



CLOSE UP mumbai's offbeat walking tours

STREETS AHEAD

The smells, sounds and sheer size of Mumbai have intoxicated and inspired celebrated chefs, acclaimed authors like Salman Rushdie and philanthropists the world over and there's no better way to discover the city's allure than by taking a curated street tour

WORDS ISABEL PUTINJA
ILLUSTRATION PAOLO LIM @ ILLUSTRATION ROOM

There are few cities as thrillingly polarising as Mumbai. Contradictions are woven into her very name: Mumbai, the newer, official title held by the city since 1995, plays the Jekyll to Bombay's Hyde. The former is the gloss to the latter's grit; a city of banks and business but also of Bollywood, *bhelpuri* (a famous Indian puffed rice snack) and packed beaches.

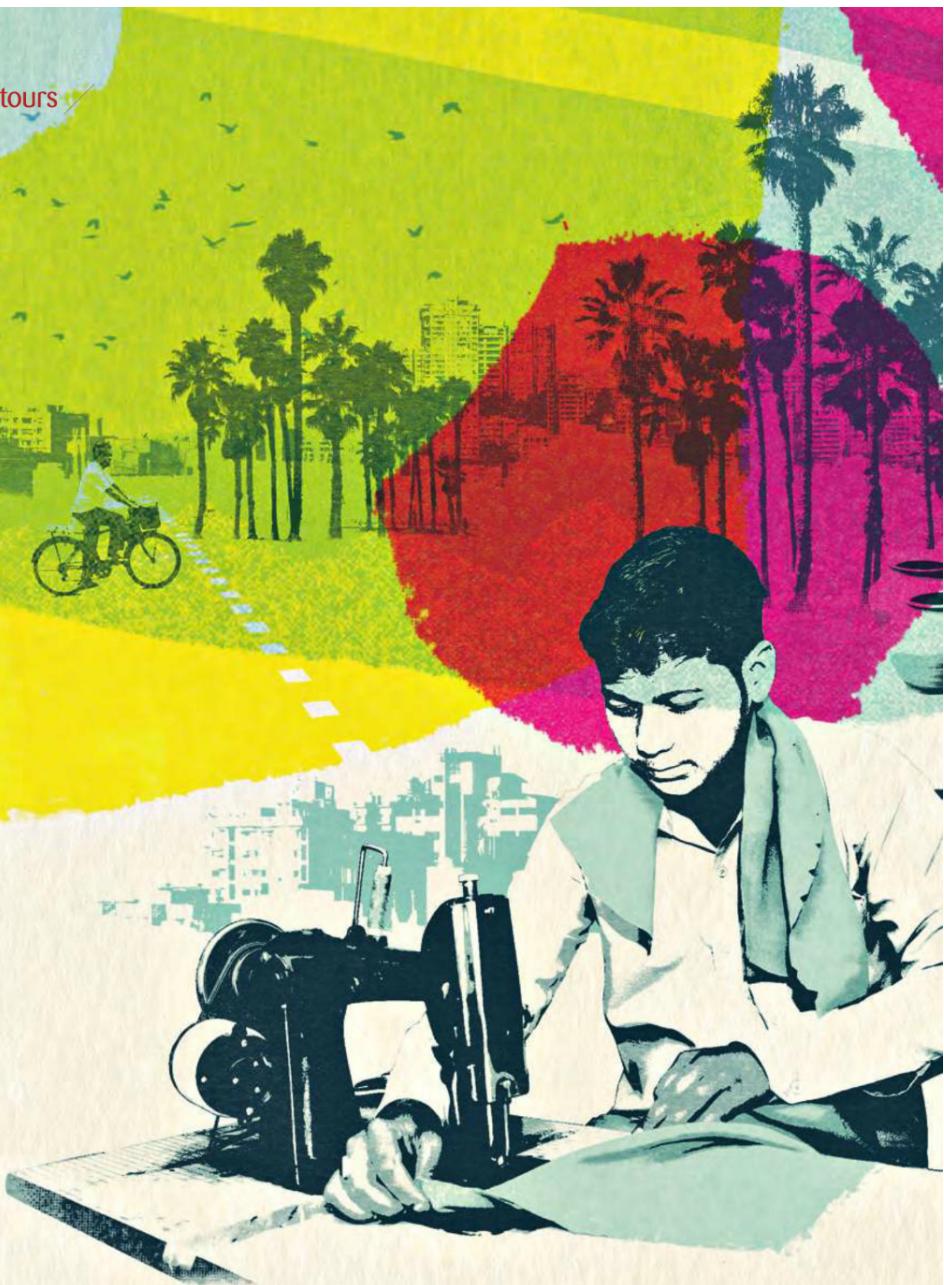
This high-octane metropolis is India's commercial capital and its most cosmopolitan city, with a diverse population of over 18 million. This is where slums share space with the world's most expensive real estate. It's also the end destination for hundreds of migrants every day, be they bankers or day-wage labourers drawn by the bright lights and enticing opportunities.

