

## Making a Meal of it:

### Northern Australasia and Southeast Asia—April 2016

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Occasionally one gets faced with a choice that isn't really a choice at all. There is actually only one viable option. This story started that way.

During 2015, I had sold the flying school that had been keeping me too busy for over a decade. Apart from suddenly actually having a little time that I could call my own, I had also liquidated an investment made over about 13 years, and there was a bit of cash lying around.

One of my pet projects that had been neglected while the flying school was consuming me was my quest to visit 100 countries, and to operate my radio from as many of them as possible. I have been a keen supporter of the DX Foot Club<sup>1</sup> for some years. I had visited over 70 countries and operated from over a dozen of them. I ranked third in South Africa on the list of countries visited, and was a contender for the top spot on the radio operating list. More specifically, the spot for the first South African to operate from all continents was still open. I had operated from four continents, leaving South America and Australasia<sup>2</sup> undone. Another South African needed only one continent, so there was no time to waste.

Attempts to do a combined trip to South America and Australasia came to naught. The Pacific is a big place, and travelling between those two continents is almost as difficult as travelling to and from Africa. I would require two separate trips.

My decision to do South America first resulted in a trip to join the Caribbean Contesting Consortium in Curacao for the CQ World Wide CW contest in November 2015. That story has already been told<sup>3</sup>. It left me with 83 countries visited and five continents activated. The time had come to put that final continent on the air.

### Quo vadis?

Before the South American trip, I had done lots of homework on activating Australasia. Both Australia and New Zealand were easy in terms of licencing, as both share CEPT compliance with South Africa and no licence paperwork would be required. Australia is relatively accessible, but requires an expensive visa. New Zealand requires no visa, but is literally at the opposite end of the planet, requiring a time-consuming and expensive journey. Neither of these destinations would combine easily with other countries. If I was going to spend the time and money to travel, I wanted to at least see more than one new country!

One area that promised far better returns was northern Australasia. Not only can one easily hop between several countries, but nearby Southeast Asia with its dense collection of unvisited countries

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<sup>1</sup> <http://dxfc.org>

<sup>2</sup> If you speak Mericun, you may know this place as Oceania.

<sup>3</sup> <http://b.org.za/stories/carib2015.pdf>

was also ripe for the picking. Even amateur radio licencing would not be too difficult in some of these countries.

I picked the brains of long-time buddy James Brooks<sup>4</sup> in Singapore and of Steve Telenius-Lowe<sup>5</sup>, who had hosted me on Bonaire in December and had been a resident of East Malaysia for many years. Both had valuable hints, and James reiterated his long-standing invitation to visit and to use their home in Singapore as a base from which to venture forth. He also provided lots of information on low-cost airlines that make Southeast Asia very accessible. I looked forward to the visit, not only to pursue my travel goals, but also to spend a bit of time with James and Koh Lee Lian. On my previous visit to Singapore, I had really enjoyed what little time I was able to spend in their company.

I had a few dilemmas. The South African rand had collapsed dramatically late in 2015, causing the cost of travel—and indeed most imported things—to skyrocket. In addition, December and January, which would be the easiest from a vacation leave point of view, would be a peak tourist season in Southeast Asia, with crowds clamouring for vacation space and with prices to match. Besides, I had run out of vacation time at work after my Caribbean trip, and the supply would not be replenished until April.

I decided to leave as soon as possible after 1 April, preferably making use of some of the public holidays during that month. Planning started in January, allowing enough advance notice for early-bird fares on the low-cost airlines.

## Priorities

I had a few objectives with this trip. One was to play with my radio in Australasia. Another was to fly in Australasia, and drive in the traffic there. Another was to cover the three CQ Zones in that area (zones 26, 27 and 28) as much as possible. I'd visited Zone 28 before, having spent a lot of time in Malaysia and Singapore in a previous job, but the other two zones would be brand-new to me. Zone 26 covers most of Southeast Asia, while Zone 27 covers the Philippines, the Marianas and the surrounding islands.

I preferred not to carry radio equipment, as some of the countries on the itinerary would frown upon such baggage. I therefore had to find hosts that would allow me to operate from their stations, in countries that would provide operating permission to a roving South African. This simple-sounding requirement proved to be much harder to meet than I'd expected.

## Preparation

Over the next few months, I got in touch with numerous individuals in Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Southeast Asia. Some never responded; others were very helpful and some very firmly tried to discourage me. I explored as far afield as the Maldives in the west and Guam in the east; Myanmar in the north and East Timor in the south.

James was a great source of local knowledge and recommendations. He suggested several ideas that had not occurred to me. The most extravagant of these was the idea of operating our radios from the Spratly Islands.

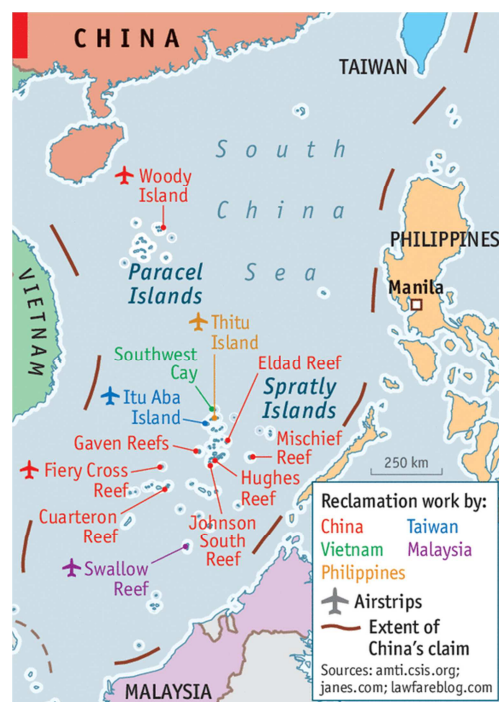
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<sup>4</sup> Amateur radio callsign 9V1YC.

<sup>5</sup> Amateur callsign PJ4DX, formerly G4JVG and 9M6DXX.

Six countries claim all or part of the group of over 100 reefs, cays and islands. Internet sources list more than a dozen occupied islands. In principle, any of the claimants can authorise amateur radio operations from there, although many of the early operations used self-assigned callsigns with 1S prefixes.

