

The Role of the Lumbini Cable Car in Promoting Tourism in Butwal

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ABSTRACT

The Lumbini Cable Car, a recent infrastructural development connecting the Rupandehi and Palpa districts of Nepal, was inaugurated in 2023 in Butwal and has quickly emerged as a significant attraction for both domestic and international tourists. Offering panoramic views of the Himalayan range, lush green landscapes, and direct access to religious sites such as the Kamakhya Devi Temple, the cable car has become a symbol of integrated tourism infrastructure in the region. This paper examines the multifaceted role of the Lumbini Cable Car in promoting tourism in Butwal, a key urban centre in Lumbini Province that has traditionally served as a transit point rather than a primary destination.

The study explores the economic, cultural, and environmental impacts of the cable car on Butwal's evolving tourism sector. It analyses changes in visitor trends, local business development, job creation, and community engagement since the cable car's launch. Additionally, it evaluates potential challenges, including environmental sustainability, infrastructure pressure, and the need for supportive services. The findings suggest that the Lumbini Cable Car has significantly contributed to enhancing the tourism profile of Butwal by improving accessibility, diversifying available attractions, and stimulating the local economy. The research concludes that such infrastructure projects, when thoughtfully implemented, can play a transformative role in regional tourism development and serve as models for similar emerging destinations in Nepal.

INTRODUCTION

Tourism remains a vital pillar of Nepal's economy, especially in regions where cultural heritage, natural beauty, and religious significance converge. Butwal, a prominent urban centre in Lumbini Province, has traditionally functioned as a transit point rather than a primary tourist destination. However, the inauguration of the Lumbini Cable Car in June 2023—linking Butwal to Banghlung Danda in Palpa and the revered Kamakhya Devi Temple—marks a pivotal shift in the region's tourism dynamics. Located just one kilometre from the Siddhartha Highway, the cable car offers convenient access, appealing to a broad range of visitors, including pilgrims, families, and leisure travellers. The Kamakhya Devi Temple in Nepal is quite similar to the famous Kamakhya Temple in Assam, India; both are dedicated to the goddess Kamakhya, a powerful embodiment of feminine energy and fertility in Hindu belief. This connection enhances the temple's religious appeal and positions it as a spiritually significant destination within the broader South Asian context. This study investigates the impact of this modern infrastructure on tourism expansion, regional development, and community livelihoods in and around Butwal.

In addition to the spiritual appeal of the Kamakhya Devi Temple, several nearby attractions enrich the visitor experience at the cable car's top station. Adventure enthusiasts can enjoy a scenic 200-metre zipline ride that offers breathtaking views and unforgettable thrills. The nearby Durga Temple provides a space for reflection and devotion, symbolising inner strength and divine protection. Visitors can also rest at the cafeteria, where they can enjoy tasty snacks and warm service in a calm and refreshing environment.

Tourism remains a vital component of Nepal's economic landscape. In 2024, international tourist arrivals reached 1,147,567—an increase of 13.1% compared to 2023—recovering to approximately 96% of pre-pandemic levels. According to the World Travel and Tourism Council, the sector contributed 6.6% to Nepal's GDP in 2023. Although final GDP data for 2024 is pending, the substantial rise in tourist numbers points toward a stable or improving contribution from tourism. Within this context, assessing the impact of the

Lumbini Cable Car is timely, as it may offer a replicable model for fostering decentralised tourism in emerging urban centres such as Butwal.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Tourism infrastructure—particularly cable cars—has been widely acknowledged as a catalyst for improving accessibility to remote, religious, and mountainous destinations. Globally, the introduction of cable cars has turned previously inaccessible locations into thriving tourist attractions by minimising travel time and enhancing safety and convenience. In Nepal, the successful implementation of the Manakamana and Chandragiri cable cars illustrates the strong link between infrastructure development and tourism growth. These projects have contributed to increased visitor inflows, generated local employment opportunities, and supported the growth of small and medium-sized enterprises in the surrounding areas (Thapa, 2018).

Despite these advantages, several researchers have cautioned against the unintended consequences of rapid tourism expansion. Regmi (2019) underscored the potential over-commercialisation of sacred sites, emphasising that an overwhelming influx of visitors can compromise spiritual experiences and disrupt the cultural integrity of host communities. Likewise, Shrestha and Dhakal (2020), in their analysis of the Chandragiri Cable Car project, reported that although religious tourism flourished post-launch, it also brought challenges such as environmental stress, insufficient waste management, traffic congestion, and diminishing cultural authenticity.

