

CASUALDX - - - IN THE LAND OF THE ICE BEARS
SVALBARD de JW/K9PET

By Marc Weinberg, K9PET

In the 16th century, Willem Barents, a Dutch seaman named it Spitsbergen (“peaked mountains”). This island is located about 600 miles from the North Pole, halfway between the pole and Norway, at roughly 74 – 81 degrees North. Today Spitsbergen is only the name of the largest island in the archipelago. The territory today is known by the early Viking name of Svalbard meaning “cold coast” and is governed and administered by Norway.

And that it can be, but by Arctic standards it is relatively mild compared to other areas at similar latitude. 60% of the land mass is covered by glaciers. The warmth comes from a spur of the Gulf Stream. 1500 inhabitants call Longyearbyen, the principle commercial center, their home. Most who come to enjoy this land of the midnight sun visit from about mid-April to August. The primary activity in Svalbard is Arctic research. Forty nations have scientists working in the territory under a mutual agreement.

Our home for the week (July 18-25, 2005) was aboard the expedition ship, M S Endeavour, operated by Lindblad Expeditions. I had been on two successful trips with them previously--they have taken small number of guests (110 per trip) to both Polar Regions for many years. Shortly after 9/11 when traveling seemed a little risky, their business dropped off like most in the travel industry. I suggested to the company that maybe Hams would enjoy traveling with them. To my surprise, they were most willing to participate in my ideas about equipping the ship’s radio room for Ham radio as well as provide the gear for shore parties to work DX. Thus CasualDX was born. With this concept as the premise, I will continue to arrange for Ham groups to travel with them on other itineraries.

In Svalbard we were confronted and treated to pack ice; home to seals, walrus and the mighty polar bear as thousands of sea birds swirled overhead. Because of the bear’s dominance, this pristine land is also called “Land of the Ice Bears.” As a marine mammal, the bear spends most of its life like a nomad, living, hunting and giving birth on the ice. Its main source of food is seals, which are plentiful here.

Being in a remote area like this brought back memories of the isolation, beauty and animals of the Galapagos. This Arctic region is an impossible experience to forget, and who would want to? In the beginning of our journey I thought that motoring through and around the ice was a chore. At first I looked at the ice as a bother; something to be avoided like a problem situation. And then one day when completely surrounded and moving slowly ahead under the guidance of our experienced captain, I realized how beautiful it was. I began photographing just the ice as a series of objects that blended perfectly with the environment at hand, just like the animals.

Ah yes, and what about Ham Radio? Well why not? It’s remote and certainly a challenge to get here. Surely someone in the outside world would want a contact. Even though I’m relatively new to the sport of Ham radio DX-ing, I quickly realized that it’s not often a family hobby, but a real bonus when it is. My thought has been that there might be a different kind of DX experience for those who might not ever get to go on a “serious DXpedition.” This would be a chance to travel to a special destination (in comfort) and bring the family so that everyone could enjoy the experience together.

After more than a year in planning and equipping the ship I discovered a “test pilot” in the person of Merv, N6NO already signed up to travel to Antarctica, S. Georgia and the Falklands aboard Endeavour. In February 2004 Merv did a solo experiment with some of the gear. At the same time, three experienced adventurers Jim W3ASA, Bill W3WKO, and Dave W3WKP signed on with their XYLs Joan, Carolyn and Jane for the intended “family experience in Svalbard.”

Our adventure began in earnest in Oslo when we boarded our charter flight for the two and a half hour trip to Longyearbyen where our ship was waiting. Soon after arriving we got busy organizing the radio room with gear provided by Lindblad. We each brought an Icom 706 and only a few related items, since the ship carried the power supplies, tuners, antennas and related components. For shore operations we had two Honda generators, tent, tables, chairs and a wonderful Big SteppIR Vertical donated by the folks at Fluidmotion.* Beside the generous supply of equipment, the Captain arranged for a few eager crewmen to take everything ashore, and do the setup and tear down for us. Their reward was to watch us work the world of DX. They had actually practiced doing the set up on their stops the week before we arrived and had the drill down perfectly. *note*(Beginning 2005, Endeavour's Ham Shack will also include an Icom 706 w/CW & SSB filters, Heil head set, and Bencher Iambic keyer).*

Every shore party had its own armed Polar Bear guard, a crew person with a rifle, just in case. It did concern me a little to notice our guard sometimes watching us having so much fun, rather than looking outside our tent for bears.

