The little airline that could

Bhutan’s Drukair has just started direct flights from the kingdom to Singapore and sees exciting things ahead, reports EVE YEO

ROWING up in land-locked Bhutan, Tenzin Namgyal’s dream of becoming a pilot began with watching planes fly by. He would run along with them until they whizzed behind the enclosing mountains to places that he could only dream of.

The tail of each plane was emblazoned with a white dragon spread across a yellow and orange background: the logo of Drukair, the national carrier.

Drukair, which started flying directly to Singapore this month, is one of the smallest national airlines you’ll see at Changi Airport. But few carriers have as big a place in their nations’ hearts.

When it began operations in 1983, it represented the end of the kingdom’s self-imposed isolation. Today, it is a key part of Bhutan’s “high-value, low-impact” tourism policy. And, for many ordinary Bhutanese like Mr Namgyal, it is a trailblazer into the wider world.

“I am proud to represent my country through the only airline that brings tourists into Bhutan,” says the 24-year-old pilot.

Now, a larger proportion of those tourists are likely to come from or through Singapore. “Singapore is an important gateway and an especially important one for Bhutan,” says the secretary of the Ministry of Economic Affairs, Sonam Tshering.

Last Saturday, the first commercial flight from Paro landed in Singapore. The flight from Singapore to Paro left yesterday morning.

Following a memorandum agreed on last year, Drukair will fly to Singapore twice weekly. The weekly flights will be the fifth country that the airline flies to – after India, Nepal, Bangladesh and Thailand. The airline will add a fourth plane to its fleet by the end of next August, with a fifth slated for arrival in 2014.

The airline is owned by Druk Holdings & Investment, the investment arm of the Bhutanese government. Its role is more strategic than to just add directly to government coffers.

“As Bhutan’s only international airline, there is a huge responsibility of not just making profits but to provide as much connectivity as possible,” says Drukair’s general manager of commercial and ground operations, Tshering Penjor.

The Singapore connection is expected to help Bhutan tap tourists on the Australian and New Zealand routes, according to tourism council officials.

It will also reduce Drukair’s current dependence on less-stable hubs. “Singapore is very stable in the South-east Asia region, both politically and financially,” notes Bhutan’s Tourism Council director of plans and programmes, Thupti Dorji Nadik. “Flights have been affected by the rioting in Bangkok, causing the Suvarnabhumi airport to be shut down. Nepal is occasionally unstable and there have been cases of bombing in Phulpi, India.”

Changi preferred

Hong Kong was also considered, but Changi’s track record as a transfer hub helped tip the scales in Singapore’s favour. “Changi Airport is a city itself; it has well-designed facilities that will ease the transfer process for Druk passengers from beyond Singapore,” says Mr Tshering of the Ministry of Information and Communication.

Bhutan’s challenging terrain is the main reason why Drukair’s flights won’t be reciprocated by Singaporean carriers. Each of the airline’s Airbus A319s is retrofitted with more powerful engines. The extra thrust is required for the steep ascent out of the airport in Paro Valley.

Therefore, although Bhutan’s air agreements are bilateral on paper, other airlines lack the aircraft that can deal with the special conditions, giving Drukair a monopoly on scheduled international flights.

Its pilots are also specially trained. They need to rely solely on their sight of the tarmac and the surrounding mountains as they zigzag their way to or from the runway.

“We have to navigate the plane by sight. We don’t land unless we can see the tarmac,” says Mr Namgyal, who trained in Australia. Low clouds can suddenly obscure visibility, he adds. “The weather in Paro changes very quickly – it can even change every five minutes.”

Four operators in Singapore and Bhutan will be ready gearing up for the impending flights. One of them is Karma Wangmo in Bhutan, who looked forward to being on the inaugural flight to Singapore last Saturday.

“I wanted to experience the duration and comfort level of the flight myself so that I can give better answers to my clients when they make inquiries,” says the 40-year-old, who has been to Singapore twice, via Thailand and India.

The take-up is expected to be gradual. According to Mr Penjor, Drukair’s general manager, the new air link should bring an additional 5,000 to 6,000 visitors to the kingdom over the rest of the year.

But Bhutan’s tourism sector has high hopes about what little Drukair can achieve over time.

Ravi Nischal, general manager of the palatial Taj Tashi Temple Hotel, says the new links could help turn Bhutan into a “365-days” destination, instead of one with a distinct low season.

“The mystique of Bhutan is not only for the high season. You can see it every day if you are here,” he says. “So maybe with the new air links and greater connectivity, we can become a year-round destination.”

Reporters Bhavan Jairupapas and Eve Yeo and photojournalist Geh Choy Teng were among 14 final-year undergraduate journalism students who took part in the annual Going Overseas For Advanced Reporting (GO-FAR) programme of the Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information, Nanyang Technological University, GO-FAR, which visited Bhutan earlier this month, is supported by the Wee Kim Wee Legacy Fund and the Shingo-en Foundation. For more of the team’s stories, visit www.gfjfair.sg