There is probably no single amateur radio “country” that has the same mystique in my mind. In 1983, I was a teenager and a newly-minted radio amateur, keenly anticipating the appearance on the air of a German expedition to these much sought-after islands. They never appeared. As they approached an island occupied by Vietnamese troops, their boat was shot to pieces. The two crew members and four expeditioners drifted on the open sea in a small lifeboat for about ten days. Two of the Germans did not survive. Although many expeditions have come and gone in the three decades since, the mystique of that location has never diminished in my mind. James’s suggestion of operating from there was almost too good to be true.



Map of the disputed territory.  
(Stolen from economist.com)

To be sure, it was not a decision I could take lightly. Not only was it an expensive undertaking, it would also consume more than a week of my precious travel time. I estimated that I could have covered at least four other new countries in that time. Nevertheless, the idea appealed to me and I was soon won over.

The obvious place to operate from would be Pulau Layang Layang, or Swallow Reef, an artificial island off the coast of the Malaysian province of Sabah featuring a naval base and a dive resort that is in use for about half of the year. James found a cancellation at the resort during early May, and paid the deposit. I bought my plane tickets accordingly. The race was now on to obtain the necessary paperwork. Because of the political sensitivities around the islands, radio operations would require not only a Malaysian radio licence, but also a permit from the security apparatus in the Prime Minister’s office.

During this period, two other Spratly operations were announced. Two Finnish operators would be there in early April, followed by a solitary German in late April and the two of us in early May. James was worried that they would diminish demand for our operation. I was not too concerned, as neither other operation appeared to be planning anything on a very large scale. Radio hams breed faster than you can work them, and I was confident that there would be enough demand left over.

I had already contacted two potential hosts in Australasia. One of them was Godfrey Yin<sup>6</sup> in Kota Kinabalu. Godfrey offered the use of a guest bedroom with radio equipment, and had set the ball rolling to get me an East Malaysian licence. I now had to ask him to assist in renewing James’s previous licence too. I also asked him about a callsign for Spratly. Officially, there is no special

<sup>6</sup> Amateur callsign 9M6GY.

Malaysian prefix for the islands. Over the years, some operations had used short callsigns with 9M0 prefixes, while others had used longer special callsigns with 9M4 prefixes, which were not uniquely identifiable as Spratly. James felt that a 9M0 callsign would be essential, as interest would be very limited if we used a 9M4 callsign. Recent operations had, however, not been able to get 9M0 callsigns. Godfrey indicated that he would not be able to help, as the local office did not have the authority. I would have to directly negotiate with Headquarters in Kuala Lumpur.

Both the April operations announced short 9M0 callsigns, so there was hope that we could get one too. I contacted both groups even while our Spratly plans were still quite tentative, asking for information on licencing in Malaysia. I did not receive a response from the Finns, but Michael Noertemann<sup>7</sup> was very helpful. He provided me with contact details for the correct person in the frequency assignment division. Although email requests to her went unanswered, I was able to get the process in motion with some persistent telephone calls.

During the next few months, I tried to juggle exchange rates and plane ticket prices to best advantage. There was always the hope that our currency would rebound somewhat, but at the same time rising oil prices and reduced lead times were driving ticket prices upwards. I eventually hammered out an itinerary that would include Singapore, East and West Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Macau, Thailand, Myanmar and hopefully Spratly and Brunei.

I continued to hunt for operating locations. By the time I departed, arrangements were in place for Singapore, Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand and East Malaysia. Spratly was pending and finding an accessible operating location in West Malaysia was proving harder to arrange than expected.

About ten days before departure, I contracted a cold. I tried to treat it with vitamins, lots of sleep and saline rinses, but about four days before departure I realised I was in trouble. I visited the doctor and collected an armful of medicines, including antibiotics. At least things started clearing up the day before departure.

## Singapore and Bali

In late April, I jumped on a series of flights to Singapore, with stops in Nairobi and Abu Dhabi. At least the tortuous journey had one advantage—the latter stop was a new country for me! I left home on Friday morning and arrived in Singapore more than 48 hours later. James spent some time showing me the expedition equipment and the luggage. Over the course of his many trips, the packing list had been honed to a bare minimum, allowing a reasonable signal to be put on the air within the constraints of airline luggage allowances. There was some finesse involved, as airlines had to be picked based on their proven attitude to overweight baggage. The two of us would carry over 100 kg of luggage on our trip—a far cry from the hand-luggage-only travel mode that I was accustomed to!

Neither the callsign for Spratly nor the permit was in hand by this time. We had requested 9M0Z, which fits well with the many southern African callsigns with 'Z' suffixes that I've held in the past<sup>8</sup>. The wheels of bureaucracy turned slowly—and I hoped surely—in Malaysia. James was very worried. Both of us were sending regular emails and James was making several phone calls a day, mostly

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<sup>7</sup> DF8AN, who operated just before us as 9M0S.

<sup>8</sup> 3DA0Z, 3DA6Z, V51Z, ZS0Z, ZS3Z, ZS6Z, ZS9Z, ZS9Z/ZS1. And, of course, ZS6EZ.

unanswered. For a while, the licence office demanded the security permit before issuing the radio licence and the Prime Minister's office demanded the radio licence before issuing the permit...

I spent an hour or two operating the radio<sup>9</sup>, marveling at how different propagation conditions were to what I was accustomed to. James and I even took a run through the adjacent Green Zone (more on that topic later) to get some fresh air.

The next day, I caught a flight to Bali. I was booked in Dede Sudarsana's<sup>10</sup> hotel in Denpasar, and he would have the licence ready for me. Dede hosts a steady stream of amateurs and has the contacts to obtain operating permission. Fortunately, even though the list of eligible countries for licencing did not include South Africa, my American licence opened the door for me.

My arrival in Bali was not exactly routine. Although immigration formalities passed uneventfully, the customs official took an inordinate interest in a few dozen sachets of vitamin powder in my baggage. My explanation that I needed the multivitamins for recovery from my deadly disease of the previous week fell on deaf ears, and they took the sachets away to be tested. The customs official eventually returned after about an hour, looking disappointed.



Dede and Chris in Dede's station.

I spent a very relaxing two days in Bali. I operated from the club station in the hotel<sup>11</sup>, with a plaque on the door proudly displaying the callsign YB16IARU. I worked mainly Europe. Conditions were interesting, and very different to what I was accustomed to. I also visited Dede's personal station. I marveled at the numerous high-end radios in his collection, and many dozens of award certificates on the walls.