And yet the most fascinating aspects of a sultry, swarming city like Mumbai are not its eye-catching monuments and rank-and-file buildings but its eclectic neighbourhoods, fascinating bazaars and visually rich everyday street life. This is where the city's ambitions and its very pulse can be felt and experienced.

Mumbai is a mélange of old and new, rich and poor, East and West. It's fitting – and fortunate – then, that there's a quirky mix of guided walks weaving through the city's arteries, steered by streetwise locals capable of sharing insights and local lore, and even revealing the many stories hidden behind seemingly nondescript façades.

We sent Isabel Putinja on four different walking tours, all well off the tourist trail, where she sampled spicy street foods, visited a recycling unit in one of the planet's biggest slums, followed the trail of an ex-convict and traced the trajectory of a new migrant to the city. She also ventured to places she wouldn't have dared visit alone.

CREATIVE QUARTER
Potters, sewing
masters and other
industrious artisans
call Dharavi home



“We pause at the recycling unit, where plastic is cleaned, dried, crushed, shredded, dyed and melted into small pellets used to make things like umbrella handles. It's fascinating”



DHARAVI TOUR: A WALK THROUGH ONE OF THE WORLD'S LARGEST SLUMS

"Poor people do not live here. Poor people live on the streets." After offering this introduction to Mumbai's best-known slum, our affable guide Dinesh provides us with a few pertinent facts: this is the planet's third most densely populated slum, where about a million people reside in an area of just 1.75km². Most Dharavi residents also work here; the city's 10,000 industries boast an annual turnover of US\$665 million.

He takes us to a variety of workshops and small businesses in the industrial area: we see bakers removing huge pans of puff pastry from wood-fired ovens, a sewing workshop spinning out garments, others producing machine parts, leather bags, detailed embroidery work and billowing burqas for the Middle East.

We pause at the recycling unit and I'm overwhelmed: the air is thick with the toxic

odour of burning plastic. This is where Mumbai's discarded plastic, salvaged by the city's rag-pickers, ends up. Inside a large shed, workers squat on the ground, sorting shampoo bottles, chipped food containers and squished toothpaste tubes into neat piles according to colour and type of plastic. These are then scrubbed clean, dried out, crushed, shredded, dyed and melted into small pellets which are sold to manufacturers to make things like umbrella handles and buckets. It's fascinating.

