



# Bangkok's original foodie haunt

The name Nang Loeng may not ring a bell, but the historical area is home to some of the best traditional street eats you'll find anywhere in the Thai capital. Words & Photography: Dave Stamboulis

Visitors to Bangkok in search of the old “Venice of the East” city tend to spend their time wandering the back alleys along the Chao Phraya River or soaking in the historical royal sights around Dusit and Rattanakosin Island. Yet almost everyone bypasses a small and somewhat hidden-away community called Nang Loeng, a market area

that is one of the city’s most historic and atmospheric spots.

Nang Loeng has been around since the late 1800s. The reign of King Rama V saw a massive building influx take place around neighbouring Dusit, with many of Bangkok’s top palaces and other exquisite architectural gems being erected at this time. Notable figures of the time like Khet Udomsak, the

Prince of Chumphon and founder of the Thai navy, had a home in the neighbourhood, and the wealth here brought traders into the area; Thais, Chinese, Westerners, and other immigrant groups lived alongside one another, leading to a vibrant and cosmopolitan market community.

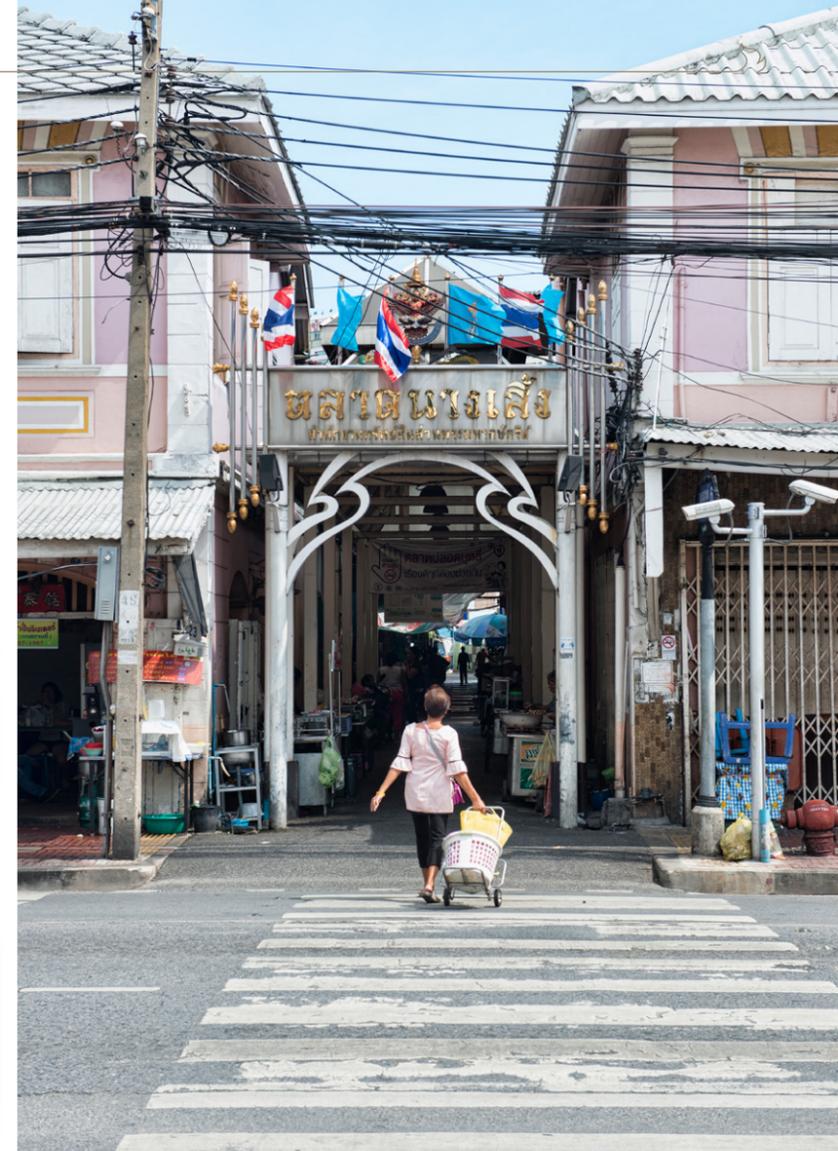
The centrepoint of Nang Loeng is its market, which in contrast to most “wet” markets around town, offers



food stalls rather than fresh produce, meat, and seafood. The market opened in 1899, named after the Mon word for large ceramic water storage jars, known as *e-loeng*, which were brought here by the early residents to sell. Recently given a facelift for safety’s sake, the food court-like interior may no longer look a century old, but it still serves one of the most outstanding

selections of unique and traditional Thai street food you will find in Bangkok.

A few Bangkok foodie street tours have started making their way here recently, showcasing a non-touristy slice of Bangkok street life, where descendants of age-old vendor families still follow recipes handed



Clockwise from top: Secret food stalls inside Nang Loeng Market.

The entrance to Nang Loeng Market

Moo Krob, or crispy deep-fried pork belly.

The bustling interior of inside Nang Loeng Market.

