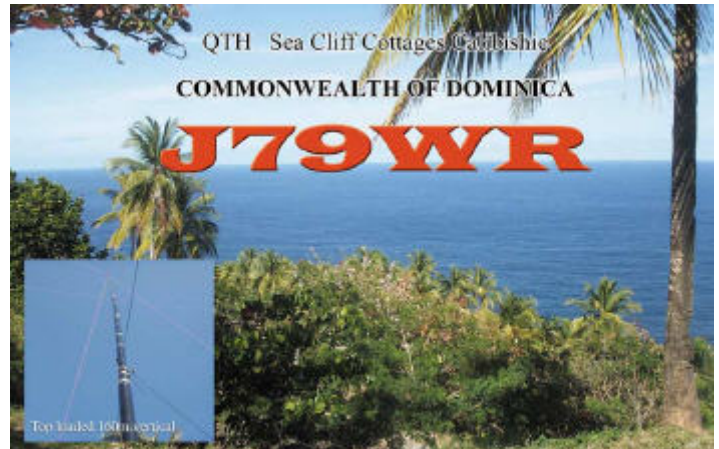


A celebration of sorts in J7 Commonwealth of Dominica or the trip that kept trying to go away but I just would not listen.

John Dunnington G3LZQ aka J79WR

Overview

After spending our last two wedding anniversaries in Capetown, and operating the RSGB Commonwealth Contest plus a little Dx'ing from the Northern Cape, 2009 had to be different well it was after all our Golden Wedding Anniversary and 52-years in Amateur Radio combined. Initially we thought S7 Seychelles but getting 80m permission proved difficult and time consuming. J3 Grenada the spice island great spot but had been well worked this year already by DL5AXX so how about J7 Dominica not a lot of CW activity and mainly by US multi-groups for WPX and CQWW. The Commonwealth Contest was pretty much virgin territory so lets go. Thank goodness for the internet- a quick Google "Amateur Radio J7" search soon gave us clues and a quick exchange of emails established criteria for a licence and suitable operating sites.



Dominica is a small island with large mountainous areas covered in rich unspoilt tropical trees. Only a couple of towns the capital Roseau (in the SW) and Portsmouth (in NW) plus a large assortment of villages, & hamlets; so choosing a suitable base was important. One main site soon appeared used previously by George K5KG & his multi-op crew. This is located up on the North Coast and although isolated had the benefit of a ham friendly owner, as a bonus it was only about 8-miles from the main airport (Melvin Hall) which carries inter-island flights, feeders from Antigua, and services to KP4 by American Eagle. Hence the American connection cheap flights to KP4 and on to J7 etc. The actual site location at Calibishie is about a mile outside the village and located on a high ridge with deep ravines on either side. Dominica being mountainous has lots of rivers draining down to the sea, On a visit to Portsmouth we counted no less than twenty bridges mostly small and narrow draining rain water. The site is high above the ocean and slopes down from the main road to the cliff top where access to the beach is limited to a well trodden and steep footpath not for the fainthearted like me. The accommodation comprises a 2-bedroomed cottage, there are 5-on site of various sizes and star rating. We were advised the 2-bedroomed had more garden space for antennas which was true but the latest much more modern cottage has the equivalent but as it has a view to die-for over the bay, it is fully booked up 18-months in advance. Our cottage to be fair had passed "it's sell by date" and we were assured it was in line for full upgrading this year. We had a full kitchen with a dining area c/w fridge freezer, a lounge area with SAT TV all USA out of KP4 it did carry Sky Sports so Saturday & Sunday Soccer from 0830 through to midnight, and BBC World Service for news coverage. It also had a Wifi Network, more on this later. There is little in the way of broadcast FM Radio, a couple of local stations plus two in FM & FG in French of course. Several small local food establishments serving mainly Chicken & Rice or Fish Dishes, and a couple of self service local shops (hardly supermarkets) but they do provide essential food and drinks. The local baker arrived daily between at 0645 with fresh bread & a fruit and veg truck visited on Friday afternoon. Fresh fruit is always available from either the garden or the cottage staff who have second or third jobs growing bananas. Most important there is also a single pump petrol station as fuel can be scarce. Car hire for a small 4-WD costs around 30US\$/Day

and is a must for shopping, only 1.5 miles but a mountain to climb on the way back with your shopping bags. A curious fact emerged in that the local population has it's main meal of the day at lunchtime, a two hours affair across the hottest part of the day.

All things radio kind of from end to end.

Royal Mail get us off to a great start; having established the licence criteria, a copy of my UK Licence & an application form from the Internet, we mail off our US \$30 carefully to Commonwealth of Dominica registered mail (actually only registered to the point it leaves UK), and the package ends up in the Dominican Republic. After consulting George James in the Telecoms Office he suggest a duplicate as it could be months before the original surfaces. George is also licenced but not active but a great guy to have around. The replacement eventually arrives, and two days later the original so we are OK. The good thing about a J7 licence you can collect at your port of entry. Tell George your flight details and he will arrange it to be there with airport customs, they then know what you are taking all that funny equipment into the country for.

