



TRAVEL

Going off track



▲ At Brick Lane, home to the Bangladeshi community

COMMUNITY MEALS

Home to several migrant communities, London's East End has a thriving food culture

Charukesi Ramadurai
mirrorfeedback@timesgroup.com

TWEETS @_MumbaiMirror

Now, this is the site where the body of Jack the Ripper's fifth victim was found," declares Emily, our guide. That gets our attention. Standing in front of the modern car park at White's Row, we silently contemplate Mary Jane Kelly's gruesome end. In London's East End, there is no getting away from the Ripper legend.

Jack the Ripper was by no means the world's scariest or most prolific serial killer, but he was certainly one of the most famous during his time and remains so after all these years. This is largely due to East

End's reputation for being a hotbed of vice and villainy by the mid-19th century.

London's East End has gone through extremely tumultuous changes in London's recent history. Today, it is one of the most vibrant districts in the English capital. Yet, the streets of East End remain off the radar for most tourists even locals.

The walk, organised by the Eating London food tour, begins at Spitalfields market, one of the oldest in London and most prominent landmarks of this bor-

ough. At 10.30 am, Spitalfields is buzzing, with sellers of antiques and bric-a-brac, artisanal cupcakes and organic soups, handmade jewellery and designer clothes setting up shop.

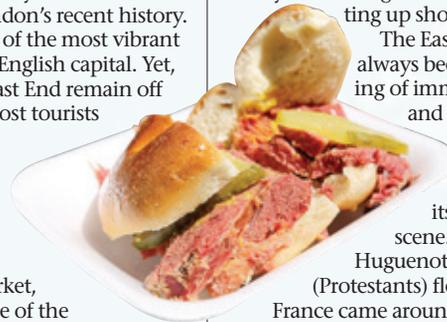
The East End has always been welcoming of immigrants and each community has left a mark on its food scene. First, the Huguenots

(Protestants) fleeing France came around 1685. On our way to Brick Lane, we walk past the grand houses of these fine silk weavers on streets which still bear French names. Then the Irish workers arrived in the mid 1700s seeking employment in the

London docks and later on, escaping the local potato famine.

The East European Jewish community fleeing persecution in Poland and Russia found this area a safe haven and stayed here for almost a century from 1880 to 1970, making it one of Europe's largest Jewish communities. Emily points out the grand 'Soup kitchen set up for the Jewish poor' building that fed over 1,30,000 Jews even in the beginning of the 20th century. We come across remnants of the area's Jewish heritage later on in the walk at Beigel Bake — where bagels are boiled before being baked in traditional Jewish style — in Brick Lane, famous for staying open 24 hours a day.

Thanks to popular culture, any mention of Brick Lane immediately brings to mind its Bangladeshi community. Here, it does feel a bit



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Brick Lane and its surrounding areas have some of the most stunning street art in the city

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▲ A waitress at Poppies, the award winner at the national 'fish and chips' event

like walking in a market in Mumbai's Dadar or Delhi's Sarojini Nagar; the tall tower of Jamme Masjid in the distance, little money transfer kiosks with names like Dешforex and shops selling colourful quick-dry saris. We are here to taste curry — and Britain's national dish of chicken tikka masala — at Aladin.

The highlight of Brick Lane is the stunning street art, including UK's own Banksy and Eine, Belgian artist ROA and Chilean Otto Schade. And the cheerful chaos. If the main street is home to Bangladeshis, the narrow lanes surrounding it attract hipster Londoners with their quirky cafés and trendy boutiques.

And what is a London food walk without the usual suspects? So, we have bread and butter pudding served piping hot, with generous lashings of vanilla custard, at The English Restaurant.

There is 'fish and chips' at Poppies, which is no ordinary cod but a winner at the National Fish and Chip awards. In a country with over 10,000 "chippies," this is no mean feat. I find Poppies enormously charming: the



▲ St John Bread and Wine, known for its nose-to-tail philosophy



▲ Street art at Brick Lane depicting communal harmony

BEFORE YOU PACK

- **Getting there:** There are several direct flights to London from Mumbai
- **Where to stay:** Accommodation in London can be very expensive. Stay at one of the Z Hotels in central London at Soho, Picadilly or Victoria, with rates starting from £70 (Rs 6, 800) per night.
- **Best time to visit:** Avoid London during the winter season — December to March. The summer months from June-September are favourable

jukebox, the waitresses in cutesy red costumes and the wall posters with Cockney rhyming slang (brown bread for dead, pen and ink for stink).

An interesting stop is St John Bread and Wine, which prides itself on its "nose to tail" philosophy. Simply put, its popular chefs follow a democratic — if queasy for me — cooking policy of "no body part left behind." Luckily, that morning, we are offered only a cured bacon sandwich and poached pear in yoghurt sauce.

My favourite is the final stop at the super tony Pizza East, which I think is the perfect metaphor for this neighbourhood's gentrification. Sitting on the uncomfortable high stool, I muse on the fact that, from pudding made from stale bread to salted caramel chocolate tart, the East End has come a very long way in just over a hundred years.