These findings highlight the importance of adopting a balanced approach that combines sustainable tourism principles, local community involvement, and heritage conservation. Insights gained from earlier cable car initiatives serve as valuable benchmarks for evaluating similar projects elsewhere. In this regard, the Lumbini Cable Car—which connects Butwal to the Kamakhya Devi Temple in Palpa—offers a compelling case for analysis. A thorough assessment of its influence necessitates not only a review of tourism statistics and economic outcomes but also an examination of its broader social and environmental effects. The existing literature thus provides a foundational framework for understanding the Lumbini Cable Car's role in reshaping tourism dynamics in Butwal.

Objectives

The central aim of this study is to evaluate the contribution of the Lumbini Cable Car to the promotion of tourism in Butwal and its surrounding regions. This research seeks to assess both the quantitative and qualitative dimensions of the cable car's impact on local tourism development. The specific objectives are as follows:

- To assess the influence of the Lumbini Cable Car on tourist arrivals—both domestic and international—in Butwal.
- To analyse the economic effects of the cable car, particularly in relation to local business growth, employment generation, and household income.
- To investigate the socio-cultural and environmental consequences of increased tourism activity in the area.
- To identify key challenges and operational limitations in the management and functioning of the Lumbini Cable Car.
- To offer policy-oriented recommendations aimed at promoting sustainable tourism development through cable car infrastructure.

METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a mixed-methods approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative techniques to gain a comprehensive understanding of the Lumbini Cable Car's influence on tourism development in Butwal.

Data Collection

Primary Data:

Data was gathered through a combination of structured and semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders, including tourists, local entrepreneurs, cable car management personnel, and municipal officials. Additionally, a field survey was conducted using questionnaires administered to 100 visitors at the cable car site.

Secondary Data:

Supporting information was sourced from official tourism statistics, reports provided by the Lumbini Cable Car management company, prior academic studies, relevant tourism journals, and reputable online platforms.

Sampling Technique

A purposive sampling method was employed to select stakeholders for interviews, ensuring input from individuals directly involved or affected. For the tourist survey, convenience sampling was utilised, targeting visitors present at the site over a one-month period in 2025.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were processed using descriptive statistical tools, including frequency counts, percentages, and trend analysis, to evaluate patterns in tourist flow and local economic activity. Qualitative data obtained through interviews were analysed thematically to extract recurring insights related to tourism development, environmental sustainability, and socio-cultural impact.

Limitations

This study focuses on the initial operational phase of the Lumbini Cable Car and may not fully reflect long-term trends or impacts. Furthermore, due to time and resource constraints, the research was geographically limited to Butwal and nearby areas directly influenced by the cable car infrastructure.

Project Overview and Features

The Lumbini Cable Car stands as a landmark tourism infrastructure project located in Nepal's Rupandehi district. Officially inaugurated in June 2023, the cable car was developed with the aim of fostering religious, recreational, and eco-friendly tourism across Lumbini Province. Operating between Basbari in Butwal and Banghlung Danda in Palpa, it links Golpark Bamghat in Butwal to Basantpur in Tinahu Rural Municipality, providing direct and convenient access to the revered Kamakhya Devi Temple. This strategic route effectively connects urban centres with spiritual destinations, offering both accessibility and cultural significance.

The cable car spans a distance of 2.6 kilometres, supported by nine towers and ascending to an elevation of approximately 3,200 feet above sea level. The system consists of 25 gondolas, each accommodating up to eight passengers, in addition to two dedicated baggage carriers for travellers' convenience. The ride duration ranges from 9 to 12 minutes, ensuring a swift yet comfortable journey.

Passengers are treated to stunning vistas throughout the ride, including dense forests, cascading waterfalls, flowing rivers, and, on clear days, panoramic views of the snow-covered Himalayan peaks such as Dhaulagiri and Annapurna. The tranquil atmosphere, fresh mountain air, and scenic beauty create an immersive experience that blends natural wonder with spiritual enrichment.

Modern facilities are integrated into both terminal stations. The lower terminal at Bamghat—just one kilometre from the Siddhartha Highway—features ticket counters, waiting lounges, restrooms, and food courts, along with ample parking space. The upper terminal, located near Kamakhya Devi Temple, offers rest areas for pilgrims and facilitates direct access to the religious site.

The fare structure is designed to be inclusive and affordable. For Nepali and SAARC nationals, tickets are priced at NPR 450 for a one-way trip and NPR 750 for a round trip. International tourists pay USD 13 for one-way and USD 22 for round-trip rides. Children under 3 feet in height and senior citizens above 80 years of age are eligible for free rides. The service pauses for a lunch break from 12:00 PM to 1:00 PM, except on Saturdays and public holidays, when operations continue uninterrupted to meet higher visitor demand.