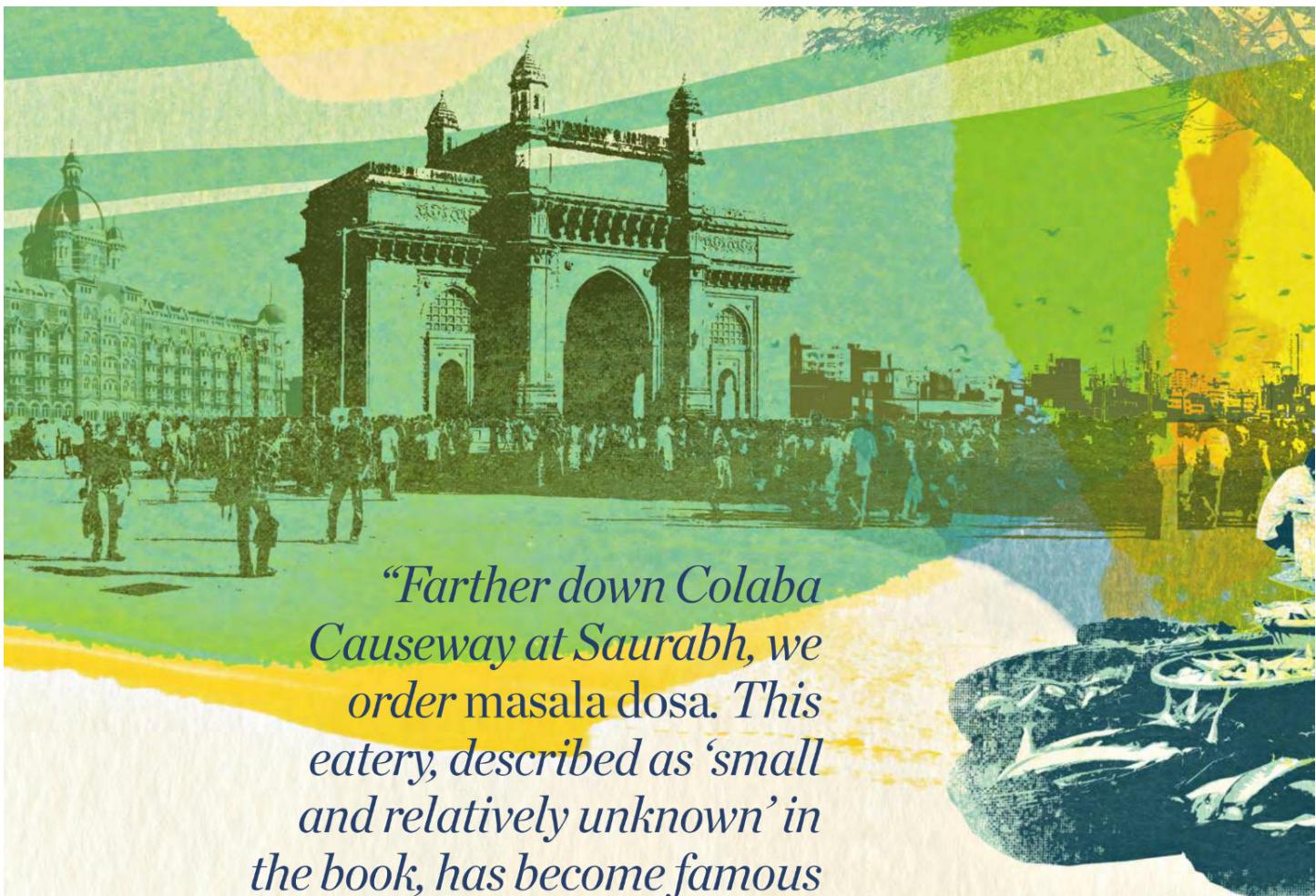
Dinesh leads us up a narrow metal ladder to the roof, where a panorama of Dharavi's corrugated-iron rooftops stretches before us like a jigsaw puzzle, as far as the eye can see. Colourful jumbles of plastic dry on roofs in the sun and a mosque dominates the skyline. It's a colourful, superbly composed scene custom-made for the camera lens but I resist the temptation to pull out my smartphone – photography is strictly

forbidden on Reality Tours' city slum walks and for good reason – in 2011, statistics showed the tours were luring almost 10,000 visitors to Dharavi each year; the policy ensures the communities visited are respected at all times.

I'm astounded at the sheer amount of industry going on inside the slum. We pass soap factories, pottery colonies and rattan cones on which poppadoms have been laid out to dry.

Next we stroll through the residential area, where the majority of houses have an area of just 10m². Through a few of the wedged-open doors visible from the narrow passageways, I spot pristine interiors covered in colourful ceramic tiles. It's clear that each home is a private sanctuary amid the squalor.

DURATION: Two-and-a-half hours. Photography is not allowed, and 80% of profits go to education and local development projects; realitytoursandtravel.com



“Farther down Colaba Causeway at Saurabh, we order masala dosa. This eatery, described as ‘small and relatively unknown’ in the book, has become famous since the author treated Madonna to a meal here”

TWO LITERARY TOURS: IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF LIN AND BABBANI

On Beyond Bombay's inimitable bookworm tours, intrepid readers can view the city through the eyes of the characters featured in two tomes set in the cacophony of Mumbai. Both have become modern travel-literature classics: the *Shantaram* tour traces an ex-convict's trail through Colaba while its *Maximum City* offering looks at Mumbai through a migrant's eyes.