Prior to leaving home I had decided not to haul heavy baggage so the "Spider Poles" and coax, wire etc I had forward shipped by TNT to DOM (I thought). Collected Wednesday they were supposed to reach DOM by the following Monday, we were to arrive Wednesday to collect and clear on entry. However TNT lost the two boxes in Leeds- a great start. Eventually they reached Antigua on the Friday after we arrived in DOM. They were shipped to the second airport on Dominica (Canefields) via DHL who had no paper work to clear them so they sat there until by chance our friend Lambert J73LC had occasion to visit customs and noticed the boxes addressed to me at Sea Cliff Cottages. A quick telephone call and the good news so with 3-days already lost we might have some antennas, however it was not that easy. On Monday (Day-6) up at 0600 for the 2-hour drive to Roseau we had to hire a pickup and driver, on arrival DHL directed us back to the airport where customs demanded upfront payment to secure release in case we sold the items before leaving. Unable to secure the correct paperwork (the office closed early due to a family funeral that afternoon) and rather than return empty handed I decided to bite the bullet it sounded a lot of money in ECD's (Eastern Caribbean Dollars) but only a few Pounds Sterling. Once paid and a receipt in hand we quickly loaded the boxes and away for no other reason than it was now 2pm and with nothing to eat since 0530am I was hungry, I also wanted to take advantage of being in town to visit a decent supermarket and stock up with essentials. At this point I remembered George James had sent me a text to request I collect my surplus US\$ from the Telecoms Office. A great chance to meet him in person, and thank him for all his efforts on my behalf. Finding a parking space in downtown Roseau is worse than London's Knightsbridge on Friday afternoon. Eventually my driver dropped me off and drove around the block while I raced upstairs to meet George. It had to be a short but pleasant meeting during which time the receptionist raided the safe and produced my original dollars and application form. We now had to get home before dark as the roads are full of dustbin sized potholes so maximum is 25mph ever but mostly around 15-20mph. The 32-miles back home seemed to take a lifetime over the narrow winding mountainous roads at 15-mph.

At this point let us go back to Day-1 when having been told about the WiFi link my first reaction was oh good let me check my emails for news of the missing parcels.

I should have been suspicious when my filtered mains multiway lit up earthed, I just exchanged it for a second one and connected the laptop, it booted OK then zap dead as a dodo. A quick check revealed nothing out of the PSU. The site owner was busy trying to fix a plug in the bathroom washbasin overheard my groans and offered an old laptop used as a spare by the site manager. Once into the internet I read all emails and

dropped one into the office to let them know the situation. At this stage we had no idea as to the location of the missing parcels. Down below in the garage was a full sized door which enabled construction of a suitable operating desk using a pair of patio tables, a borrowed bed sheet from the laundry, and things started to look up. I downloaded SDC and a few other bits including the Microham router and drivers. I soon had the system up and running including the K2 CAT so I could now concentrate on antennas if they ever arrived. Remember next time put all software on a memory stick just in case. Oh dear we have no dits just dahs, my wife graciously hand carries my "Profi-2 Paddle" so she looked alarmed perhaps something I have done she enquired. A few quick checks and without doubt the cable was open circuit. In fact it was open circuit on the dit-core 5" up from the point it left the paddle body. A close examination showed a tell-tale crush mark, as is my way I wrap the cable around the paddle body which weighs 1.5Kgs so clearly something happened.

I did have a Plan-B for antennas in that I hand carried an OCD (off-centre-dipole) based on 80m. Roughly 90ft one side and 40ft the other fed by 300-ohm ribbon and a balun plus about 30ft of coax. A site survey show several potential tall trees all in the wrong direction. I had a 50m reel of 1.5mm Kevlar Rope and with the aid of the garden boys we managed to raise the ends up around 30ft but a bit close to the cottage to enable a main lobe into Europe on 40m. This was soon confirmed by severe RFI even running 10w to the K2. More worrying was the micro-HAM keyer and the USB computer port had more RF than they could handle. Lots of ferrite (clip-on's) helped but never cured the problem. I was later to learn part of the problem was a lack of a mains earth on the cottage wiring. Earth and Neutral appeared to be the same thing so I left well alone. A single street light had it's junction box wide open and used one phase plus a ground stake as far as could be seen. By this time we had reached Day-3 and not a lot further towards sending RF out to the wide world. Being somewhat jet-lagged I called it a day hoping for a better day, Saturday (Day-4) confirmed the location of the parcels so pressure was off but more wasted time kicking heels until Monday. Lots of time was wasted trying to resolve the RFI problems as unless the keyer worked we had no integrated station. Memo for next time take an alternative although as a last resource the K2 internal keyer could be used and back to pen & paper logging. Ah high technology..