During the morning, I went running down the coast. The most notable feature of the waterfront pathway was the series of irresistible

swimming pools at all the fancy resorts. About 5 km from the hotel, I left the coast and cut inland through thick jungle, to get back onto the main road. I was amazed to find a rather overgrown monument in the jungle, featuring the names of the victims of the 1974 Pan Am crash in Bali. I also took a swim in the bay. That venture wasn't too successful due to the shallow water presented by low tide, but the assortment of brightly-coloured fish, the coral and even a few bright-red starfish made the swim an interesting one. Later in the day, I rented a bicycle and pedaled up and down the beach walkway as far as it went, taking dozens of pictures along the way. I finished the day with a great local meal.

One of the aspects of Bali that I enjoyed was the fact that things were rather cheap, even for a South African. It was a refreshing change. Traveling in Europe or the USA is often painful, as our money is practically worthless there. However, in Bali I could actually eat and do touristy things without flinching.

<sup>9</sup> 9V1/ZS6EZ.

<sup>10</sup> YB9AY.

<sup>11</sup> YB9/N3EZ.



Technically, Australasia was in the bag. I had finally operated from all continents, and there were two more Australasian stops to go!

## The Philippines

The next day, James met me in Singapore airport during my stopover on the way to Manila. He showed me how things were being automated to reduce the dependence on unskilled workers—exactly the opposite to what we experience at home! We had a great meal while comparing notes on life, the universe and everything. James is great company, with a vast store of good stories and a great willingness to share them.

I was collected at Manila airport by Robin and Christine Go<sup>12</sup>. I had first contacted Robin around 1985, when he was my first Philippine contact on the low frequency bands. I was put in touch with them during my attempts to secure a station to operate from by one of my early amateur radio mentors, Roland Mensch<sup>13</sup>. Roland and Vera had spent some years in Manila at the turn of the century, making friends with the Go's in the process. I was whisked to their home in the southern suburbs, to a hearty welcome and a lavish meal. I did some operating from his radio station<sup>14</sup> during the late evening. In a few hours, I worked all continents but Africa.



Local radio amateurs enjoying a lavish meal at the Go home: Warren Uy DU1EIB, Robin Go DU9RG, Christine Go DU3YL and Thelma Pascua DU1IVT are seated. DU1/ZS6EZ Chris R. Burger, Roger Flores DU1KT and Ramon Anquilan DU1UGZ are standing.

The following morning started with a lavish meal. Robin had a conference to attend, so I joined Christine on her daily errand to pick up and drop off the grandchildren. We stopped in a downtown mall for a lavish meal. Later that day, we returned home to a lavish meal with a number of local amateurs. Thelma Pascua, the president of the Philippine Amateur Radio Association that had issued my operating permission, mentioned that they were in the process of

establishing a Lifetime Achievement Award. I mentioned to her that the South African Radio League had just introduced an Amateur Radio Hall of

Fame, and explained the nuts and bolts of the nomination and election process in detail.

The following morning started with a run around the neighbourhood, returning to a lavish meal. After another lavish meal with Robin and Christine at a local mall, we braved the traffic before they dropped me off at the airport for my flight to Macau.

<sup>12</sup> DU9RG and DU3YL.

<sup>13</sup> DK3GI.

<sup>14</sup> DU1/ZS6EZ.

## Macau

Macau is a weird place. Situated right next to Hong Kong, it shares Hong Kong's status as a Special Administrative Region within China. Like its neighbour, it was leased from China in the early twentieth century, but by Portugal instead of Britain. It is basically a gambling den, with no visa requirements and no budget accommodation. I had to reserve accommodation in advance, and the accommodation accounted for more than half of all the money that I spent on this entire trip! There is some evidence of the old Portuguese town, but most of the town consists of glitzy casinos with flashing neon lights. I got directions from the Internet. Take Bus 26. Travel 19 stops. Get off at the Inner Harbour Public Car Park. Walk about 10 minutes. Simple, right?

There were a few snags. Bus 26 demanded cash, and did not give change. I was not about to pay for a \$ 5 bus trip with a \$ 50 bill. Fortunately, several passengers chipped in with small change and I was on my way. Unfortunately, it was difficult to see how many stops we were passing, as late at night the bus did not stop at every one. A fellow passenger, a returning young local working in Taiwan as a film script writer by the unlikely name of Galilee, was very helpful. She looked up the name of the hotel on her smart phone and told me that she would be getting off very close to my destination. Home and dry!

Not quite. We were the only passengers left on the bus—which was being driven with a fierce determination that I often see in our minibus taxis—when we suddenly jerked to a halt. An unintelligible exchange in some version of Cantonese ensued, and Galilee indicated to me that we had been on the wrong Number 26 bus. We had to get onto another Number 26 bus which was parked nearby, in total darkness. After a while, that bus came to life. We had to pay another fare. And after more than half an hour, we were back at the airport. Finally we tackled the famous Route of the 19 Stops. We eventually got to the right stop. By now, Galilee's friend Antonio had given up and left. Her cellphone had died from over-exertion, and needed some fancy footwork with a laptop and a USB cable to come alive again. We stood waiting in the deserted street with the ghostly glow of neon signs for Antonio to arrive. When he finally did, they walked me to my hotel. It was labeled in a very obtuse way; I would never have found it without their assistance. I checked in close to midnight, and found another nasty surprise. They wanted a "room deposit" in cash—something that had not been disclosed on the booking site. My cash reserves were dangerously depleted, especially for a notoriously expensive gambling den!

Although my room was the cheapest in the entire town, picked solely on price, I was pleased to see that it was clean and spacious and had a spectacular view. I was on the top floor, with a 270° view through panoramic windows. It almost felt worth the price. Almost.

I noticed on the tourist map that the attractions were numbered from 1 to 26 in a more or less consistent order from southwest to northeast. In the morning, I ventured down to the harbour and started visiting the attractions one by one, in numerical order. The theme was always the same: East meets West. Portuguese culture meets Chinese culture. It was very hot and humid, and it was a long walk. By the time I got to number 23, I was tired, it was mid-afternoon and it started raining. I was close to my hotel, and decided that I had had enough of East meets West. By the time I woke up from my afternoon nap, it was dark and still raining. I never did get to see numbers 24 to 26. Pity—it would have been interesting to learn more about East meets West. I went out to find something to eat, and had a local meal at a little local restaurant where no English is spoke. After the laborious

process of ordering my meal by gesturing and speaking slowly and loudly, I enjoyed the waiter's astonishment when I actually knew how to wield chopsticks.