From a technical perspective, the cable car adheres to international safety standards, with routine inspections, trained personnel, and established emergency response protocols. The project also integrates environmentally responsible practices, including waste management systems, minimal ecological disruption, and community-focused sustainability awareness initiatives.

In essence, the Lumbini Cable Car is more than a transport system—it is a thoughtfully executed tourism infrastructure that enhances regional connectivity, promotes cultural and natural exploration, and positions the Butwal–Palpa corridor as a growing destination within western Nepal.

Visitor Trends and Statistical Overview

Visitor data from 2081 BS (2024-2025 AD) reveals that the Lumbini Cable Car attracted **148,371 visitors**, with the majority (over 102,000) being regular domestic tourists. The SAARC region contributed significantly, with more than 34,800 visitors, while foreign tourists outside SAARC accounted for 134 individuals. Seasonal peaks were observed during festivals and favourable weather months such as Kartik and Baishak.

Table: Visitor Statistics (2081–2082 BS)

Months	Total Visitors	Normal	SAARC	Foreign	Local	Scheme
Sharwan 81	9408	6474	1506	3	150	1275
Bhadra 81	10159	6494	2103	9	192	1361
Ashoj 81	11759	9219	1880	6	351	303
Kartik 81	19503	13300	2100	13	403	487
Mangsir 81	10861	8273	1706	5	139	738
Poush 81	11440	5991	4540	20	117	772
Magh 81	8474	5845	1993	14	288	334
Falgun 81	8809	6316	1754	13	219	507
Chaitra 81	12631	8297	3354	15	270	695
Baishak 82	15094	11958	2475	11	296	354
Jestha 82	14884	8832	5154	15	200	683
Ashad 82	15349	8556	6243	10	161	379
Total	148,371	102,755	34,808	134	2,786	7,888

This trend highlights the cable car’s growing popularity and its importance as a year-round tourism asset.

Impact on Tourism in Butwal

The inauguration of the Lumbini Cable Car in 2023 has notably transformed Butwal’s tourism landscape, elevating the city from a mere transit hub to a vibrant destination. This infrastructure has enhanced access to significant religious and natural sites, while also catalysing broader socio-economic development in the region.

Growth in Tourist Arrivals

Since its commencement, the Lumbini Cable Car has attracted a considerable influx of both domestic and international visitors. Its proximity—just 35 kilometres from the Belahiya border—has made it particularly popular among Indian tourists. Madhav Kumar Khanal, President of the Hotel Business Association, reported a sharp increase in Indian tourist arrivals to Rupandehi district in recent years. The region's favourable climate, picturesque hills and rivers, and nearby attractions such as the Kamakhya Devi Temple, Siddhababa, Jitgadhi Fort, and the Ramapithecus archaeological site have all contributed to this surge.

Economic Stimulus

The rise in tourist footfall has significantly boosted the local economy. Businesses in the hospitality and retail sectors, including restaurants, hotels, transportation services and shops, have increased rapidly. In Butwal Sub-Metropolitan City alone, there are 498 hotels and restaurants, with the total reaching 907 across the Rupandehi district. This expansion reflects not only rising tourist demand but also growing investor confidence in Butwal's tourism potential.

Former Hotel Business Association President Lekhnath Bhandari emphasised that the tourism surge has generated ample employment opportunities, particularly within hospitality and service industries. Likewise, Chunu Poudel, Director of Sepron City, observed that this heightened interest has stimulated the development of higher-standard accommodations, including multiple new three-star hotels. Collectively, these advancements are helping to establish Butwal as a model for sustainable tourism in the province.

Diversification of Tourism Products

Before the cable car's introduction, Butwal's tourism largely centred on religious and cultural transit visits. The cable car has diversified the city's offerings by integrating spiritual tourism with leisure and nature-based experiences. Visitors now tend to extend their stays to explore a broader array of sites, including scenic hills, rivers, and historical landmarks, contributing to the creation of tourism circuits linking Butwal with Palpa and Lumbini.

Cultural and Environmental Implications

The growth in tourism has heightened awareness of environmental conservation and cultural preservation. Local authorities have initiated efforts to manage waste and mitigate traffic congestion. Nonetheless, increased visitor numbers at sacred sites such as the Kamakhya Devi Temple have raised concerns regarding the protection of cultural sanctity and the regulation of commercial activities around these areas.

