

A CW ONLY DX-PEDITION TO CHRISTMAS ISLAND

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Jim, G3RTE and I have managed to make a trip most years since our first operation from Les Minquiers Islands (IOTA EU-099) in 1996, although he was unable to accompany me to Mayotte last year. However he was keen to make a trip in 2010 and we started looking at possible destinations on the Top 100 Most Wanted List in mid-June 2009. Of the list of possibilities we discussed at that time, Christmas Island (VK9X) was by far the least dangerous and easiest to get to, and thus a fairly simple decision.

History

Captain William Mynors of the East India Ship Company vessel, the *Royal Mary*, named the island when he arrived on Christmas Day 1643. However, it was not until 1688 that the first recorded landing took place.

During his 1872-76 oceanographic expedition, Dr John Murray collected mineral specimens from the seabed adjoining what is now Indonesia and predicted that phosphate deposits would be found on an island in the area. Royal Navy landings on Christmas Island in 1887 confirmed his prediction, and Britain annexed the island on 6th June 1888.

Phosphate is an important substance in both agriculture and industry and the first commercial exports were sent to Japan and Germany in January 1900. Mining operations flourished in the period leading up to the First World War, with Japan the biggest customer.

When war broke out in South East Asia in 1941, Christmas Island was a target for Japanese occupation because of the phosphate deposits and the island was occupied on 31st March 1942. Preparations were made to mine and export phosphate, but further acts of sabotage meant that only small amounts were exported to Japan during the occupation. In October 1945, *HMS Rother* reoccupied Christmas Island.

After the war, the island was administered as part of the Colony of Singapore. On 1st January 1958, Christmas Island was excised from the Colony of Singapore and made a separate UK Crown Colony. On 1st October 1958, and following a payment by Australia to Singapore of £2.9 million, sovereignty was transferred from the UK to the Commonwealth of Australia.

In more recent times, Christmas Island has achieved some notoriety as the site of an Australian government Immigration Detention Centre (IDC) on the north-west end of the island, capable of accommodating about 1,100 refugees.

Climate

Christmas Island has a relatively uniform climate throughout most of the year. Temperatures vary little from month to month. The average daily maximum is 28°C in April and the average daily minimum falls to 22°C in August.

Being about 1,000 KM south of the equator, the island has a typical tropical equatorial climate and has just two distinct seasons: “wet” and “dry”.

The “dry” season ranges from June to November and is characterised by long dry periods with steady south-east trade winds and occasional showers.

The “wet” season falls between November and May, when the island comes under the influence of the north-west monsoons, when the day starts with a bank of cloud moving across the island from the north, bringing with it intermittent downpours of rain.

The monsoon also occasionally brings high swells and gale force winds. Heavy rainfall can sometimes last for days, although it's more likely to alternate with periods of humid, calm weather. The heavy seas disrupt shipping activities for weeks at a time and heavy mists occur at higher altitudes also, often disrupting incoming and outgoing flights.

Although we were on the island in the middle of the “wet” season, we only saw two, short but very heavy rain storms, the second as we were boarding the aircraft to start the journey home.

Geography

About 2,600 KM north-west of Perth, 500 KM south of the Indonesian capital, Jakarta, and 975 KM ENE of the Cocos (Keeling) Islands, Christmas Island is a territory of Australia in the Indian Ocean with an area of 135 square kilometres and a population of about 1,400 Chinese, Malay and whites residents who mainly live on the north-eastern tip of the island. This is a legacy of the historic, colonial-like system when indentured workers from China and Malaysia were employed in the phosphate mine. Following reforms pushed through by the Unions in 1980, all are now Australian citizens.

Licensing

The normally major obstacle of getting a licence was eliminated by Australia having implemented the CEPT T/R 61-01 system in 2008, although the strict wording required VK to be “appended to a visitor’s personal callsign as a suffix”. Nigel, G3TXF must have been one of the first to utilise this facility when

passing through Queensland during his Pacific sojourn in March 2009 and he used VK4/G3TXF without any howls of protest from the WIA (or anybody else for that matter), being a much more logical and conventional arrangement. Jim and I decided to use his G6AY call with the normal VK9X prefix and to operate as VK9X/G6AY.

