

Regional Sciences

Poverty tourism

in Cape Town (South Africa), Rio de Janeiro (Brazil) and Mumbai (India)

Results of field studies in 2007, 2008 and 2009

During the mid-1990s, a new form of tourism was established in metropolises of several “developing countries” or “emerging nations”. This type of tourism consists of visits to the most disadvantaged parts of the respective city. The target group of these tours consists primarily of international tourists.

The working units' interest in this field arose during a student project in Cape Town, South Africa, when 14 geography students from Potsdam University started an empirical research on township tourism. In the course of the past 2 years several students wrote their final theses on related topics, and further research was initiated in Rio, and in Mumbai, India.

Township tourism in Cape Town

It is estimated that 300.000 tourists visit the townships of Cape Town per year. What started as a niche market for travellers with special political interests, eager to see the sites of the liberation struggle against Apartheid, has now become a mass phenomenon. About 40-50 companies operate tours through various townships of Cape Town.



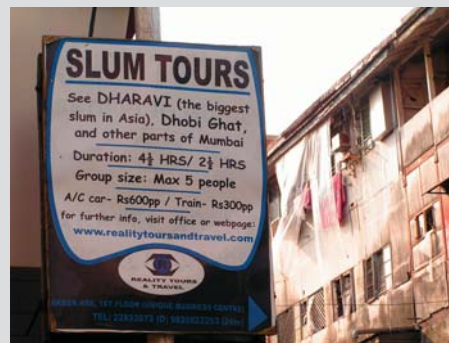
Tourists marvelling at the view over the favela Rocinha in Rio. Photo: B. Uhl

Favela tourism in Rio de Janeiro

Professionally conducted favela tourism is a growing market segment, albeit still much less significant in terms of quantity than, for example, in Cape Town. For Rocinha, the most frequently visited of Rio's favelas, an annual number of visitors is estimated at about 40,000.

Slum tourism in Mumbai

In India, slum tourism is a very recent phenomenon. The destination of slum tours in Mumbai is Dharavi, an informal settlement of circa one million inhabitants. No numbers to indicate the quantitative scale of Dharavi slum tourism are known. By now only one or two operators conduct tours through the slum.



Come and have a look at the slum. Photo: M. Rolfes

Some parallels can be drawn between these three types of poverty tourism. It is a goal for the majority of operators to distract the view away from poverty. The negative image of townships, favelas and slums, considered by the tour operators to be primarily dominated by poverty, crime and violence, is to be corrected. The operators try to show that informal or marginal settlements contain impulses for socio-economic development, too. In all three cities this is attempted through the aim of designing a tour as authentic, as realistic, as possible. The authenticity is to be achieved by using locals as tour guides, by providing opportunities for conversational contact with the inhabitants and by offering insights into private and economic everyday situations.

Indubitably, public discourse places the stigma of poverty, violence, and insecurity on townships, favelas, and slums. In spite of that negative image, tourists chose to participate in a guided tour. They normally justify that decision through the fact that they want to experience “real life” of in visited city or an alternative to the world of mass tourism.

Thus, on the one hand, tourists are curious to see what they are shown or meant to be shown and, on the other hand, mixed feelings and a certain sense of guilt also occur in individual cases.



Vicky's Bed & Breakfast in Khayelitsha, Cape Town. Photo: P. Frommberg

Despite these similarities, the basic characteristics of the quarters that are demonstrated vary: In Cape Town tour guides focus on historical, political, and cultural categories, which is a result of the ethnically segregated development of South African cities under Apartheid. In favela tourism basic elements are the good provision of infrastructure, and themes of violence, crime, and drug traffic. Slum tours in Mumbai are strongly and formatively influenced by an orientation on the economic activities of the community.



Memories for tourists in Rio: Photo: M. Rolfes

Poverty tourism will be an important research field for working units in the next years to come. An application for funding is being written, and further papers and theses, as well as presentations on international conferences are being worked on.