



Southern Song

Text & Images
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Some thirty minutes north of Hat Yai, wedged between Songkhla Lake and the Gulf of Thailand, lies Songkhla's Old Town. Its three main streets, stitched together by a network of narrow alleys, deliver a smorgasbord of terrazzo-floored restaurants dishing out vinegary pork noodles, ice cream with egg yolk and rare Chinese-Thai specialties from century-old kitchens. Like Penang and Phuket Town, the old town was once a cog in a thriving network of Chinese merchant settlements (and like them, the weathered walls of its historic townhouses now also wear murals by local artists).

Here, South Chinese-style godowns with terracotta roofs and louvred window shutters stand next to ornamental Sino-European townhouses in pastel pinks and yellows. Tiny shrines, with their sweet smells of incense, alternate with curvy mid-century homes and ramshackle teak workshops. On the southern end of town, the golden dome of the Masjid Asassul mosque (one of Southern Thailand's oldest) juts out from a jumble of candy-coloured shophouses. Food stalls out front hawk mutton curry and nasi goreng, while makeshift cafes with metallic folding tables serve roti and sweet tea after dark.

It's a multicultural foodie playground steeped in history, but that's only half the reason why magazine editors, photographers and big-name Thai designers have flocked here on weekend jaunts over the past few years.

The other half can largely be credited to Pakorn 'Aey' Rujiravilai, the hyper-connected creative entrepreneur behind gallery and artist residence a.e.y.space. The Songkhla native bought the then-derelict early 20th-century building almost a decade ago after returning from stints in New York, Bangkok and Beijing. Over the years, he has hosted renowned Thai artists (Bangkok-based designer Saran Yen Panya among them)

and organised film festivals and grassroots arts activities in an effort to introduce the local community to ideas from beyond Songkhla's borders and, conversely, share the town's cultural capital with visitors.

Rujiravilai isn't alone in his endeavour. All around town, smart cafes, galleries and boutiques breathe new life into heritage buildings. Hub Ho Hin takes over a lipstick-red former rice mill as a creative meeting space and library, and hosts an informative exhibition about Songkhla's past for first-time visitors. A few blocks away, the owners of Studio 55 have turned a lakefront shophouse into a modish chef's table and cafe, while Rujiravilai transformed a former Hokkien apothecary building into a cafe and souvenir shop dubbed The Apothecary of Singora.

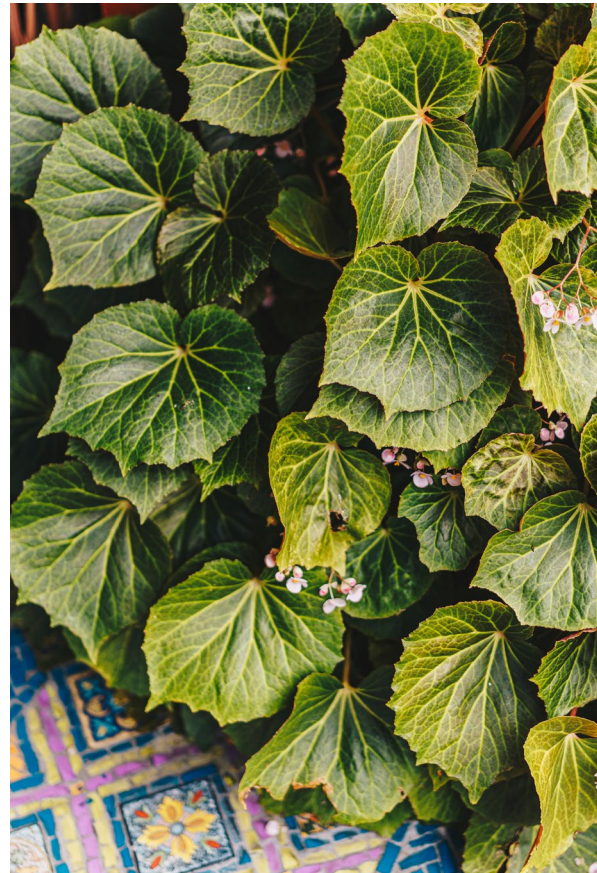
Titan Project Space, opened in early 2021, is the Old Town's most design-forward addition yet. Founded by Koblarp 'Pok' Thaitun, the gallery and tea house serves as a tribute to his grandmother, whose family moved to Songkhla from Guangdong in the 19th century. In contrast to its crumbling shophouse neighbours, the building, made from clay tiles and blackened metal, is a contemporary spin on the low-slung Chinese homes that once lined the street. Inside, rotating exhibitions showcase artistic interpretations of the local culture through a Thai-Chinese lens.