However, in October 2009, and in conjunction with the Wireless Institute of Australia (WIA), the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) issued a press release stating that from 1st November 2009 and following “consultation” with the amateur community, they could no longer support having a suffix letter as a geographic identifier in VK9 callsigns to denote each of the six Australian external territories, including Christmas Island.

The press release recognised that, although most operations from the external territories would require a VK9 callsign for DX-ing, contesting and / or QSLing purposes, under the provisions of the Amateur Licence Conditions Determination, portable operation is permitted using the amateur’s home callsign /VK9 and stating their location.

Understandably, Jim was rightly concerned that the use of VK9X/G6AY would be contrary to the ACMA’s rules and may thus invalidate our planned operation for DXCC and IOTA purposes. We certainly didn’t want to use G6AY/VK9, as was inferred! Consequently, he took the matter up with Jim, VK3PC who had circulated the press release in the first instance and received the very reassuring response: “I would use VK9X/G6AY. The DX world knows where VK9X is, even if ‘our’ WIA don’t”.

Flights

I quickly found that there was a weekly charter flight operated by Australian Indian Ocean Territories Airways (AIOTA) using Malaysian Airlines aircraft from Kuala Lumpur (KL) via Singapore.

Flights from London with Singapore Airlines integrated nicely with the charter flight times and in August 2009 I booked us both seats, departing Heathrow on 19th February 2010, returning on 27th February 2010. I also booked and paid a deposit on seats on the AIOTA flights between Singapore and the island, with the balance to be paid in December.

Problems

When I contacted the island travel agency in December to pay the balance, I was told that AIOTA were no longer operating the service. It was now operated at slightly different times by Christmas Island Airlines and – most importantly - no longer stopped at Singapore.

This meant that we would change our departure date to 18th February, take a connecting flight from Singapore to KL, stay overnight and then get the charter flight to the island on the morning of the 20th. It

was obvious that the agency was highly embarrassed, as they booked us on the connecting Singapore / KL flights in both directions at no charge. We did have to pay extra for the changes to the outgoing London to Singapore flight but did not need to make any changes to the timing of the homeward flight.

For the night of 19th February, I booked a room at the airport hotel, which is close to the airport and is served by a free shuttle bus.

Accommodation

I contacted the Christmas Island Tourism Association, CITA who manage various properties available for rent, carefully explaining a little about ham radio and about the purpose of our trip.

Their recommendation was that we rent two rooms at The Sunset, located close to The Settlement and on the top of the cliffs at the north-eastern end of the island with a clear take-off to Europe and most of Asia. The owners were very happy for us to erect antennas and allocated us rooms at opposite ends of the first floor overlooking the ocean.



Red crab

Competition!

In July 2009, four German operators announced a DX-pedition to Christmas Island in November / December, with activity on 160-10 metres using amplifiers on CW, SSB and the digital modes. The VK9XW and VK9XX operation did a superb job, focusing mainly on CW on the low bands and making some 27,000 QSOs over a two-week period. Naturally, I opened a dialogue with Rene, DL2JRM, who was kind enough to provide much helpful feedback.

Planning the antennas

Katrina at CITA sent to me some photographs of The Sunset and the surrounding area in an effort to give us an idea of where we might rig our antennas, but there appeared to be no suitably located (or high enough) trees. I asked if she could suggest someone from whom we might hire some scaffolding poles and to give us a quotation for helping us to erect them. She recommended John McDonald, better known as John-

ny Mac, and we exchanged a number of e-mails describing what we wanted.

However, it was clear that our suggestions, based upon Katrina's photos, Johnny's comments and Google Earth images were impracticable and we had to wait until we were together on site before making final decisions. However, there was no problem in Johnny providing a number of 6 metre long 50 mm dia. poles, and rope etc. to guy them, which was a great relief.

Antennas and equipment

Jim is a great lover of dipoles whereas I prefer to use a 30 metre top doublet fed with 300 ohm ribbon cable. With a small ATU, the doublet covers all bands from 80 to 10 metres and it's easy to change bands without leaving the shack. Even in daylight, changing Jim's dipoles tends to be a two handed operation.

Jim took his Elecraft K2 and his brand new laptop running Wintest under Windows 7 in his hand luggage. I put my Kenwood TS-570D in the hold and carried a new (to me) hand laptop running N1MM in my hand luggage. To my horror, the floppy drive on my ancient and much travelled Compaq running Windows 95 and CT had finally died and had had to be replaced.