J79WR 40m-Vertical 2-elevated radials

It is worth mentioning at this point that fair skinned Europeans only have around two hours in the morning and again late afternoon to work outside in the sunshine. The humidity is also very high, I was chastised a few times by locals for not having a long sleeved shirt on when working outside. Around every 30-minutes it would have required a change as by then clothing felt as if it had just come out of the washing machine, a typical day saw at least three changes but the good thing was having rinsed them out they were dry again within the hour.

On our return from Roseau (Day-6) with the parcels we could get cracking and the evening was spent unpacking and sorting the contents. We managed to reposition the OCD and get the K2 up to something near full power without causing problems the following day and at dusk (2330z) a quick tune on 40m found Bob MD0CCE calling CQ. I ignored two calls for supper in order to have a quick QSO with Bob. A little later after supper I worked LY7M so convinced all was well I retired. Unfortunately overnight we had our first (of many) squally showers with wind blowing off the sea, up the canyon and making very turbulent air resulting in the OCD being draped around several high bushes and impossible to recover only with the aid of cutters.

With the Commonwealth Contest only 3-days away the 40m Vertical went up ty-wrapped to a small shrub. The elevated feed point and two elevated radials helped support it. The 12m Spiderpole had a 34ft wire taped to the outside leaving the feed point around 6ft above ground. A fan dipole for 10-15-20 had been constructed and an 80m inverted L using a second 12m Spiderpole was added so by Friday evening (Day-9) we were ready for the 0600 local time start. A final check on the entire set up was carried out and I decided to use SDC in logging mode with no CW from the computer and no CAT. This would mean manually telling SDC I had changed bands no hardship so long as I remembered (twice I forgot) and using the little microHAM CW Keyer as a stand alone.



With the alarm set for 0500 local time I had vague recollections of hearing the wind during the night. A quick shower and breakfast and ready for the off on 40m then to 80m before daylight breaks. Dave (G3TBK) J88DR had given all the travellers a breakdown of what to expect by time and band during the Commonwealth. Forty metres got off to a fine start with the vertical but with just 70watts I was going to be down the pecking order. Try 80m and almost zero power, now what, try 20m same oh dear.

It was just beginning to break first light and peering out of the window confirmed my worst fears the fan dipole, and the 80m-L were hanging in tatters with palm branches decorating the wires like christmas toys. Needless to say considerable time was spent recovering the wires and a makeshift 80m antenna was put together which proved largely ineffective although a few UK and Canadians were worked. The 15m and 20m dipoles worked very well as slopers with the bottom some 10-12 ft above ground. I guess leaning them forward towards Europe helped but they were no answer to a decent beam. The 40m vertical was a revelation and Bob 5B4AGN was way over S9 some 2-hours before sunset. Working VK2BJ and VK6GN long path with 70w was satisfying however a QSO with 9V1 was spoiled by Eu callers.

Having struggled on until 03z I finally decided to take a break until the local sunrise and on my return found several strong UK stations on 40m very little in the way of VK/ZL short path but it seems dipoles were the order of the day according to Dave J88DR on

40m.

The plan had always been to have just a 40m antenna and add a top loaded 160m vertical for the last week. In the event by working split shifts 22z through 01z and 04z through 07z then 10z-12z this left little time for 40m bearing in mind we were supposed to be on holiday as well. Local time was GMT -4 so going to sleep at 3am and up at 6am soon took it's toll.

Having built up the vertical on the day following the Commonwealth Contest arrangements were made to lift the antenna late afternoon and in my haste to get the job finished I slipped on a steep grassy bank ending up sitting on the inside of my ankle and sliding about 25ft down the bank into the jungle. It would have been difficult to climb back up without the mishap but with a damaged ankle nigh on impossible. Having managed to stand up, I lashed a guy rope which somehow came down with me to a tree and just hoped as I pulled myself out it would hold as the other end was at the 30ft level on the vertical. It had a good back rope tied to two water tanks and held OK. By now being almost dark the chance of finishing the antenna had gone and with a swollen foot pleading to be removed from my shoe I called it a day but not before connecting up the coax although sadly the elevated radials would have to wait. After a good 60-minutes soak in iced water and confirmation that nothing appeared broken I raided the medical chest and found a spray for sprains and sports damage. I just could not resist having a listen on 160m so approaching 00z I put the rig on and the band was quiet then at 0015z IK4GME popped up with a loud signal, tongue in cheek and with just 70w I went for broke and he came back 579; G3FPQ was calling CQ so a quick exchange, and next in line Bob MD0CCE by 0038z my non resonant antenna seemed pretty good. At this time my right foot was pleading to be lifted off the floor so reluctantly I switched off. For several evenings I sat in the operating chair foot soaking in a roasting tin topped up with iced water from the fridge and by using a soup ladle could manage steady and regular soothing of by now jet black bruised toes. It did however keep me on the air.