The following morning I followed the hotel's directions to the bus depot. I dutifully waited for the right bus. When the fourth Number 35 passed and mine had not yet arrived, I became suspicious. After looking through all the timetables, I eventually noticed that my bus would only start running at 07:00. I was in trouble—there would not be enough time to make it onto my flight. I improvised, and caught the next bus that was headed across the bridge to Taipa Island. I figured I could make a plan once I was on the right island, even if I had to walk. My plan almost worked. Unfortunately, the bus driver did not speak English and my fellow passengers were not very helpful. Instead of telling me where the closest approach to the airport would be so I could get off there and walk, they were absolutely adamant that the bus was not going to get anywhere near the airport, and that walking was out of the question. I eventually opted to get off the bus sooner rather than later, as I was worried that it would head back across the bridge into the city, forcing me to take a long-distance taxi and completely exhausting my cash reserves. My strategy worked, more or less. I walked some distance and then picked up a taxi for a five-minute ride to the airport. The flight to Bangkok was routine, except that I could not help noticing that the Macau Chinese did not share the total lack of obesity that I'd seen in other Chinese populations. East meets West?

## One Night in Bangkok

*Bangkok, Oriental setting*

*And the city don't know what the city is getting*

Champ and JayCie Muangamphun<sup>15</sup> collected me at Suvarnabhumi airport around mid-day and whisked me off to the monthly meeting of the Radio Amateur Society of Thailand. I met new faces attached to many familiar callsigns, and had a lavish buffet meal. I enjoyed seeing the new Icom 7300, a newly-introduced radio which was taking the world by storm, and which I was going to see more of the following week on Spratly.



Champ, JayCie and Chris enjoying a lavish local meal.

*I'd let you watch, I would invite you, but the rigs we use would not excite you*

Afterwards, Champ and JayCie dropped me off at my hotel, not far from their home. I had a bit of time to freshen up before being whisked off to operate their radio station.

*One town's very like another*

*When your head's wrapped in a headset, Brother*

*It's a drag, it's a bore, it's really such a pity*

*To be playing with the radio, not looking at the city*

We visited a local restaurant for a lavish meal before taking in the Riverfront, an authentic fake local market mostly for tourists. Throughout my visit, Champ and JayCie were always dressed in identical T-shirts. The actual design changed perhaps five times, but they were always a matched pair!

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<sup>15</sup> E21EIC and E20NKB.



The next morning, I squeezed in a run around the neighbourhood before returning to their family home. I took some pictures, something I could not do the previous night, before retiring to a local restaurant for another lavish meal. Around mid-day, they dropped me off at the Don Mueang airport for my flight to Yangon<sup>16</sup>.

## Myanmar

I've wanted to see Myanmar for a long time. I think it was James that told me in the Nineties that Myanmar was the last vestige of Old Asia, due to their persistent isolationist policies over many decades. All that has changed now, with e-visas and much more accessible tourism, but the degree to which the country has been overrun by neon signs and ghastly fast food is definitely lower than for other Asian countries that I've seen.

The countryside definitely appeared more developed from the air than I'd expected. Descending over the rice paddies, there were definite signs of extensive industry. Yangon is a relatively small city, but fairly densely built up.

Myanmar's traffic has one unique characteristic: Virtually all the vehicles are right-hand drive, but the traffic drives on the right hand side of the road. Huh? Passengers embark on the left side of a bus, right in the thick of the traffic. Very innovative—or the epitome of mindless bureaucracy?

I arrived at my hostel during the evening. I took a stroll through the streets to get something to eat, but I was too late. Most of the stalls had run out of customers, and I could not really see what they were offering. I eventually gave up, lacking the language skills to order anything without being able to point. The hostel recommended a restaurant down the road, and I went there. It proved to be an interesting locale, being the house that housed first the British supreme command before and during WWII and later General Aung San, the father of modern-day Myanmar and of modern-day political leader Aung San Suu Kyi. I can only assume that the pumpkin curry is a new addition to the menu, as I do not think that General Aung or indeed his predecessors would have tolerated it in their day.

The general consensus at the hostel was that Yangon was not a fascinating holiday destination. My desire to see the countryside was reinforced, and when the Chinese beauty Wu Zhi Hong<sup>17</sup> who shared my bunk bed mentioned that she was departing for some tourist trap in the countryside at 04:30, I jumped at the chance. It was an arduous journey—an hour by taxi, then five hours in a bus, then almost an hour on the back of an open truck up the windy mountain road to the top of the mountain where a kitch gold-painted boulder was perched precariously on a cliff edge, with a pagoda. Although the journey was long, it was interesting. It really was untouched Asia, with rice paddies being worked manually by the roadside and nary a sign of Colonel Sanders. We stopped for lunch under a rusty tin roof with modest tables and hard benches with peeling paint. Using the point-and-order technique, Zhi Hong and I had a delicious noodle-and-egg dish that was very filling indeed, for the princely sum of \$ 0,40. Life doesn't get much better than this.

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<sup>16</sup> If this section doesn't make sense to you, it's time you were introduced to the delights of Chess, the Musical. You can find it on Google using keywords like "sheltered life".

<sup>17</sup> I could also introduce her as Andreal Wu, a Chinese-American civil engineer from Washington DC, but this way makes for a far better story, don't you think?

I managed to get a picture near the kitch boulder, after much scouting<sup>18</sup>.



A dog, a panic in a pagoda.

Beyond the kitch boulder was a small shantytown with a cornucopia of merchandise at rock-bottom prices, and a pagoda. I managed to find the hat of my dreams, a flamboyant trilby<sup>19</sup> in bright yellow. After a great lunch of noodles with unspecified plant material, ordered off a real menu with English and everything, we ventured down the mountain, using the open truck again. The downhill grade served as encouragement to the over-zealous driver, and the trip was excruciatingly uncomfortable. The wild gyrations, the series of near-accidents and the three kids retching their lungs out due to motion sickness all contributed to the special atmosphere. Another aspect that made the descent “different” was the young Buddhist monk who was obsessively taking selfies with his fancy smartphone. I still wonder how that fancy technology and especially the selfies fit into the monk ethic. It did make for an interesting journey, though, especially when Zhi Hong managed to catch a picture of a selfie showing my flamboyant trilby to great advantage.

