

Going Dutch: My Hilly Holland Holiday

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2015 was an exciting year travel-wise, with a mid-year trip to Alaska to fly a Grumman Goose¹. One would not have thought that another wild trip would be on the cards before year-end. However, with a few long-term commitments dropping from my list of things to do this year, I did have a bit of spare capacity. I obviously also had too much time, as my mind started wandering to ways of activating Oceania² and South America on the radio. I've visited both these continents, but never operated from them. Obviously, this omission had to be rectified, sooner or later. And sooner is always better.

I started making enquiries for operating opportunities in Oceania, but close to Southeast Asia. The idea was to combine a long-envisaged trip to SEA with a brief operation from something to the south. However, despite a lot of research, no obvious solution came to light. The two rental stations that I have been eyeing for years, both seem to have become unavailable recently. In addition, travel and accommodation are hideously expensive late in the year, and it appeared that a delay of a few months would reap handsome rewards.

I also investigated operations from Australia and New Zealand. The disadvantage would be the long travel times, the expensive Australian visa, expensive ticket prices and limited opportunities to pick up a few other countries on the side. Who wants to go to all that trouble and have only one or two new countries to show for it? However, the advantage would be that I could operate my radio from both of these countries without any paperwork, under the CEPT³ agreement.

A lot of staring at the globe went into finding a way to combine South America and Oceania. It eventually became clear that there was no advantage in trying to combine the two. The Pacific is big. Very big.

Finally, I turned my focus to South America. Various enquiries highlighted a few possible opportunities. The most notable appeared to be HK1NA in Colombia and PJ2T in Curaçao, both well-established super stations on the very northern end of the continent. If you are a radio ham, you will understand that this place just happens to be one of the best areas from which to win contests. You're practically inside North America, with an easy shot into Europe. Virtually every station you work earns you full credit for an inter-continental contact, yet there is a relatively short stretch of salt water in between. With the stations being established, there would also be no need for me to carry a lot of equipment on intercontinental flights.

I approached Jeff Maas⁴, who was a regular at PJ2T. Jeff pointed me in the direction of Geoff Howard⁵, the owner of the PJ2T property and prime logistics coordinator. I had met Geoff before on a

¹ <http://b.org.za/stories/USA2015.pdf>

² If you speak English, you would know this place as Australasia, but seeing that the Worked All Continents rules are written in Mericun, I'll stick to the Mericun term.

³ The European Conference of Postal and Telecommunications Administrations has defined requirements under which member nations can allow amateur radio operators to freely operate in any member states. Several nations outside Europe, including the USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa, also honour the agreement. <http://www.erodocdb.dk/docs/doc98/official/pdf/TR6101.pdf>

⁴ Amateur callsign K8ND.

⁵ Amateur callsign W0CG and PJ2DX.

business trip to Ohio many years before. He immediately responded positively, including a generous arrangement that would bring the costs within reach of my third world budget. The game was on.

I decided to aim for my favourite contest, the CQ World Wide CW⁶ Contest at the end of November. Preparation started in all earnest. Getting a visa for the Dutch Caribbean proved to be very, very difficult, as the legendary service of the Dutch embassy in Pretoria had been replaced by a third party application handler called VFS Global. The dysfunctional Web site along with a call centre consisting solely of recorded messages proved very frustrating, and it took many hours of trying to finally get an appointment for the interview.

In the mean time, I read a lot about the cost of plane tickets. I decided to wait a few weeks before buying my ticket, as it was likely that prices would come down.

Amsterdam was the only point in Europe or Africa from which one can easily fly into Curaçao. When I finally bought the ticket, I was dismayed to find that a direct flight to Amsterdam was no longer available. I had to route via Paris. Ironically, I didn't save any money either, as the exchange rate had gone on the slide soon after the project was initiated.

I also spent some time figuring out how to travel around the Caribbean, as the relatively short distances between countries presented an amazing opportunity to accumulate a few new countries.

Falki Aviaton in Curaçao offered a range of American-registered aircraft for hire. I thought I had a practical and affordable way of getting around. However, all attempts to get information out of them failed. Eventually I did get in touch with the principal via a roundabout route, but the news was not good. Things had suddenly changed, and instead of a choice of a fleet of aircraft, there was suddenly only one aircraft available. Also, the owner wanted to accompany me. Somehow it didn't make sense for me to economise by living in a sleeping bag and tent and then handsomely having to pay for some other guy's accommodation!

