

The spirit of Dharavi

Tours of Mumbai's largest slum are flourishing

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When the Oscar-winning 2008 movie *Slumdog Millionaire* showcased to the world the exuberance and dogged spirit of a Mumbai slum, it also fuelled tourism growth.

Dharavi, the area where the movie was largely shot and where its hero Jamal grew up, encompasses one of the largest slums in India. Founded more than 100 years ago, when work-hungry people from country areas began to migrate to what was then Bombay, Dharavi is home to a million or so residents across an area of about 2sq km that was once a mangrove swamp. It's 40 minutes by car from the luxury of Mumbai's Taj Mahal Palace Hotel. That India is a land of contrasts is a given, but it's with a touch of embarrassment that we approach the hotel's impeccably tailored concierges to book a tour.

Reality Tours and Travel, mentioned in our guidebook, is the only operator we know. When our guide takes us to our waiting car, however, we are with Be The Local Tours and Travel. Trips to Dharavi began in 2006 with Reality Tours and Travel but in 2010 competition arrived when Fahim Vora and Tauseef Siddiqui launched their Be The Local operation. Says Fahim, "People were visiting Dharavi before *Slumdog Millionaire* but the movie definitely increased the number of tourists."

Dharavi's blended community includes diverse religions, ethnic origins and cultures. The first mosque was



founded in 1887, the first Hindu temple in 1913. The influx outstripped adequate housing. Anxious to keep its people content, the government began to legalise slum areas, enabling residents to own land and structures.

Continuing the skills brought by those early settlers, Dharavi is host to industries that include textiles, pottery, leather, jewellery and, more recently, recycling cardboard and electronic parts and crushing plastics. Many women make snacks that sell widely; its products are exported to the US and Europe. Dharavi's so-called "informal" economy has mushroomed; 60 government schools and a handful of private institutions have been built and its many hospitals include private establishments, plus medical clinics are dotted about streets and lanes. Dharavi residents are conscious of fitness and its 10 gyms are well attended.

If touring slum areas smacks of distasteful voyeurism, bear in mind both these tour operators put back into the



High-rise buildings tower over Mumbai's Dharavi, top; a scene from *Slumdog Millionaire*, above

economy. Reality Tours has expanded into community work, providing classes in English and computer skills, and established a non-profit arm aimed at providing education for disadvantaged children. The company also has extended its tourism reach beyond Mumbai.

Be The Local Tours has grown sufficiently to employ a staff of 15 and has its office in the heart of Dharavi. It helps full-time students continue their education by offering employment and training as guides. And forget preconceived notions about slums, Dharavi may be cramped and overcrowded but it buzzes with community spirit and innovation. There is work to be done, schools to attend, a living to be earned.

"This is an environment of hardworking people," says our guide, Ankit, an IT graduate studying for an MBA who was born and reared in Dharavi. He says turnover of Dharavi nudges \$US1 billion (\$1.3bn) a year.

Open flaming furnaces burn in confined, inadequately lit spaces, men work with sharp metals, deal with melting plastics, but we see no goggles, ear muffs or protective footwear. Those with more enviable jobs work at sewing machines in calmer surroundings. Industries such as crumpling metals and plastics and melting aluminium give rise to noxious, arguably toxic, smells. I mention unions. Ankit is firm. "They don't want rules here ... these guys want to work. They want to upgrade their jobs, move on, earn more, provide for their families, rent or buy a house."

Conditions in Dharavi have improved. Water is provided daily by the government and piped into houses so housewives no longer trudge to a community tap and power is available 24/7.

We leave Dharavi's bustle and thrum and drive back to the hotel. As we walk into the lobby's air-conditioned splendour, a fellow traveller enquires how we are and then confides, unasked, that he is feeling better. "Bacteria just doesn't agree with me." As a pick-up line it doesn't rate; as a reminder we are back among First World concerns, it's a bull's eye.

Byron Bay-based author Edna Carew Hoffmann attended this year's Jaipur Literary Festival and regularly chairs sessions at the Byron Bay Writers Festival.

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