

Pollution: Quality of life versus quality of air

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In a 2013 interview with China Central Television, Briton Jason Pym spoke about his work creating a detailed map of the old town in Dali, a city in Yunnan province. The map was a labor of love for the graphic artist, who produced it as a way of cementing his memories of a city to which he feels strongly attached.

"Most people I know have been here (in Dali) for a few years. The air pollution has been getting more and more serious, but has only hit the news as a major problem in the last year or two, I guess," he said.

Pym, from Hertfordshire in the UK, and his Chinese wife Cecilia, have been part of the southwestern city's multinational expat community for 10 years. The net of nationalities has been cast wide, and the long-standing foreign presence includes natives of the UK, the US, Spain, the Netherlands, Poland, Australia, Germany and France.

Many of the expats in Dali have families, and that's one of the city's big draws. It's a great place to raise children, according to Pym, who has a young, Chinese-born son. Because the city is surrounded by lakes, forests and mountains, the area teems with wildlife. On weekends, Pym takes his family to the local hot spring or a swimming pool. "Having a kid helps, because you tend to spend time with other parents, and regardless of whether you're Chinese from Shanghai or Australian from Melbourne, people's reasons for coming to Dali are all pretty much the same," he said.

Before moving to Dali, Pym lived in Shanghai for five years. "I loved living in cities when I was in my 20s, but as I got older (he's now 40) my tastes changed. I like living in a place where I can go for a walk in the woods five minutes from my house," said Pym, who studied Chinese at Leeds University in the UK.

On Sept 13, the Geneva-based International Organization for Migration released the World Migration Report 2013, which stated that there were more than 680,000 foreigners living in China in 2011, a rise of 35 percent from 10 years before.

Both Beijing and Shanghai have resident expat populations of about 100,000.

Heading for the coast

Many expats who leave Beijing to relocate in China opt to move to coastal cities, such as Xiamen in Fujian province or Shenzhen in Guangdong, which are bustling regional centers, but have fewer environmental problems than the major inland centers, according to a report by the Ministry of Environmental Protection.

Smaller, second-tier cities, such as Changsha in Hunan province, which has an expat community of about 2,000, and the southwestern metropolis of Chongqing, which plays host to about 6,000 foreigners, gained few mentions in the report, even though life in these places can be colorful and vibrant.

Tom Strand, a UK native who lives in the Shapingba district of Chongqing, said he hadn't heard of any new expat arrivals who had fled Beijing or Shanghai specifically because of the air pollution. The 20-something, who is opening an agency to sell and distribute British beers, regularly travels around China on business.

The Ministry of Environmental Protection recently released a list detailing the air quality in 74 cities across China in 2013. For the entire year, only three cities — Haikou in Hainan province, Lhasa in the Tibet autonomous region, and Zhoushan in Zhejiang province — met the standards set for PM 2.5 and ozone set by the State Council in 2012.

The revised standards consider the safe level for PM2.5 — particularly harmful airborne pollutants smaller than 2.5 micrometers, which can penetrate the lungs and enter the bloodstream — to be 35 micrograms per cubic meter.

In contrast, the average PM 2.5 reading for Beijing in 2013 was 89.5 mcg per cu m, according to a media release from the Beijing Municipal Environmental Protection Bureau.

The Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei cluster saw China's highest levels of pollution last year, according to the report. In the first half of 2013, the 10 cities with the worst air quality — including Beijing, Tangshan, Shijiazhuang, Xingtai and Tianjin — were all within the cluster.

However, the 10 cities with the best air quality, including Haikou, Zhuhai, Zhongshan, Zhoushan and Shenzhen, were all in coastal regions.

"So all of us (to some extent) moved here because it was healthier, but for more general reasons, not air pollution specifically," said Pym, the graphic artist. The lack of industry in the area has resulted in much cleaner air.