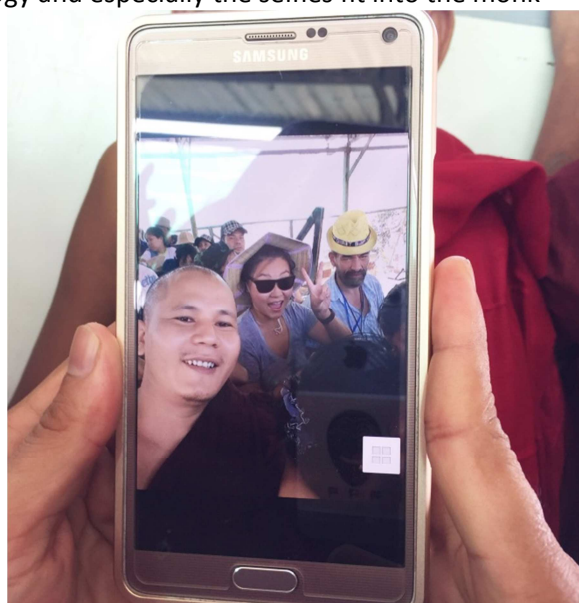
The bus trip was again interrupted by a dinner break. This time, the experience was less agreeable. Besides the nauseating ablution facilities that convinced both of us that we really could wait, the delicious food was a massive ripoff at more than a dollar.

We got back to the hostel around 22:00. I crashed into bed, tired but happy. An email message from James intimated that the long-awaited security permit for our visit to Pulau Layang Layang had finally arrived. Now we needed only the radio licence, and we would be ready to roll.

The following morning, I took an early-morning run through the streets of Yangon. In the immediate vicinity were several green parks with serene walkways, and a pagoda. Just up the next hill was the town’s largest pagoda. Behind it was a bustling street with lots of traffic, and a pagoda.

A short taxi ride past several pagodas, and I was on my way back to Singapore.

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The self-aware monk, the Chinese beauty and the flamboyant trilby. (Wu Zhi Hong photo)

<sup>18</sup> Read the caption backward. I dare you!

<sup>19</sup> Both Zhi Hong and I deemed it a fedora, but later research revealed that it is an upper-crust trilby.

## East Malaysia

My holiday was about to undergo a dramatic change. From a whistle-stop tour with little time in each location, we were about to slow down to a leisurely pace—like it or not. I relished the prospect very much. In the event, reality was even better than I'd thought.

The taxi ride and the flight to Kota Kinabalu were uneventful, although I was intrigued to see that we could indeed travel on an airline with over 100 kg of baggage between the two of us. We booked into our hotel before venturing out into the town itself. I tried to secure an aircraft to rent, but my



Multi-operator radio station on the move! Another backpack completed the kit.

timing was bad. The only local flying school's only trainer was engaged in a Search and Rescue mission and would not be available. I got the young instructor's phone number, though, hoping that the vessel would be found while we were in town. I also tackled another project. I had been trying since before my departure from home to obtain a visa for Brunei. Although Bandar Seri Begawan is apparently not the most interesting tourist destination, it was a shame to let slip the opportunity to see yet another new country. It was a short hop from KK, and definitely feasible as a day trip. Unfortunately, Brunei does not have diplomatic representation in South Africa. I

contacted the embassy in Cairo, who referred me to the embassy in KK. I now contacted them, only to be told that they could not help me in less than three days. The wonders of tourism resulting from easy visas had clearly not reached the shores of Brunei.

We had scheduled several days in KK to allow us to work on the paperwork if required. The flights had been booked months in advance, and could not be changed. We therefore found ourselves in KK with very little to do. Although we still did not have our paperwork, we could do nothing about it in KK. All the inaction was taking place at Headquarters in Kuala Lumpur.

The first morning, I decided to sleep in. I had a lot of catching up to do. James is an early riser, and I was vaguely aware of him working on his laptop near the window. By late morning, Lee Lian apparently suggested to James that he should check my pulse. They were clearly not used to sleep-deprived night owls!

Because James speaks the local lingo and knows the local cuisine, he ended up ordering all the food. We went through each day wandering around town doing some last-minute shopping and taking in the local sights. Each day included three lavish meals, each of which was utterly memorable to my occidental palate.

We operated from Godfrey's station<sup>20</sup> during two of the evenings. Godfrey told us that he had built the fleet of dive boats in use on Pulau Layang Layang, providing an interesting link to our would-be destination. He also provided another personal connection when he told us that a fellow member at the yacht club was missing at sea—the same boat that the flight trainer was looking out for. Both of

<sup>20</sup> 9M6/N1YC and 9M6/ZS6EZ.

us had a chance to play radio, with most of the resulting contacts in Europe. After Bali and Manila, this was my third operation from Australasia. I guess the mission had been thoroughly accomplished.

We also visited John Plenderleith<sup>21</sup> and his wife Honey. We visited the Kinabalu Club for a drink, before visiting their house beyond the airport. John is of Scottish extraction, and a former marine radio officer. He had been to Layang Layang with James on a previous occasion and related many stories of his journeys in southern Africa.

The radio licence for 9MOZ finally arrived on Thursday night, after the close of business. We were greatly relieved. Seeing that Friday was the last possible day before departure, and especially

since Friday is a work day in Malaysia in name only, we really were cutting it a bit fine.



Chris, James and John in the members-only Kinabalu Club.

Three days passed in a flash, and we soon found ourselves queuing in KK airport before dawn for the charter flight to Layang Layang. Some smooth talking around luggage resulted in us soon cruising towards our destination in the South China Sea.

## Pulau Layang Layang

Let me start by saying that Layang Layang is one of the strangest places I have visited. Its status as a disputed territory has been mentioned. It features a Malaysian naval base and a Malaysian dive resort, as a firm statement to the other claimants that this territory was indeed Malaysian. I was therefore intrigued to discover that the majority of guests were in fact Chinese. It was great to have James's skills as a cunning linguist available, as he could point out the origin of all the guests surrounding us at lunch.