Shantaram tells the fictionalised story of its author, Gregory David Roberts. Its protagonist is an Australian ex-convict who escapes prison and flees to Mumbai, where he plunges deep into the city's underbelly. I meet Sriti, my guide for the tour, at the exact spot where Lin, the main character, arrives on a bus fresh from the airport. It's in front of the Regal cinema in the heart

of Colaba, the city's tourist and business hub. Mumbai's best-known landmarks, the Gateway of India and Taj Hotel, are just blocks away.

Over the next three hours, we retrace Lin's steps, walking down Colaba Causeway with its crowd of small stalls selling tie-dyed hippie dresses, jewellery, sunglasses and leather sandals. Plumes of incense fill the air, mixing with the gritty smell of the city that so enlivens Lin in the novel. We stop at Leopold's, an iconic café dating back to 1871, and a significant setting in the novel: a meeting place for criminals and drug smugglers who are ignored by officers in the police station just across the street.

We even see where Lin sleeps and eats. We climb the narrow staircase of a run-down building on a corner of a road leading to the seafront, en route to the India Guest House. The

“headache-green” walls of its cramped rooms are now coated with a more eye-catching hue. Farther down Colaba Causeway at Saurabh, we order *masala dosa*. This simple South Indian eatery, which is described as “small and relatively unknown” in the book, has become famous since the author treated Madonna to a meal here.

I smell the Sassoon docks before we reach them. We pass under its gateway entrance and the stench of putrid fish grows stronger: this is the odour that made Lin's “stomach flip”. Women walk by with baskets balanced on their heads, while others are busy peeling shrimp. The site of a large fish market, this is one of Mumbai's oldest dockyards. It's also the spot where Lin philosophises about the complexity of the universe with Khaderbhai, his “mafia boss and surrogate father”.



BY THE BOOK

A tour inspired by a classic Mumbai-set tome takes in the Sassoon docks

The next day, I'm up early, this time to learn more about Suketu Mehta's great novel *Maximum City* – an ode to Mumbai that weaves together extraordinary true-life tales about its ordinary residents. Babbanji is a teenage “runaway poet” from Bihar who, on a whim, jumps on a train bound for Mumbai, where he experiences his coming of age. He spends his days working at a bookstall, wandering around the city and scribbling poetry in a journal while watching the sunset.

My guide Shriti and I follow Babbanji's trajectory, exploring the world of the newly arrived migrants who live and work on the city's pavements. We meet outside Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus, an imposing Victorian Gothic structure built in 1878, and a UNESCO World Heritage Site. This is where Babbanji arrives on

