

CasualDX in Svalbard, July, 2004

Writing this article for the readers of DX Magazine, a “serious” DX audience, feels a little risky. “CasualDX” by design is quite different. The concept is really simple. Some families and spouses undoubtedly feel left out when the serious DXer gets the notion of traveling to be the “DX.” Although I am new to this sport, it seemed there might be a less stringent and more inclusive way to travel, have fun on the air, and include those who might not want to be there to fully support the passion for extreme isolation and remote operations, if invited.

After two very successful trips with Lindblad Expeditions, one to the Galapagos and the other to Mexico, I was pleased when they agreed to fully participate and support my idea. They gave me everything I asked for: a radio room with an antenna for operating Maritime Mobile, power supplies, tuners, coax and more. They also provided two Honda generators, a tent and a support crew to set up on shore. SteppIR Antennas graciously contributed their Big SteppIR vertical.

This left little for me to do except put out the word and invite participation. Fortunately I discovered Merv, N6NO ready to travel to Antarctica, S.Georgia and the Falklands aboard Lindblad’s M S Endeavour. He agreed to be the test pilot for my concept and you’ll find his published report in the Sept/Oct 2004 issue of this publication.

The object of my first effort (after the initial effort by Merv) was focused on the other pole: Svalbard, about 600 miles from the North Pole. Svalbard, JW became a reality when three adventurers stepped forward; Jim W3ASA, Bill W3WKO and Dave W3WKP. Of course, fulfilling the CasualDX concept, they were joined by their XYLs Joan, Carolyn and Jane.

M S Endeavour accommodates 110 guests and has an impressive record of treating them to the wonders of both Polar Regions as well as exciting places enroute. Our group met in Oslo on July 17 for a brief one-night rest before flying direct to Svalbard by chartered jet some two and a half hours north.

We landed at the center of commercial activities in the islands; Longyearbyen, 78 degrees, 12 minutes North. This location serves as the headquarters for polar research and is the seat of local government as well as Norway’s main administrative center. This small and colorful community has approximately 1500 inhabitants. You may have had a QSO with the club station JW5E.

After nearly two days of travel and several hours of layovers (especially for me, starting from Seattle) we were ready to settle into our cabins for this exploration of “The Land of The Ice Bears.”

Once the domestic chores were satisfied and the mandatory lifeboat drill completed, we wasted little time checking out the gear in the radio room, which had been there since N6NO was aboard. Three of us brought Icom 706's. New since the Antarctica trip was a Shakespeare whip and an Icom AH4 auto tuner, located directly above the radio room just behind the bridge. We quickly learned that this was an ideal location, since the ship allows guests on the bridge at all times. We had many interested crew and passenger visitors. It also meant that when something exciting happened, like entering a new ice pack or spotting a bear to observe or photograph, we were one of the first to know.

We got on the air quickly and within minutes on either CW or SSB the pileup both surprised and delighted us. With only a paper log it took management skills and sometimes two of us, one logging and the other operating to handle the frenzy. We also worked split and called by regions on more than one occasion. Wow, if it was this good operating Maritime Mobile what would happen when we got on shore?

From Longyearbyen our route took us a little more than 80 North to Møffen Island, a favorite hangout for walrus. This spot lived up to its reputation. These animals are not particularly friendly and this wasn't the place to ask to go ashore. But we all waited anxiously for the conditions to be right for a landing and a chance to get on the air from shore. It took nearly two days of exploring before we worked our way through the ice pack, found a fog-free gravel beach with no polar bears. Captain Skog gave the word we could prepare for a landing.

106 guests, including the happy XYLs would be exploring the shore and the four of us would be setting up the first real (qualifying) DX site.

We had not realized it, but the Captain had five members of his crew practice taking the SteppIR, the Hondas, tent, table, chairs and all related gear ashore during the week before we arrived. They demonstrated their expertise and their training flawlessly. So once our Zodiac landed the crew was waiting for us to plug in and get on the air. The frenzy started again, much to our delight. We were now on shore in Liefdefjord at 79.32 North and 12.23 East. Now having operated CW, SSB and PSK31 we just looked at each other in amazement at how easy this was. This was really fun! Clear cool air, 45 degrees Fahrenheit, sun gleaming off the ice pack and our families were just as happy with their scheduled activities while the world scrambled to talk with us. What could be better? We were the DX and loving it! This day, with barely two and a half hours on shore, we counted 87 contacts and 25 countries. Most gave us reports of 59 or "big signal!"

