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TourismConcern
research briefing

Slum tourism: helping to fight poverty …or voyeuristic exploitation?

Research briefing 2016 • Elizabeth Monroe & Peter Bishop

Introduction

Slum tourism – which involves touring marginalised and impoverished areas that tourists would normally never visit – is becoming increasingly popular in many locations around the world. Proponents argue that it can enable economic and social mobility for residents, and that it can also change the perspectives of those visiting. However, many critics see it as little more than voyeuristic classism with potentially damaging consequences, and few benefits for those who live in the slums.

The United Nations defines a slum as 'a run down area of a city characterized by substandard housing and squalor and lacking in tenure security'(UN, 2007). From street tours of the homeless in Amsterdam to funicular rides above shanty towns in Rio, visits to these run down areas are becoming a familiar adjunct to tourism itineraries around the world.

In South Africa, hundreds of tourists visit the famous Johannesburg township of Soweto every day. Similar numbers travel with the 40 to 50 companies now offering tours of townships in Cape Town. In India, Mumbai's famous Dharavi slum is firmly on the tourism trail. And in Brazil hundreds make daily visits to favelas in Rio de Janeiro.

Slum tourism in Jakarta, Indonesia

Similar tours are being developed all over the world: in Medellin, Colombia; Jakarta, Indonesia; Windhoek, Namibia; Kingston, Jamaica; Cairo, Egypt; Bangkok, Thailand; and Mexico City. Even Neukölln, a neighbourhood in Berlin known for high rates of poverty and crime, now has its own walking tours. With Bed and Breakfast lodgings in some areas, it is even possible for tourists to spend a night or two in a slum.

Ethical debates often appear polarised between concerns about exploitation on the one hand, and potential economic and social benefits to slum residents on the other. So, how can operators ensure that their tours are beneficial? How can visitors to slums know if they are choosing an ethical tour?

This report presents findings from desk-based research which sought to answer the following questions:

- *What is slum tourism and why do people choose to visit slums?*
- *How can slum tourism benefit people in deprived areas?*
- *When is slum tourism voyeuristic and exploitative?*
- *Is it possible to define best practice principles in slum tourism?*

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Action for Ethical Tourism

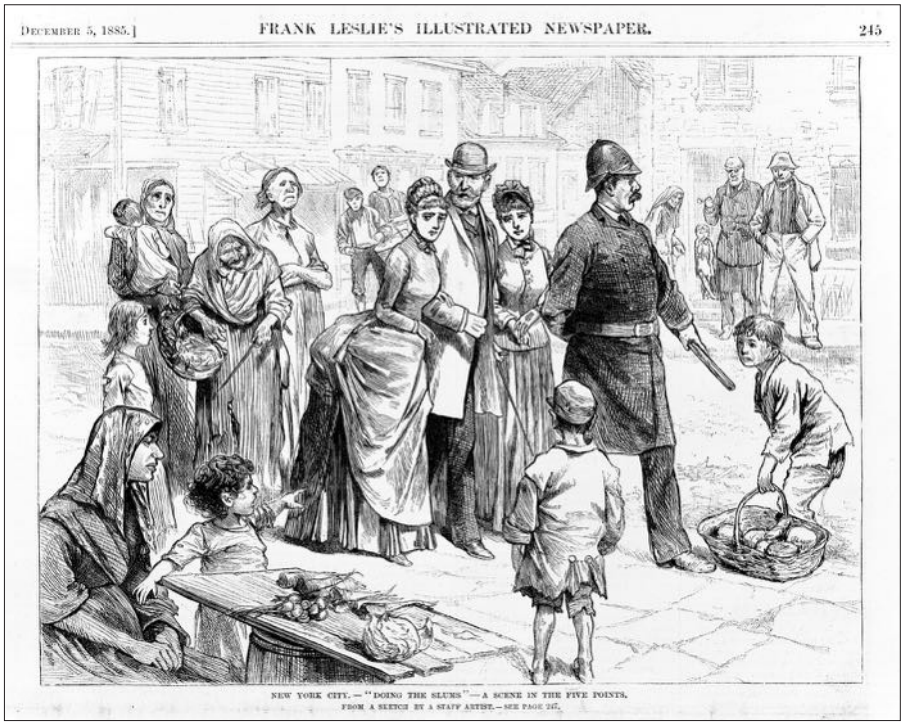
What is slum tourism and why do people choose to visit slums?

