

Case 2: Poverty Tours

Many Americans may never know what life without modern amenities like television, air conditioning, and indoor plumbing would be like. They now have one way to get a glimpse of such a life – poverty tours, also known as “poorism,” help those who want to see what the poor life is like, if only for a short time and second hand. While poverty tours may be found in many areas of the world, some of the most famous are those of Rio de Janeiro, South Africa, and Mumbai.¹ In a *New York Times* article, Eric Weiner notes, “Slum tourism isn’t for everyone. Critics charge that ogling the poorest of the poor isn’t tourism at all. It’s voyeurism. The tours are exploitative, these critics say, and have no place on an ethical traveler’s itinerary.”²

However, tours may expose visitors not only to the extreme poverty and dismal living conditions of the slums but to the entrepreneurial spirit and hard work of slum dwellers, the cohesive family and community structures, and other positive aspects of poor life.

Although some tourists might come to the slum tour for voyeuristic reasons, exposure to the world’s poorest people can be a transformative experience for many. The direct observation of the hard work and resilient spirit of the poor can earn the respect of the well-to-do tourist and possibly lead to charity and advocacy work.³ Harold Goodwin, director of the International Center for Responsible Tourism in Leeds, England, states “Ignoring poverty won’t make it go away. Tourism is one of the few ways that you or I are ever going to understand what poverty means. To just kind of turn a blind eye and pretend the poverty doesn’t exist seems to me a very denial of our humanity.”⁴

¹ Kendle, Amanda, “Poverty Tourism: Exploring the Slums of India, Brazil and South Africa,” *Vagabondish*. Feb. 7, 2008. <http://www.vagabondish.com/poverty-tourism-touring-the-slums-of-india-brazil-and-south-africa/>.

² Weiner, Eric, “Slum Visits: Tourism or Voyeurism?,” *The New York Times*, March 9, 2008. Sec. Travel. http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/09/travel/09heads.html?_r=1&oref=slogin.

³ Krishnan, Deepa, “The Ethics of Slum Tours,” *Mumbai Magic* (blog of Deepa Krishnan), Sept. 29, 2007. <http://mumbai-magic.blogspot.com/2007/09/ethics-of-what-i-do.html>.

⁴ Simpson, Dave, “Slum Tourism: Pro-poor or Simple Voyeurism?,” *Commonwealth Agricultural Bureau International Blog*, March 12, 2008. http://cabiblog.typepad.com/hand_picked/2008/03/slum-tourism-pr.html.