

Tibet to be location of highest airport in the world

Chinese plan terminal in Tibet at 4,436 metres above sea level

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China is to build the world's highest airport, at an altitude of 4,436 metres (14,500ft), in Tibet. The construction, at Nagqu, is likely to be a daunting task given the altitude and climate, with average temperatures staying below zero throughout the year.

The airport will be just 764 metres lower than the Mount Everest base camp on the Chinese side, which is located 5,200 metres above sea level.

Nagqu is in the centre of the Qinghai-Tibet plateau, about 186 miles from the Tibetan capital of Lhasa, with a population of 400,000. The airport will be the sixth in Tibet, and its addition means there will be one airport in each prefecture.

"The airport construction is planned for 2011 with a construction period of three years," said Xu Jian, director of the Nagqu committee of development and reform. "It is expected to cost 1.8bn yuan [£160m] and cover an area of 233-266 hectares."

China announced in 2008 that it would build 97 new airports by 2020, so that four-fifths of the population would be within a 90-minute drive of an airport.

"With the airport, Nagqu, which is also on the Qinghai-Tibet railway line, is expected to become the centre of an economic hub in the plateau region," said Tan Yongshou, commissioner of the prefecture.

Xu Bo, director of the Tibetan branch of the China civil aviation administration, added: "The objective for the next stage of development is to open direct air routes from Tibet to south Asian countries."

The new airport will beat the current altitude record holder - Bamda airport in Bangda, Qamdo, which, also in Tibet, sits at an elevation of 4,334 metres. That airport overtook the one at Lhasa, which has been built at a mere 3,600 metres.

The plans underline the astonishing speed with which China is unrolling ambitious infrastructure projects, often under challenging conditions, and, in particular, highlights the rapid development occurring in Tibet.

An extraordinary railway line connecting Tibet to the rest of China opened four years ago, and the government is constructing six new rail lines in and around the vast region, which is rich in natural resources.

Beijing argues that such changes are needed to boost growth and raise living standards.

But opponents claim that the developments are eroding the Tibetan way of life and damaging a fragile environment. They also believe that the economic benefits of the changes have been overstated.

There is particular concern about increased Han migration, made possible by the Qinghai-Tibet railway.

But the railway itself has been a feat of engineering. At its highest point, the Qinghai-Tibet line hits 5,072 metres - a height that is above the peak of any European mountain.

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