Conditions on 160m went downhill after the first evening and regular late evening rain showers offshore increased the QRN to impossible levels at times. One good bonus was that I secured the loan of a very old Heath Kit Amplifier using a single 4-500 which allowed me to run approaching 500w. In the end I finished up with just over 700 Q's on 160m and strangely only 150 of these were USA. Quite a lot of UK got into the log including the usual GMDX high rollers. I also tried something never previously done a self spot on the Dx-Summit the first resulted in several speculative calls from Europe. Probably the highlight was after three attempts was completing a sked with Greg ZL3IX at sunrise plus all the many thank you QSL's for a new one.

Once home I faxed a copy of the licence to the DXCC Desk and put the logs straight on to LOTW. Paper cards are in hand via UX5UO Gennady has promised a quick turnaround.

For the technically minded the 160m antenna consisted of a 56ft wire taped to an 18m Spiderpole with 3-28ft top loading wires connected at the bottom of the 3rd section down the pole. Anything above this is too thin. The feed point is about 2ft up the pole and by using 4-guys at the 20ft level (20ft out) the radials can go up at 45-deg and join each guy rope half way up it to provide an anchor for the elevated radial. The halfway point can also be tied back to the mast to provide a secure anchor when the radials are pulled out. An interesting point was that the antenna before raising the radials was way down on 1725Khz and just raising a pair brought the resonant point up to 1880Khz so a quick 2-turn series coil wound round the fiberglass mast at the bottom brought it to 1831Khz. A simple UN-UN removed any traces of RF on the feedline even running 500w.

Next year? The boss is adamant not J7 so may be S7 (if we can straighten out 80m) or a number have asked what about 7P both for BERU and 160m. With plenty of gear stored in Bloemfontein the 7P border is only a 60-minute drive away if we can find a ham friendly hotel. That way she gets a final few days break in Durban or Capetown.

Ascension – worth giving up a UK Hogmanay for?

Gordon, G3USR recounts what was possibly the very first DXpedition of 2009

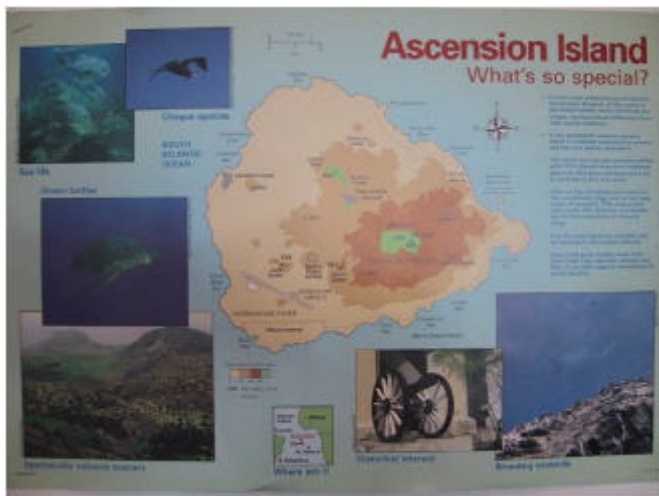
On Hogmanay evening 2008, along with five members of the Cambridge University Wireless Society, I boarded a Ministry of Defence chartered Boeing 767-300 at RAF Brize Norton for the 10 hour flight to Ascension. The original schedule allowed us to spend New Years Day at home, however, MOD operational considerations necessitated short notice rescheduling to the last day of 2008. As MOD service flights are 'dry', Happy New Year was limited to flight attendants in festive party hats and a glass of lemon squash. Our sacrifice in the cause of Amateur Radio knows no bounds!



Ascension Island

Ascension is located just south of the equator in the South Atlantic. It is a British Overseas Territory and is governed by an Administrator on behalf the Governor who is resident on St Helena, 750 miles to the Southeast. The island covers an area of 34 square miles whilst the nearest point of Africa is Liberia which is nearly 1,000 miles to the north east.

The weather is warm all the year round rising to a maximum of 30 degrees C although a breeze from the South East Trade Winds moderates temperatures. Rainfall is variable and hard to predict. The island is volcanic with its lower slopes and Western side made up of volcanic ash with little vegetation. Green Mountain, which rises to a height of 2,817 feet at the centre of the island, is lush and green. Arrangements had been made to rent 'Garden Cottage' which is located high up on the side of Green Mountain and promised a clear take-off to North America, the UK & Europe and Asiatic Russia & Japan.



Welcome Board in the airport transit lounge



Photo 1: View of Green Mountain from the cinder golf course with our QTH just below the right hand saddle.