

Discovery Bay: "Best place I've ever lived".

By Peter Nixon, May 2024

The ferry departed Blake Pier beside Hong Kong's General Post Office and within minutes the lights of Victoria Harbour were behind us. The only light we could see from the open top ferry was the luminescence in the water and the silhouette of Tiger's Head on Lantau Island lit up by the rising moon. My arrival in Discovery Bay included Christmas carollers singing to arriving passengers. My homesickness transformed into happiness.



Why do people from around the world consider Discovery Bay the best place they've ever lived, why are they leaving in vast numbers, and why are all the retail shops closing?

DB is a community, and a community is so much more than just a place to live. Few people in the world today have experienced community living. I was lucky to grow up in a great community in Canada and it is the DB community that has kept me in HK since that memorable ferry ride in 1989.

There are great communities all over the world and many DB residents come from these communities but why do so many of them consider DB better than anywhere else they have lived?

DB began life towards the end of British rule in HK and flourished during its first 25 years in the HKSAR. Sadly, the sequence of protests, government crackdown, covid, government quarantine, and finally the National Security Law wreaked havoc on DB residents and businesses. Most people that departed DB in the last few years did so because their jobs, livelihoods, and dreams for the future evaporated. As the population shrunk and the spending power of those that remained diminished, the retail outlets closed or were forced into bankruptcy by rents no longer in line with economic reality.

It is useful to recognise what makes DB special so we can protect and enhance it long into the future. The top 10 elements of great communities are not unique to DB, but DB does many of these things better than any community in the world. When DB does have problems, they are often caused by people who don't live in DB yet whose decisions directly affect the livelihood of DB residents. Here is my take on what makes DB special.

Shared goals, values, purpose & meaning.

The profile of the typical DB person is changing but certain elements remain the same. DB residents enjoy living in a low density, semi-rural, car free, green environment that is quiet, safe and close to nature enabling outdoor activities with children, pets, friends, and neighbours from around the world.

Like communities everywhere, DB residents might clash when they face off with people of opposite interests (e.g., kids vs no kids, dogs vs no dogs, music vs quiet) but these problems tend to dissipate thanks to the green spaces allowing for distance when needed.

Active participation & collaboration

Although the community is aging, DB residents tend to be younger and active. They do things and get involved. Be it sports groups, schools, churches, or clubs many people participate and help organise events for others. This extra level of involvement is fun and allows for more activities to exist for everyone e.g., Tennis Nations Cup, Team Fear, Picnic in the Park, Dragon Boat Festival etc.



There isn't much of a downside except when the economy turns sour and service providers competing for DB resident dollars find it hard to survive. The groups that tend to survive are those that either cost the least (e.g., Pirate Rugby), or cater to a niche market of devoted followers with savings (e.g., Golf).

Meaningful relationships showing empathy and looking out for each other.

Raising children is the stage of life where people make the most connections. DB is full of families raising children. The natural connections that arise between parents and children (e.g., playdates with kids in the same class) become relationships that last a lifetime. As people get to know each other and see each other more often they share life's joys and sorrows, and this brings people even closer together. As relationships grow people help each other find work, service providers, friendship, and even romance. It is in times of trouble that DB shows its strength e.g., helping teenagers that drank too much, helping friends survive the loss of a loved one, or overcoming personal illness and injury.

There are times when people find DB too intense. It is like living in a fishbowl where everything you do is seen by people that want to gossip. This problem is minor when compared to living in a city where no one knows or cares about you. DB people prefer relationships over anonymity.

Diverse yet inclusive residents treating each other well.

DB is also fairly unique with residents from all over the world most of whom have travelled and/or worked in third countries making ethnic and cultural diversity a source of connection. Since many people in DB are parents or staff at the international schools this experience further reinforces love of people from distant lands, cultures, religions, and customs. Many DB families are blended

families with members from different cultures or races. Adding to the inclusiveness of DB is people's willingness to embrace gender, mental, and physical differences.

The benefits of diversity are limited when DB's Chinese population, who make up the majority, choose to communicate in Cantonese or Mandarin to the exclusion of most foreigners who use English rather than Chinese to connect with people from around world.

Prosperous trustworthy accountable residents

DB is akin to a gated community making it relatively easy to spot people who are not residents. DB is a bit removed from the rest of HK and transport to/from DB is more expensive compared to living elsewhere in HK. DB residents tend to have higher disposable income, better paying jobs, and higher levels of education compared to HK's general population. Since DB people have sacrificed to get ahead, they (usually) care for each other by saying hello, driving responsibly (e.g., golf carts, scooters, bikes), and behaving kindly towards each other (e.g., noise, dogs, substance abuse, consumer behaviours).



There are occasional issues which arise between residents but most problems in DB are caused by outside service providers, day visitors, and opportunists (e.g., theft and rude behaviours). Being relatively immune to the crimes and aggression that afflict many cities, young people growing up in DB must learn to remain safe in the wider world which suffer bad parts of town and untrustworthy people.

Resilient population despite HK's ups and downs and DB's evolution

DB residents have proven their resilience over the years, never more so than in the last years of political and pandemic chaos. Each time HK has been thrown into disarray by local or global events DB has been shaken but DB residents in general have survived. The resilience of DB residents is directly linked to their higher levels of education, skill, and experience enabling them to change jobs, but still land on their feet after a period of adjustment. The community itself provides DB residents with help in these times of transition and many people point to this help as a reason for their continued success. DB residents tend to help each other because of their relationships and because they know one day it might be themselves being the person in need.