The outward journey

We met at Heathrow's terminal 3 for the overnight flight to Singapore. Our bags were booked through to KL without difficulty, although we would have to collect boarding passes for the Singapore to KL leg on arrival in Singapore.

The flight was uneventful, as was the connection to KL and the luggage arrived. Despite a confirmation e-mail, the hotel had no record of our booking but managed to find us a room. We managed a fitful night's sleep and an early breakfast before taking the bus back to the airport and checking in for the flight to the island.

The flight was about half full, which meant that Jim and I had a row of seats to ourselves. Customs and Immigration formalities were lengthy, even though most of the passengers held Australian passports.

The Australians are quite paranoid about the importation of plants and insects but we must have looked respectable, as our bags were merely passed through an X-ray machine and declared free of contraband.

I'd booked us a taxi for the transfer from the airport and the driver was waiting for us as arranged. Johnny Mac also turned up, promising to meet us at The Sunset later to help with the antennas.

The drive from the airport took about 15 minutes and deposited us at The Sunset, which was deserted apart from a note on the door of Reception confirming our booking.

Rigging the antennas

We just had time to change and take a quick walk around before Johnny Mac arrived with scaffolding poles to make two 12 metre high masts.

There were some apparently derelict buildings next door and a convenient palm tree to the north, so I decided to place my mast on a piece of scrub land outside one of these buildings, a few metres from the cliff edge, guy it three ways and to support the centre of the doublet from it. The two ends of the doublet were supported by the palm tree at one end and the roof of The Sunset at the other, generally facing north-west.

Siting Jim's mast was a bit more problematic due to the access road, but after some discussion we decided to lash it to a conveniently placed timber post, guy it three ways and for him to rig his various dipoles as inverted vees. Jim's mast was even closer to the cliff edge than mine, again facing north-west.

It was very hot and we needed Johnny's industrial gloves to be able to handle the scaffolding tubes after they had been lying in the sun but we had the masts erected and the antennas strung in record time. We rigged plastic dog bone insulators at the top of both masts and ran nylon halyards through them to facilitate changing antennas, which was a necessity in Jim's case.



The location with Jims mast

It was then time to retire to the local pub to re-hydrate and to reward Johnny for his efforts, as he refused all other forms of reimbursement.

On the air

Jim decided to open on 17 metres, and was immediately busy with a mainly European pile up. His first QSO was with UA9CCP at 1013 UTC (1713 local time). My first QSO was with JR5DPV on 20 metres at 1047 UTC but I couldn't generate a pile up, so tried 15 metres, also without much success before settling down to a nice run of mainly JAs on 30 metres.

After a couple of hours, we took a break for dinner. Being a Saturday, all the restaurants were closed, ex-

cept one which was a short walk away. We then found out just how high is the cost of living on the island, mainly due to most things having to be imported plus the presence of the staff of the IDC. It wasn't helped by the adverse change in the exchange rate since August 2009, having deteriorated from better than 2:1 to around 1.6:1. A simple evening meal and a bottle of beer cost between £20 and £25. After dinner, it was back on the bands for a few more hours before falling into bed, absolutely exhausted.

The Sunset has a WiFi network and a reasonable Internet connection, so we'd planned to upload the log on a daily basis to my web site. After a successful upload on the morning of 21st February the site crashed that day and I was unable to do anything about it until I got back home. What was interesting was the ability to log into the CDXC Cluster and watch the incoming spots and comments. It was also very useful to be able to put out a "DXALL" spot when starting a new session, rather than have to wait for someone to spot us.

Conditions were much improved over those experienced over the last several years, with the SFI around the 84 mark for all of our stay. On 21st, I found 15 metres to be open to Japan and Asia from around 0500 UTC, with Europe starting to coming through at around 0700 UTC. Jim found 12 metres open to Europe from around 1100 UTC. I was quite amazed to find 10 metres open to Europe at the same time and we did our best to take advantage of these openings.



Jim, operating

To minimise the number of duplicate QSOs, we agreed that, as far as possible, we would each stick to individual bands. I operated on mainly 30, 20, 15 and 10 metres, whilst Jim operated mainly on 40, 17 and 12 metres.