Sometimes termed poverty tourism, tours of slums are also referred to as township tours, favela tours, reality tours and so on, depending on the country where they take place. At their best such tours may be a form of pro-poor tourism, bringing benefits to people living in deprived areas. However, media use of the term 'poorism' is indicative of their sometimes more voyeuristic nature. Slum tourism has even been referred to as 'poverty porn'.

The earliest form of poverty tourism can be traced to the 1800s in London. In this era, the Victorian elite developed excursions to showcase how the poor lived. For some, these trips to slums or 'slumming' were born from curiosity and thrill seeking. For others, visits were driven by moral, religious, and altruistic motivations. By the 1880s, the practice had made its way to the United States, where British tourists started incorporating tours of the New York, Chicago, and San Francisco slums into their travel itineraries.

Today's slum tourism is a relatively recent phenomenon – starting in South Africa at the beginning of the 1990s after the end of apartheid: "*Tourists came to South Africa and wanted to see the townships and places of the apartheid repression and Mandela's house – so it began as a niche tourism for tourists with a special political interest*" (Dr Malte Steinbrink, University of Osnabruck, Germany).

However, the driving motivators for going on these tours remain similar to those that were documented in Victorian London. Some go out of curiosity – to get a sense of real life for the poorest communities in places they are visiting. Others may go for less easily defined, perhaps even voyeuristic reasons. Inevitably tourism providers package experiences they think tourists will pay to see and emphasise selling points that reflect this. Some companies, supporting local initiatives, package their tours to highlight community innovation and dispel negative perceptions about slum life. However, other operators can appear to actively promote the 'otherness' of the people who live in deprived areas – marketing tours which put on show the dramas and hardships of people living in poverty.



'Slums (e.g. favelas, townships and other notations) have long tempted popular imagination. They have been and are scandalised, fought, bulldozed down and walled in. At the same time however, they are idealised and sought out as places displaying a more authentic humanity, flourishing culture and deviant, but inventive entrepreneurship. The concept of slum tourism remains popular today and is being addressed in a growing body of academic and practitioner's research.'
www.slumtourism.net

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the countries where slum tourism is most popular are also places with extreme wealth disparities. As indicated in the introduction, amongst the most visited are South Africa (Township Tours), India (Slum Tours), and Brazil (Favela Tours), but similar tours are being developed all over the world.

As slum tour itineraries vary considerably it is difficult to describe a 'typical' tour. Nonetheless, there are certain common elements. For example, many tours include a walk around a neighbourhood and the chance to buy souvenirs, thereby bringing business to marginalised areas. Such close engagement between

tourists and residents can arguably also offer local people the chance to shape the narrative of their communities. However, poorly run tours can fail to bring significant benefits to the majority of residents whom the tourists encounter.

Poverty tourism can perpetuate images of misery and despair which misrepresent the complex and organised social structures that are the reality. Conversely, there is a danger that, in seeking to make slums attractive, even locally-run tours can aestheticise and depoliticise poverty. Cultural stereotypes and fantasies can distort the reality of poverty, promoting images of the 'exotic', 'authentic' and of 'happy' communities. In Mumbai, Reality Tours & Travel (see box, right) are an acclaimed slum tour operator, giving back to the community whilst offering visitors a nuanced understanding of the Dharavi slum. Yet even tourists with Reality Tours could be left confused (Frenzel K., Koens K., 2016). Is what they are witnessing – presented as a place marked by ingenuity and determination – a unique example of an exceptionally prosperous slum, or does it represent urban poverty more generally? It is arguable that a truly meaningful tour should engage with the wider issues of global poverty, in order to show that the day-to-day issues faced by Dharavi's residents are not abstracted from their national politics, or from those of the one billion other slum dwellers across the world.