The resort consists of a series of flat wooden buildings, raised off the ground and featuring rather rickety plank floors. Some of the previous operations had used the sea wall and positioned their radio equipment in the conference centre, but we were out of luck. The centre was being refurbished for an upcoming event, and was in chaos. The air conditioners had been removed and the electricity had been disconnected. We were therefore forced to operate from our room. James spent some time negotiating with Engelbert, the resort manager. His subordinates did not know who were talking about, and it soon became clear that his name did not make sense to them—he was universally known as Angel Bird!

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<sup>21</sup> 9M6XRO.





Pulau Layang Layang from the southeast. The runway is on the closest edge. The naval base is on the right, with the resort to its left. The lagoon lies beyond the island, with the channel visible to the left of the runway.

We erected James's vertical antenna between our bungalow and the next, and mine to the south of the building near the runway. I was a little apprehensive about my antenna, as I didn't know what the effect of the buildings to the north would be. My fear was borne out by the almost total lack of signals once we turned on the radios. There was very little on the bands. Even Japan, just 4000 km away, was hard to work. Our attempts to find out what was going on were thwarted by the almost total lack of Internet connectivity. James had bought SIMs from local suppliers to ensure independence from the resort's Internet, but both avenues proved equally frustrating. We could not access the Web, but James could get some email in and out using a POP server.

I managed to exchange some text messages with my friend Bernie van der Walt<sup>22</sup> back home. It turned out that the day of our arrival, Mother's Day, had seen one of the biggest solar storms of Solar Cycle 24. The planetary A index had peaked at over 70, wiping out all shortwave propagation in the process. And we were about to start an expedition with the sole purpose of making shortwave radio contacts!

We did manage to eke out some contacts that first day, but longhaul communications were all but non-existent. Our toughest target area would be North and South America, halfway around the world and across the North Pole. We were almost completely out of luck with those areas.

There were two other niggles. One was that the bands were filled with noise, eliminating all weak signals completely. James had more trouble than I did, but we both struggled to hear weak callers. And, of course, due to the ionospheric conditions virtually all the callers were weak.

The second was that the island's main generator had packed up, relegating us to a smaller standby unit. The power would be turned off three times during each day. We soon discovered that the main reception block still had electricity, and tried to organize access to that supply, without success. Although the daylight interruptions would not interrupt our radio schedule too much, as there was

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<sup>22</sup> ZS4TX.



little propagation during the day, it had an impact on our rest periods. James had grave difficulty sleeping in the heat, and although I am accustomed to tropical climes, I also found the humidity uncomfortable. The floorboards heaved whenever someone walked by in the corridor, imparting a ship-like instability to our beds. Of course, if we could not sleep by day, we would find it hard to operate all night.

During Monday, I took a swim across the lagoon. The water was reasonably clear, and I could see the corals on the bottom down to a depth of about 5 m. I swam down the coast all the way to the canal and back in a straight line, a distance of over 1 km. I also took a run around the western part of the island, carefully avoiding the naval base on the eastern side.

Conditions gradually improved, and Tuesday actually proved to be a fruitful day. We settled into a rhythm where James operated the conventional bands, and I focused on the “fringe” bands. James was making far more contacts than I was, and I preferred to stick to the bands where my smaller number of contacts was easier to rationalise.

Wednesday produced more solar action, wiping out the bands to some extent again. I wondered if we would reach 5000 contacts at this rate. I was feeling a little under the weather, with some of the symptoms of my two-week-old affliction recurring. I slept in for most of the morning. When I awoke, James had moved his antenna to the sea wall. He reported a dramatic improvement in noise levels, probably due to more distance from the air conditioners, and was confident that his results would improve markedly. Results definitely started improving as the week progressed, so the sun was finally cooperating. Most gratifying was the improvement in conditions to the Americas. After three days, less than a dozen contacts were in the log from there. At the end of the week, we exceeded 400.

I had some moderate success before sunrise into Europe on a low frequency band where long-distance communications were the exception rather than the rule<sup>23</sup>. Contrary to my expectation, things fizzled out before sunrise. James mentioned that his companion Wilbert Knol<sup>24</sup> had had great success on a previous expedition from East Timor by working through the European sunset, using the very same antenna that I was using. I decided to try the same thing. For the remainder of our stay on the island, I spent the first part of each night looking for propagation to the Americas that was mostly not there, and the last part working through European sunset. It was remarkable to see how closely the contacts matched the sunset. I could seldom hear more than one or two signals at a time. When a European signal became audible above the noise, it was almost always within a minute of that station’s calculated sunset that was being displayed on the logging screen. In some cases, the signal faded audibly even within the few seconds that the contact took.

Thursday started with several text messages, relating the sudden death of a friend back home. It was a strange dose of reality from a world that seemed so far away. During the day, James and I took a long swim together. He is a strong swimmer, having grown up at the seaside, and I had to work hard to keep up. On the return to the quay, I got distracted by the coral reef, and ended up lagging behind. When I finally knuckled down to catch up, I would swim a few hundred metres before looking up. I was constantly turning left, in one case by as much as 90° in about ten minutes of

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<sup>23</sup> 3,5 MHz (or the 80 m band).

<sup>24</sup> PE7T.

continuous swimming. My deviation from the coast took me into deep water—in more ways than one. I ended up in the boat channel. Fortunately, there is not a lot of traffic in those waters, but the one dive boat pilot did take the trouble to deliver a stern lecture to James before I showed up at the quayside where he was waiting.

Friday and Saturday were very productive indeed, radio-wise. Some time during Friday, I worked all continents in the space of a few minutes, and started thinking that 10 000 contacts would be feasible. During Saturday, things improved even more. Our last three hours on the air produced over 800 contacts, taking us close to the 11 000 mark, with almost 100 countries in the log. We closed down somewhat before sunset to enable us to pack up the antennas in the last remaining sunlight. We collapsed into bed after midnight, and were up around 05:30 to get ready to check in for the return flight.

The flight circled the island several times before setting course for KK. Unfortunately, photographic opportunities were limited, with haze and scud making the island hard to see.

On our return to KK, I tried to contact the flight instructor. I had tried to make arrangements by text message for a flight in their training aircraft, with no response. Now, he did not answer his phone. After my second call, he called back. He was very irate, claiming that he had responded to my text message and made all the arrangements, and that I had not pitched up. I wasn't sure how it was possible, since even his return call was still half an hour before the requested flight time! I was disappointed, as I was quite keen to fly in that area.

