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*Happy
Holidays*

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Small-scale "holiday-style" DXpeditions are growing in popularity, but they still require a lot of advance planning and preparation. WB2REM and K5PA offer a roadmap...

So You Want to Go on a DXpedition?

Let's Plan Your Adventure

BY JIM MILLNER, * WB2REM AND GENE HINKLE, # K5PA

Have you ever thought about going on a DXpedition to an exotic or remote part of the world but did not know what to do first? Do you have the calling for working big pileups? Are you a technical person who enjoys setting up equipment and antennas from scratch, solving problems on the spot, and creating a working amateur radio station where there is nothing in place? If your answer is yes, then this article is for you.

Arranging a DXpedition from scratch can be a complex endeavor that includes securing transportation and lodging,

choosing team members, and transporting radios, antennas, computers, generators, and fuel. This article will concentrate on DXpeditions that the regular ham radio operator can experience. One warning: Do not do what WB2REM did and bring the radio on your honeymoon! He is still hearing about it 41 years later.

Why Do Hams Go On DXpeditions?

On top of my list is to provide the opportunity for others to contact a new country. The harder it is to go to a place, the greater the need for that entity. A prime example is North Korea, where political barriers make it impossible to get licensed and operate. Club Log keeps a list of the most want-

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Photo A. There are many reasons to enjoy a DXpedition. In these photos, Mark Bevan, WY1G, is visiting Cuba. (WB2REM photo)



Photo B. Hard case luggage protects the critical radio gear during travel. (K5PA photos)

ed DX entities.¹ The most-wanted DXCC list has North Korea as the most wanted entity and the U.S. as the least. In general, the rarer the country, the bigger the pileups you will experience on both ends of the contact.

The DXpeditions that intrigue us include those where you can explore the environment around you (*Photo A*). There is a way to mix the fun of operating a DXpedition with the pleasure of relaxing during your off-hours. On previous DXpeditions, WB2REM climbed a volcano, swam with sharks, sea lions, and marine iguanas, snorkeled and scuba-dived, and drank his fair share of local beverages.

What Kind of DXpedition Will You Go On?

We divide DXpeditions into three groups. The first type is the holiday style, which may include one or more operators. Holiday-style DXpeditions involve traveling to easily reached places where people normally go on their vacation. Traveling from the U.S., these include places like the Bahamas, Jamaica, Hawaii, or similar locations. These DXpeditions may also involve bringing a spouse and/or children, and radio operations may occur on a limited schedule as time permits. There are already existing holiday locations with fully equipped ham shacks, which just require getting a local ham license prior to radio operation.²

The second type of DXpedition is the single or multi-operator(s) who travel to semi-rare locations, such as Easter, Canary, or Galapagos Islands and operate with the sole purpose of logging as many contacts as possible. In most cases, this involves a small group of hams who operate the radio stations over the full operating period, both day and night.

The third type is major DXpeditions involving multiple operators who travel to difficult and rare DX entities and require a year or more of planning. These major DXpeditions are very expensive and may be self-funded with additional support from commercial sponsors, DX clubs, and private ham radio

operators. They are difficult to organize, time-consuming, extremely expensive, and require highly skilled operators with extensive equipment, training, and support. We will not consider this type for your first DXpedition.

Planning Your DXpedition

To help with DXpedition planning, *DX University* and *INDEXA* produced an excellent video called “DXpedition Planning,” which gives three steps in the planning process.³ The steps are: Selecting a location based on multiple factors, looking at the supporting infrastructure, and selecting your team. *Table 1* gives many of the steps to help with the planning.

First, study the Club Log DXCC list and search for locations that might be of interest. What becomes apparent is that countries ranked from 1 to 100 are extremely difficult to reach. Surprisingly, number 132, the British Virgin Islands (BVI), is relatively rare. The British Virgin Islands are approximately 1,100 miles from Miami, Florida and 1,600 miles from New York City. Given this relatively short distance, the islands’ sizeable population and tourist trade, one would expect it would be easy to reach by airline. So, let us consider BVI as your destination for the following discussions.

As locations are considered, determine what the propagation might be like during your trip. If it is the top of the sunspot cycle, conditions may be good all year round. If operating north or south of the equator, VHF and HF conditions may vary. For BVI, the Caribbean tends to be a suitable location for holiday-style DXpeditions because it is easy to reach and has relatively good radio propagation year-round.