Governments can also work to hide the reality, arguably making them complicit in perpetuating poverty. They welcome tourists who wish to see the sights their country has to offer, and yet – for the purposes of branding and to signify law and order – they sometimes also seek to control what sights are available and how they are presented.

The possibility that slum tours might genuinely open tourists' eyes to the enduring problems of poverty is enticing. But the reality may be that tour operators prefer to present a picturesque view of slums, even when sold as a quest for authenticity which embraces the 'real' and perhaps the seemingly shocking. But does such visibility really link poverty to the state and market ideologies which perpetuate it?

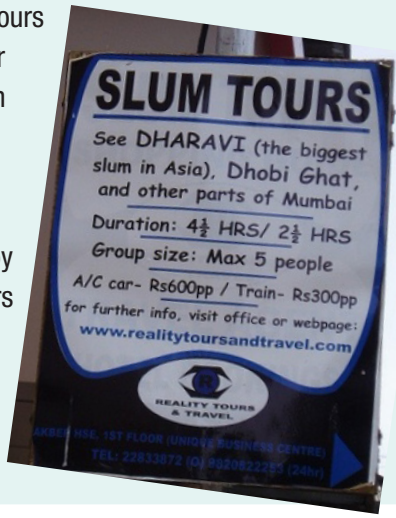
There is clearly an obligation on prospective tourists to ask searching questions both of themselves and of any tour they might be considering. What is your motivation for visiting a slum? As an ethical traveller you should surely think about your impact, but should you also choose tours which educate you about the people you are visiting?

Tour guide Bipin explaining the work of Reality Gives

Reality Tours and Travel, Mumbai

Reality Tours believes that tourism can and should be a force for local development whilst also promoting cross-cultural understanding. It is a social business that gives eighty percent of post-tax profit directly to its sister organisation, Reality Gives, which runs high quality education programmes.

Dharavi, Mumbai, where Reality Tours started ten years ago, is recognised as one of the largest slums in the world. Most of the work of the Reality Group has been for the benefit of the Dharavi community. However, as Reality Tours and Travel expand their tours of Delhi and multi-day tours of Kerala and Rajasthan, they are also expanding their projects to local communities in these areas. They run educational walking tours where tourists are exposed to the business activities of the slum and some of the residential areas of Dharavi. Visitors are also taken to one of the three community centres that are funded by profits of the tours. Tours last about two and half hours and are marketed to "give visitors a more nuanced understanding of life and work in Mumbai slums." Reality Tours has a no photography policy and caps its tours at six people.



How can slum tourism benefit people in deprived areas?

If run well, slum tours can bring economic benefits and social mobility to people living in under-resourced areas. The tours themselves may be run by local people, and visitors often buy locally produced goods, including food and souvenirs. They can help to change perceptions about poverty and even help in developing political recognition.

For good or ill, visiting slums appears to be a permanent and growing part of tourism, particularly in countries in the global south. Whilst there are concerns about perpetuating stereotypes and exploiting people's suffering, if managed well, there are potential benefits to slum tourism too.

Economic Arguments

Tourism is a valuable tool for economic development. Therefore, it is argued, bringing this type of business to otherwise marginalised areas creates opportunities for employment and growth. Slum tours can help to create both direct and indirect job opportunities in areas that most need them, helping both individuals and their communities to grow and flourish.

Tourists visiting these locations can also contribute to the local economy beyond just paying the price for their tour, by purchasing local commodities such as food and souvenirs.

Furthermore, if helped to develop a nuanced and humane understanding of these areas, tourists may leave with a desire to do something more to help. And they may encourage others to do something to help too.

