

# SOAKED TO THE SKIN, BUT SAFE

## Editor's note:

It's a sad but true fact that disasters can bring people together. The devastating downpour that hit Beijing on July 21 shocked not only locals, but also expat residents who are usually inured to the aridity of the Chinese capital. Their sorrow at the deaths of 77 people was mixed with admiration and gratitude for the drivers who volunteered to help the stranded, the selfless actions of the citizens who visited the sick and the elderly to ensure their safety and the work of the emergency services. China Daily spoke to a number of expats to gauge their reactions to the storm and its impact.

**Bonnie Elbaum**, 38, from New Jersey, is a webmaster for a children's adoption agency in Beijing.

**O**n Saturday, we went to Shiqidu in Fangshan district, having been invited there by friends. We were having a barbecue in the evening and the rain just got heavier and heavier. At some point the power cut out and we went indoors. We didn't realize how serious the situation was.

On Sunday, there was no electricity or cell phone signals and so we couldn't contact anybody. Basically, we didn't know what was going to happen, we feared that we could be stuck there for days or weeks without food and with the water running out.

I was particularly worried that my three kids — the youngest is only 18 months — might get sick because of the bad sanitary situation. The hotel owner could only serve steamed bread and preserved tofu. I told my kids, "You have to eat this food, that's all they can offer."

Sunday seemed so long. We had to wait with 21 other people in a courtyard hotel. The worse thing was my parents, who were visiting from the US, didn't know we were gone, because we couldn't call anybody.

On Monday, one local suggested we should leave because they were running out of food and it looked like the rain might fall again on Wednesday. So we packed a bag and left our van there. All three bridges connecting the area with downtown Beijing were badly damaged and impassable. However, the locals were really organized and helped us to get out. They put a ladder on top of the damaged bridge for us to climb over. Then they passed my kids across to the other side. We got to the next bridge in minivans owned by local residents.

Then we had to walk to the third bridge. My husband carried our youngest daughter and I took the bag. It was really tiring for him. We were really lucky. After we passed the third bridge, we saw a bus provided by the local government and that took us home. It usually takes about two hours to drive to Sanlitun from Fangshan, but that day we spent eight hours getting home from the hotel.

When my husband returned to work, his colleagues treated him to a celebratory dinner. They were really worried when we "disappeared" on Monday.

In New Jersey, we had a hurricane last summer and lost power for a week. It was inconvenient, but at least we could leave. For this time, resources were running low and we couldn't leave on our own. That was the scary part.

On Sunday (July 29), my husband and our driver were able to return to Fangshan to retrieve our van because some temporary roads had been built to allow people to get through.

*Bonnie Elbaum spoke to Hu Yongqi*

**Matthew Stinson**, 36, is from Florida in the US. He has lived and worked in Tianjin for eight years.

**T**ianjin suffered in the storm as well, and many parts of the city have been difficult to get to. The south side of the Haihe has been better than the north. Many of my co-workers in the Hedong district and Hebei district couldn't go home or leave their homes because of flooding. Several tunnels such as the Tangkou Tunnel were filled with water for days at a time.

I live and work in the downtown area, which has better flood controls overall, but still has poor drainage. I have to bring a change of clothes to work because I can't wear my business clothes in the streets. I'm a teacher and many of our students didn't go to class when the rains came. Things have been a little better this week, though.

There are two main problems in Tianjin. The first is a lack of good drainage in the streets, which means that the rain floods major streets quickly, and sewage backs up, so we're not just walking on water, we're walking on toilet water. One of my friends refused to leave his house for three days because of this! The design of the drains is poor, the pipes are too small, and the road doesn't lead the water into drains. The city usually relies on street cleaners to come and sweep the water into the drains. Similarly, because the drains always fill up with garbage, the city has men clean the drains out regularly.

However, the modern drains are larger and self-cleaning. Tianjin should invest in these in the future.

The other problem, which Beijing has as well, is that the transport system breaks down when the streets flood. Taxis refuse to take people, buses can't run their usual routes, and

the subways flood out. Our subway situation is better than Beijing's, but then again, we have fewer subway lines overall. The government of Tianjin provides taxi drivers with a guaranteed income, so they really should insist that drivers help out Tianjin taxpayers in these bad weather situations.

Overall, though, I feel Tianjin's drainage and flood handling has improved over the last few years. In 2005 I was stuck in Hedong for a week and the water didn't go anywhere!

