

A52G, a great experience



In the late 1970s, I had a QSO with Pradhan (A51PN), which initiated a series of written correspondences in the absence of email or internet. My interest in Bhutan, with its rich culture yet relative inaccessibility to tourists, began at this time. However, it was not until forty-five years later that I was able to visit Bhutan in person.

Mode	EU	US	US-East	US-West
CW	95	28	32	33
SSB	120	47	55	50
Digi	134	62	65	69

Figure 1 - Noth America high in the Most Wanted List

To prepare for my DXpedition, I consulted Yanusz (SP9FIH), who had previously undertaken radio operations in Bhutan. He generously provided practical information regarding his stay and additional recommendations. With this insight, I worked closely with a travel agent to finalize arrangements. Once the timeframe was established, I collaborated with Ugyen from Zhidey Bhutan Tours & Treks, who efficiently coordinated visa procurement, hotel reservations, flights, and the radio license.

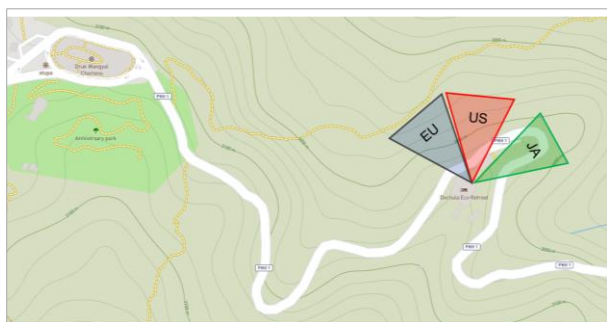
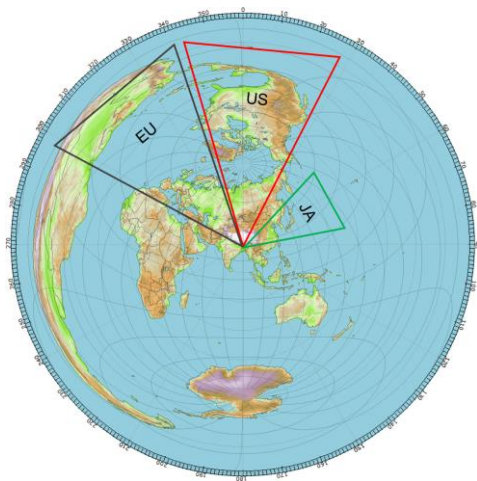


Figure 2 - Free radiation towards EU, US and JA

The selected hotel was situated near Dochula Pass, 3,100 meters above sea level, offering optimal transmission conditions across the Himalayan range to North America and Europe, and permitting unrestricted antenna installation. Visitors to Bhutan are subject to a USD 100 daily sustainable development fee and must be accompanied by a guide, including arrangements for transportation. All visa and license formalities were completed without difficulty.

My journey commenced with a flight from Amsterdam to Dubai, followed by Drukair from Dubai to Paro. Landing at Paro Airport is renowned for its challenging approach between mountains, navigable only by specially trained pilots—a process well-documented on YouTube. Upon arrival, I purchased a local SIM card, ensuring consistent internet connectivity throughout my stay given concerns about hotel Wi-Fi reliability.

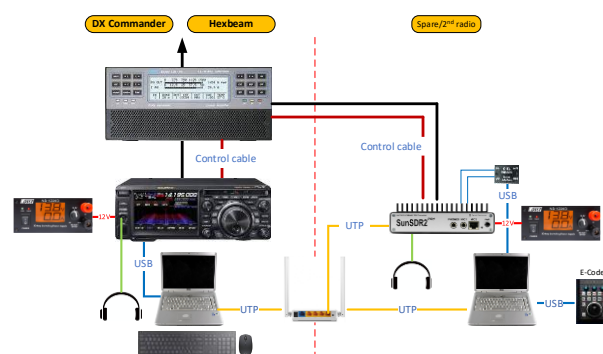


Figure 3 - Station setup, now with my new FTDX10

Preparation for antenna installation involved extensive communication with Ugyen regarding suitable mast materials for the Hexbeam antenna. Though initial options were inadequate in diameter, we sourced a compatible tube at a hardware shop in Thimphu during our transit from the airport. Upon reaching the hotel, site limitations necessitated use of only the terrace at the hotel front for antenna setup due to ongoing construction.

Assembly of the DX Commander antenna proceeded smoothly prior to nightfall, allowing for immediate operation. The station was established in my room, where sufficient workspace existed. Despite fatigue from travel, I commenced operations after sundown, making my first QSO with 9A2DS on 30m on September 30 at 17:29 UTC.