Social Empowerment and Education

Slum tours can also help to demystify some of the negative perceptions of deprived areas and marginalised communities. Slums are frequently portrayed as places of squalor, violence, and misery – perceptions that some see as compounded by movies like *Slumdog Millionaire*, *The Constant Gardener*, and *City of God*. Locally-led tours offer tourists an opportunity to learn from those who actually live there, allowing residents to create their own narratives about their neighbourhoods.

AFFCAD Slum Tour in Kampala, Uganda

On an inter-personal level, tours can demonstrate first hand that people who live in slums are not by any means all miserable or criminal, despite their portrayal in the media. Many tours have started to incorporate 'face time' in their itineraries, allowing tourists opportunities to interact more with local people. This can help tourists to understand the complexities of life in the slums and the diversity of the people who live there. These people can reclaim their identities and generate pride in showing their communities to visitors.

Socio-political Aspects

Tourism can offer locals opportunities to build businesses which also foster self-empowerment and social mobility. At the same time economic power can create political capital and help to force governments to acknowledge areas that have historically been marginalised.

Typically, areas of extreme poverty have been deemed by governments as undesirable for tourists. Indeed they have frequently sought to make them essentially invisible to visitors to their countries. The international attention that comes with slum tourism's popularity can grant politically weak neighbourhoods power – solidifying the legitimacy of their existence and even helping in political cases of gross negligence or eviction.

Perhaps slum tourism will ignite societal change in some places in the future, but for now, researchers agree, its most obvious positive effects occur on a more modest scale: improving lives and changing minds, one person at a time. Guides as well as local artisans and vendors along tour routes make money, and visitors sometimes give additional donations to the community after the tour. There are also more intangible benefits, academic experts have found. Tourists almost always come away with a different impression about life in the slum than they had before they set foot in there. According to statistics Reality [Tours] keeps, 86% of visitors say that Dharavi [in Mumbai, India]changed preconceptions about the slum. "These tours break the stereotype that slums are just impoverished places of misery and horribleness," Koens says. "Yes, it's dirty, but there's also a lot of excitement, diversity, life, happiness and joy."

Rachel Nuwer 2015 'Who Does Slum Tourism Benefit?'
www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/next/earth/slum-tourism/

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Rocinha favela, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

Rocinha is the biggest favela in Brazil with an estimated population in excess of 250,000. Although often portrayed as a dangerous hotspot for violence, drugs and other crime, the reality is a mixed and vibrant community of people, most of whom are hard-working and law-abiding. *'The favela has everything: friendly people, home cooked food, workers, doctors, lawyers, musicians, artists and sportsmen!'* (www.favelatour.org).

As part of a research project in 2012/13 Tourism Concern spoke to 25 residents in Rocinha about their view of the possible tourism-related benefits and challenges in their community. Although many hoped that tourism might bring financial resources for social projects and generate jobs for local people, the most common answer regarding the current benefits of tourism was 'none'. There was criticism of the companies operating the tours, including concerns that that little of the profit generated by tours stayed in the community. Several operators run tours in Rocinha bringing several thousand visitors each month spending an estimated average of about £25 per head. However, very few operators are locally owned. According to Leo, president of Rocinha's community association (UPMMR), people are fed up with being exploited by tour operators and not receiving anything back. Even residents directly benefiting from tourism were critical of the way the tours are run. Tour operators claim that they help enlighten tourists about the real situation in favelas and dispel the myths. But residents remain concerned that there is a lack of concern for the veracity of the facts presented and how it can affect the perceptions of tourists, particularly as the majority of tour guides are not Rocinha residents.

"...tourists are not helping Rocinha, they help the company owners that exploit Rocinha. Tourism is good for the ones who sell it. For us it is terrible to know that our community is being exploited in order for some people to live in luxurious conditions while the poor here live in precarious conditions. If they [tour operators] say they help the poor, tell them to come and talk to us at the community association and tell us how they are helping... I'm not aware of any tour operator that supports any social project in Rocinha... What we have here is a lot of bad intentioned people who come here to exploit Rocinha, put the money in their pockets and walk away."

