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Dharavi Up, Close And Personal

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With carefully planned guided tours through the buzzing Dharavi, a group of young men are slowly re-framing the true picture and identity of one of world's largest slums, and empowering their lives, along the way

The need to wipe off the negative shades attached to their community, pushed two young men, from Dharavi, Fahim Vora and Tauseef Siddiqui, to start a tour guide service of a place they call home. Be the local was started in 2010 to show the inside world of one of the most complex and talked about spaces in Mumbai. Its well-planned tours are organised and conducted by young residents of Dharavi who seek additional income to pursue education.

Kids in Dharavi pose for a photo

The other picture

"Dharavi has always been portrayed as a space for corruption. This attitude increased after Danny Boyle's Slumdog Millionaire, and other films too. We wanted to ensure that when outsiders visit our homes they are shown the correct picture, an insider's perspective to the life here," said Vora. Over the past few years, academicians have also started expressing their interest in Dharavi. With an incredibly low carbon footprint and a thriving recycling industry, this stretch of land is setting an example to the world with its efficiency. Typically, a two-hour tour generally consists of a visit to the industrial and residential spaces, schools, temples, markets and ends with the paper industry at Kumbharwada. The recently launched Dharavi foodie tour will provide an opportunity to taste and cook Dharavi's local food as well. "The feedback has always been positive.

Co-founder of Be the Local Tauseef Siddiqui

The people inside Dharavi are happy that we are portraying the true image of our neighbourhood. The visitors are even more thrilled because they are given an insider's view," shares Siddiqui. But it wasn't a smooth rode for these young entrepreneurs. They tried to kick-start the business by distributing pamphlets at tourist destinations. However, it was the Internet that gave them their first major breakthrough. Through it, word about the organisation spread fast and, people started signing up for their tours from across the world.

Educate, empower

The company, which started with one computer and a pack of visiting cards, today, boasts of a small office with ten collegians from Dharavi working as part-time guides. They also provide car rental services and city tours to other parts, for which they hire students outside Dharavi also as guides. The founders ensure that the money earned by the students is channeled towards education. "We believe that students can learn a lot from interacting with these seasoned travellers," maintains Fahim.

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with open arms. Our only wish is that they do not give a false impression. Also, we believe, when you take something from the community you are obliged to give something back," asserts Siddiqui – a lesson that India's tourism industry can learn from.

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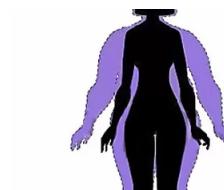
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