For the British Virgin Islands, check on the difficulty of obtaining a radio operator’s license and if there is a reciprocal licensing agreement. Is it possible to obtain a VP2V call-sign, or do you have to operate portable using your own home call? The authors have a personal preference to operate using the country-issued call-sign to readily identify the country by the call-sign and shorten the characters in the call, which

PHASE	TOPIC	COMMENTS
Pre-trip	Where to go	DXCC list, ease of traveling
	When to go	Time of year, propagation, low-season saves money
	Licensing	Reciprocal licensing vs. country assigned callsign
	Infrastructure	Transportation, suitable lodging, equipment, access
	Travel/medical insurance	Protect your financial investment; canceling
	Select leader and team	Can lead decision making, team player, all team players
	Team attributes	Skill levels to perform tasks
	Announcements, QSL ordering, Club Log	Let ham community know your plans, sponsors
During	Execute your plan	Getting there, operating, enjoy the adventure
Returning	Confirming Contacts	Send QSL cards and confirmations promptly
	Good and the Bad	Group discussion to learn from the adventure

Table 1. Developing your plan (Table by K5PA)

is important for CW, SSB voice, and data modes. But policies vary from country to country.

The U.S. does have reciprocal licensing with the BVI through its bilateral treaty with the United Kingdom, which extends to BVI. After researching their licensing agency for this article, a reference was found to the Telecommunications Regulatory Commission, specifically to Mr. Darren Woodley <dwoodley@trc.vg>. We emailed him, and he was extremely helpful in providing additional licensing information. However, the contact information was different than that listed in the ARRL reciprocal licensing page. Therefore, it is necessary to verify the information since contact and agency information can rapidly change in different countries.

A helpful hint is to search the web for other hams who have visited the country under consideration and email them to see how they secured their licenses. Once the licensing agency is located, request their procedures to obtain a license. In the case of the British Virgin Islands, they emailed an application in PDF format. Usually, the licensing agencies require a copy of your “home” amateur radio license, passport, and application fee. In addition, the British Virgin Islands will only issue a VP2V+2 letters callsign (ex., VP2VAA) to be used in contests and special events. Otherwise, you must use VP2V/your-home-callsign (e.g., VP2V/K5PA).

Determine the Infrastructure

Look at the available infrastructure needed to complete the expedition. The infrastructure consists of transportation, mobilization of equipment and antennas, availability of housing, food, and access to supplies when on location.

It is prudent to consider high and low seasons when considering a resort island to find the best accommodations at the lowest prices. But, of course, there are many other constraints, such as the personal interests of team members, work conflicts, and family considerations.

June is a good month to travel to the Caribbean. This is just before the hurricane season and a time of lower tourist accommodations and travel rates. Therefore, a choice might be to go to Virgin Gorda (a small island near the main island of Tortola, BVI) because of its low population density, beautiful scenery, and picturesque beaches. Both the HF bands and 6 meters can be operated with the possibility of participating in the ARRL June VHF contest. This is not in the main international contesting periods, so it may offer a more relaxing, holiday-style ham adventure.

In researching the travel itinerary, it is easiest and most economical route is to fly to St. Thomas in the U.S. Virgin Islands. There are many flights, including non-stops or transfers to St. Thomas from both New York and Miami. It’s imperative to have direct flights, when possible, to avoid the transfer of luggage and equipment for connections. However, in the case of the British Virgin Islands, we will also have to obtain transportation to the seaport and take a ferry boat to Virgin Gorda.

In the British Virgin Islands, all equipment taken into the country must clear their customs. Therefore, it is essential to make an itemized list of the gear brought into the country. This list should include the make, model, serial number, and value of each piece of electronics. Equipment brought into the country must be taken out at the end of the DXpedition. Custom officers will review the gear being brought out against the manifest they retained when you entered the country and will charge an import tax fee for missing gear.

A decision needs to be made on how many people can be accommodated at a potential DXpedition location. One of the easiest ways of locating accommodation is to go to the Airbnb site.⁴ There, you will find many one-to-four-bedroom homes, some located on the water and others in the hills and valleys. Whichever you choose, it is necessary to make sure your host understands the purpose of the trip and the need to set up antennas and radio equipment. We prefer to allow one bedroom per operator, although this is a personal preference. When choosing the house, carefully pick one that could be beneficial to the direction of the radio transmissions that are desired. Make sure that nothing obstructs the transmissions, such as mountains, hills, or manmade structures. For the purposes of discussion, let’s assume that a four-bedroom house has been chosen that is located on a beach. The number of days of operation needs to be determined and availability of the house confirmed.

Another important component of traveling is to protect your financial investment. There are insurance companies that offer “cancel for any reason” travel insurance. They will usually refund 75% of the non-refundable costs for “any reason” and 100% of the amount you insured if there’s sickness of even just one team member of the group listed on the policy. It also pays for the insured to be airlifted out of the country for medical reasons. Some countries may even require that you have travel insurance before entering. We have used Seven Corners Insurance.⁵ Another travel insurance resource for “cancel for any reason” insurance companies

can be found in the referenced "Forbes" magazine article.⁶

The weight of the equipment must also be considered. Most airlines allow for one carry-on suitcase, a personal bag placed under the seat, and one to two checked luggage with a limit of 52 lbs. each (this may vary between airlines). It is advantageous to purchase an SBG airline cabin-approved hard-shell case with padding, or similar, to carry the radio and power supply on the plane. *Photo B* shows how to use the SBG airline luggage to your advantage for transporting the radio equipment. An antenna such as a portable hex beam can be stowed in the plane using an SBG hard shell golf case or equivalent. Most of the time, this incurs an additional payment. Medicine, a laptop and other fragile gear can be placed under the seat in the carry-on bag.