Leo, 46, UPMMR president

"For the community I don't see any difference, I see a difference in the number of people in the community, we see a lot of foreigners, but benefits for the community I don't see any."

Francisco, 34, Mototaxi driver

"I think all of us see tourism as an opportunity to get some help for social projects, schools, and so forth... the positive is that through tourism we can show that not 100% of the people in favelas are bad people or criminals..."

Mototaxi driver, 34

"We don't want charity, we want qualifications, we want to be able to work and earn our livelihood and show our history the way it really is."

Mototaxi driver, 34

"The benefits tourism could bring for us are the investments in social projects inside the favela. If there was an institution...an NGO that distributed a percentage of the revenue of tourism to social projects, it would be a benefit; in my opinion it would be a real benefit..."

Peter, 42, fisherman

"There are some types of companies that work here that, for example, fill 2, 3 cars with tourists and bring them here...so they are making their money, but when they pass in front of the art stalls they don't even look at us. That's not cool, not cool. They have made their money already so they just come, show something and disappear... they just show what is interesting for them."

Handicraft vendor, 31

When is slum tourism voyeuristic and exploitative?

Despite claims about the potential benefits of slum tours, research indicates that the majority of residents fail to share in the profits generated. Furthermore, poorly run tours can add to social stereotypes and exacerbate the marginalisation of slum areas and the people who live there.

Economic Arguments

There are many counter arguments to the claims that slum tourism can offer poverty alleviation in slums.

While tours may be conducted by local residents, many are run by external businesses that retain the lion's share of the profit. And, even where tour companies describe themselves as local and/or non-profit organisations, it can be difficult to verify this, or to track where the money being generated goes.

There is a lack of quantitative research to evaluate slum tourism's role in poverty relief. Tours may be able to prove that they use the majority of their profits for local projects. However, it is difficult – perhaps impossible – to ensure that the money benefits all of those people whose lives are impacted by the tours. Reports have shown that some tours operate within pre-existing power structures within the slums and hence that the most marginalised get little benefit. Indeed, tours in some areas have been shown to generate further wealth and power for local drug lords and gang leaders.

Finally, even if slum tourism does bring more widely-shared financial gains, this may be outweighed by the negative social repercussions that accompany it.

Social Empowerment and Education

Set against claims that slum tourism educates and empowers people, it can sometimes package poverty in exotified and romanticised ways, creating false tourist perceptions of real life in slums. This also takes away the agency of people who actually live in these areas to present their own personal narratives. This is especially so when the tours are managed and run by people who aren't from the area.

After the success of Slumdog Millionaire, slum tourism increased notably in Dharavi slum in Mumbai, India

Children by open sewer in Kibera, Kenya

"They see us like puppets, they want to come and take pictures, have a little walk, tell their friends they've been to the worst slum in Africa."

David Kabala – Kibera resident.

The presentation of people's living conditions as a tourist attraction can clearly be an exploitative invasion of privacy. And it prioritises the business of tourism over the needs of the community; and arguably on occasions even of the tourists. Though these tours are marketed as educational opportunities for tourists, they frequently work to reinforce stereotypes and pre-existing judgements of slums. Agencies promote and sell images they think tourists already know and recognise. Yet these aren't necessarily realistic or fair representations of life in slums. This drives some operators to adjust their narratives to create packages they think tourists will pay to see. For example, some township tours in South Africa capitalise on tourists seeking 'the African spectacle' by including exotic and 'tribal' aspects that aren't necessarily authentic or traditional, may be outdated, and are often oversimplified and reductive. This is done in order for tourists to experience the 'exotic tribes' and 'poverty' of Africa all in one neatly packaged and comfortable tour.

