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RAZZAK'S DHARAVI

Don't be fooled by its label as a slum; this area of Mumbai, India is far from what you might expect

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In India, there is never a bad time to enjoy a piping hot cup of chai. Be it on a train, during a break at work, amongst friends or with complete strangers, the sipping of chai tea has a way of slowing down the intense world that is India. It's a way to catch your breath. Not even the blistering Indian heat eases locals from enjoying this ritual, and this particular day was no exception.

Earlier that morning, our group of five had landed in magnificent Mumbai, India. With more than 18 million inhabitants, organized chaos does not even begin to describe the country's most populated city; its electric pulse was enough to keep our extreme jetlag at bay. We knew we had to get out and explore.

Taking shelter from the sun's assailing rays in a narrow alleyway, our cheery guide Razzak chuckled as he passed around small cups of the milky magic. Thicker than standard tea, traditional Indian chai is a creamy beverage with a subtle spice. He could see the group's bewilderment at the fact that anyone would drink a hot beverage on such an unfathomable scorcher of a day.

Reminded of a previous visit to India with marathon train rides through the countryside, nourished and refreshed by countless cups of chai and the locals who offered them as a gesture of kindness, I reached for a helping. Just like that, the world slowed down and in that moment, that alleyway could have been anywhere in the world.

But we weren't just anywhere; we were in the heart of Dharavi, one of the world's largest slums, made famous by the Hollywood film Slumdog Millionaire.

This story of Dharavi began two hours earlier when we arrived at a pre-determined meeting point. Razzak, a tall, lanky fellow dressed in trousers and long sleeves (despite the oppressive humidity), greeted us with a beaming smile and handshakes, jubilantly welcoming us to India. He led our pack along a busy street and paused atop a

bridge at the edge of the slum that spanned a web of main roads. He waited no time in sending an important message: if we were visiting the slum to experience despair and extreme poverty, we had come to the wrong place.

Razzak's Dharavi is much different than what one might expect. Setting off into the maze of winding streets and alleyways, it was clear that he was born and raised right here. Aside from clearly knowing the layout like the back of his hand, this well-spoken young man enlightened us to the unique identity of the surrounding community, while often seen by the outside world as nothing but a decrepit and dangerous ghetto, the Dharavi that Razzak knows is a living, breathing, thriving metropolis; a city within a city, playing a key role in the success and functioning of its big sister, Mumbai.

With a much-debated population between 300,000 and one million packed into a mere 336 acres, Dharavi is the most densely populated place on Earth. Estimated to have an economic turnover of US\$300 million to US\$1 billion a year, the slum's largely off-record economy is driven by a powerful recycling industry and global product exports.

Keeping us close to ensure that we didn't get lost, Razzak paused every few minutes to show our group a particular industry or business. First, metal recycling, with each door offering a different stage of the process: sorting, melting, molding, packaging. Discarded metal from all over Mumbai is gathered here and transformed into new products for eventual resale. Around the next corner, plastics. Again, a steel-rolled machine, turning old into new.

Many twists and turns later (and utterly clueless of our location), we were brought to the fabrics sector, here, we observed two young men dyeing large pieces of cloth in vats of the most brilliant colours. Once dried, a group of girls would press, fold and deliver the fabric to a nearby shop where we watched an older man apply

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a combination of oil dye, creating intricate designs, which would eventually be used to make everything from saris to tablecloths.

After briefly stopping to enjoy some freshly baked biscuits, we soon arrived in the leather district. Wallets, purses, shoes, bags, jackets – if it could be made from leather, you could find it here. In one man's shop, I spotted a rack of leather belts and asked whether I might be able to buy one for myself. Not only was my request welcomed but the leathersmith quickly wrapped the belt around my waist and then measured, cut and punctured it to fit me perfectly. For just a few dollars, I was the proud owner of a beautiful new belt and a memento crafted in one of the most misunderstood societies in the world.

Hoping our escalating exhaustion – a result of the relentless mid-May heat, the sweltering humidity, and our fresh-off-the-plane jet lag – Razzak offered to take us to the office of his tour company. Like every other business in the slum, the headquarters of Be The Local Tours was modest. At the top of a ladder in a single room with benches and pillows, the owner greeted us and shared the story of their company. Owned and operated by a group of students and youth, its mission is to break down the stigmas and misconceptions people have of Dharavi while providing sustainable income opportunities to full-time students pursuing higher education. They see Dharavi, their home, as the 'Land of Opportunity'.

After countless laughs, stories and some business strategizing, we found ourselves back on the move, visiting pottery



makers, market stalls and a man who, sitting outside his home with friends, played some music for his surprise audience.

Two hours of walking, learning and profuse sweating had gone by in what felt like five minutes and we had come to that narrow alleyway to 'take chai'. A small cup in hand, I took a sip. As I tasted the sweet milk chai on my tongue, it was apparent in that moment, the preconceptions we had brought with us to the slum were not accurate. Sure, there was no denying the less-than ideal conditions and standard of living comparative to what we know in Canada, but it wasn't a scene of extreme crisis and crime.

Our safety was never a concern and unlike many other cities around the globe, beggars did not line the streets. Everyone we encountered, though their lives were in many ways tough, greeted us with genuine smiles and interest in showing us their craft, never with the intention of making a sale. That in-itself is a rare distinction.

Although unmistakably foreign, for those few minutes standing in the alleyway shade with Razzak and other Dharavi residents, we almost felt like locals - all of us, simply humans, laughing and sharing stories with other humans, our nationalities and incomes stripped away by a small, piping hot cup of chai. ■

Back Graembridge is the founder of travel blog **Backpack With Brock** (www.backpackwithbrock.com), where primarily through video, he shares stories and insights from his adventures in more than 70 countries around the globe. He also provides coaching services to travellers planning an extended trip, helping them depart prepared and confident. You can find him on most social media as @backpackwithbrock. Be sure to check out his "Indian Market".

The Local Tour is a small tour company based in Mumbai, India that provides an intimate look into many aspects of India's largest city. Run by students, visitors can explore everything from the Dharavi slum to Mumbai's main attractions, or hire a private driver to take them wherever they please. <http://belthelocalsandtravels.com/>

