

# SLUM TOURS IN MUMBAI: GET TO KNOW THE OTHER SIDE OF THE CITY



The tours through Dharavi, the large slum in Mumbai, show the visitors not only the shanty houses but also the hidden beauty and spirit of community present in the area.

On the Dharavi slum tours, one sees why the area is the heart of small scale industries in Mumbai (annual turnover is approximately US\$ 665 million). The visitors can see a wide range of these activities - from recycling, the making of clay pots, embroidery, bakery, soap factory, leather tanning, papad (poppadom) making and many others, most of which take place in very small spaces.

**The tour guide leads the tourists also by the residential areas, where one really gets a feeling of how the people are living.** You can see the sense of community and spirit that exists in the area. People from all over India and from all religions live in Dharavi so the visitors can see the rich diversity in the form of e.g. numerous Hindu temples, mosques as well as churches.

Besides showcasing the way of life in the area, one of the aims of the tour is to break down the negative image of Dharavi, and of slums in general. Unfortunately the popular film “Slumdog Millionaire” did not portray the area in a very positive light. Yes, there is poverty and the area has its problems, but what shines through is the energy and spirit of the people.

Dharavi was originally marshy terrain home to the Kolis, a traditional fishing community who lived at the edge of Mahim Creek. As the swamps separating the seven islands that formed Bombay were filled in, migrants from all over India settled in Dharavi. Potters from Gujarat, tanners from Tamil Nadu and embroidery workers from Uttar Pradesh were among those who put down roots in Dharavi beginning in the nineteenth century. For migrants, Dharavi offered work and affordable housing; for authorities, until recently, it was a place where illegal settlements could acceptably proliferate away from the central city.

In the context of rising land values, the latest plan to redevelop Dharavi was elaborated a decade ago by US-based architect and consultant Mukesh Mehta and approved by the state government of Maharashtra in 2004. Known as the Dharavi Redevelopment Project (DRP) and overseen by the Slum Rehabilitation Authority (SRA), **the plan is painted as a win-win situation in which eligible slum dwellers receive secure housing and amenities while middle classes gain new residential and commercial spaces**, developers and the government make a profit, and an embarrassing blot is removed from the landscape of the aspiring “world-class city.”

Valued at Rs. 93 billion (around USD 2.3 billion), the plan - which the authorities have dubbed “The Opportunity of the Millennium” - divides Dharavi into five sectors to be developed by global firms after a competitive bidding process. Profits from the sale of high-end developments will fund the resettlement of eligible slum dwellers (those who can prove their residence prior to January 1, 1995) in free 300 sq. ft. flats in multi-story buildings. Developers are also charged with providing some amenities and infrastructural improvements.

Although many laud the plan’s transcendence of a piecemeal approach, the project has been

criticized for being pro-developer instead of pro-resident; for proceeding without transparency towards, consent of or consultation with the community; and for adopting an approach that ignores the generations of incremental self-development that have made Dharavi the unique and productive place it is today.

**Residents have further protested that the plan will deprive many of their livelihoods, does not allow enough space in light of current tenement sizes,** and does not account for Dharavi's sizable population of renters and more recent migrants.

When the redevelopment will finally take place is difficult to say, but due to the value of the land it's inevitable that it will happen, and the sense of community which one sees on the tour will not be the same in the high rises.

**By Chris Way** (Director of Reality Tours and Travel)

Reality Tours and Travel organizes Dharavi slum tours for social purposes. The tour receipts are used to support the company's sister organization "Reality Gives" - an NGO running a community centre and kindergarten in the area. Both facilities are shown on the tour.

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