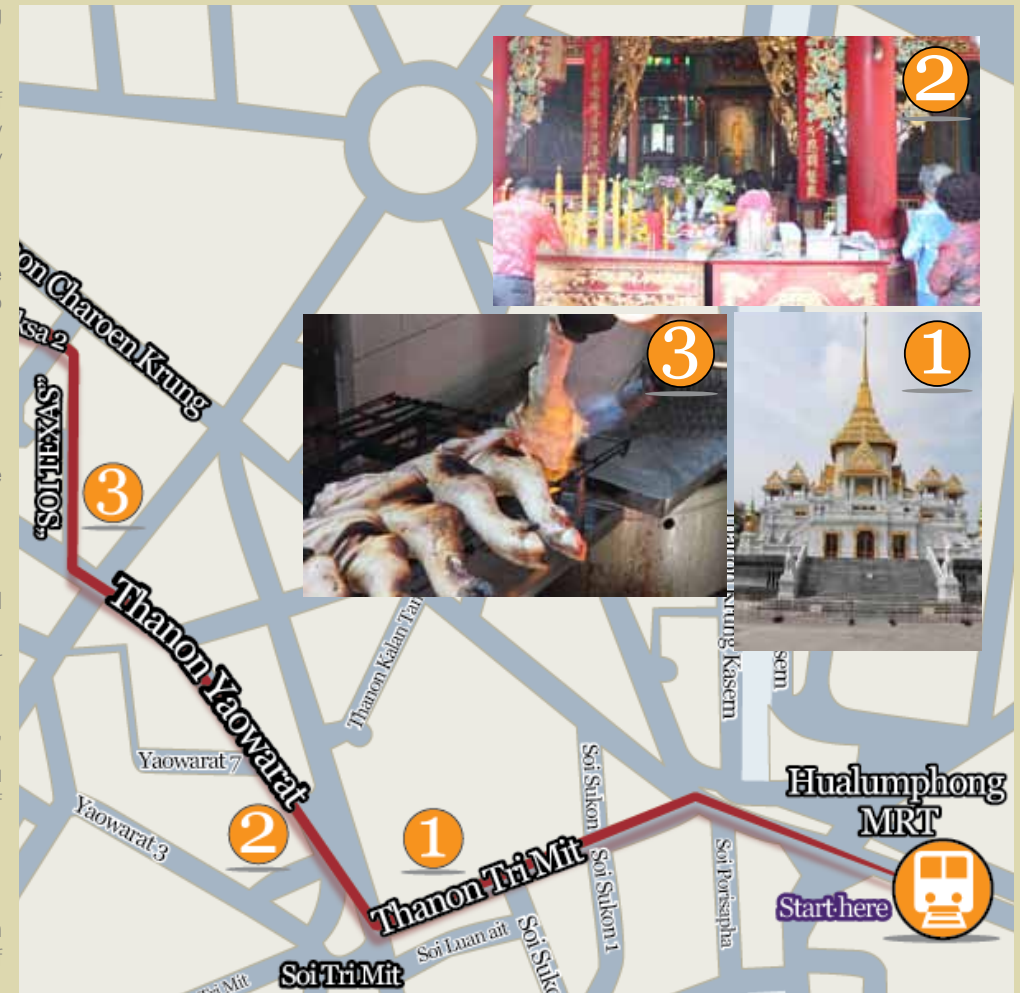
You'll soon pass the ornate temple at the opening of the Tian Fa Hospital, built in 1903 by the five main Chinese clans who traditionally didn't get along so well. This hospital gave the community their first sense of identity as a single group, paving the way for Bangkok's Chinese-inhabited district to become Chinatown.