Unfortunately, the most convenient airline for travel around Curaçao, Insel Air, proved to be a major disaster. I attempted to buy a series of plane tickets from them, which resulted in them repeatedly taking money from my credit cards yet refusing to issue tickets, saying that the transaction had been declined. Shortly before departure, I found myself in a major battle with them and the banks to get my money back so that I could travel. The situation came within 12 hours of sinking the entire expedition.

Departing... almost

I finally reported to the airport on a Friday night, ready to conquer the Caribbean. A Caribbean resident confirmed that they regularly had similar problems with Insel Air's Web site, but that buying tickets at the counter did not present any trouble. I just hoped that the flights would not fill up by the time I got there.

I was somewhat apprehensive about my flight through Paris. In the week before departure, there were multiple terrorist attacks in the City of Light, and border security was at fever pitch. Colleagues wondered about my beard and my relatively dark complexion that made me look somewhat like an Arab, but I assured them that I would hide my beard with a red and white chequered dishcloth,



The Air France Airbus 380, seen from the boarding gate.

⁶ CW is Continuous Wave telegraphy, using Morse code. Microphones are strictly for sissies.

and my tanned arms with a white bedsheet. No-one would be any the wiser.

Our passport control and the airline's checkin desk had no qualms about my visa, but entering the gate area, the security guard was adamant that my visa would not allow me through Paris. His boss came and overruled his decision, letting me into the gate area. However, I was worried. Getting good information on a Friday night is not easy, but dozens of phone calls eventually convinced me that there was a high probability of being turned back from Paris.

Fortunately, an exceptionally helpful Air France/KLM ticket agent was able to secure me a new flight on Monday via Nairobi, using the alliance with Kenya Airways to good advantage. With a bit of negotiating, I managed to re-book a ticket to Sint Maarten, another Dutch Caribbean island, for a relatively small penalty. I was losing three days of my already short trip, but at least I was now hopeful that I would be within reach of Curaçao well before the contest. The biggest variable was whether Insel Air would come to the party.

Seeing that I'd already excused myself from all commitments, I had a very relaxed weekend. My only chore was to pay the penalty fare in person at the international airport, involving a special trip of several hours. On Monday, I caught a mid-day flight and ended up in Nairobi for a transit of about four hours. At the gate, I was accosted by a very suspicious character. He asked many questions, particularly about the reason for my presence in Nairobi. He wasn't buying the story that I was on my way to Amsterdam, and that Nairobi was merely an intermediary stop. I had a rather anxious hour or two when he disappeared with both my passports, despite my protestation. He finally reappeared, and sent me on my merry way with no further explanation or apology.

The flight to Amsterdam and from there to Sint Maarten were relatively uneventful, and I was deposited in the Caribbean, less than 1000 km from my final destination, on Tuesday afternoon.

The Northern Isles

I've long wanted to hit the Caribbean and tick off the 30-odd available counters on my country list. However, given how time-consuming and expensive it had been to get the Dutch visa, I figured that it would make sense to try and cover all the Dutch possessions, so that I would not have to worry about these islands if I ever returned.

In 2010, all the Dutch islands in the Caribbean voted on their future status. Various options were on offer, from complete independence to complete integration with the Netherlands. Aruba had already gone its separate way in 1986, although it remained a member of the Dutch commonwealth. Now, Curaçao and Sint Maarten decided to follow suit, while the remaining islands of Bonaire, St Eustatius (or Statia) and Saba became special municipalities within Holland itself.

The islands consist of two groups. The northern group, consisting of Sint Maarten, Saba and Statia, lies at the confluence of the Windward and Leeward islands. The southern group is the ABC Islands, just off the coast of Venezuela, consisting of Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao (although geographically Curaçao lies between the other two).

For amateur radio purposes, the new arrangement resulted in the deletion of the two previous countries (northern and southern island groups) and the addition of four new ones: Sint Maarten and Saba/Statia in the north, with Curaçao and Bonaire in the south. Obviously, the brand-new countries generated a lot of interest, and tens of thousands of radio hams world wide were actively looking for these new countries on the air. They did not disappoint. With their ready accessibility from Europe and especially the USA, dozens of stations were on the air for several weeks after day one.

I would try to operate from each of these entities. Licencing was relatively easy, as my South African licence would be useable without any special paperwork in all but Aruba, courtesy of CEPT. I set the process for an Aruban licence in motion well in advance. Problems in sending a fax to their offices required some intervention from Emily Thiel⁷, the president of the Aruba Amateur Radio Club. The licence was issued on the Friday of my intended departure from South Africa, while I was on my way to the airport.

