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Beijing and cash lure men from tunnel

By Andrew Bomford

BUS driver Paul So Kwok-pui reckons he has the best job in Hongkong.

On Tuesday he will be behind the wheel of the first-ever Hongkong to Beijing bus service, a 10,000-kilometre round trip, which could not be more different from Kowloon and back on a rainy morning.

Operated by Citybus, the trip takes 23 days for a one-way journey.

A few days ago Paul and his three co-drivers were working for Citybus' Hongkong island rivals, China Motor Bus, doing the regular run through the cross-harbour tunnel.

But after the four work-mates answered the same job advertisement they now feel they were pretty lucky to land not only the most exciting bus driver's job on offer, but also the highest paid.

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— Paul So

They will each take home around \$20,000 a month — about twice as much as they were being paid at CMB, and three times as much as many of Hongkong's bus-drivers are paid.

"We were all driven by the excitement of working on the first Hongkong to Beijing bus journey — it's one of the longest over-land routes you can take," Paul said yesterday.

But along with the job comes responsibility, and Citybus say they will be the company's ambassadors in far-flung parts of China.

Paul and his colleagues Martin Au Pui-shing, Duncan Kiang-leung and Wong Chung-kit (who does not join until next week), will have to cope with mechanical breakdowns, burst tyres, and rough road conditions a long way from home.

They also have to be linguists, speaking English and Mandarin as well as Cantonese.

Less glamorous tasks like cleaning out the bus and emptying the chemical toilet also fall into the job description. "If the tyre bursts in the middle

of nowhere you have to replace it," said Paul. "If you don't know how, you're in trouble."

Two drivers will take it in turns to tackle the lengthy route, which takes in popular tourist spots like Guilin, Changsha, Wuhan and Xian before the final roll into Beijing and the Great Wall.

On reaching Beijing, the drivers will rest for about a week before picking up passengers at the other end and travelling back to Hongkong along the same routes.

They will then have a two-week break before setting off to another long journey.

The journey is the first cross-China coach service staged by a foreign company, and took two years of delicate negotiation.

For Paul and his fellow

drivers the job is the chance of a lifetime, for which they were prepared to sacrifice the benefits of a steady home life with their families.

"I like driving, but my old job was so boring," said Paul. "This is a new challenge, and it is so rare that even in middle age a chance can come along to achieve such a goal."

Paul, Martin, and Duncan are all married and each have children, but they say their families don't mind about not seeing so much of them in the future.

For the long-distance bus drivers, a long-distance telephone call could be their main point of contact.

But they are quick to point out that some sacrifices have to be made to jump from cross-harbour to cross-China in one smart move.