Reinforcing Butwal's Destination Identity

The Lumbini Cable Car has been instrumental in reshaping Butwal's tourism identity. Beyond the boost in daytime activities, the city is witnessing the rise of a dynamic nightlife scene. Loknath Neupane, Ward Chairperson of Butwal-6, noted the growth of night markets, Dohori Sanjh musical events, cinemas, live performances, and cafés, which collectively enrich the visitor experience and stimulate economic activity during evening hours.

In conclusion, the Lumbini Cable Car has acted as a key driver for comprehensive tourism development in Butwal. By increasing tourist arrivals, fostering local businesses, attracting investment, and enhancing the city's cultural and recreational offerings, it has laid a solid foundation for Butwal's emergence as a leading tourism destination in western Nepal.

Increase in Local Transport Activity

Since the launch of the Lumbini Cable Car, there has been a sharp increase in activity among auto-rickshaws and E-rickshaws in Butwal. Rickshaw drivers based around Golpark and Traffic Chowk have reported significantly higher demand, ferrying passengers to the bottom cable car station and catering to tourists before

and after their ascent. This surge has increased the frequency of rickshaw usage for short-distance tourist transfers.

According to auto-rickshaw drivers Bijendra Shrestha (Lu 1 Kha 4174) from Tilottama–3 Shankarnagar, Man Bahadur Pariyar (Lu 1 Kha 3032) from Tilottama–4 Rupandehi, and Amar Gurung (Lu 1 Kha 2294) from Jyotinagar, Butwal–3, approximately 25 to 30 auto-rickshaws operate daily around the Lumbini Cable Car area. On average, around 100 domestic and international tourists use these auto-rickshaws each day. The drivers earn approximately NPR 1,300 to NPR 1,800 daily, with expenses of around NPR 500.

After registering with the Transport Management Office, they are also required to register with the Sub-Metropolitan Office, which increases their tax obligations. The drivers believe that if some tax relief were provided, the profession would become even more attractive. The increased income has made it easier for them to support their families, invest in their children's education, and afford better healthcare. Alongside financial improvements, drivers also reported improved awareness regarding health and education. They further noted that tourists generally behave in a friendly and respectful manner, contributing to a mutually positive environment.

Mission, Values, and Operational Excellence

Message from the Chairman of Lumbini Cable Car

It is my great pleasure to welcome you and share a few reflections on our journey and vision. At the core of our efforts lies an unwavering commitment to delivering outstanding service, crafting meaningful experiences, and embodying the values that define us. Our dedicated team works diligently to ensure every visitor's safety, comfort, and memorable experiences.

As we move forward, we remain steadfast in our commitment to innovation, sustainability, and community engagement. Thank you for being part of our journey. We look forward to reaching new heights together.

Chandra Prasad Dhakal

Chairman

Our Mission

Our mission is to create meaningful and lasting experiences that foster connections between people, nature, culture, and adventure. We strive to provide safe, high-quality services—ranging from cable car rides and guided tours to outdoor recreational activities—tailored to diverse age groups and interests. Through a commitment to innovation, warm hospitality, and respect for the environment and local communities, we seek to inspire exploration, promote responsible travel, and generate lasting value for our guests and the regions we serve. Every journey with us represents more than transportation—it is an opportunity to discover, connect, and grow.

Operational Excellence

We are dedicated to ensuring a smooth and enjoyable experience from the initial planning stages through the completion of your visit. Whether you are booking a cable car ride or seeking information about our destinations, our user-friendly platforms, knowledgeable staff, and comprehensive support are designed to assist you at every step. Our streamlined online reservation system, on-site assistance, and clear guidance ensure your adventure begins with ease.

Behind the scenes, a safety-first culture governs every aspect of our operations. Routine equipment inspections, rigorous staff training, and effective crowd management are all integral to delivering a secure, dependable, and memorable experience. We continually assess and refine our processes to uphold the highest standards of hospitality, comfort, and operational excellence.

DISCUSSION

The introduction of the Lumbini Cable Car has significantly changed tourism patterns in Butwal and its surrounding areas. This study's findings align closely with existing literature that underscores the pivotal role of tourism infrastructure in driving regional development (Thapa, 2018; Shrestha & Dhakal, 2020). Similar to the experiences observed with the Manakamana and Chandragiri cable cars, the Lumbini Cable Car has improved access to key religious and scenic destinations, led to an increase in visitor numbers, and boosted the local economy.