I am in the habit of travelling very light, with hand baggage only. This time I was loaded down with lots of stuff. I had to have a sleeping bag and tent for accommodation, and was carrying an antenna and some tools for my ham radio activities. I'd assembled some tent poles and trimmed some wires for a multi-band ground plane antenna, but did not have the time to assemble it before departure.

Now, on arrival in Sint Maarten, I had several chores to take care of. The first was to find a way to get to Curaçao. Once I knew how to get there, I would know how much time I had available in Sint Maarten, and could start planning my other stuff. Imagine my chagrin when I arrived at the Insel Air counter only to find it unmanned. Staff at adjacent counters told me that she would be back at 14:00—almost two hours away. I was tempted to get agitated, but soon realised that the Caribbean did not lightly earn its reputation as a very relaxed place. I spent the time finding out about ferries and flights to nearby Saba and about rental cars.

Once the recalcitrant agent returned, I managed to buy a ticket to Curaçao for Thursday. There was again a problem with the credit card, and I paid cash, knowing that my credit card was again snarled up. Thanks, Insel Air!

I immediately set about organising a flight to Saba. The second last flight of the day was already closed, so I bought a ticket for the last flight. I then ran to the checkin counter and offered my best attempt at smooth talking. It worked, as I was taken on the first flight that would leave in under half an hour. Security and passport control took a long time, and I arrived at the gate after the second announcement admonishing Passenger Burger to report at the gate.

I managed to secure the middle seat in the front row, practically between the two pilots. I wanted the best seat in the house, not only because I was interested in seeing the Twin Otter close up, but because I knew we would be flying into the shortest runway in the world used for scheduled services.

The 20-minute flight was uneventful. Except, perhaps, the landing. The copilot did all the flying until short final approach. At this point, the captain took over. He put the wheels down exactly on the threshold, and the two PT6s strained to provide maximum reverse thrust. However, he effortlessly turned off at the only taxiway, halfway down the 400 m runway. I live at high altitude, and at home few two-seater trainers can land comfortably in that space.

The approach into the island made it amply clear that this volcano did not offer many opportunities for an airport. The airport is on a small peninsula, the only flat space I could see on the island. The 877 m tall Mount Scenery dominates the entire island, and is the highest point in the Netherlands.

⁷ Amateur callsign P43E. Emily was very helpful with local information and licencing, and was also a gracious host during my visit.



Saba through the Twotter's windshield. The runway is on the peninsula to the left.

We filed through the airport to clear passport control. I enquired about a rental car, which the guide book said was the best way to get around. The counter agent looked a little confused, then made some phone calls. This request was clearly not routine. Yes, there was a rental car, but I would first have to take a taxi into town. The rate was exorbitant, but I guess one has to expect high rates in little tourist traps. At this point, we learned that our luggage had not made it onto the flight, as we were too heavy. It all made sense. I had noticed that we were carrying fuel for three hours, which felt a little excessive in good weather for 40 minutes of return flying. No wonder there was no capacity for baggage.

I also shot a video of the plane taking off. Runway 12 is slightly downhill into the prevailing wind. The pilot rotated close to the end of the runway and lifted off into level flight, clearing the end of the runway by not more than a wheel diameter.

I took a taxi into town to collect my rental car. I felt that the agent was a little too anxious about my risk of damaging the car. I pointed out to her that I had never broken any of the hundreds of rental cars I'd used, and I didn't intend to change that pattern. However, after driving on the roads for an hour or so, I realised that her concern had not exactly been misplaced.

The only road on Saba runs the entire length of the island. On the map, it twists and turns with a series of hairpin bends. What is not evident on the map is that it is very narrow, and very steep. When two cars pass, there is very little clearance to either wall or between cars. There are also lots of cars parked on the road. Not that the locals are deterred in any way. Speeds of up to 100 km/h were in evidence. Most of the cars are festooned with scratches.

The road has an interesting history. After both the Dutch government and a Swiss civil engineering firm pronounced a road impossible to build, a local named Lambee Hassell took a correspondence course in civil engineering and started building the road with local volunteer labour. After more than a decade of construction, the road was completed to the site of the future airport in 1958. The first landing at the new site happened in 1959, ushering in a new era of accessibility for the island. Today, tourists come and go several times a day, although Saba remains one of the most unspoiled destinations in the Caribbean.

I returned to the airport to collect my luggage, and watched the landing of the next flight. This time, the pilot did not make the turnoff, and careened down the runway, almost to the opposite threshold. Fortunately, it is not as hairy as it sounds. There is at least 50 m of overrun before the steep plunge down the cliff into the ocean below. Plenty.

