

Nepal sees Belt and Road's human side

Landlocked Himalayan country gives high priority to building cultural and bilateral ties with China through tourism

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Tourism can serve to promote long-lasting bilateral relations between China and Nepal, especially with the building of stronger connectivity under the Belt and Road Initiative.

That is according to Nepal's ambassador to China, who was speaking to *China Daily Asia Weekly* on Oct 16 during the Global Tourism Economy Forum in Macao.

Leela Mani Paudyal said Nepal has given high priority to tourism promotion in China, as cultural relations are a basic foundation for promoting bilateral ties.

China declared 2017 as Nepal Tourism Promotion Year, so Paudyal also expects to attract more tourists as a result of promotion activities.

"Tourism is not just a business, it is about human connectivity, human values and culture," said Paudyal, adding that with more tourists visiting Nepal, better mutual understanding and more shared benefits can be created between people from

both sides. "The economic benefits are automatically generated and coming to Nepal, and to China as well. It is win-win cooperation."

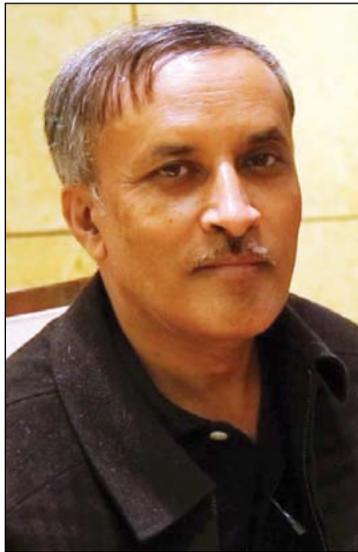
According to data from the China National Tourism Administration, China is Nepal's second-largest tourism source country after India. Last year, more than 100,000 Chinese tourists visited the landlocked Himalayan nation, up 55 percent year-on-year.

Potential growth

But in the context of China's total of 122 million outbound tourists in 2016, Paudyal sees potential to increase the number of Chinese visiting Nepal by more than fivefold in the coming five to six years and making China the country's No 1 tourism source market.

He also noted that the more than 15 million Chinese who visited Southwest China's Tibet autonomous region, which borders his country, represent a potential tourist market for Nepal — the only country connected to Tibet by air and road.

"Chinese are among the highest spending tourists, which will sub-



Leela Mani Paudyal,
Nepal's ambassador to China.

stantially contribute to Nepal's economy. For that, we need to improve our infrastructure," Paudyal said, making the point that infrastructure is fundamental to the tourism industry.

The Belt and Road Initiative is where Paudyal sees great opportunities to strengthen connectivity through infrastructure development. Proposed by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013, the Belt and Road Initiative aims to build a trade and infrastructure network connecting Asia with Europe and Africa along the ancient trade routes of the Silk Road.

Benefits of connections

Paudyal believes that by connecting through transport, telecommunications, power transmission and cross-border industrial zones, fruitful results and shared benefits for common prosperity can be generated for China and Nepal, South Asia, as well as other parts of the world. "Ultimately, that will bring us stability and harmony."

In May, China and Nepal signed a memorandum of understanding on bilateral cooperation under the

framework of the Belt and Road Initiative. Paudyal said this will open up the platform for connectivity, creating high-quality infrastructure and bringing business opportunities for both countries.

"But infrastructure alone is not sufficient." He said railway and other infrastructure-related services should be improved to give tourists from both sides a pleasant experience and to boost overall tourism attractiveness.

The ambassador hopes to enhance Nepal's image as the birthplace of Buddha, and to raise awareness of this among more Chinese tourists. Mountaineering tourism is also a focus, given Nepal's unique natural resources: It is the location of eight of the world's 14 peaks above 8,000 meters.

Paudyal also spoke of the importance of sustainable tourism, saying it should be achieved through cooperation between government, organizations and individual tourists. "We must be careful to protect the historical and cultural sites," he said, to preserve this heritage for future generations.



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