I can honestly say we loved the SteppIR vertical for its performance and ease of set up and tear down. The Captain had warned us that although the crew was well armed it wasn't their goal to shoot anything and if a bear approached we might have to leave some things behind. Fortunately that didn't happen.

I had made a ground of 15" X 15" copper plate for the vertical and planned to float it attached to a simple boat cushion, which I shipped ahead. Mysteriously when I found the plate in the radio room, the cushion was missing. So Elvis, our Radio Officer, got me an old ship's life jacket, which we cut and fit to the plate. I floated it a few feet into the sea and secured it to the ground on the SteppIR with #14 wire. Dave W3WKP felt we should run some radials too, which we did. We had no time or real interest in analyzing it, but were so happy it was working well.

Did I mention that the danger of polar bears increases geometrically with each hour you stay on shore? The Captain and our naturalist guides (equipped with rifles) had told us that two to three hours at any one stop was the limit. Fortunately, with our heads buried inside our tent focused on logging contacts, we had our trusty armed guard looking out for us. It did concern me a little when he sometimes became distracted by the fun we were having and I noticed him watching us, rather than our surroundings.

The three days that followed were more of the same. Both crew and passenger guests showed more and more interest in our activities. So during the regular evening debriefings conducted by the naturalists, I was often given the opportunity to advise the guests about our efforts. We all learned about the creatures under the sea and saw them displayed via the electron microscope projector or learned about how bears find their food in the long dark nights of the Arctic.

After all our successes, we were startled one day to be shut out from the world. It was nearly 36 hours before we were able to contact a station near Bergen when we learned we were not the only ones knocked off the air by a really large solar flare. While we often did have email, depending on our location relative to the satellite (but not at this time), we had no Internet to check out what the rest of the world already knew.

For those keeping score as a measure of a DX adventure success, please remember that radio on a CasualDX is only part of the trip. There is much more and our group certainly took part in all of it. Our record of "part-time operations" was 346 QSOs, 29 countries and 7 US states, 20 polar bears, 100 hundred-plus walrus, a dozen beluga whales, and many seals and reindeer. Of course, there were thousands of birds.

Oh yes, and did I mention "ice?" In the beginning I thought of it as something that was just in the way. Quickly, I began to see it as a real beauty in the overall landscape of hundreds of glaciers in the rugged carvings of glacial mountains. However, the pack ice presents a hazard to be dealt with by passing vessels. We rescued two sailboats stuck in fast moving pack ice that filled the fjord after they had entered. I thought at first it was just their poor planning until I saw the same thing happen to us one day in a matter of only a few hours. The ice itself is not the only hazard, but once surrounded you might find yourself on a heavily traveled "bear highway." Not a good place to be!

As you can imagine, the consensus of our group was, “What fun and what an educational experience!” Jim, W3ASA in an email to me after the trip, best described it.

“Being a person with multiple interests and hobbies the Endeavour expedition fitted my needs perfectly. My wife could hang out with ‘normal’ people and I could play with the radios as much or as little as I wished. Since I am interested in technology and environmental issues the trip certainly had elements of both which had a lot of appeal to me. Joan, who has no interest in ham radio, had a great time – especially since I didn’t have to set up the radio in our cabin!”

When you read this, the next CasualDX trip will be in the full swing planning stage. We are leaving March 1, 2005 for a trip to the southern tip of South America at Ushuaia and up the rugged coast of Chile. It will terminate near Concepcion 15 days later. It’s probably not too late for you to sign up, so if you’re ready, climb aboard with us. There is Svalbard again for July, 2005 with specific dates to be determined and the limits of other trips is bound only by your imagination, interests and Endeavour’s schedule. Starting in 2006 CasualDX will be headed for the islands of the South Pacific from Easter Island to Papua New Guinea. Hope to see you soon. – Marc Weinberg, K9PET

There will be more trips and any of Endeavour’s itineraries is open for a CasualDX participant’s pleasure. Marc Weinberg is retired and lives in Shoreline, WA with his wife Marion. To learn more about the history and the future of CasualDX trips aboard M S Endeavour please contact K9PET@arrl.net or consult the website at www.casualdx.com