

PJ7PK – Pelikan Key, NA-247 NEW IOTA

Dave EI9FBB

“ELEVEN NEW IOTA GROUPS were announced at IOTA’s 50th Anniversary Convention, held in Windsor, England over the weekend 4 to 6 July 2014. All new groups have provisional numbers. This means that they will need to be confirmed by an operation taking place after 5 July 2014 that meets the 1000 QSO and other normal validation requirements. Most of the new groups have not seen a previous amateur radio operation. “

The above has been taken directly from the pages of the IOTA website. Some of these 11 new IOTA groups were introduced as a result from the rule changes announced in the latest IOTA Directory, published in May 2014. The others.....well just read on and see. The NA-247 group was added as a new coastal islands group of a split sovereignty island. Dutch Sint Maarten (PJ7) & French Saint Martin (FS) are both very different and independent of each other. These islands were not previously shown on a 1:1,000,000 scale map but now qualify from being shown and named on Google Earth in the same way that the coastal islands of St Martin FS count (NA-199). Thus, the new **Sint Maarten’s coastal islands group** was born. There are 2 islands that qualify for this group. Molly Beday and Guana Key of Pelikan aka Pelikan Key. The latter was the obvious choice for us to try to activate. Sure, it was going to be tough, we knew that, but it was still going to be a lot easier than Molly.



Pelican Key

Col, MM0NDX was the brains behind this, and to be fair, did Trojan work behind the scenes. When activating a brand new IOTA, one has no resources, no past experiences to call on. We had no one to ask for help and no one to advise us either. No one had done this before. You could say, we were almost in the blind. This rock is barely known even on a local level. The

Local Sint Maarteniens don’t even land there. 4 photos were all we had in hand along with blurry Google maps imagery. Still though, this didn’t deter us and after concrete plans were in place, the team was formed; Dom 3Z9DX, Dave EI9FBB, Jeremy EI5GM, Frans J69DS & Col MM0NDX. Each team member played an important part, and each had their responsibilities. Sure, there were the odd cultural clash and difference of opinion, but together, we all had the same aim, to activate this rock for the first time.

Activating a brand new IOTA group was going to be fun, great fun, almost like activating a brand new DXCC entity. For the IOTA community, that’s what it is, a brand new entity, and once word got out of our intentions, great interest soon followed. To do this, was going to take blood, sweat and tears. I’m not exaggerating! A lot of thought had to go into this project in order to try meet the demands. Imagine a rock, with steep jagged sides jutting up out of the ocean, intimidating us and practically warning us off. It seemed that right from the start this operation was doomed.

Frans, our local...(ish) contact dealt with the relevant licencing authorities to secure our licence. Sure, Sint Maarten is in CEPT agreement, however, to mark this special activation, we thought the callsign **PJ7 Pelican Key** was worthy, worthwhile and justified. Copies of our individual licences and passports were forwarded and the straightforward application process began. Dates agreed, flights booked, stations prepared and most importantly, we had a fool proof plan in mind (or did we)?

The only way to do this was to have a boat anchored nearby this blessed rock. This would be our base, our home, and our means of commuting to and from the rock. Looking at Google maps can be very deceiving (as we learnt) and what looked like just a few hundred meters, actually turned out to be several nautical miles. Sure, point to point is just a few hundred meters offshore, but this is to a steep cliff face on the mainland, no use whatsoever for launching a boat. We were infact a little over 3 nautical miles from the marina, our departure point. Several quotations later and we had decided on a 6 berth yacht was adequate for this job. We now had an approximate budget in hand and could now try to request some sponsorship. Dom, 3Z9DX is a well experienced skipper and has all the relevant papers to captain his own boat, yacht etc...even oil tanker! We were not fussy about what type of boat we got, once it did the job. The problem was, we did not know the job, we hadn’t seen the rock and therefore was always going

to be unsure of our specific requirements. This is where Dom's experience shone through. He felt responsible for all our safety and needed to be 110% certain of our needs and requirements. Simpson Bay, Philipsburg, has to be one of the most 'flushest' marinas in the world. Hundreds of Cruise ships visit here each season. There are many marinas overflowing with yachts and pleasure boats of all types, from the small jet ski right up to the largest of super yachts belonging to the rich and famous. It was out of season, and from browsing several of the many charter websites, there were boats abundant. We all agreed it made perfect sense to try get the boats that suited our needs exactly. To do this we would first have to evaluate the situation at Pelikan, do a recce, and then get the required boats – we needed two! There was always the hopeful too of getting a good cash deal.