Water purity and food safety are equally important factors for Pym. In Dali, water can be drunk from the tap and the food is fresh. Farm-grown vegetables have only a minimal dousing of chemicals, and many Dali residents, both Chinese and expats, grow their own.

A US-born friend of Pym's buys all her milk from a farmer who has just two cows. That way, she can ensure that nothing has been added to the milk, which she uses to make ice cream.

"The environment was a major reason my wife and I made the decision to live here," Pym said.



MA XUEJING / CHINA DAILY

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million

number of people worldwide who die from the effects of air pollution every year, according to WHO

680,000

foreigners

living in China in 2011, a rise of 35 percent from 10 years before

200,000

foreigners

living in Beijing and Shanghai



WEN BAO / FOR CHINA DAILY

Foreign visitors in Beijing on March 25, when the city issued a yellow alert.

THE GLOBAL PICTURE

The World Health Organization estimates that 2 million people worldwide die from the effects of air pollution every year.

1. China has an estimated 299,400 pollution-related deaths a year, far higher than the United States, with an estimated 40,600 deaths annually.
2. Asian cities, such as Karachi, New Delhi, Katmandu and Beijing, have some of the world's highest levels of airborne pollution. In South America, cities such as Lima and Arequipa in Peru are noted pollution hotspots, as is the Egyptian capital, Cairo.
3. People in developing countries are often most at risk from health problems arising from pollution, but significant health concerns also affect relatively cleaner cities in developed countries in Europe and North America.
4. Exposure to airborne pollutants is largely beyond the control of individuals, and a solution will require direct action by authorities at regional, national and even international levels.

WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION

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JASON PYM
BRITON LIVING IN DALI

The smaller, the better

Although she has lived in Beijing for three and a half years, Nina, a Russian woman in her late 20s, has experienced life in one of China's smaller cities. Before she moved to the capital to teach art at an international school, she lived in the coastal city of Dalian in Liaoning province. Her time in the beautiful port left a strong impression on her, not only of the blue sea, cleaner air and a healthier lifestyle, but also closer connections with the expat community.

Nina was first attracted to the city and China as a young girl when her mother visited Dalian and returned to Russia bearing armfuls of gifts, which exposed the girl to a new world centered around Chinese art and crafts. Nina started to dream of traveling to China, finally achieving that goal when she arrived in Dalian in her early 20s.

"There are just a couple of places in Dalian where expats can get together to celebrate or hang out," she said. "The community is kind of fixed — we always knew if anyone new had arrived in town and would have a welcoming party for them. When I was there, there was a small, close circle of friends, not like in Beijing where people come and go quickly and there are several expat hotspots, which means the foreign community is less connected."

Having spent six years in Dalian, Nina has considered leaving Beijing and returning to the port, not only because of the air pollution in the capital. Other factors would also influence her decision. "I like the arts environment here in Beijing and I have experienced a lot of great culture here. However, if I wanted to retire or opt for an easier life, I would definitely return to Dalian," she said.

"There's too much pressure in Beijing — the air quality, the flow of people and the lifestyle," she said. "When I first moved to Beijing, for the first six months I was completely alone without a circle of close friends."

An attractive destination

China is becoming increasingly attractive as a destination for immigrants, with the speed of economic development and the relatively low cost of living cited by many as the main reasons.

In some places, it's still possible to set up your own business without too much stress, according to Pym. His wife has opened a café in Dali, something she couldn't imagine doing in Shanghai, given that rents and other living costs are so high there.

If anything were to make them consider leaving China, it would be their son's education, rather than the level of pollution, according to Pym. Their son will be fine until he reaches high-school age, but unless a school with high educational standards opens in Dali in the next few years, the family will probably have to leave.

But should circumstances force them to move, Pym has no idea where they would go next. As an illustrator for several publishing houses and magazines, he could return to the UK, but equally he could move elsewhere.

"But like I said, it's years till we have to make a decision, and hopefully we will be able to stay," he said.

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