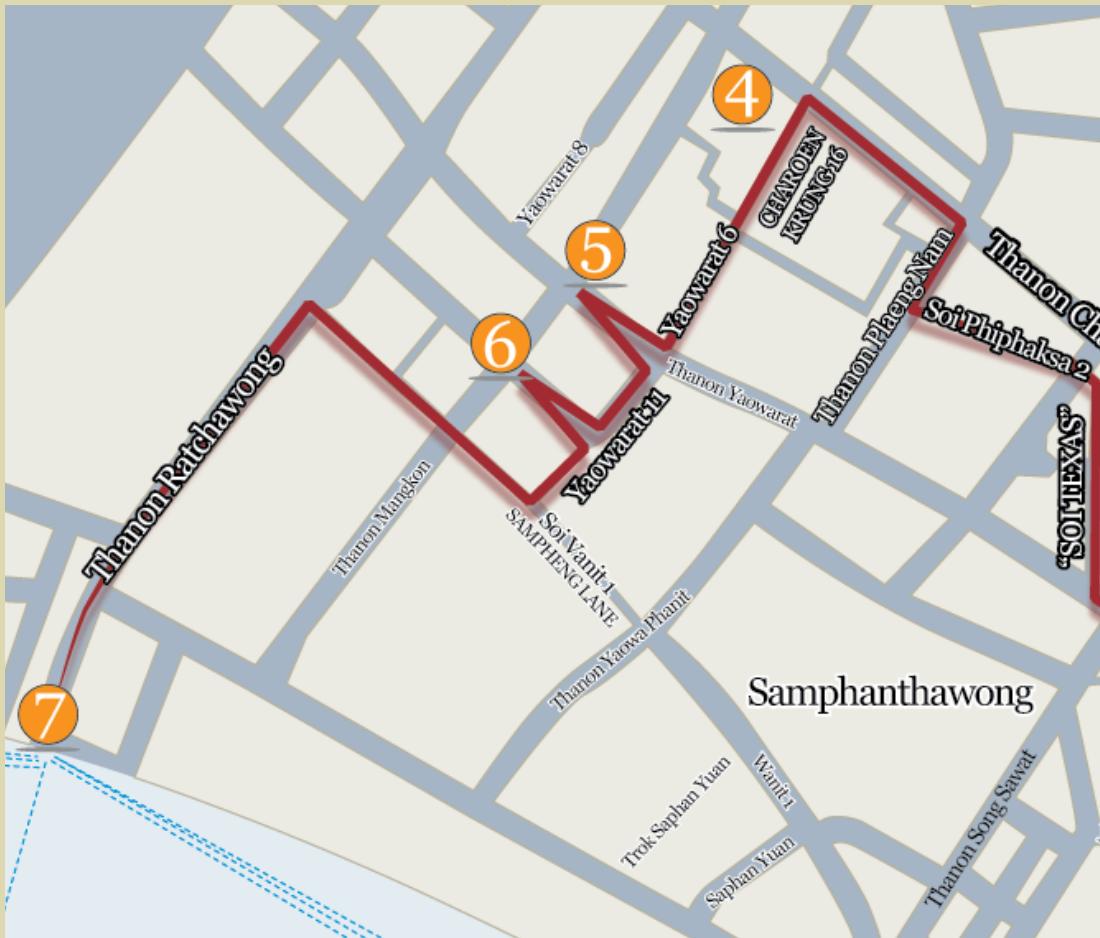
Stop 3: Good ol' Soi Texas

From the hospital, continue walking up Thanon Yaowarat until you hit Thanon Song Sawat. You'll be standing at the south corner of this intersection. Make your way to the north corner and continue up Thanon Yaowarat for a few more steps until you see a street sign for Yaowarat Soi 2 -- turn right into here.

This soi (alley), also called Soi Texas for the karaoke joint 20 meters in, looks pretty much how it did 100 years ago. Shops turn into living rooms which turn into shrines, while masseuses snack at card tables with octogenarians and off-duty chefs, all of whom seem to enjoy staring at strangers as they walk by. Keep following this soi as it curves to the left, crosses a bigger street and continues into another, surprisingly tranquil, little neighborhood. (The soi endures a name change, to Soi Phipaksa 2.) A good cluster of food stalls is here, surrounded by more Chinese shophouses that appear right out of a colonial picture book.