One evening, whilst we were changing one of Jim's dipoles, and much to his chagrin, the halyard came tumbling down on top of us. Only one thing could have happened, and that was the friction of the 2 mm dia. nylon rope running through the plastic dog bone insulator had sawn its way through, and so it turned out. It would be necessary to lower the mast and re-

place the insulator and halyard, not a job that I was prepared to do in the dark with just the two of us, so we temporarily rigged a low 20 metre dipole as best we could and Jim was surprised at the results.

The following morning, we made contact with Johnny Mac, who came down that afternoon and very quickly got things back to normal.



Phil, operating

Another odd thing that happened was that I was contacted by the manager of The Sunset who had a lady with her that wanted to speak to me "about my wires". My first thought was that I had some sort of a TVI problem, but it turned out that she claimed to be the owner of the piece of scrub land on which my mast was sitting and wanted it removed in case it "fell down and injured someone or damaged something".

She had already cut through the rope securing the end of the antenna to the palm tree. I explained that to lower the mast safely required three people and that we would have to contact Johnny Mac, but would sort it out for her. Johnny subsequently spoke to her boyfriend and resolved the issue. I didn't put the antenna back on the palm tree though, but found an alternative anchor point and didn't notice any difference in performance.

Operating standards

Generally, the pile ups were furious but well behaved and I saw no evidence of any DQRM. Stations trying to make duplicate QSOs have always been a problem and I was very firm with them, saying "QSO B4" and moving on. Only twice did the station concerned argue, and I logged those two QSOs. Jim worked about 40 on the first day, but after that took the same line as me.

We'd been particularly asked to listen for north American stations, as it was alleged that the German group had ignored the openings, (although the statistics on their web site seem to disprove this). The short path was not helped by hill directly behind The Sunset.

Consequently, when a US station broke the pile up, we asked the pile up to stand by to see if there were any others. In the early days it was difficult to per-

saude the Europeans so to do. There was one well-known G0 station, unfortunately a CDXC member, who would just not stop calling and he was blacklisted by us both.

With the improvement in HF band conditions and the excellent job on the LF bands that the Germans had done in November 2009, we decided to concentrate on 15, 12 and 10 metres as far as possible. We never did plan any 160 metres operation but I tried 80 metres one evening and called CQ for about 30 minutes but made only one QSO – with a UA0, so there was no doubt that I was getting out. Jim operated on 40 metres towards the end of the week after 17 metres had closed.

Getting home

The return flight to KL left the island at 1205 local time (0505 UTC) on 27th February and we were able to book our luggage all the way through to Heathrow, although we would again have to collect boarding passes in KL and Singapore. The flights were uneventful although we realised we actually flew between KL and Singapore three times that day!

It was long journey, not helped by the fact that some children in the cabin seemed to wake up and cry at

half hourly intervals during the Singapore to London leg. Arrival at Heathrow was on time at 0545 UTC on 28th February and the baggage also arrived.

The raw log was uploaded to LoTW on 4th March and has also been uploaded to (fully searchable on) my web site (www.g3swh.org.uk/christmas-island.html), showing the operator's callsign against each QSO. Special, colour photo QSLs have been printed and are available direct with SAE and adequate return postage (recommended).

Bureau cards can be requested from the web site and will be processed as quickly as possible. Cards are also available via the traditional bureau route.

Our particular thanks go to our XYLs, Cheryl and Jan for allowing us to go; to Katrina at the Christmas Island Tourist Association (www.christmas.net.au); to Kashirah at the Travel Exchange Christmas Island for sorting out the flights; to Angie and all the staff at The Sunset and to Johnny Mac for help with the antenna masts (what would we have done without him?); as well as to all of our sponsors: (RSGB, Chiltern DXC, GM DX Group, EUDXF, GDXF, Clipperton DXC, Swiss DX Foundation, West Tennessee DX Association, Nippon DX Association and Singapore Airlines) for their support and for making this DX-pedition possible.

Statistics

The table below shows the full QSO breakdown by band:

BAND	80	40	30	20	17	15	12	10	TOTAL
G3RTE	0	902	138	212	2,396	0	1,321	0	5,040
G3SWH	1	0	1,790	663	0	2,305	0	457	5,216
TOTAL	1	902	1,928	875	2,396	2,305	1,321	457	10,256

The table below shows the Dx-pedition statistics by DXCC entity:

BAND	80	40	30	20	17	15	12	10	TOTAL
DXCC	1	63	77	58	80	77	64	44	102

We made QSOs with 5,209 unique calls and 191 UK stations.