If you're a "serious" DX adventurer, please remember this trip and others to follow will not require roughing as on some trips logging thousands of contacts. Here we were concerned with "doing it all" and that's what we did. We were able to sample the crisp clear Arctic air, the sea packed with ice, the animals and the spectacular mountain scenery. The XYLs were so glad we were happy because they were too. There was indeed something for everyone including plenty of time to be together at wonderful meals and naturalist briefings about every aspect of our surroundings. I averaged more than 100 digital photos per day to share with family and friends. You can see 80 of my photos at www.casualdx.com by checking into "the Gallery."

Whether in the ship's radio room with a Shakespeare 23 foot vertical whip tuned with the Icom AH4 auto tuner or on shore with the Big SteppIR vertical, we were constantly rewarded with a frenzied pileup of anxious responders to our CQ. Since we were in the territorial waters of a Norwegian controlled area, reciprocal privileges of CEPT prevailed whether on board our Bahamian registered ship or on shore. So all our calls had the "JW" prefix. This attracted much attention and we were delighted to receive what we were assured was a true 5-9 and "big signal" report almost every time.

We were fascinated by what some northern Europeans told us was the "northern flutter" or QSB which seemed to happen in rapid swings-- more so than I've experienced stateside. That was the result of being so far north and from the effects of the Aurora. Of course, it being summer and constant sun, we were not treated to the brilliant colorful displays of the winter months. So then, for those of you who consult my website www.casualdx.com you will ask, "then how did you get such fine Aurora photos?" Well, you caught me! There is a small museum in Longyearbyen where we were treated to many things, including a short slide show presentation. As I sat in the front row of the theater, I whipped out my camera and fired away at sights I knew I would not get to see. And as Paul Harvey would say, "Now you know the rest of the story."

Some fjords were inaccessible with "multi-year ice" as the Captain called it, while others gave us the opening we wanted. Some were beautifully clear of ice and others required maneuvering and smashing ahead with our "ice hardened hull." Ramming the ice sounded and felt like freight trains being connected in the switching yard. At times the fog was dense and other times the sky and air reminded me of a brilliant day toward the end of winter. The weather was warm enough for just a turtleneck and a flannel shirt much of the time.

Our station on shore was just great. We were housed in a large standup canopy tent with table and chairs. Our Honda purred outside near our antenna and the world came calling as we announced our presence. Since paper logs were all we had, sometimes we worked as a team – one of us writing and the other on the

radio. The Captain's rule about our duration on shore was not more than two to three hours at any one location (polar bears have a great sense of smell). While we were limited in what we could do at any one time, there were truly so many things to do and see that this didn't bother us in the least.

One of the more exciting moments occurred when we had radio contact with a sailboat stuck in the ice. The fog was so thick that we couldn't see them one-quarter mile away. When they entered the fjord, it was clear sailing, but the ice closed in behind them. The procedure was for us to break the ice as they followed us to clear water. This happened a second time with another sailboat a few days later.

By our "casual" standards 346 QSO's in 29 countries and 7 US states on SSB, CW, and PSK31 was a fine total. We would have had more except for the giant Solar Flare part way through the week. Since we had no Internet and email didn't work so far North (we were out of the satellite's range) we checked equipment for almost two days, thinking that the silence was just on our end. Finally toward the end of the second day of no contacts, we heard a station in Bergen and found out we were not alone.

One final highlight occurred on our final half day in Longyearbyen. We had previously made email contact with Mathias JW5NM. He is one of the local hams who arranged the schedule for visiting hams that want to use the club station, JW5E. We thought we might have time for that too, but did not. We contacted Mathias by phone while he was working in the airport control tower. We gratefully accepted his invitation to visit him there. From that vantage point we got a wonderful view of the harbor with a fresh flow of pack ice moving in. During that morning the scenery changed from clear water to perhaps 50% ice in just four hours, which aided in my understanding of how the sailboats became trapped. We also heard his perspective on life in Svalbard.

With the pack ice being so mobile and closing in fast on the West coast, our charter pilot (737-300) announced he would fly low and slow for the first five minutes after departure so we could get one last good look and some aerial photos.

Would we do it again? You bet! Nothing beats making everyone happy – Fun, Family, and Ham Radio too. CasualDX is sponsoring another Svalbard trip in July 2005. And a group will also be cruising the coast of Chile from March 1-15, 2005. After that we will turn our attention toward the South Pacific in 2006, from Easter Island to Papua New Guinea. So, climb aboard – there's nothing worse than a dream unexplored!