Fortunately, all was not lost. Some months before, a friend had visited Bintan Island, an Indonesian resort island just off Singapore. I had done some research for her, and now remembered finding a sightseeing outfit in Bintan that operated floatplanes. I set about contacting them. On our return to Singapore, I managed to get in touch with the owner and set up an appointment for the following morning.

Before continuing the story, I must spend a few minutes philosophising about continental boundaries. We all know all the continents. However, for ham radio purposes, each island must be included in one continental area or another. Some are clear-cut. Japan is clearly part of Asia, not so? Others are not so clear-cut. How about some of the Caribbean islands? Or Sicily? Or, indeed, much of the area I was visiting?

As it happens, the fathers of ham radio's Worked All Continents award decided in their 1920s wisdom to include Singapore and the Spratly Islands in Asia while lumping Borneo, all of Indonesia and the Philippines into Australasia. These days, those rules are the subject of much hate and discontent, especially since Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines culturally see themselves very much as part of modern-day Asia.

By WAC rules, our trip back home went from Asia to Australasia and back to Asia in a matter of a few hours.

## West Malaysia

During my preparation for this trip, I had written to several individuals to arrange the opportunity to operate from West Malaysia. I had visited Kuala Lumpur several times in a previous era, but never

got the opportunity to operate. I was hoping to rectify that omission this time. Licencing would be no problem, as I'd already arranged a Malaysian licence for my KK and Spratly operations.

None of the responses were promising. KL is some distance from Singapore and would require an airline flight. Southern Peninsular Malaysia did not seem to feature any accessible radio stations.

An unexpected answer presented itself while I was in East Malaysia. I was working European and North American stations at a fair clip on Morse code when a West Malaysian station called in. His Morse code sounded competent and fast, and on my return to the hotel, I looked him up. He was Zaki bin Din<sup>25</sup>, one of the operators of the 9M2M contest station that Champ had told me about. Although the contest station was up north, near the Thai border, Zaki turned out to be in Johor, just across the channel from Singapore! I immediately shot off an email, and was overjoyed when he responded enthusiastically.

Now, having just returned from Spratly, I was due to visit Zaki in the evening. James and Lee Lian briefed me on transport options, and I jumped on a bus to the Woodlands border post. Several bus changes and two immigration queues later, I found myself in a shopping mall on the Malaysian side of the border. Zaki and his wife Amera were there to welcome me. What should have been a 45 minute trip for them was turned into an ordeal of several hours by traffic associated with an unexpected public holiday. The Sultan of Johor had decreed the holiday after the local team proved victorious in a major football league. Everyone and his uncle made use of the opportunity to make a quick day trip between Johor and Singapore, snarling up roads and immigration facilities alike. Nevertheless, we reached their neighbourhood around sunset and sat down to a lavish meal at a local restaurant. At their home, I met their young children before taking some time out to play with the radio<sup>26</sup>. After making a string of contacts into the US and Asia, I spent more time chatting with Zaki and showing him some tricks of the trade with the contest logging software. They later delivered me back to the border and I jumped onto another bus with standing room only for the hour-long crawl across the Straits of Johor. Even though it was now late, the traffic had not subsided. It was a long trip.



Amera and Zaki in the local restaurant.

I crashed into bed, hoping to snatch enough sleep before the following day's ferry ride.

## Bintan

The trip to Bintan is a one-hour ferry ride from Singapore. Unfortunately, I had not paid enough attention when they told us about good ferries and bad ferries in kindergarten. After enquiring about options in the cluttered departure hall, I unsuspectingly bought a ticket on the Mozaic ferry to Bintan. It departed at 09:00, exactly as advertised. Unfortunately, we were well on the way to Bintan when I realised that it was not going to arrive at 09:00 as expected<sup>27</sup>. In fact, we were going to arrive

<sup>25</sup> 9M2ZAK.

<sup>26</sup> 9M6/ZS6EZ/2.

<sup>27</sup> Really. There is a one-hour local time difference between Singapore and Bintan.

half an hour late and at the wrong end of the resort strip. This was the Bad Ferry—the antique monohull with less than 100 seats, as opposed to the sleek catamaran with over 300. Several people later regaled me with tales of this particular ferry breaking down in mid-channel on several occasions. I guess I got lucky, as we pulled into the harbour only 30 minutes later than I'd expected.

The driver from Air Adventures Bintan was there to whisk me away. The flight school cum joy ride facility is based at Lagoi Bay, on an apparently manmade lagoon in the middle of golf course-like lawns. They operated several types of ultralight floatplanes, including the Maxair Super Drifter 912 amphibian that I was going to fly. Stuart Perkins went through commercial pilot training in the UK as a teenager, where his dad had high hopes for him as an airline pilot. Things didn't work out that way. After a spell as a flight instructor in Florida exposed him to floatplanes, he never looked back. He was now operating this small outfit in Bintan and working to expand into locations in Bali and abroad. He seemed to have carved out a nice niche for himself, treating wayward travelers such as myself to a unique flying experience.



Stuart and his amphibian.

Stuart briefed me thoroughly on the aircraft. I sat in the front seat, presumably so that he could watch me like a hawk. I did most of the flying initially, but after about half an hour I asked him to take control so that I could get some pictures. I needed both hands for this task, as the open cockpit made it uncertain whether I'd be able to retain control over the camera with divided attention. He gave me a guided tour of northern Bintan, including the Treasure Bay swimming pool that I'd seen on the way back from KK and the century-old MV Doulos Phos, which has terminated its illustrious missionary ship career to soon become a five-star resort on Bintan. Stuart also told me about his wedding, where his bride and her Japanese family had sat by the poolside with music from *Top Gun* blaring from the PA, while Stuart flamboyantly landed his floatplane in the pool to meet his bride. He

called it cheesy—I would not have dared. He also told me that the swimming pool was the sixth

largest in the world. At 1 km long, it certainly looked the part. How could I resist?