While tours are frequently created to meet tourists' expectations, they are also, and unsurprisingly, manufactured to maintain tourists' safety and comfort. This may well mean that tours don't even visit the poorest areas. It can also mean that the way slums are presented oversimplifies or masks the complexities that lead to inequality even within the slum area. Again, this works as an unfair and inaccurate representation of the areas that the tours claim to be educating visitors about.

Socio-political Aspects

Depending on how they are run, slum tours can turn into voyeuristic expeditions to gawk at how 'the other half' lives. Some companies even run safari-style tours that allow tourists to see, from the comfort of their tour bus, living conditions in the slum. Though some tours do attempt to mitigate disrespectful behaviour by prohibiting pictures and limiting the size of tour groups, it can be problematic to control what 'paying guests' might do when they are on a tour.

Local guide Zezinho showing off his tattoos, all of which are about Rocinha, the slum in Rio de Janeiro where he lives

"'Favela tourism' in Rio de Janeiro has reached mass tourism dimensions and is characterised by an almost exclusive dominance by external agencies but little participation of the local population as well as scarce interaction between locals and tourists, who are bonded by the search for the 'authentic' other... Until [residents'] 'genuine participation' in the production of the 'favela as a touristic space' is achieved, 'favela tourism' will not go very far beyond being a form of the much criticised 'negative sightseeing' with a bitter, voyeuristic aftertaste."

Thomas Frisch
Independent Scholar

The residents of these informal settlements are directly affected by the tours on a daily basis. It is a blatant and inescapable fact that those who are visiting have the social and economic means to do so. The residents are likely to be less privileged. Yet the fact that these well-heeled foreigners are visiting shows that there is something in the slums worth them paying to see. So what is the attraction? If the primary reason is to somehow witness the drama of poverty and to see under-resourced communities first hand, surely this reinforces the sense of stratification between the 'haves' who are visiting, and the 'have nots' who are being visited? Marginalisation is not just a consequence of poverty but also a defining dimension of it. Tourism which constantly reinforces a sense of difference for people in slums is surely unethical.

Kibera slum in Nairobi, Kenya

'It's about time Kibera stopped being Kenya's poverty poster child. Despite the inescapable poverty and hard living conditions, Kibera is teeming with so much life, energy, community and promise; with so much talent yet to be harnessed. Kibera needs land/tenancy rights, housing, water, electricity, health clinics, education, employment, security plus much more... Where does the government fall in this picture? Why should Kenyan citizens have to rely on outsiders to do something for them when the very people they elect sit by and watch them suffer?'

Olive Maloti, Chief Editor/Deputy Director of Communications at Twenty-First Century African Youth Movement, August 2014

'The Kibera I experienced was more a complex, diverse, and charming community than all of my pre-trip internet research made it out to be' whatsupwithsara.wordpress.com

Is it possible to define best practice principles in slum tourism?

Whether or not we agree with them, the existence of slum tours is an inescapable fact. It is therefore essential to continually seek better practices to ensure that the people who are the focus of the tours are socially and economically empowered and that the negative impacts are minimised. As the body of research into slum tourism steadily grows – including into the massive inequalities that allow slums to exist in the first place – some important ideas about best practice are emerging. Asking the right questions of the tour on which you plan to go can help to ensure that it is beneficial to the community and that your presence is going to be genuinely welcome.

Why are you going?

First of all ask yourself what your motivation is for going on a slum tour. If you don't know the answer, maybe it is not a good idea to go.

Understand the community you are visiting

If possible, research the community you are going to visit – it is possible to find information about many slums on the internet or from guidebooks. Is the tour itself educational? Will there be help to contextualise and understand the realities of areas to be visited?

Who is benefiting from this tour?

Choose tour operators run by community residents or community associations over external tour operators. In either case ask how their tour benefits the community, which sort of social projects they support, etc. What is the background of this specific tour provider? Is it clear where the proceeds go? Ask for evidence for their claims and ask to visit the projects they support or run.