These urban regeneration efforts haven't gone unnoticed. The Thailand Creative & Design Center is set to open its Southern Thailand branch here in 2022, and rumours of UNESCO recognition are whispered through the streets. Even generic coffee chains have started snooping around for real estate, but proudly local gatekeepers like Rujiravilai will undoubtedly ensure that this charming town doesn't lose its creative community edge.

The history of Songkhla's Old Town as a Chinese merchant settlement means its urban fabric is a rich tapestry of cultures, cuisines and, increasingly, creative influences



Hub Seng is a charmingly old-school teahouse serving up sweet tea and kaya toast



Sitting in the garden of characterful boutique hotel Baan Nai Nakhon (left) is sure to energise after a day of exploring, while the plethora of local spots like Pork Tail Noodle restaurant (right) offers sustenance of a tastier variety



New creative space Titan Project Space's CLAY ROOM teahouse (right) overlooks Songkhla Lake and its boats



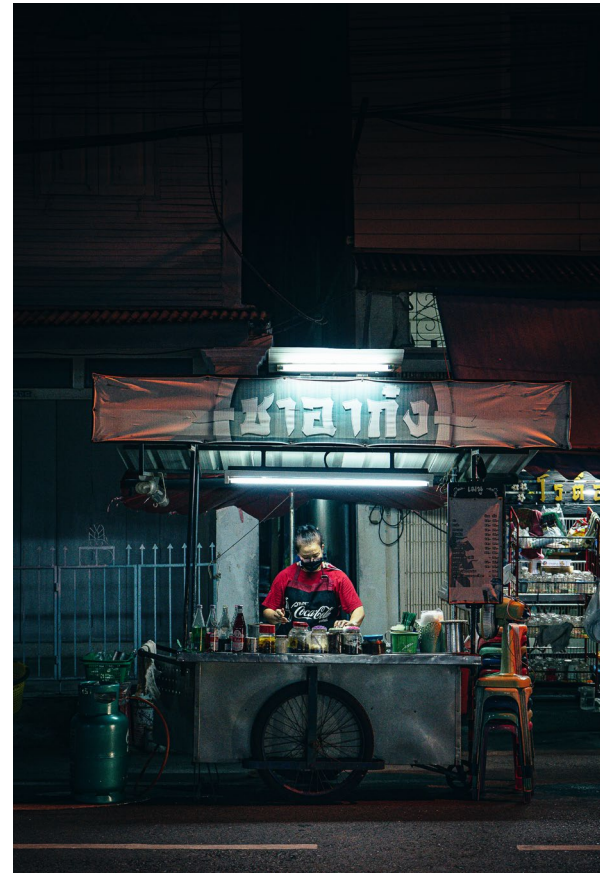
Left
The colourful facade of Baan Nai Nakhon (left) hints at the six-room hotel's bold interiors



Right
As its name suggests, Pork Tail Noodle is known for dishes like this noodle and minced pork ball bowl



Pakorn 'Aey' Rujiravilai turned a derelict early 20th-century building into gallery and artist residence a.e.y.space



Reflecting the area's multicultural influences, streetside stalls in the Muslim district serve coffee after dark (left), while tasty breakfast congee with Chinese crullers can be found at Koh Thai (right) the next morning