After receiving my Official Certificate and GoPro recordings of my flight, I did some arm-wrestling to secure transport. Minutes later, I was on my way on a bright-yellow Yamaha scooter, sporting a bright-yellow helmet. I looked and felt very much like a local, only taller. I went to view the Doulos Phos, then found the Treasure Bay resort. It was easier said than done, as the entrance marked Treasure Bay was defunct and overgrown. Another entrance was totally unmarked, and turned out to be the right one. I figured out what a swim would cost, and learned that they would not accept foreign currency. I had to take a detour to the local town to find local money, swimming trunks and



swimming goggles. And, of course, lunch. Lunch came in the form of simple fare in simple surroundings among locals, with barely a buck changing hands.



Now *that's* what I call a swimming pool!

Back at the swimming pool, I was advised to avoid one end of the pool to stay out of the way of tourists on various noisy machines, so I started near the middle and swam all the way to the eastern end. As such, I could only swim about 600 m in a straight line. Still, I don't recall having done that in a swimming pool before. Time was limited, so I walked back to the reception area to cash in my voucher for a Segway ride. Another first—I'd always relished the opportunity to ride one of these babies. These machines were industrial grade, and I zipped around the man-made lagoon at speed, stopping only to take pictures of the most noteworthy features. Being a mall security guard could be a lot of fun, that first day.

I made my way back to the flight school. They delivered me to the resort, from where I would catch the Bad Ferry back to Singapore. It was late. I attempted to buy a cold drink. The \$ 5 price tag quickly dissuaded me. It cost at least ten times the going rate outside that fancy fence.

I got home really late, feeling tired but looking back on a thoroughly enjoyable day in Bintan. I'd achieved my objective: I'd flown in Australasia for the first time and negotiated its traffic for the first time. And, I guess, I'd traversed a continental boundary four times in two days; twice by air, and twice by boat!

## Doing Singapore

I'd been to Singapore at least half a dozen times, but I'd never really had an opportunity to do the tourist thing. James and Lee Lian had taken me around the island on the first day, giving me a grasp of the layout and showing me where the island had been expanded since my first visit. Tuesday would be my first opportunity to play tourist in this town. I took a long early-morning run down the Green Zone, a strip of neatly-trimmed grass that had once been the bed of the Singapore-Malaysia



railway. With the Malaysian government's decision to discontinue the railway service, the lines had been ripped up and the route left as a green haven in an otherwise densely-populated city. I enjoyed the opportunity to view the residential part of the city from close-up. Surprisingly, despite dense jungle in places and expanses of neatly-trimmed grass in others, I saw only one wild animal—a splendid black gleaming Asian spitting cobra. Fortunately, it was as keen as I was to avoid a confrontation, and it hurriedly disappeared into a crevice in a pile of rubble while I hurriedly disappeared further down the green zone.

After cleaning up and packing, I set off on the underground train network to James's office for lunch. James and I took an extended lunch with a lavish meal. As always, I was fascinated by the tales of little islands and rogue sailors and disputed territory, from someone who had been a key player in many of these stories. We also worked in an electronics surplus store. I can state categorically that I would not complain if one of these sprang up in my neighbourhood.



I also had an opportunity to try to get an Oriental experience that I had heard so much about: the durian. This prickly fruit is legendary for its horrible smell and delightful taste. All trains in Singapore feature notices that prohibit the carriage of durians—presumably not for their delightful taste! Unfortunately, durian season had passed. All we could find was a stall selling packaged pieces in cellophane. The smell wasn't all that horrible, and the taste not all that delightful. Seems that I'll have to try the durian thing again some other day.

I spent another hour or two exploring Singapore's Chinatown before returning to James's office. James and Lee Lian drove me to the airport. Thus started another tedious multi-leg journey, via Abu Dhabi and Mahe in the Seychelles. I stepped off the plane the next day and returned straight to my office, quickly getting absorbed into the normal routine. After a three-week absence, there was much to do and many fires to kill.

## Now what?

This trip was unusual in several respects. Firstly, I normally travel alone. This time, I spent a significant portion of the trip in James's company. It was not a bad thing. I was intrigued by the tales of adventure, coming first-hand from one of the living legends of ham radio. I think he was intrigued too. He often laughed about my comments, labeling them anachronistic and me as the Rip van Winkle of amateur radio. I don't mind—I did take an absence of more than a decade from amateur radio to raise my daughter, and relished the opportunity to immerse myself in the novel experience of a suitcase expedition to a relatively rare location. If being mocked was the price to pay, I'm game. Come to think of it, I'm even prepared to stomach the relentless mocking of my stylish trilby!

Secondly, I was entertained by radio amateurs in several locations. It was wonderful to be treated to such unreserved hospitality, including the wonderful cuisine.

The trip was a culinary feast. Probably as a result of South Africa's British associations, my attitude to food is fairly utilitarian. Having the opportunity to experience a series of lavish meals with cuisine quite unlike what I'm used to was a delightful change.

I finally got to fly in Australasia. Now, only Europe eludes me. I would have liked to have flown in the Philippines and Thailand, but between the lavish meals and the public holiday we somehow never quite got around to it. I accumulated eight new countries during this trip, and operated radio from seven new ones. I'm now firmly in first spot on both lists in South Africa, with a bit of breathing room. I am also the first South African to claim operations from all continents on DXFC.

For the entire trip, I needed only one visa, that being for Myanmar. Even this visa was relatively easy to get, with a Web site and a credit card resulting in a visa letter within 24 hours. Most Asian nations have realised that onerous visa requirements discourage tourism, to their own detriment. Their more relaxed stance has definitely led to an increase in tourism as they try to tap the lucrative Chinese market. I can't vouch for all the Chinese tourists, but I do know that visa requirements ruled out several destinations that I would have liked to have visited. I'm sure I'm not alone. Meantime, South Africa continues to go the other way, introducing increasingly stringent visa requirements in the recent past, apparently in a quixotic attempt to stop worldwide child trafficking.

Unlike previous trips, this one is not being followed by planning for another one. Indeed, I'm now regrouping and paying attention to a few other projects that are clamouring for attention. My severely depleted stocks of vacation leave and expendable cash, my changing work environment, my moonbounce antenna that is approaching completion, my protracted PhD studies and my flying career all require some focus. I guess travel will boil to the top of my "to do" list again one day. With 91 countries in the bag, a concerted effort could get me to 100 in a single trip. What will it be? The Caribbean? South America? Eastern Europe? The UK? Only time will tell. For the moment, I'm quite content to squirrel away at the other commitments, with the occasional chuckle as I think back to an amazing three-week journey.