Once I'd collected my luggage, I proceeded back to Windwardside, accompanied by a young medical student from New York who had been sitting next to me on the flight. She gave me the low-down on local conditions, including a stern warning to avoid being on the road after dark. Apparently, drunk driving is pretty much the norm on the island. She answered many of my questions about the rather incongruous medical school. More than a quarter of the island's residents are medical students, mostly from the USA. The lecturers are from all over the world. Many are strong on stern warnings to students about how liability suits can ruin your career.

After dropping her off at the campus in The Bottom, I did some shopping and went to look for a place to sleep. By now, my visions of a significant radio operation were evaporating. There was no space on the island big enough to erect my antenna! I looked up a place I'd found on the Internet, which proved adequate, but was on the south side of the island. On the map, it had all looked so flat. I settled in and started improvising an antenna. I hung some wire from a tall tree and set up my station on a little table on the verandah in front of the bathroom. My illustrious plans for a ground plane antenna would have to wait for another site.

I spent about an hour before going to bed and another half-hour after getting up, playing with my radio⁸. It was a lot of fun, albeit somewhat frustrating. The modest antenna, low power and poor location made it very difficult to be heard. I worked only a handful of stations, with most of them being south of me.

The morning before my return flight, I wanted to climb the highest mountain in Holland. The brochures and signs warned that the climb would take about 90 minutes, with as much time again for the descent. I didn't have that much time, so I was hoping that the estimates were made for slobs. On the way to the mountain, I passed a runner who was wearing a marathon T-shirt. He told me that his personal record had been 27 minutes to the top. I was happy. Although I probably couldn't equal his time, at least I shouldn't need the full 90 minutes. The climb was very demanding, and I maintained the highest speed I thought would be sustainable. After 40 minutes, I was at the apex, looking out



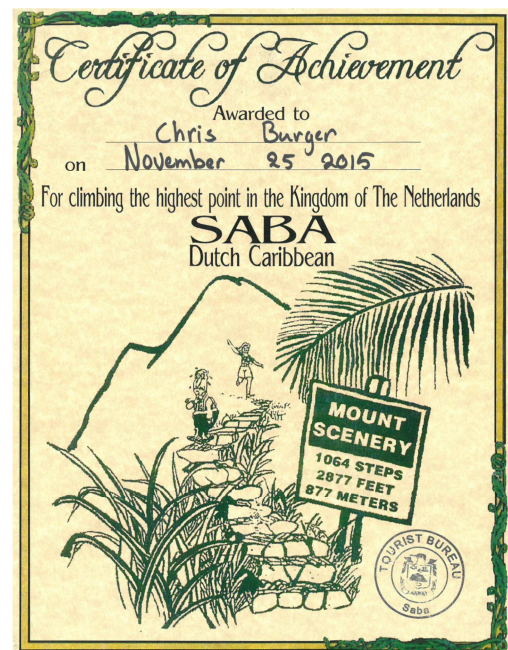
across the countryside—or at least staring into thick fog where the horizon should have been. A headstone boldly proclaims that this peak is the highest in the Netherlands, more than twice as high as any point in European Holland. The descent took slightly longer, with precarious footholds because of the moisture and moss.

At the base, I tried to collect my certificate of achievement for conquering the highest mountain in the Kingdom. The shop was closed. Jelle, a ranger with the Saba Marine Conservation Foundation, tried valiantly to help me, but the shop did not seem to have stock. We bantered for a while about what a blow this omission would be to me, before giving up. The island's museum was closed, and I proceeded back to El Momo for a quick swim before packing and heading back to the airport.

⁸ Callsign PJ6/ZS6EZ.

I had one more project to complete. I'd heard a Finnish operator⁹ on the island the previous night. I could not attract his attention on the air, due to the persistent European pileup, but I was keen to look him up and introduce myself. After unsuccessfully calling all the known hotels on the island, I proceeded to the Tourism office, where Glenn was very helpful. He investigated several rental places on the north side of the island, without success. I later heard from Seppo that he had operated from a private house on the northeast slope, the only sensible place for a radio amateur on the island. With the mountainous terrain, the antenna was invisible from the road.

The tourist office was even able to issue that famous certificate. It's an absolute must-have, as I'm sure you'll agree.



