

《London or Beijing, the topic 's the same – the weather》

Writer: Chris Peterson

Forget for a moment if you will, talk of Brexit, a golden era, trade deals and tourism. There's one thing that always binds Britons and Chinese, and that's fascination about the weather.

It's a standing joke that if you get two or more Britons together on a train journey or in a pub, they'll end up talking about the weather. Like the woeful performance of the England soccer team, it's a safe subject that anyone can talk about.

I'll bet it's the same in China, especially at present, with torrential downpours flooding the streets of Beijing. Whilst we Britons bask in – for us – abnormally high temperatures of around 30 degrees Celsius, folks in the Chinese capital are photographed pushing their cars through thigh-deep floods, riding bicycles along inundated streets, and watching as buses throw up a bow-wave worthy of a speeding ship.

Right now here in London the newspapers, tired of running story after story about EU negotiations, new governments, terror attacks and other major sagas, have eagerly jumped on the chance to run the usual hackneyed photographs of office workers soaking up the sun in central London's many parks, of kids jumping in and out of the sea, pretty girls in bikinis and for the tabloids, the opportunity to use the word "sizzles" in every front page headline.

I can confidently predict that some publicity-seeker will attempt to fry an egg on the metal hood of a parked car.

Colleagues tell me that 10 years ago, the idea of flooded streets in Beijing was a rarity, although it's becoming more commonplace these days.

Down in Thailand, the capital, Bangkok, which was built on a network of canals and waterways, is slowly sinking as the canals are filled in to be replaced by roads, and the water has no-where to go.

I'm no geologist or scientist, but I can offer anecdotal proof that Bangkok is sinking.

When I first went there as a green foreign correspondent in 1972, the road near our office building had a steep kerb, maybe 10 inches high. I returned about 10 years ago and that same kerb is now over three feet above road level. It's outside the McDonald's (specialised local offering, the McThaiBurger. Not for the unwary.)

Floods in Bangkok can be epic, as I can attest.

Ho Chi Minh City is also subjected to torrential rainfall, but since these are a routine occurrence during the monsoon season, as in Hong Kong a well-developed series of storm drains quickly clears the water away.

London, as the pessimists note (why are they always French?), has more than its fair share of rain. But just in case things get a little over the top, we have a massive flood barrier across the Thames downriver from Greenwich. As soon as the tides get abnormal, the large, clamshell-like booms are lowered. It happens a couple of times a year.

A comforting sight, especially from my wife's design studio, although she was less than impressed when I pointed out she was the wrong side of the barrier.

So you can see why weather is such a popular topic. In London as in Beijing, it dictates what you wear each day, how and if you can travel to work, and whether to get out the motor scooter or the rubber dinghy.

It gives everyone a chance, in London at least, to moan about the lack of air-conditioning on buses, trains and the subway.

And the weather gives London's seriously put-upon commuters a fantastical series of announcement from transport companies – buckled tracks because of hot weather, the wrong kind of snow (seriously), leaves on the track and my favourite, delayed trains because the sun is shining in drivers' eyes.

As I write, London and the Home Counties are basking in high temperatures, light breezes and blue skies.

But trust me – it won't last. After all, we have to have something to talk about.