Generators were another issue. As the 3 main stations were all coming from Europe, we needed 220 volt generators. Sint Maarten is 110 volt, 60Hz supply, however, as luck would have it, the French side, Saint Martin, use 220 volts, but also 60 Hz supply. Was this going to be an issue for our 50Hz PSUs? We hoped not. Two of these would be needed to do what we wanted to do. By having a second one also meant we had a back-up in case one failed. Renting these was not an option. A huge deposit was needed along with a hefty daily rental fee. Thankfully, Frans has family in Philipsburg and they would try to source these at a 'local level'.

I guess we were all guilty of over planning. A lot of preparation, research, etc went into this project. Stations were set up, logging programmes checked, antennas built and tested and only when we were satisfied that everything was 100% in order, it got packed away. Packing is becoming quite a challenge in DXpeditioning as of late. Protective padded hard plastic waterproof cases are essential to do what we were doing. These are heavy though and don't be long using up one's minimal airline baggage allowance. We all got hit with these excess baggage charges. At an estimate, over \$400 in excess baggage charges were paid. Still though, everything arrived on the day and everything was in perfect condition.

Col and Frans arrived on the Saturday, the day before the rest of us. It was the plan for them to round up some

possible boats and to secure the generators. Sure, there was a lot of other equipment that needed to be bought locally, but this could be done when the whole team was together. Worries over the current Air France strike were thankfully resolved just prior to Col's departure from Paris. Frans' flights were delayed though and as a result the duo didn't meet up until later that evening (after dark). It was too late to do anything that day. Jeremy and I both arrived on the Sunday morning (from Amsterdam) moments after Dom's flight touched down from Panama. He was arriving from Brazil and transited through there. Arrangements had been made to land all our baggage at the same hotel that Col and Frans had used on the previous night. We didn't need a hotel, we were getting a boat for our accomadation-remember?

Bags dropped, a quick freshen up and off out again with Frans' nephew to go boat hunting. Several marinas were visited that day, on both sides, French and Dutch, all to no avail. Some were closed, but those that were open had some lovely boats available. Some of these would have been ideal, and were within our budget. However, once we started getting serious and showing them the green, no one wanted anything to do with us. They all had a system, and what we were doing was not part of the system. Imagine handing someone a wad of cash and them not wanting it? That's what was happening here. The only way to get one of these boats was to go on-line, book it and pay for it on-line. The charter company (middleman) would then have to make the bank transfer (after taking his cut) to the boat owner who would give his permission. The boat would then be serviced and cleaned and might be ready by the end of the week. It was impossible to get a boat on the spot. This was a big blow to us as we had been so sure and so certain of this. This caused a delay and pushed us a day behind. Monday came and we woke to hear that a 'friend of a friend' had a boat that could take us. A breakthrough. We couldn't even finish our breakfast as our ride was already outside to bring us to the marina. There we viewed a boat, two boats in fact, and although a little grubby and had a lot of hours on the clock, was found to be adequate. Either one of them would have done, so after negotiating a price, the owner said he would come with us to take it out for the first hour or so. During this hour we decided to go to Pelikan and get the recce trip done. All of us on board and as we started to leave the bay, the engine overheated causing us to pull over onto a nearby jetty. This boat, we discovered, hadn't been used very much in recent months. The skipper actually lived in this boat and it was the other boat that he used often. We had chosen the wrong boat. At least though, we knew where there was a second boat and so, soon we were on route to switch boats.

This other boat was a diesel engine boat, and started first pick of the key. Again, as we pulled out of the harbour area, the skipper gave it a little more throttle and boy, was she blowing smoke. Serious smoke. Thick black smoke in fact. We continued in the hopes that it would clear up. It didn't. Reducing power eased things a little, not much, but a little.



We were just around the headland from Pelikan when he recommended it was too risky for us to hit the open sea with this boat. We turned around and headed back to shore and stayed within the safety of the harbour. This had taken up most of the morning and we were now, back to square one. Still no boat. We had to go searching again. So much to do and time was against us. To cover more ground, we decided to split up. Frans went to collect the PJ7PK licence while the rest of us decided it was vital to get an actual visual on the rock that was causing us all this grief. So back to the marina where we had earlier seen a sign for private boat charter. We went in and told them in detail what we wanted. To be fair, everyone there tried their hardest to source us a boat, they were getting the same results as us. However, they did have their own big rib that could be hired. Expensive? Yes, and we had to use their captain! This was a serious rib, had twin 400 HP Yamahas on the back of it and they used it for private hire for Cruise ship passengers. Every second day a cruise ship/ships come but...guess what...today there was none. The boat was idle. They WERE willing to take us out to Pelikan and at least the recce trip could be done. This rib was well able to move and in less than an hour, we had been to Pelikan, circled it several times, photographed it, identified a possible landing spot and came back. A new plan came into action, and as 2 boats were needed (one to bring us out and another small one to get in close to the rocks) it was decided to use a small rib that Frans' nephew had, and, Pierre was more than happy to take us out again in the big rib.