I then drove down to the south end of the island, to the only filling station. It was closed—lunchtime. Sigh... I took a swim in the harbour, after again bumping into Jelle. He lent me a pair of fins and a high-visibility buoy. I swam through the harbour and explored the close-in reefs. It was an exhilarating experience, as it was my first ocean swim since I'd learned to swim strongly a few years ago. I was completely relaxed and was able to move around freely, surrounded by fishes of about 1.3 m long. They were completely unafraid, probably due to the active conservation that the Foundation is overseeing around Saba. This swim alone was worth the trip!

I then drove to Wells Bay on the western edge of the island before returning to refuel and return the rental car. Initially, the rental agent had said that I should return the car with “about the same” amount



Morgan Car Rental: Den of Thieves.

of fuel as I'd received it. I tried to do so. However, as I was driving the 2 km up the hill to the rental office, the gauge slipped one bar below the original level. I didn't think it was a big deal, as it was “about the same”

amount of fuel. However, the other agent who returned the car was

adamant that she was going to charge me \$ 20 for that one bar of fuel. Not bad; at that rate, they can get \$ 160 for a tank of fuel in a small rental car. My pleas that the exorbitant charge had not been disclosed up front fell on deaf ears. I could have filled up the entire tank more cheaply if I'd been warned!

Another taxi ride, and I was on a short flight back to Sint Maarten. Fortunately, this time Winair had planned better. We had only half as much fuel, and they were able to take my luggage. They again flew a very steep approach into the famous Princess Juliana airport, crossing the famous Maho Beach—that of the low-flying Boeings—at ample altitude. After landing I asked the copilot some pointed questions. It was clear that the principles of stable approaches and spooled-up turbines have not made it into the Winair just yet...

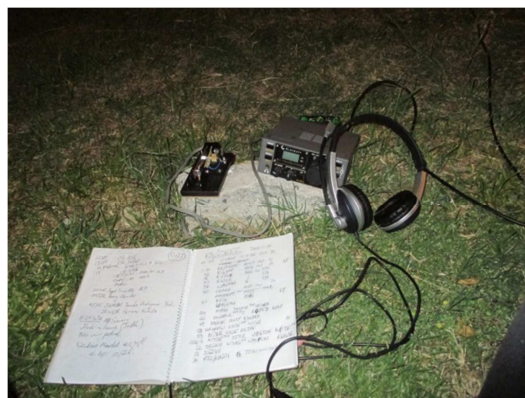
⁹ PJ6/OH1VR.

After yet another bout of passport control, I set about getting a rental car. My homework of the previous day paid off, as I was able to get a car about 30% cheaper than the going rate. However, it soon became obvious how that was possible. This company was off-airport, and took its time to get to their premises. The car was less than pristine. I didn't mind—cheap is good.

My first stop was the restaurant where Marco Ferrante¹⁰ works. Marco and I had a brief chat, as he was getting ready for the evening rush. I then went off to find accommodation. The Seaside Nature Park that had looked so promising on the Internet turned out to be a dust bowl right next to the island's diesel power generators. I was almost relieved to hear that they didn't take *ad hoc* campers. I returned to the restaurant for a delicious meal—my best of the entire trip—and the occasional chat with Marco. It was clear that we came from very different worlds and live very different lives!

Marco and his colleagues gave me some pointers on looking for a camping spot. They specifically warned me that there had recently been some crime directed at tourists, and were adamant that I could not camp just anywhere. I spent some time driving around and investigating all those sites, and eventually gave up. I had only one night to activate both Sint Maarten and its French neighbour, Saint Martin. The small island is shared by the two nations, and counts as two different countries for amateur radio purposes. There is no border control, allowing visitors to move freely between the two halves. I drove up the west coast, looking for a place to camp and play radio. The first suitable spot I found was in Marigot, on the French side. I started building the antenna that had never been built, discovering some surprises along the way. I had to make some serious changes to the design, but was able to erect the antenna in about an hour. Soon after starting, an armoured police vehicle stopped about 20 m from me. Five policemen with bullet-proof vests jumped out, menacingly brandishing their machine guns. I was more than a little concerned, as I knew that the Frenchmen were a little jumpy after the terrorist attacks and concerns about radio transmitters are not always allayed by official paperwork. However, it soon became clear that they were not there to harass me. They were staring at premises across the road. They left just as I was pulling the antenna upright. I could breathe again.

I started calling¹¹, and noticed that the little transmitter was not very happy with the antenna. Its output power was down to about 2 W, half of what it is capable of and pitifully low relative to normal amateur power levels. However, I was amazed to receive a continuous string of callers from the USA and Europe. I played for about an hour, sitting on the ground in a very uncomfortable posture and with really bad ergonomics. I was almost relieved when the time came to disassemble the antenna and pack the car. It had been an exhilarating day, but I still had to find a place to stay. I returned to the Dutch side via the east coast, taking in the sights as much as I could by night.