*Matthew Stinson spoke to He Na*

**Francis Young**, a British architect

**I**planned to go to an exhibition in the 798 art district on the afternoon of July 21, but I canceled my trip because the rain was so heavy. However, there was no way I was willing to miss a leaving party for a close friend held in the Dongzhimen area of the city that evening.

I set out at 9 pm and waited in the rain for 45 minutes. There were no taxis on the street, no licensed cabs or so-called black taxis either, nothing at all. I walked to the nearest subway station (on Line 10) but found it was packed out. I then tried to walk to Guomao to take Line 1 but the water was 2 meters deep, so I had to go back and take a different route.

Fortunately I found a tuk-tuk (a three-wheeled motorcycle carriage) at Jianguomen. I usually don't take them, but I was so relieved to see the guy there. He asked for 100 yuan (\$16), which is high, but I didn't care about the price at the time.

I arrived at the party at about 11:30 pm, two and a half hours after setting out. More than 50 people were supposed to be at the party, but only 25 showed up because of the rain.

I think it's a real shame. Beijing is the capital of the country, the showpiece, the city that hosted the Olympic Games. As an architect, I think the planning for the drainage system has been inadequate.

However, what most surprised most foreigners was that we didn't get advance warning in English from the authorities or our embassies. Maybe it's my problem that I don't read Chinese, but there are many expats in Beijing and a lot of tourists who can't be expected to speak Chinese. I would have been happy to have been told "Don't go out tonight."

It (the lack of a foreign-language weather warning) is not a problem unique to Beijing, but cities around the world. I'm from Edinburgh. We don't have rain like this, but we do have very heavy snow and we don't offer warnings in Chinese, Spanish or other languages. Maybe this is China's opportunity to take the lead and ensure that visitors are prepared for such extreme weather.

I feel more sorry for those who live outside Beijing, because they probably suffered more in the floods. I'm also sorry for those who lost their lives. It's a real shame.

*Francis Young spoke to Tang Yue*

**Ismael de Pierrepont**, a 29-year-old Frenchman who has lived in Beijing for four years

**I**stayed at home when the rain swept across Beijing. I only understood the scale of the storm when I watched the news reports. The floodwater reached a depth of 0.8 meter on a street not far from my apartment in Tuanjiehu, a populous area on the Third Ring Road. Thankfully, I wasn't really affected at all.

Actually the storm that hit Beijing wasn't even that bad in my experience. I've often seen rain like that in Caen in Normandy, where my parents have lived for about 15 years.

The drainage system there is very effective, but every other year there are rains heavy enough to flood and immerse a few areas. On two occasions there, a number of buildings were completely flooded. However, I've never heard of leaks from the roof or that sort of thing. And I've never heard of traffic being completely stopped either.

I have to say Beijing has a lousy drainage system. It rained for, what, 12 hours? And there were 4 meters of water? I don't think 12 hours is that long.

I heard the news that 77 people died in the storm. I wasn't at all surprised. Truth be told, I've read a lot of stories about the poor quality of construction work here, such as brand new buildings being sold, even though they are already leaking.

*Ismael de Pierrepont spoke to Peng Yining*

**David Moser**, an academic adviser of China Educational Tours academic program in Beijing

**W**hen the storm hit Beijing, I was at a friend's house near The Place. I left around 9 pm and had some trouble getting home to Dongzhimen. In some areas, the water rose as high as my knees, but we weren't disrupted too badly. Umbrellas were useless and my pants and shoes were totally soaked very quickly. I saw many cars stuck in holes or in the gutter.

It was very hard to get a cab, and the drivers were unwilling to go to some areas of the city, but thank goodness there were the tuk-tuks. Those guys really made a lot of money that day. They put plastic sheeting around the cabs to shield passengers from the rain and were quite convenient to take. That sort of vehicle can go to places where it's unsafe for taxis. I often took those motorbike cabs during the next few days.

I'm from Ann Arbor, Michigan. We often have heavy rainfall, but there is seldom flooding. Tornadoes are a worse problem.

I was not too surprised to hear that so many people were killed in the rainstorm. I know a lot of people, many of them elderly, live in basement apartments, which are prone to flooding, and I read that some people were trapped in their cars. It was a great tragedy.

*David Moser spoke to Zhang Yuchen*

