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Slum tours are about reality

18 Jan 2009, 0121 hrs IST, Chris Way

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Mumbai is a pretty tough city to live in. Getting around is a nightmare. Something simple like going for a run takes major planning. People are often rude. And all this from an expat living in the queen of suburbs, Bandra. However, with Mumbai, nothing is ever simple - and that is definitely true of the city's appeal.

In the Mercer Index 2008 of best cities to live in the world, Mumbai comes in at 142 out of 215 (Baghdad is last). I always get asked by friends and family back home in the UK why I live here (for nearly four years now). It fails the obvious tests - housing, transport, open spaces and pollution. So why is it that fellow expats and I live in this city? Is it just for work reasons, in both the profit and non-profit sectors?

The weather is one reason I am here. The UK has the largest number of

weather "grumblers" in the world, me included. When I tell people back home of 'zero rain' from mid-October to mid-June, and how I've only once worn a sweater (this time last year), the ears prick up. And, of course, who in the UK wouldn't want to employ somebody to clean your house, wash your clothes and cook your food for little more than a round of drinks in a London pub?

But there is something else less artificial. Much has been made of the spirit of Mumbai since the 26/11 attacks - how the terrorists won't defeat us, etc. Sometimes it's difficult to understand what this spirit is - you certainly don't see it while waiting in a queue, or when opening a door for somebody, or when trying to get onto a train in rush hour. "What is wrong with everybody?" I ask myself all the time.

But this Mumbai spirit does exist and you see it in places like Dharavi. Here you have people with materially very little, living in poor conditions - open drains, poor toilets, small homes - working many hours, but meeting these challenges and getting on with life. People are chatting, smiling, enjoying each other's company.

There is a sense of community, which doesn't exist in the UK, and dare I say it, in the more affluent parts of Mumbai too.

Our company takes groups of tourists around Dharavi, including its many fascinating small-scale industries (no cameras, groups of six maximum, money from the tours gets invested in our community centre) and the smiles and happiness are what tourists comment about. Yes, there is poverty but this only increases their admiration for the people that live there. There is no pity.

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And that is the aim of the tour - to help dispel the negative image that many have about slumdweller. There is a lot to admire in their spirit.

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