



PICS: MIN BAJRACHARYA

Across the hump



MARK TURIN

Tracing Princess Bhrikuti's journey from Kathmandu to Lhasa in an air-conditioned Sajha Yatayat bus

MARK TURIN in LHASA

On Friday, 29 April, a group of local Chinese officials, Tibetan businessmen and a contingent from the Royal Nepali Consulate to the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) gathered at the bus station on the western side of Lhasa. Quite a crowd had assembled on this bright morning, including a fair number of passengers whose departure on local transport had been delayed by the inaugural ceremony for the direct bus service between Kathmandu and Lhasa. The local press were there in droves: tv cameramen, reporters and photographers, making the most of the splendid weather and colourful balloons which had been hung up to herald the occasion.

After a traditional Tibetan welcome involving costumed and masked dancers, the official introductions started, including that of Leela Mani Paudel, the

Royal Nepali Consul General to Lhasa. Paudel read out a thoughtful three-page speech, delivered in excellent English and simultaneously translated into Chinese by an interpreter at his side. It was a matter of rejoicing, he said, that 11 years after the signing of a Transport Agreement between Nepal and China, this direct bus service between the capitals of the kingdom of Nepal and the Tibetan Autonomous Region of China should be ready to depart. Nepal is the only foreign country which has a direct air link with Lhasa, courtesy of Air China's biweekly flights and this direct transnational road service will help provide increased mobility to the citizens of these neighbouring regions, the Consul General stated.

The commencement of the bus service was widely reported in the local media in Lhasa and is generally seen by both ethnic Tibetans and by migrant Chinese residents of Lhasa to be a positive

move leading to increased connections between the cities. On the other hand, the railway linking Lhasa with 'mainland' China, which is under construction, is far more contentious and many Tibetans are concerned about a massive influx of Chinese labourers and settlers to the region.

As for Lhasa's resident Nepalis, some expressed doubts about the utility of the Kathmandu-Lhasa bus service, suggesting that the practical benefits may be limited simply because the vehicles will ferry only around 100 people up and down every week. The flight, although expensive at \$280 one-way, remains the option of choice for well-heeled travellers, while Nepalis involved in trade will continue to make use of the trucks and lorries that bring their supplies in and out *en masse*. The direct bus service is truly a passenger service for short-stay tourists.

Who, then, are the projected



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Clockwise, top:

- The first Lhasa bus drives past fields of wheat near Bhaktapur on 29 April, it reached Lhasa on 4 May.
- Chinese passengers of the Lhasa bus walk through the Friendship Bridge.
- Hundred-year-old Bhekh Maya come to greet the passengers of the first Lhasa bus at Bhaktapur.
- Spectators gathered at the inaugural ceremony in Lhasa.
- Leela Mani Paudel, the Royal Consul General of Nepal to Lhasa, standing in front of the Lhasa bus, flanked by Chinese and Tibetan officials.
- People waiting to welcome the passengers at Friendship Bridge.
- Driving off after a brief stop at Sangha to keep the engine from heating up too much.



punters? Are they Chinese, Tibetan, Nepali or foreign? As long as a structural inequality between China and Nepal remains unresolved, it appears that the number of Nepalis able to avail themselves of this service will remain limited: the Royal Nepali Consulate in Lhasa issues tourist visas to Chinese citizens at no charge within a few hours of application, while a reciprocal service has as yet not been extended to Nepalis applying for visas at the Chinese Embassy in Kathmandu. It would be great to be able to secure a short-stay Chinese visa together with the bus ticket or have them both organised by a tour operator. Until this happens, once the flow of dignitaries making the trip has subsided, it is likely that the bulk of the passengers will be non-Asian tourists who can't afford the flight but are interested in the novelty of the bus service. Even for this to happen, security between Kathmandu and Kodari must be assured and the vehicle

will need a proven track record of comfort and reliability.

In short, then, the commencement of the service is an important step for cross-border mobility and a credit to the persistence of the authorities in both countries who have seen the idea through all of the possible obstacles. Now that the road is clear, we can only hope that more of Nepal's citizens will be able to visit the city where their ancestors set up shop after weeks of gruelling hikes across Himalayan passes. What would the fabled seventh century Princess Bhrikuti Debi, who married the then Tibetan ruler Tsrong Tsang Gampo, have thought of an air-conditioned Sajha Yatayat bus completing the journey in two days. ●

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