Figure 4 - The Hexbeam and DX Commander on the terrace in front of the hotel. This view is towards Japan

The following morning, I assembled the Hexbeam antenna with substantial support from Ugyen, especially in mounting and securing the mast. Outdoor setup concluded, I shifted focus to radio operations. Propagation conditions were initially poor, but improved over subsequent days, resulting in successful pileups—particularly with Japanese stations. Contact with the East Coast of the United States was challenging due to the trans-polar path, with opportunities typically arising around 06:00 local time on 20 meters. Signals exhibited characteristic flutter, with openings lasting approximately 1–1.5 hours. The expedition concluded with extended activity into Europe on 10 meters. While I operated without geographic preference, the majority of QSOs were with European stations. The final QSO occurred with RZ3DJ on October 8 at 11:19 UTC on 10 meters.



Figure 5 - My comfortable operating position

During my stay, the hotel was undergoing complete renovation, and I was the sole guest. Meals were served on a set schedule, and I negotiated menu options with the staff. Beverage availability was limited; however, coffee and tea facilities were provided in-room. Due to the hotel's isolation, procuring additional supplies was impractical. Heating was traditionally via wood stoves, though electric heating was available in my room.



Figure 6 - The Tshechu festival on the Tashichho Dzong square

On October 3, I visited Thimphu with Ugyen, coinciding with the annual Thimphu Tshechu festival at Tashichho Dzong. This cultural event, attended by thousands in traditional attire, was a highlight of the trip. During my visit to Punakha, I toured the historic Punakha Dzong also known as Pungthang Dewa chhenbi Phodrang (meaning "the palace of great happiness or bliss"), constructed between 1637 and 1638 and second oldest and second largest dzong of Bhutan. The Punakha Dzong is depicted on my QSL card.



Figure 7 - Tshering A51DX in his shack at Paro

On October 7, I met Tshering Tashi (A51DX), an enthusiastic amateur operator recently licensed and eager to expand into HF bands and CW. Our discussion was engaging and productive. That day, Ugyen departed due to a family bereavement, and Sonam assumed guiding responsibilities.



Figure 8 - My guides Ugyen and Sonam

Anticipating rain, I began dismantling antennas on October 8 to avoid damage. Equipment was systematically packed, and, on October 9, we travelled to Paro for sightseeing. In the afternoon I was picked up by Tsering to visit his house in the mountains. We discussed how he could install an antenna for the HF bands. I gave him my 30 meters long ExtraFlex bury 7 coax, to be used for his future HF antenna and gave him also a small multimeter.

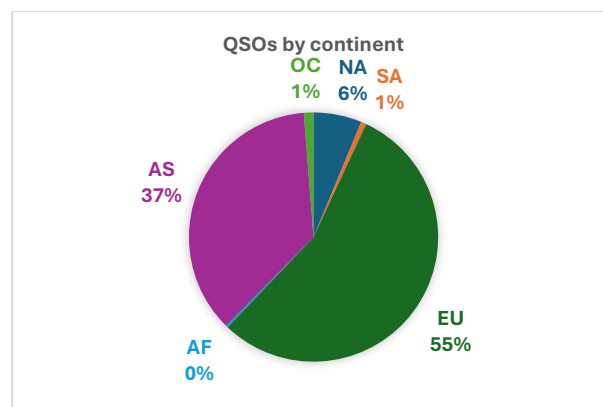
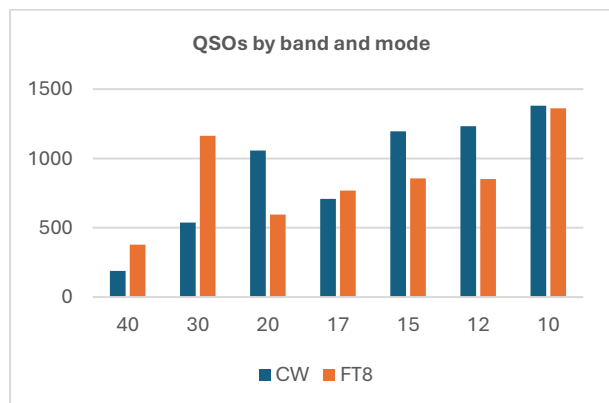
I'm currently preparing a 10/(15)/20/40 EndFed antenna for him which I will mail to him in the coming days. With that he should be able to make his entry into our Ham world. Tsering is also interested to establish a kind of club station that can be used by other interested Bhutanese radio enthusiasts.

After an overnight stay in Paro and a smooth check-out process, I departed Bhutan via Dubai, returning to Amsterdam following an eleven-hour layover.

Results

Operations covered 40–10 meters using CW and FT8 modes. Because both antennas were close together on the terrace, which prevented running two radios simultaneously. The noise level was extremely low which allowed me to work pile ups with very low signal strength, sometimes just about the noise level.

Despite variable propagation and early inclement weather, I logged 12,278 QSOs, exceeding my target of 10,000. Later in the expedition, both propagation and weather conditions improved, providing clear views of the Himalayas, having good weather conditions during my trips to Thimphu, Punakha and Paro and great operating conditions.



I sincerely thank my sponsors for once again supporting me. With their commitment and help I can recover part of the costs.



Furthermore, I like to thank the individuals who made their donations upfront.

My QSL Manager is again Charles M00XO. Please request your QSL via <https://www.m00xo.com/oqrs/>.



73, Gerben – PG5M