This local company proved to be invaluable and this skipper (Pierre) was a godsend. He had the local knowledge that we needed, knew the places to bring us, where to source the right equipment. In fact, that day alone we sourced everything that we needed for the

DXpedition. We bought 2 generators, fuel cans, extension leads, tables, chairs, foodstuffs, liquids, hic! fans, lights and much much more. He even arranged for it all to be delivered to the marina and to load it onto the big rib ready for departure a few hours from now. Dom had already left to meet with Frans and nephew to collect the small rib. Finally, it was all coming together! Col, Jeremy and I waited with Pierre for Dom and Frans to arrive but.....several hours went by and we feared the worst. The small rib had broken down and Frans and Dom were waiting to be rescued. Pelikan was not going to happen today either. Pushed back again by another day. The problem we now had was that Pierre was not available the following day to help us. It was cruise ship day and Philipsburg was to be a very different place.

That night, I don't think any of us slept. There was a severe lightning storm and torrential rain. It is hurricane season after all. Our minds were already in overdrive thinking of possible ways to execute this DXpedition. Subconsciously though, we were all glad NOT to have been out in it, and stuck on that rock!

This previous boat that we had looked at was now the only possible option. If we were to do this, this was our last hope. We were assured that the problems were now sorted and it *would* be able for the trip. It was now or never. We loaded up this boat the following morning and with Dom and Frans in tow behind in the small rib, we headed out of Simpson Bay and headed towards Pelikan. We made progress, good progress, almost too good to be true. Pelikan was now in sight and the closer we came, the more determined we all were to make this happen. We slowed right down next to this rock, and the local guys turned to us and asked, are you sure this is the place? Why would anyone want to overnight here? You white guys are crazy! For now though, we had more serious business to be dealing with. The proposed landing spot that we had identified the previous day was now under almost 2 meters of swell, and was now impossible to land here. The risk of bursting the small rib was too high to even attempt. Again, Dom's experience shown and an alternative spot was a possible option. This would be tricky though as it would need very fast manoeuvring of the rib, to and fro, almost like a dance. There was a 10 foot gap between two sharp jagged rocks, and this is when Jeremy, dived into the sea and swam ashore. He was the first man to land, followed by Frans who was equally as crazy. Dom returned to the big rib and got that skipper to bring him ashore. Ashore is a very pleasant word, but let me assure you that it was anything but pleasant. We had been warned, to use protective footwear at all times. Poisonous sea urchins are abundant here and if you step on one, it's needles will pierce the sole of your foot and the result is...well, not nice to say the least. The first

rock you land on is at a 45 degree slope, is wet and is covered in seaweed. You must try to take a giant step from here and onto a more level rock, but also covered in seaweed. It takes a few of these giant steps before one can actually begin to feel a little grip. The risk of falling is extremely high. If you fall and do yourself an injury, it will be very difficult for you to be rescued. The landing is difficult even with all your faculties; imagine trying to take someone off! Still though, three of our men were now on the rock. They surveyed the rock in great detail, left, right, up and down, all looking for an easier landing spot. There was none. The three of them all shook their heads and all agreed that there was no way possible to land all 5 guys and equipment. It was certain that someone or something would end up in the deep waters. Frans was the first one off the island and came back to inform both Col and I of their findings. It was not going to happen. The skipper was now anxious to leave and was under pressure to go. So near and yet so far. At that very moment, Col realised that the hardest bit was actually already done. Two guys were already safe on the rock. This could be the turning point of the DXpedition. If only we had one complete station to hand them, so they could at least make the minimum required 1000 QSOs.