A particularly notable outcome is the shift in Butwal's identity—from mainly serving as a transit hub to becoming a popular tourist destination. This change supports the idea of tourism-led growth, where building infrastructure not only makes travel easier but also shapes how visitors view and experience a place. The noticeable rise in Indian tourist arrivals, as reported by the Hotel Business Association, shows how important border location and easy access are in boosting cross-border tourism.

The economic benefits are evident in the expansion of hospitality services, including hotels and restaurants, as well as the rise of night markets and entertainment venues. These developments mirror Regmi's (2019) observations that tourism infrastructure often acts as a catalyst for urban diversification and the creation of new entrepreneurial opportunities.

Nevertheless, the study also brings attention to challenges that echo concerns documented in previous research. Environmental pressures—such as increased waste production and traffic congestion—have surfaced alongside rising visitation. Additionally, maintaining cultural sensitivity around sacred sites like the Kamakhya Devi Temple remains essential, as unchecked commercialisation risks undermining spiritual authenticity, a concern similarly raised in studies of the Chandragiri Cable Car.

Moreover, while the infrastructure is technically strong and works well, its long-term success depends on regular maintenance, responsible environmental care, and active involvement of the local community. Stakeholders must avoid focusing only on short-term profits and ensure that cultural heritage and the environment are protected.

Overall, the Lumbini Cable Car shows how well-planned infrastructure, along with sustainable policies and strong local involvement, can promote inclusive tourism growth. It serves as a useful example for other mid-sized cities in Nepal aiming to use focused investments to develop their tourism potential.

CONCLUSION

The Lumbini Cable Car has emerged as a transformative infrastructure project within the Rupandehi and Palpa districts, positioning Butwal at the heart of this regional tourism evolution. Since its inauguration in 2023, it has redefined Butwal's role on the tourism map of Lumbini Province—transitioning the city from a transit hub to a vibrant destination offering a unique combination of religious, recreational, and scenic attractions. The project has significantly improved access to the Kamakhya Devi Temple and surrounding natural landscapes, while simultaneously driving substantial economic growth across the hospitality, transport, and retail sectors.

This study reveals that the cable car has played a key role in increasing both domestic and international tourist arrivals, with a particularly notable impact on Indian cross-border visitors. The growth in hotels, dining establishments, and entertainment options, alongside enhanced employment opportunities, underscores the maturation of Butwal's tourism ecosystem. Moreover, the project's commitment to safety, accessibility, and environmental responsibility presents a promising framework for tourism infrastructure development in emerging urban centres.

However, the research also points out important challenges. The increase in tourism has raised concerns about the environment, the risk of turning culture into a commercial product, and the urgent need for sustainable management. Taking early and careful actions will be essential to protect the long-term benefits of the cable car while making sure development includes everyone, respects local culture, and is good for the environment.

In summary, the Lumbini Cable Car shows how well-planned infrastructure investments, based on sustainability and community involvement, can strongly boost regional tourism growth.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Drawing on the study's findings and discussions, the following recommendations are proposed to support the long-term sustainability and success of the Lumbini Cable Car and the broader tourism ecosystem in Butwal:

Strengthen Waste and Environmental Management

- Enforce comprehensive waste management systems, particularly around cable car terminals and pilgrimage sites, to minimise environmental impact.
- Launch educational campaigns to promote responsible tourism practices among visitors.

Preserve Cultural and Religious Integrity

- Establish clear guidelines governing visitor behaviour at sacred locations such as the Kamakhya Devi Temple to preserve their cultural importance.
- Engage local religious authorities and cultural experts in the planning and management of tourism activities.

Support Local Enterprises and Communities

- Offer training programs and financial assistance to small businesses, tour guides, and vendors to enhance service quality and competitiveness.
- Encourage community-based tourism projects that share economic benefits fairly among local people.

Diversify Tourism Offerings

- Highlight and develop nearby attractions like Jitgadhi Fort, Siddhababa, and the Ramapithecus archaeological site to encourage longer visitor stays.
- Create integrated tourism packages and circuits that combine spiritual experiences with eco-tourism opportunities.

Enhance Infrastructure and Visitor Services

- Improve public transportation and road connectivity to ensure easy access to the cable car stations.
- Upgrade signage, establish well-equipped tourist information centres, and optimise digital booking platforms to enhance visitor convenience.

Implement Regular Monitoring and Impact Assessments

- Conduct periodic evaluations of environmental, social, and economic impacts to guide adaptive management.
- Adjust operational strategies based on empirical data and community input to maintain sustainable development.

By adopting these measures, stakeholders—including governmental agencies, private sector participants, and local communities—can ensure that the Lumbini Cable Car remains a benchmark for balanced and sustainable tourism development in Nepal.

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