Darius Ansari’s CEO Mumbai Experience

A few weeks prior to my departure to Mumbai, I began to receive a great deal of advice from people around me. My parents fretted over an alarming documentary they had watched regarding India’s water problems. My second cousin regularly retold the story of her visit to India thirty years prior that had resulted in a nasty bout with Malaria. Even my trusted friend from Mumbai, who gave me much valuable advice on places to eat and go out at nights, ended her Facebook message with the alarming note to “not get kidnapped.”

Therefore, as I said goodbye to my parents and embarked on my two-month journey to intern in Mumbai through Columbia’s CEO program, I couldn’t help but be a bit nervous for what was ahead of me. The counseling I had received from different sources seemed to finally build up and amass in a large ball containing all of India’s worst horror stories. In my mind, my summer was about to be spent fighting endlessly with episodes of nasty bacteria, apocalyptic monsoon rains, and cheating street salesman.

And yet for some reason, as I was boarding my flight to leave Mumbai two months later, I looked back and could confidently say that I had one of the most rewarding professional and social experiences in my life. Much of it began at my first day at Mumbai Mobile Crèches, which was the grassroots non-profit that I worked at, where my CEO gave me the most useful advice I would receive, “India will simply throw things at you that you can’t control, and you need to learn to become comfortable with that lack of control.” And for those two months this was
precisely the type of attitude that I found to be extremely useful while living in a city of twenty million people.

The MMC office acted as a microcosm for my overall experience in Mumbai. Every day I would take the train to an office filled to the brim with over thirty of the most passionate and hardworking individuals. The work environment verges on the chaotic, but always results in productivity and teamwork. Working at a non-profit in India means that you will be asked to work six days a week on some of the most pressing humanitarian issues anywhere in the world, which was done at MMC with an amazing attitude and no complaints. In order to overcome the pressing challenges the organization dealt with on a daily basis, the MMC staff supported each other in every way possible, whether that meant spending hours hashing out a particular problem or simply hugging a co-worker who had a rough day. In fact, I left MMC not only gaining a great deal of professional experience that I know I can apply to any career I pursue in my future, but more importantly, I gained a group of friends from my office who made my experience in Mumbai feel as if I had never left home.

As for the city itself, its beauty, liveliness, and inherent chaos were aspects that quickly become commonplace and were sorely missed upon departure. While it did take a bit of time to adjust to the various things that are instantly thrust upon you — such as the traffic, foods, and various cultural intricacies, both Columbia and the people of Mumbai help in making these transitions simple. A striking example of the tremendous help you will receive from everyone around you took place during a simple taxi ride to a foreign part of the city. As we were nearing the vicinity of our
destination and needed some extra guidance, we decided to quickly ask a group of men if they had any idea where we had to go. Instead of simply receiving a set of verbal instructions, we were soon following a group of bikers literally guiding us to our destination and then going on their way. People in Mumbai know you’re a confused tourist, and they will probably stare at you because of that, but they will also be tremendously generous and assist you in any way possible.

So yes I did become a little sick, and yes it rained a lot, and yes I definitely overpaid while street shopping—but instead of negatively impacting my time in Mumbai these experiences taught me to learn to let go of the irrational need to always be in control of everything around me. This was an especially important development for me in the workplace, where I became much better at managing my time and producing valuable work for the organization despite any hurdles or gaps in understanding that would inevitably come up. And one of the very best aspects of the Columbia CEO program was that even if you did have a particularly stressful day, there were always eight other CEO interns who you could see later that night in the hotel or at a local Bandra restaurant and laugh about your experiences with.

Mumbai will always hold a special place in my heart because of the valuable lessons I learned, the amazing places I saw, and the lifelong friends I made. And while it is important to properly plan for the experience, I’m very glad I didn’t pay too much attention to all of the advice I received beforehand.