When things go wrong in HK expatriates feel the most vulnerable because the system in HK is not designed to help them unless they are permanent residents. Most DB residents prefer to return to their home country when the dream of living in HK has come to an end. Although more and more expatriates are retiring and staying in DB, the cost of living is still prohibitive for most people. DB gives time to residents overcoming challenges but when the time is up most people, including locals, tend to leave DB to save money.

Effective leadership, dialogue, rules, and management

DB is a private housing estate but given its size and interconnectedness it is really a municipality. Since its founding DB has been well run because the developer wants to make DB attractive to home buyers. When DB has been at its best, the developer has created ways to reach out and listen to its residents, but for the most part there has been little dialogue between the developer and the average DB resident. Certain aspects of DB work very well e.g., ferries and buses, police, and fire department but it is hard to imagine why a developer would want to run a municipality or why the Hong Kong government would enable it to do so over the long term.

Leadership is DB's biggest failing because the governance structure of Owner's committees liaising with the developer on how the community will run means that most residents (tenants, not owners) lack a voice in decision making. This dialogue gap is reinforced by the fact most of the DB city management team don't live in DB and are not international professionals which means their views and opinions are often at odds with the residents. DB residents, relying on their professional competence which got them to HK in the first place, expect the same level of global best practice to be demonstrated by city management. When they don't see it they can become quite irate and difficult to work with. When this behaviour is met with typical conflict avoidance it means DB's worst moments occur when people ignore the need for dialogue.

Having worked on many projects in DB over the years I know if one group wants one thing another group wants the opposite. I good example of this was a resident's design of a skate park for kids' vs owners who wanted skateboards banned in DB. Community managers must be effective at resolving differences and building consensus amongst stakeholders.

Clean, safe, beautiful, and peaceful environment

DB's uniqueness results from being perched between green mountains and beaches facing the South China Sea giving it a comfortable climate most of the year. Add to that effective cleaning and security services and it is no wonder why so many tourists come to visit on weekends and public holidays. DB is best enjoyed by residents that live and work there e.g., students, pre-schoolers, retirees, helpers, and people that work from home. There are very few places left in the world where children can walk to school in a safe environment. DB is one of those special places.



Our community is at risk by the growing number of residents, vehicles, and outside service providers. People said DB would never be the same after they opened the tunnel. Then they said DB would never be the same after the introduction of double decker buses, private vehicles, and taxis. It is inevitable the growth of vehicular traffic and high-rise blocks changes DB's road safety and low-density environment. Effective dialogue is needed to ensure the needs of residents, owners, retailers, service providers, and the developer remain balanced moving forward. It would be a shame to keep adding more and more residents to DB until its unique community feel is lost and DB becomes just another place to live in HK.

Happy gathering places that promote social interaction.

DB is effectively car free, and the unexpected benefit of this green initiative is that people meet and talk on the ferry, bus, or trail. DB residents see each other in the clubs, parks, plazas, beaches, playgrounds, rock pools, pitches, pagodas, monastery, and hiking trails. Regular interaction is part of what makes DB so special.

The downside of living in a car free village is needing to wait for taxis when you face mobility issues. It is also strange to see people in tuxedos and ball gowns going to soirees on public transit, but this is a great leveller. DB's gathering places are nice and can be enhanced with more benches which are popular with DB's aging population.

Good services, groups, institutions

Another plus living in DB is easy access to quality services such as medical clinics, sports & recreation, grocery stores, schools, restaurants, retail outlets, and delivery services. The simple fact we can walk into the clinic and see a GP is no longer something available in places like the UK and Canada.

The downside comes from the cost of space which the developer keeps monopolistically high forcing retailers, restaurateurs, and service providers to struggle. The DB community would be better served if certain essential services were allowed to remain open for business even though they do not make enough to pay premium rents (e.g., shoe repair, stationary, playgroups, fitness). The high cost of retail space (only available to rent) has caused DB to have a disproportionately high number of businesses operating out of residential flats which is illegal but tolerated if no one complains.



Three things set DB above other communities.

DB ticks the box on all the above elements of great communities but in my opinion three things that make DB "the best place I have ever lived":

- a) the fact DB is a car free village pushing people to socialise.
- b) internationally diverse population with better than average education, spending power and family values.
- c) a beautiful setting and climate perched between mountains and ocean just thirty minutes to HK's central district or HK's International Airport.

So why is everyone leaving?

There was a massive exodus from DB during the pandemic reflecting all the reasons I mentioned earlier. Since DB hit bottom in July 2022 a lot of new residents have moved to DB to take advantage of its environment. Some former residents have returned. DB's longer term outlook has more to do with global economics. As long as China gets along with the rest of the world, the rest of the world will want to do business with China and if that's the case there is no better place to live in China (or Asia) than in DB.

Peter Nixon has lived in DB since 1989. He specialises in the dialogue, negotiation, and leadership of change. Peter's pro-bono work in DB is listed below. He is currently investigating creation of a **global DB alumni** to help DB residents and businesses (past and present) succeed globally.

- **DB Lifestyle Committee** which led to the creation of restaurants facing the water in South Plaza, showers on the beach, helipad pitch (now closed), and the DB customer service point (now closed)
- **DBIS Council** which led to the conversion of the police post into the DBIS Early Years campus, construction of the DBIS Discovery Centre, DBIS secondary campus, and extension of the school from K-6 to K-13.

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