At the next big street (Thanon Plaeng Nam), turn right, and then left on the main street, which will be Thanon Charoen Krung. For the next 100 meters or so the sidewalk is crammed with vendors selling everything from old audio cassettes to watermelon to dubiously obtained impotence cures (probably best to ignore those). When you get to Charoen Krung 16, take a left.





Stop 4: Impotence cures and chicken's feet



This is the center of Chinatown's shopping madness. Known as Talat Mai, this 200 meter long soi could be out of a 1940s Shanghai gangster flick. Huge bags of unknown food products crowd the narrow walkway and vendors run back and forth, screaming in Teochew at each other while brandishing bags of chicken's feet and other edible curios.

Charoen Kring 16 becomes Yaowarat 11. Follow it until it ends, at Thanon Yaowarat.

Upon exit, turn right. After 70 meters you'll get to a gold shop and just past that, a nondescript set of double glass doors, festooned with a 'Tesco Lotus' sticker. Head in here, turn right and go up the escalator to the second floor. It's time for a drink, Chinatown style.

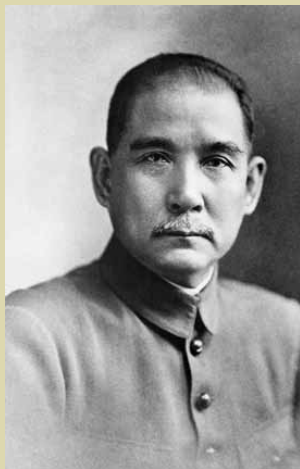
Stop 5: Play mahjong with the old gaffers

This is the Pichaiyat Building, and the second floor is jammed with Thai/Chinese seniors (mostly men) who come here to play mahjong, argue about politics and hang out with their much younger, uh... lady friends. It's also a great place to enjoy a cup of tea, prepared to the exacting rules governing a traditional Chinese tea ceremony.

Pick a counter (they're all basically the same), order a pot, and strike up a conversation with one of the old gaffers for an interesting peek into the local culture.



Stop 6: A lesson in soap box revolutions



Once quenched, head out the doors you came in by, cross the street (careful again) and essentially backtrack. Make a quick left and then turn right into Yaowarat soi 11, the entrance of which will be jammed with fruit and food stalls (all are recommended). Walk straight into this soi, but when you get to the first intersection, stop and look to your right. Somewhere on this side-soi (exactly where has been lost to time) exiled politician Dr Sun Yat-sen literally stood on a soapbox to raise overseas support for his cause, which happened to be overthrowing the Qing Dynasty. He, of course, succeeded, and formed the first government of post-Imperial China, which in turn led to the rise of the Communist Party.

If you continue going forward another block along Yaowarat soi 11, you'll hit a soi stuffed with people shuffling along. This is Sampheng Lane (aka Soi Vanit 1) and you'll need to turn right here. Believe it or not, at one time Sampheng Lane was Chinatown -- this road was where the entire Chinese community lived. Today, it's one of the most densely populated shopping areas in the city and you can find everything from Hello Kitty nail clippers to bulk fabric to food. It's hot and slow going here so take your time.

Stop 7: Sweet riverside relief

Eventually you'll get to Thanon Ratchawong. To be honest, by this point we're usually pretty tired of the crowds, but if you want to see more, continue across the street for more Sampheng action. It goes for quite a way, eventually coming out in Little India -- but that's another story and another tour for another time.

At any rate, turn left at Thanon Ratchawong. The crowds should thin out by now, so enjoy the walk to the end of the street, where you'll hit the Ratchawong river taxi pier. From here, you can catch a boat upriver (Grand Palace, Wat Pho, etc) or downriver (River City, Saphan Taksin BTS, etc) for 12 baht.