I was very conscious of my baggage allowance and how things were packed. I had repacked my case earlier that morning to have one complete station ready in one case. Frans reminded us of the risks involved and thought it very likely that it would end up on the sea bed. After hearing that, I suggested to try landing the generator first. If we could do this, we could land other equipment. If we couldn't land it or if it fell, nothing lost as without a generator we couldn't be QRV anyway. We decided to give it a go. At this stage, Dom and Jeremy were waiting to be collected and to be brought back. Instead they were been thrown a generator and told to take this quickly. Moments later, the generator was on the rock, Dom and Jeremy still dumbstruck. What was happening? It's going ahead, that's what's happening. Frans went backwards and forwards many times that afternoon, handing equipment to Dom and from Dom to Jeremy. It had been 30 years previous when Frans was used to manoeuvring ribs like this. He must have

been good at it in his day because this day, he was excellent, driven with precision. The rib kept bobbing up and down, in and out in the swell and somehow, he avoided grounding it. One sudden movement or jerk and something would have ended up in the sea for sure. Meanwhile Col and I were busy getting another complete station together. Yes, it was still going to be a compromise but...two stations are better than one! We knew at this stage that the complete team could not land. We needed a ground crew, this is something that we hadn't thought about. If all 5 of us had been on the rock, there was no-one to organise a way to get us off. Col volunteered to stay behind along with Frans, who would drive the rib back to the mainland – he had already demonstrated his driving skills. We also needed someone competent enough to come back out again in case of emergency and to come to recover us. I was the last person to get onto that rib and to go ashore onto that cursed rock. As Jeremy, Dom and I watched Frans and Col disappear into the horizon, we immediately began the station set-up. We were alone, very alone and isolated. We had everything we needed to make this happen, a generator, fuel, 2 complete stations, a little food and water and most importantly, determination. We had to get on-air as soon as possible and begin operating. We needed to make that required 1000 QSOs unsure of when and how we were going to be collected. Our original plan came into action. The only CW station was going to be on 30m, with 20 & 17m on SSB. This would give pretty much 24 hour propagation into most geographical areas of the globe. Although all club sponsorship came from Europe, we wanted to give all areas / continents equal chances of working us in this now, shorter window.

I was the first station QRV on 17m SSB. The band was alive. Our 17m vertical dipole was going to 'rock this rock'! Infact, the band was so busy, it was hard to find a clear frequency to call CQ. I squeezed myself a spot on 18.130 and CQ CQ CQ. This is Papa Japan Seven Papa Kilo, New IOTA NA-247, QRZ? Zilch ! 12 minutes of unanswered CQs got me frustrated. Was my antenna not working? Had I microphone / audio problems? One way to find out. I scanned the band and found 2 loud stations in QSO. I broke in and asked for a radio report. PA2LO was most helpful and obliged. Infact, Gert was completely aware of our activation and was waiting for us. There had been some pirate activity before our activation using our callsign and so I think he needed a little convincing. I asked him to QSY to 18130 and there we continued the chat. After brief formalities were exchanged, he was delighted to be the first QSO with this NEW IOTA group and kindly agreed to spot me on the DX cluster. Moments after this all hell broke loose and the fun began. It was at this

moment when I realised why exactly, I do this DXpeditioning lark! The pure adrenalin rush of a pile-up. The goal here was to work the needed 1000 and anything more than that was going to be a bonus. The pileups were huge, most enjoyable and surprisingly, excellently behaved. The propagation gods were looking down on us (for once) and we had openings into all continents at once. The rate was phenomenal, and one wouldn't be long clocking up high QSO numbers. Jeremy was also QRV at this stage and running 30m CW where he also noticed, equally good propagation and pile-ups.

Life on the island was not pretty. We did not spend too long on preparing our operating site. We thought it much more important to spend that time on making QSOs. As a result, we set up between two giant boulders. There had been a previous rock fall here. The surface was uneven. There was no comfort and if you decided to try move about, there was a high risk of tripping or standing on a loose uneven stone and falling. It was smelly, and signs of dead crabs were evident. It was also hot, very hot. It tipped 41 degrees at one point between these two boulders on our thermometer. There was no shade – nor air conditioning! We had a tent but this increased the ambient temperature even more. The risks of the dangers from the sun were high. We certainly didn't want to dehydrate. We had to drink often. Our bottled water was warm, there was no way to keep it cool. There was no breeze, a dead heat with high humidity. There was always the risk of further falling rocks down upon us. We had to be careful of our movements. Not to mention all the insect bites. And we also knew that there was a high risk of that lightning storm returning. Basically, we were exposed to all the elements here and were at Mother Nature's mercy.

