

# The Highest Railway in the World



by Ir. Chin Mee Poon

**EARLY** July last year, my wife and I travelled by train from Lhasa, the regional capital of Tibet, to Geermu, a city near the centre of Qinghai Province, China, a distance of 1142km. Our soft sleeping berths in an air-conditioned coach, one on the upper deck and the other on the lower deck, cost us RMB566 yuan and RMB583 yuan respectively.

This stretch of the Qing-Zang Railway was completed in 2006 and was open to traffic on 1 July 2006. The other stretch, from Geermu to Xining, the provincial capital of Qinghai, covering a distance of 830km, was completed in July 1979.

The Lhasa-Geermu stretch of the railway has achieved several world records:

- 1) The 1686m Kunlun Shan tunnel is the longest tunnel constructed in permafrost;
- 2) The Mt. Fenghuo tunnel with a track level at 4702m a.s.l. is the highest permafrost tunnel;
- 3) With 550km of the track sitting on permafrost, the railway is the longest permafrost railway in the world;
- 4) The highest level attained by the railway, at 5072m a.s.l., is a world record;

- 5) The Tanggula Station at 5068m a.s.l. is the world's highest railway station.

Our train left Lhasa Station at 7.45 am. Its top cruising speed was 108km/hr. The railway line runs more or less parallel to the Qing-Zang trunk road. Most of the passengers in our coach were Europeans, including a group of 20 Germans who were on their way to Xining to catch a flight to Beijing and thence back home.

It was a cloudy day. It even drizzled a number of times. Fortunately, when the train was running alongside Lake Cuona over a distance of 15km, the sky had cleared up and the turquoise lake against the backdrop of the snow-clad Tanggula Mountain Range appeared particularly charming. At about 4500m a.s.l., Lake Cuona is the highest fresh water lake in the world.

We saw some Tibetan antelopes and wild Tibetan donkeys grazing near the track. We reached Geermu at 8pm. Our purpose of stopping at Geermu was to visit the Chaerhan Salt Lake, reputedly the world's second largest. The salt lake, however, turned out to be a disappointment, so we continued our train journey to Xining the following evening. ■

