

Full speed ahead for Tibet on prosperity highway

“A region has to build roads if it wants to build wealth” the saying goes, and they are certainly sticking to it in the Tibet Autonomous Region, an area of more than 1.2 million square kilometers.

“It was a headache to travel to the Ali district in the past as there were only cobblestone and mud roads. It might take one week from Lhasa to Ali by truck, and you had to take water and food with you as there were no restaurants along the way,” said Tsering, a driver in Lhasa.

Today, it takes him under four days as there are several blacktop highways between both places.

Tibet has seen its economy invigorated by improved transport conditions.

The total length of highways in Tibet grew from 65,198 kilometers in 2012 to over 82,000 kilometers today, extending by over 4,200 kilometers a year. High-grade highways, similar to expressways, saw their length increase six-fold from 2012 to 2016, said Chen Chao, deputy head of the region’s transport bureau.

In 2013, the Motuo Highway opened to traffic, linking the outside world with the remote region of Motuo in southeastern Tibet. It was the last Chinese county without access to highways.

The rapid development of highways is the result of investment which grew from 10.101 billion yuan (US\$1.52 billion) in 2012 to over 40 billion yuan in 2016, increasing by 41.3 percent a year.

Thanks to investment in infrastructure and the effects of improved transport, Tibet posted impressive economic growth in the past five years, recording an annual average GDP growth of 11 percent. The region’s economy grew 10.8 percent year on year in the first half of 2017, outperforming every other provincial region.

“Once transport barriers are removed, there will be more commercial activities like logistics and tourism, thus improving local people’s livelihoods,” Chen said.

And building highways can help protect the environment, Chen said. When there were no highways, drivers would cross a region randomly, destroying the vegetation. Grass and plants are now spared as drivers run on a fixed route.

By 2020, Tibet will have 110,000 kilometers of highways, with all counties having access to blacktop highways and all towns connected by cement roads.