Clockwise from right: Duck noodles at Sor Roong Raj restaurant. View through the trees of Wat Sommanat. Colonial shutters at Wat Sommanat. The exterior of the Sala Chalerm Thani. *Kanom Tuay* - a traditional Thai dessert. Locals enjoying duck noodles at Sor Roong Raj restaurant



down over generations. Here you will find some of the best *khao raat gaeng*, “rice topped with curry” vendors in Bangkok. One stall, Khao Raat Gaeng Rattana (Nakhon Sawan Soi 6, Tel. +666 (0)2 282-6150), prepares an array of spice-laden curries and other dishes that customers choose from to go over their heaping plates of rice. The *yam makua yao* grilled eggplant salad here is legendary, as is the dry green coconut curry, and on most days, the best curries are all sold out once the lunch crowd hits at noon.

Another stall just outside the main food area, Rung Reuang (Nakhon Sawan Soi 8, Tel. +66 (0)2 281-9755), has wonton noodles known as *giao naam*, stuffed with fresh crab meat, a departure from the fake or canned meat used elsewhere, cooked up by an old man who still makes his own homemade noodles to go



along with the wonton. Come lunchtime, the alleyways here are filled with smoke and pungent aromas emanating from all corners, attesting to the gourmet feast to be found.

Nearby is a hole-in-the-wall eatery called Sor Roong Roj (141-3 Nakhon Sawan Rd, Tel. +66(0)2 629-9800). The humble interior is packed with customers crammed together, eating from red plastic stools and Formica table tops, yet nobody seems to mind the basic surroundings, as the fresh braised duck and duck noodle soup that is sold here is superb. The walls are adorned with framed photos of famous politicians and movie or TV stars who have eaten here, along with clippings from just about every magazine and newspaper heralding the food. The restaurant has been given a prestigious Shell Chuan Chim food award listing, and in addition to the duck, the 50-plus year old eatery features a comprehensive Thai-Chinese menu of other treats.

Speaking of treats, Nang Loeng is famed for its *kanom waan*, or Thai traditional desserts. Vendors crowd the edges of the food court selling a selection of sweets. Here you can find *kanom*

*pueak* or *kanom kluay*, taro and banana cakes, made by a woman whose ancestors worked in the kitchens of the royal palace. You'll also find coconut and rice batter treats which are shaped by pouring the batter into tiny porcelain bowls called *kanom tuay* at Montha, a three-generation stall, alongside crispy coconut crepes (*kanom beung*) made at Kanom Beung Boran Mae Cham (Nakhon Sawan Soi 4); the fried banana vendor here has a queue down the block every day, attesting to the 2,000-plus baht they make per day just selling tiny 15 baht bags of fried bananas.

It's not only food that makes Nang Loeng attractive. The community was once a hub for entertainment and nightlife. There were opium dens, a red light district, and even a race course during the early 1900s. While these dubious amusements are long gone, the Sala Chalerm Thani cinema is still standing, and is a historical masterpiece. The Chalerm Thani was Thailand's first cinema, built in

1918. Made entirely of wood, the theatre began during the days of silent film, with a brass band performing accompaniment to the movie being screened inside. During the cinema's heyday, tickets sold for two baht, and crowds of several hundred people a night were the norm. Famed Thai actor Mitr Chaibancha lived in Nang Loeng, and hundreds of his films screened at the Chalerm Thani. Chaibancha was buried here at the local Wat Sunthon Thammathan, in a ceremony which saw hundreds of thousands of devotees descending on the temple and actually damaging it in their fervour to send off their beloved idol.

The Sala Chalerm Thani is no longer in use, although a foundation called the Southeast Asia Movie Theatre Project has been trying to spearhead an effort to get the Crown Property Bureau, which owns the land,



to turn the decaying treasure into a film museum. These days, the crumbling interior of the cinema is used as a warehouse, but the original sign still stands outside, and you can see the entire upper half of the building from the large square outside.

The faded wooden panels of the cinema match many of the simple slat wood shophouses that ring the narrow lanes of Nang Loeng, while just outside, you find architecture that shows off the diversity of the time. Nearby Wat Sommanat features a colonial design, with golden window shutters and gardens fronting its large golden *chedi*, and wealthier homes cluster on the fringes. Even the main streets leading into the market here feature some quirks. When one crosses the streets here, there are no traffic lights, and as elsewhere, fast cars usually pay no attention to the zebra crossings. However, Nang Loeng shows off its own answer to this by installing hand held safety flags that are set on either side of the crosswalks. Pedestrians pick up the flags, hold them overhead, and walk out as if in a school zone crossing; despite Bangkok's notorious drivers, the flags seem to work, with cars slowing down and stopping.

As Bangkok becomes increasingly more modern by the day, Nang Loeng remains a marvellous ode to the city's storied past; as preserved history becomes harder to find, places like this becomes ever more worth exploring.



**Nang Loeng Market**

Located in Pom Prap Sattru Phai District, Bangkok, Nang Loeng Market is a haven for traditional Thai food and sweets. The century-old market by Krung Kasem canal is only a 10-minute walk from the famous Ratchadamnoen boxing Stadium and boasts easy access from Pha Nieng, Ratchadamnoen, Lan Luang and Nakhon Sawan roads.