The electrical system used in the destination country needs to be investigated and appropriate adapters purchased. Fortunately for us, the British Virgin Islands uses the same electrical system convention as the U.S.

Selecting Your Team

If more than one operator will be making the trip, a team leader needs to be chosen and DX team members selected. The selection of the team should be based on the skill level of operators, such as the ability to operate high-speed CW (25-35 WPM), rapid-rate SSB operation, specific technical skills (set up equipment, antennas, software), problem solving, and prior DXpedition experience. Operators also need to display the ability to get along with each other. It does not hurt to have a least one team member who is a good cook!

There needs to be a discussion about where the team will meet and/or proceed individually to the destination. Much of the pre-DXpedition meetings can be arranged through virtual meetings (e.g., Zoom) and spreadsheets created and shared to track the equipment and expenses. The team needs to settle on what logging software will be used and to ensure all the team members are familiar with it prior to the DXpedition. Also, the logging programs may need to be networked or used stand-alone. In this case, it is helpful to have one of the members familiar with networking and servicing computers.

Now that the DXCC entity, team, equipment, and operational dates have been chosen, it is important to determine who will transport each piece of apparatus. It is vital that no one person carries more equipment than another.

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DX Call Sign & Location



Home Address

Initials of Issuer

QSL CARD BACK

Photo C. An attractive QSL design is critical for confirming the contact. (K5PA photo)

Once the actual costs of lodging, food, transportation, and equipment are calculated, the expenses should be split prior to the DXpedition.

Notifying the Ham Community Prior to the DXpedition

One of the most important tasks is to notify the amateur community of the upcoming DXpedition. This will let the hams know about the DXpedition well in advance of the operation. Included in the notification should be the location of the DXpedition, dates, operational frequencies, modes, and QSL route. A notice should be generated with the above information and sent to some of the following sources: DX News, Daily DX, DX World, OPDX Bulletin, and the ARRL DX Bulletin.⁷⁻¹¹

We advise getting your QSL cards printed in advance of the DXpedition, so there is little delay and backlog in responding to requests. When selecting the graphics for your card, there are many stock pictures available online of the DXpedition location that can be used with the permission of the photographer or representing agency. *Photo C* shows some of the important features to consider as you design your card. One of the best and most economical QSL card printers is Gennady, UX5UO QSL service.¹²

Next, the DXpedition QRZ page needs to be set up. It should list the DXpedition mission, operating frequencies, team members, and QSL information. It is advisable to apply for Logbook of the World (LoTW) certification and a Club Log account prior to the DXpedition so that QSL cards can be requested online as the operation progresses. This will also give the stations working the DXpedition the ability to check the log for QSOs. Some logging software will automatically upload the contacts to the different sites if you have good internet connectivity.

It is also advisable to assign a ham who is not going on the DXpedition the task of responding to all emails sent during the operation. A log should periodically be uploaded to him/her, so he/she can answer QSO-related questions.

Finally, look for sponsors who might help provide equipment support in return for listing them on your QRZ page,

DXpedition webpage, or your personal website. The more important the DXpedition, the more exposure the sponsors will get for their product. It is not uncommon to have transceivers, amplifiers, and antennas loaned to the DXpedition in return for exposure.

After the DXpedition

During the DXpedition or after the event, ensure that all logs are submitted to Club Log, QRZ, and LoTW. The QSL manager should promptly respond to QSO inquiries and answer QSL cards that have been received. The DXpedition team should schedule a meeting after the DXpedition to review what went right and wrong and suggest how things can be improved for the next DXpedition.

Summary

Whether you are going on a holiday (vacation) style operation or very rare major DXCC DXpedition, it takes considerable planning, time, and financial investment. It requires studying propagation, investigating where to go, how to get there, obtaining a license, and more. Choosing a cohesive team with varied skills must thoughtfully be done with many things to consider. Mobilizing equipment, determining transportation routes, lodging, and food can be complicated and costly. After all is said and done, when you have accomplished all the above and sit down to your first huge pileup, you will know that it was all worth it!

Notes:

1. <<https://clublog.org/mostwanted.php>>
2. <www.dxzone.com/catalog/DX_Resources/Shack_Rental>
3. <<https://tinyurl.com/3jnv3ehv>>
4. <www.airbnb.com>
5. <www.sevencorners.com>
6. <<https://tinyurl.com/3wuumxyu>>
7. <www.dxnews.com>
8. <www.dailydx.com>
9. <www.dx-world.net>
10. <www.papays.com/opdx.html>
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12. <www.ux5uoqsl.com>