Involvement/donations by tour operators

An ethical and responsible tour operator should give back to the local communities through community involvement or donations. Companies should clearly detail what they do to give back to local communities and how the community benefits.

How large are the tour groups?

Smaller groups can more easily visit homes and businesses and are less intrusive to residents. Interaction between tourists and the locals is easier, as is communication between the tour operators and tourists.

Choose walking over driving tours

Opt for tours by foot and in small groups (max 6 people). This way your presence is going to be less disruptive and will help avoid the more voyeuristic nature of looking at people from a car or bus. Walking tours can allow for more meaningful connections between you and local residents. They also make it easier for you to purchase locally made products and to make donations.

Is the marketing material appropriate?

Study your chosen tour operator's website carefully. Do they depict local people in stereotypical or demeaning ways? Is there advice on how to behave while in the community?

What information is given to tourists?

This may be the first time you have encountered such

Main road winding through Rocinha favela, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

poverty and living conditions. You may not know how to behave, especially when entering people's homes. Tour operators and guides should ensure that you and other visitors dress and behave appropriately, and encourage you to be curious about residents' customs through respectful interaction. Are there guidelines on how to prepare and advice regarding photography?

Photography policies

Most visitors want to take photographs or videos to remember their tours. However, being constantly photographed can be intrusive. Ideally you should not take pictures at all, but certainly do not take pictures of people without asking their permission. This is disrespectful and unacceptable. If you wish to take pictures, ask people you have had a conversation with and friends you have made. And don't forget to send them a copy of the picture by post or email, or through your tour operator.

Promoting local purchases

Spending money is an important way in which you can help the local communities you are visiting. This may include buying local handicrafts, purchasing local services, staying at local homestays, or eating and drinking in local bars and eateries. It is also a great way to get to know the local culture and people.

Can you donate to the local community?

Many people go on slum tours in order to learn more about the culture of the people and, afterwards, many have a desire to give back to the community. While purchasing items or services may be one way you can give back, you may also want to donate money to local community projects (e.g. schools, construction projects, churches).

Do guides receive fair salaries?

Providing a fair salary to tour guides and other staff avoids exploitation of cheap labour in impoverished communities, gives back to the community, and generates staff goodwill that can also contribute to visitors' experiences. Even if there are no local tour operators operating in the community you wish to visit, you should request that they provide a local guide. This generates jobs and, importantly, it also encourages tour operators to invest in training for local people and helps to improve their language skills. Local guides are also likely to have better local knowledge.

Tipping guides

Tour companies should encourage you to tip the guides for providing a good service. This supplements their typically small salaries and could perhaps lead to more of your money ending up in the hands of the visited communities.

Will households be remunerated?

Most tour companies visit at least one local household during your tour. Ideally they should vary the households visited, and should compensate each of them for their time, either with money or with goods such as foodstuffs or fuel.

Residents' feedback

Does your tour operator continually seek feedback from residents? This not only helps avoid exploitation of the local population, but enhances good will, cooperation, and local participation.

Five simple ways to make your visit better

1 Interact with people.
Don't know the language? Learn some basic words. Lots of us do it when we go to France or Germany, why wouldn't we do it when we are going to a poor community? However, do not force an interaction when it is not welcome. Many people will be busy working and won't have time to talk to you.

2 Wear simple clothing.
Not because otherwise it would attract attention and put you at risk of being robbed, but for respect for the people in the community who perhaps can't afford to buy new and fancy clothes.

3 Respect people's privacy.
In slums, favelas or shanty towns you will probably go through very narrow alleys and people usually leave their doors and windows opens. However, that isn't an invitation to look inside their houses.

4 Respect people's space.
Do not stop in front of people's front door or block alley ways. You are on holiday, they are not.

5 Do not give hand-outs.
However, money donations to established social projects or donations of books, art supplements, toys, nappies, milk are more than welcome.

Dharavi slum tour

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