



The uneasy metropolis

Scratching Mumbai's surface, Ben Martin finds its decaying slums bustling and alive

It was with no little sense of irony that I bought an Indian tricolour and pinned it to my shirt on my way to work on the 15th of August. As a 'Britisher' in Mumbai, sporting saffron, white and green, I attracted interested stares whilst picking my way through the crowded concourse of Chhatrapati Shivaji train station. Today, non-colonial India was 60, and I stuck out like a sore thumb.

I had managed, through some hopeful emails and a bit of CV-sharpening, to wangle a summer placement at the Indian Express in Mumbai. I had been assigned to cover the state-government sponsored celebration of India's 60th year as a free nation. "We thought it would be good to send you along," my editor had said with a knowing gleam in her eye. I caught a cab to Mani Bhavan, where, 65 years previously, Mahatma Gandhi launched the Quit India Movement with his famous call to "do or die". Today Mani Bhavan would be host to the chief Minister of Maharashtra, veterans from India's struggle against the British Raj, and a 2000-strong troupe of dancing school children.

There is surely no better way to comprehend a culture or to taste its zeitgeist than from behind a reporter's notebook, and Mumbai, the gargantuan megalopolis, the Koh-I-Noor of lesser diamonds and the poster boy for all that is 'New India', certainly provided a flavour worth savouring.

I was put up on the southern tip of the Island City, in Colaba. Here, you can buy rip-off Diesel handbags for 50p; hostels proudly display their

Lonely Planet recommendations, and this is where you'll find all of the *frangi* (foreign) watering holes. The ever-expanding built up area sprawls 40 miles north up the coast of Maharashtra, and contains an estimated 19 million people, making it the fifth most populous tranche of urban settlement in the world. Nobody could ever hope to know Bombay in its entirety, and the vastness of the place becomes immediately apparent every time you try to cross the road or board a rush hour train.

Anybody who has been to India will know that in no other country is such grinding, absolute poverty juxtaposed as frequently and as emphatically against such fabulous wealth. Here in the financial capital, a highly educated, professional middle class watches Big Brother and drinks lattes. High-rise apartment blocks, selling for more than those in Manhattan, look out over Chowpatty beach, whilst 4X4's cruise roads lined with gleaming shopping malls. Bollywood stars flaunt iPods and drink Cristal. I even had the pleasure of attending the unveiling of Air India's new Boeing 777, set to fly non-stop to New York's JFK, giving Mumbai an arterial link to the financial heart of the world. Mumbai is going places.

At the same time, however, it is also thoroughly backwards. Built mostly on reclaimed mangrove swamp, the city's drainage system has, due to both a lack of funds and endemic corruption, been largely neglected, resulting in flooding every year during monsoon season. Similarly, hasty development unchecked by a lacklustre civil admin-

istration has led to corners being cut during construction; while I was there an entire apartment block collapsed due to structural weakness and 30 residents died. Sixty percent of Bombay's 19 million citizens live in illegal slums - basically a shanty town big enough to house the entire population of London. For a city trying to sell itself as the next Shanghai, such a figure is embarrassing. People on the 'going places' side of the fence prefer to overlook those in the city's slums, and poverty is side-

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lined in the face of 'progress'.

One of my more stimulating jobs required me to report on a tour company that had been running guided tours of Dharavi, Asia's largest favela, which sits plumb in the middle of Bombay on 250 acres of prime real-estate. The area is about to enter a massive regeneration programme, so I was very keen to see it before I left. The tour company, Reality Tours, is run by a British expat Chris Way and his Indian business partner Krishna Poojari. The two have received heavy criticism from the press following accusations of encouraging 'poverty tourism'. Such a reaction is a classic illustration of the division between rich and poor in Mumbai; the subtext of the outcries from those most vociferously critical of Reality Tours was appall that Mumbai's poverty ridden carbuncle was being shown to impressionable foreigners. I was to be one of them.

The dwellings there house an incredible one million residents, and are linked by narrow, labyrinthine alleys that twist and turn chaotically. The slum, and the so called 13th Compound in particular, is also the hub of Bombay's recycling industry. Plastic, rubber, oil drums, broken computers and reams of old newspaper are re-processed here, generating \$665m per year. Everywhere bustles with an incredible level of activity. Behind every door somebody was doing something; sewing, baking, sorting, cutting, carving. The foul smelling disarray, the rank open sewers, the exposed electric wires and the terrible living conditions, were contrasted against an unbelievable level of productivity. I spoke at length to Krishna who was my guide on the tour, and he said that the aim of Reality Tours was, rather than to make a spectacle out of Dharavi's poverty, to show visitors how much the residents of Dharavi had achieved despite their hardship and socially peripheral position. I was thoroughly convinced and wrote them a gleaming endorsement in the next day's edition.

The duality of Bombay left me utterly confounded. I would devote hours at work to pieces on cholera outbreaks, travel home past railway track slums, and then head off either to the Bombay Gymkhana (one of oldest British sporting clubs in India) or to a club in Bandra (one of Mumbai's trendier suburbs) for some Soho-priced revelry. The vibrant contrasts that I found myself dealing with at every second of every day made life tiring and confusing. But, as one expat said to me, despite the stress, the poverty and the frustration, "Bombay gets under your skin".