The pile-ups continued and were never ending. Jeremy was our main CW op. I took a break at 500 QSOs and switched and did a bit on CW to relieve him. It was nearing midnight, and both stations were in full swing. Dom on SSB and I was on CW. Jeremy came up from his rest and told us that there was a boat coming straight in our direction at speed. It looked like a police boat. We were in trouble. A quick check of the log showed little over 900 QSOs at this stage. Damn, we need that required 1000. Again, so near and yet so far ! Jeremy got back into the hot-seat while I tried to negotiate with the boat. He's faster than me. We had to rack up the last remaining needed QSOs. They had their searchlight on and were illuminating the rock. They must have circled it several times before trying to communicate with us. I'm sure it was at this point that they realised that they too, couldn't get ashore. Not only that, they couldn't get us off either ☺. Frans had left his VHF handheld with us in case of emergency. This was set to channel 16. Dom suggested to get them to call us on channel 16. All

I could do was to signal (using my torch) 16, 16, 16, in the hopes that someone on board knew a little morse. A carrier was heard on channel 16, end stopping it was, it had to be them. I have to say that Dom handled them perfectly. It was the coastguard, and they were concerned for our safety. The weather forecast was not good and they had received a report from someone on the mainland. Once they knew that we actually had permission to be there, and knew what we were doing, they bided us a farewell and reminded us to call them again on channel 16 if there was an emergency. This was obviously a breakdown in communication between their departments.



Operations continued throughout the night and the pileups were endless. 30m and 20m were the 2 night time bands and before we knew it, we were well passed the required 1000 QSO mark. We took it in turns and ran quite irregular shifts. There was always a spare man waiting to take over and both radios were always manned. We had so little time to try pack in as much as we could. Time goes by remarkably quick when running at this speed, and before we knew it, the sun was starting to come up. We had survived the night on Pelikan. We were lucky though, we knew that, and decided to count our blessings and not to risk another night.

We were at Pierre's mercy on when to collect us and despite our requests for 2 hours notice, a twin engined 400 Horse power rib moves remarkably quick and got to us in no time. Both stations ran continuously but as there was a slight null on 30m, that was the first station to shut down. We had tuned our vertical dipole for 10m as that band was wide open and continued the pileups until the last minute. We went QRT at 13:24 with EI8BLB being the last station in the log.

Now, of course there was a sudden rush to dismantle, get everything down and to pack up. Carefully ! Things had to be properly packed – we knew the dangers. And so the pack up begins, as does the dangerous journey back down to that slippery rock. All this as the temperature rises to over 30 degrees. We are careful not to forget anything, no trash, this is a wildlife reserve after all. The only thing that's left behind is the pile-ups, still begging for their QSO. We always set out to try to give

this new one to as many uniques as possible and discouraged dupes and multiple band slots. This is unnecessary towards IOTA – one QSO is surely enough.

The only way to off load the equipment was for the three of us to go waist deep in the water and to form a chain. Col was on the rib with Frans. We passed each case and each precious piece of equipment to him and after a few slips and a little foul mouthed language, all equipment gets transferred safely and onto the big rib. Jeremy next, then me and the last to leave the rock is Dom – he needs to untie the rope. Everyone gets off safely, and so now the trip back to Simpson Bay, all of us exhausted. Unload the boat, make the final payments, and dispose of some of the leftover food etc. We donated the left over equipment, generators, tables and chairs to those locals that had been good to us for without them, this would not have happened.

They say a picture paints a thousand words, but, a picture can also be deceiving. To some, this DXpedition looked easy despite of our difficulties. Were we over exaggerating? Those who followed us on Twitter often saw pictures of nice blue skies and couldn't see any danger. WX here was always a major safety concern. We had experienced that lightning / thunderstorm on

our second night. Not nice. We were so thankful that we had not been exposed on the rock that night. We learnt that the day after we all flew home, Hurricane Gonzalo hit Simpson Bay with winds of over 125 mph. More than 12 people injured, over 30 boats sank, severe structural damage, one man confirmed dead and several still missing.

We on the other hand, achieved what we set out to do somewhat, we activated the new IOTA, netted 2,200 QSOs in little over 17 hours, gave a new one to the deserving and most of all, got through all the mishaps and hardships together as a team. We are most thankful to our generous sponsors and individual donors for helping to offset our ever increasing costs. Now the enormous job of QSLing is just beginning for Dom, 3Z9DX our QSL manager. The QSL is being designed and will be available shortly. Thanks to everyone for calling us and thanks to the IOTA committee who have already approved and validated this operation towards credit. For video footage, photos, on-line log and more, visit our website: www.pj7pk.net

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