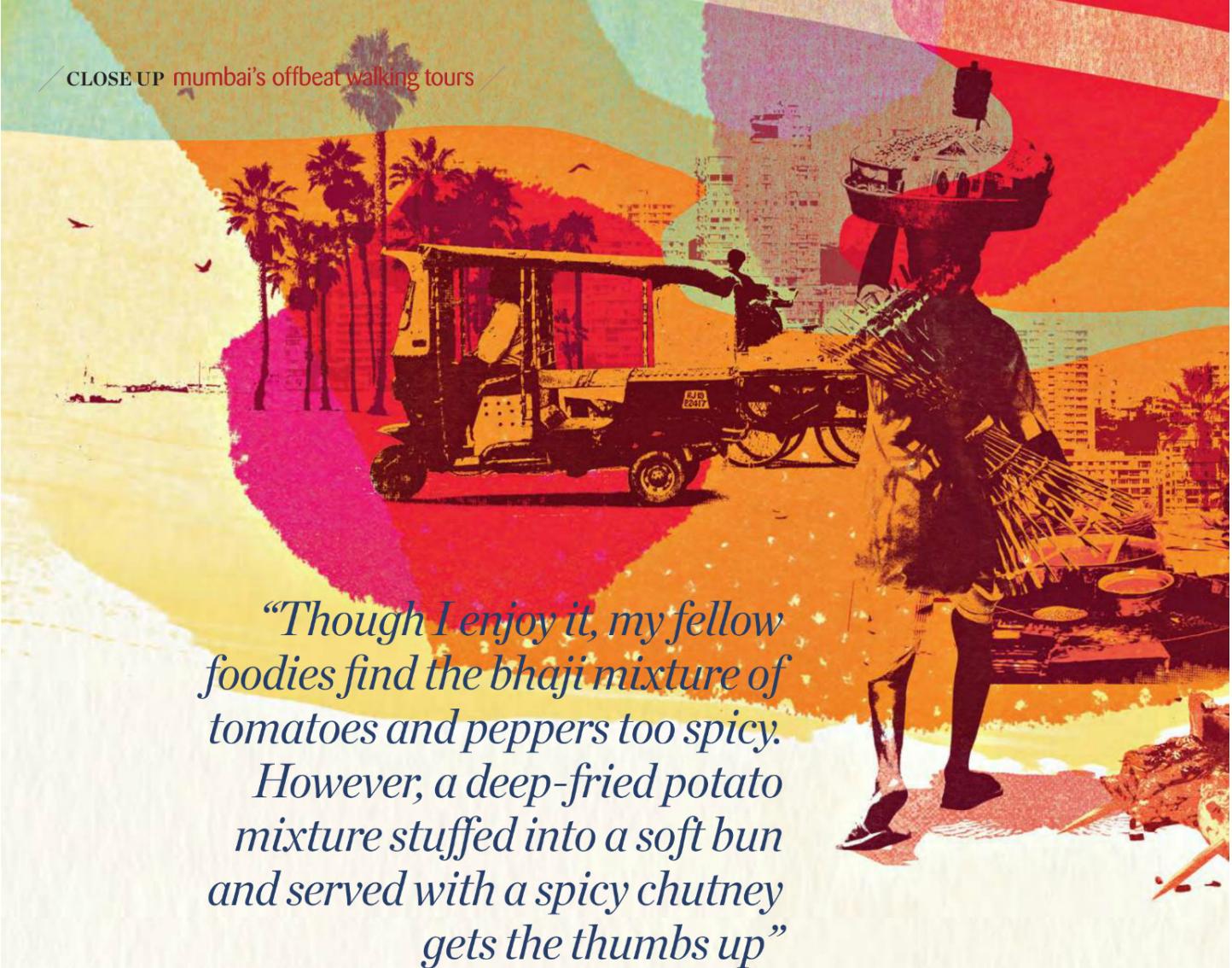
the Mumbai-Lucknow Express after a two-day journey. He “slowly descend[s] onto the platform” and touches the ground, then lifts his hand to his forehead, “taking its blessings”.

In the book, Babbanji explains his reasons for living on the streets, saying “I don't want a home; I'm more free on the footpath.” He makes use of the amenities that exist for itinerants, which are “well hidden from the commuters rushing to the station.” Shriti points to a row of hawker stalls, which have platforms that fold down and become open-air beds at night. We also see a public bath and toilets run by local NGO Sulabh International; each day a staggering 15 million people use its toilets across India.

On the way to Flora Fountain, we pass the pavement bookstalls where Babbanji finds a job, making 50 rupees a day. In the Kala Ghoda arts

district, we admire heritage buildings – the Indo-Saracenic David Sassoon Library and neo-Gothic Elphinstone College – before stopping at another of Babbanji's haunts, Jehangir Art Gallery. We wrap up the tour at Café Mondegar – one of the city's oldest Iranian cafés – where Babbanji's story comes to its end. The famous café is now adored by locals for its jukebox, mugs of cold beer, plates of comfort food and walls decorated by celebrated cartoonist Mario Miranda. But this is also the spot where Babbanji decides to leave the city with his father, after the latter comes searching for him. He goes home but is no longer the same person because he's now, poignantly, “Bombay-returned.”

DURATION: Each tour takes around three hours; beyondbombay.in



“Though I enjoy it, my fellow foodies find the bhaji mixture of tomatoes and peppers too spicy. However, a deep-fried potato mixture stuffed into a soft bun and served with a spicy chutney gets the thumbs up”

STREET-FOOD TOUR: A GENEROUS HELPING OF GRAB-AND-GO EATS

My street-food adventure begins with a brief journey on Mumbai's infamous local trains. I rush through heaving Churchgate Station with Tam from London and Helena and Otto from Berlin, trying to keep up with our excited guide Suraj. We hop onto a train, alighting two stops later at Charni Road Station.

It's a short walk to Chowpatty beach, known for its plethora of stalls offering some of the best street food in Mumbai. First up is one of the most popular local street snacks, *pani puri*. The *pani puri* *wallah* hands each of us a deep-fried puff of dough filled with a mixture of potato, onions and chickpeas, and flavoured with a minty tamarind water. I pop it into my mouth

whole, in keeping with Suraj's instructions. The crunchy puri contrasts with the tangy, sweet yet sour taste of tamarind and the zesty spice mix. Otto quickly decides that one is enough. The *dahi puri* we try next goes down better with the group. This time the crunchy, spice-stuffed puff is covered in a sweet and runny yogurt. We sample two more quintessential Mumbai street snacks: *pav bhaji* and *vada pav*. Though I enjoy it, my fellow foodies find the bhaji mixture of tomatoes and peppers, eaten with a *pav* (soft bun) too spicy. However, the *vada pav* – a deep-fried potato mixture stuffed into a *pav* and served with a spicy chutney – gets the thumbs up. We round things off with some very sweet *kulfi*, a dense and creamy cardamom-and-pistachio-flavoured ice-cream that's cut into slices.

Soon we're piling into a taxi and heading to the Mohamed Ali Road area to explore "non-veg" street-food options. We arrive at a bustling bazaar during the evening call to prayer and stroll past shops selling stainless-steel kitchen utensils and colourful textiles. We take seats in a nondescript eatery where plates soon appear filled with chicken tikka rolls, *chotta kebabs* of minced mutton and *baida roti*, a flat bread stuffed with minced lamb and fried in egg batter. After sampling these local Muslim specialities, the feast ends on a sweet note with the arrival of piping-hot and sticky *jalebis* (sugar syrup-soaked wheat-flour pretzels), served fresh from a huge, smoky cauldron. 

DURATION: Four hours; realitytoursandtravel.com



มหานครรวมเป็น ริบิเป็นเมืองแห่งความแตกต่าง
อย่างสุดขั้ว เป็นที่ท่องเที่ยวที่ใหญ่ แหล่งศูนย์กลางการค้า
บันทึก “นอลล์สตี้” ที่รักษาไว้ อย่างเคร่งครัดที่สุดในโลก
เมืองที่ประทับใจกว่า 18 ล้านคนนี้ ยังเป็นแหล่งสัมภានดิจิทัล รุกเข้าสู่โลก
ด้วยความเร็วที่สุด ทั้งความทันสมัย ความรวดเร็ว ความทันสมัยและความน่าอ่าก

เจ้าคุณนาย แม็คกีนีมีตัวที่หนึ่งเรียกว่าคัทตี้ด็อกกิลเรือง คราวนี้เจ้ารู้ว่าเขามีภัยหนึ่งที่ เป็นตัวอ่อน เท่านั้นรู้ให้ไม่ลับที่สูงไป ทำงานที่ริบิน หนังสือ เก็บเก็ตติชรีนในเมือง ก่อนหน้าบันทึกการนั่งรั่วทางไม่และทรงพระอยู่ที่บ้าน เรืองเริ่มที่ลากันไปให้ทราบภาคใต้ ชีวิตี้ ล้วนแต่ล้มลับ ค.ศ. 1878 ถ้าที่ตัวเอกันรักให้ไฟในและให้ไวอ่อนอยู่ เรืองบังคับรอบไปแล้วรักษาหนังสือให้ไว้ทำงาน รวมถึงเป็นผู้สอนภาษาศิลปะ ภาคใต้ เฟรเดอริกสันกับศิลป์ที่รัก ก่อนหน้าที่รัฐรัฐภาคใต้ สไตล์ศิลป์ร้าน “พงษ์แคร์” บริการเป็นรัฐบาล เค้าได้ริบูนเพลิงจากที่ขึ้นอยู่กับเพลิง

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