FS/ZS6EZ, including radio, paddle, headset, battery and log. The logbook is in A5 format.

¹⁰ Amateur callsign FS4WBS, previously PJ7MF.

¹¹ Callsign FS/ZS6EZ.



The famous cabin-baggage antenna, this time at PJ7/ZS6EZ on Sint Maarten.

I was again unable to find a suitable camping spot, so I curled up in the rental car and tried to get some sleep. I got about five hours of fitful sleep before sunrise, and resumed my search for a place to operate from. I found the ideal spot—a small sandy outcrop into Simpson Bay Lagoon. I erected the antenna in about 20 minutes and fired up from the comfort of the rental car.

Conditions were not as favourable as the previous night, or perhaps everyone was at work. Nevertheless, about two hours of intermittent operation¹², interrupted by a leisurely swim in the lagoon, netted contacts with four continents.

A few pieces of wire and a fist-sized radio powered by AA batteries were enough to work the world. The Caribbean really was proving its reputation as a wonderful place to operate from!

My next stop in Sint Maarten was the famous Maho Beach, where airliners scrape across the fence onto the short runway, barely above the heads of the bathers. The crowds were in attendance, keenly watching for the arrival of the next plane. Warning signs on the fence warned of dire consequences for those who would become too bold. I even managed to get the compulsory video of a landing airliner, as demanded by a friend back home.



Looking down the runway. The hills in the distance are in France, and make even the departures exciting.

My final stop was Philipsburg, a quaint seventeenth-century Dutch town turned tourist trap. Three cruise liners had disgorged their contents into the little town, rendering it all but impassable. I walked the length of the town, desperately trying to imagine its charm from 250 years ago. It is hard when you're surrounded by overweight tourists on Segways.

Finally, I was on an airliner to Curaçao. Considering the unanticipated three-day delay, phase one of the trip had been a resounding success. Three new countries were in the bag, including radio activations. Now for the big time!

¹² PJ7/ZS6EZ.

Curaçao

I arrived at Curaçao shortly before sunset on the Thursday. Geoff Howard¹³ and I did a lot of catching up on the way to the station. He told me the history of the place, from the early days of PJ9EE to the later era of W1BIH to the current PJ2T crew.

I arrived late for the Thanksgiving turkey dinner. However, the leftovers kept for me proved more than adequate. I was a little overwhelmed, not only with the strange faces belonging to familiar callsigns and even a few new callsigns, but also with the hearty welcome. I felt a little like a celebrity for a moment there. I had made contacts with some of these individuals for decades, yet we had never met.

With less than 48 hours before the contest, there was a lot to do. I knew the basics of the N1MM+ logging software, but nowhere near enough to do my bit in a contest. I had to learn to iron out the delays and uncertainties. To do so, I started with a run on 80 m using my own callsign¹⁴. I really enjoyed the resulting run of Europeans, unlike anything I hear from home. The band was relatively quiet and the signals were loud. I don't think I sounded very slick, as I was trying to figure out which buttons to push to make things happen. There was also a lot of rust to scratch off, as I'd only worked one partial CW contest in the past decade or so.

I crashed into bed late that night, but still spent some time exchanging ideas in the dark with my roommate Gary Hembree¹⁵. Gary hails from Chandler, Arizona, where I had spent a lot of time in a previous life. He is a retired physicist. One of the topics that came up for discussion was my PhD that hasn't exactly shown a lot of progress recently. I expect he may remind me again if I don't pick up momentum soon...

Friday started with a run to Soto, the nearby village. I had my camera with me, and stopped several times to photograph the natural beauty, interesting road signs and especially the derelict Coral Cliff hotel. As is the custom in Africa, abandoned buildings are immediately raided and stripped of all windows, roofing material and even wiring.

I then had a run of a different type on 10 m, again trying to learn which buttons to push. Or, more precisely, when and in what sequence to push them. I felt a lot more comfortable with the new software, and almost started feeling like a real contester again. I hoped that I was also sounding like one on the air. Propagation sounded promising. If both 10 and 80 m were in good shape, we were going to have a lot of fun.

Around mid-day, all operators were asked to vacate the station, so that they could reconfigure the computers for multi-operator action.

We took the gap for a pizza lunch at a restaurant some distance away. The group proved to be delightful company. Most of the guys are retired, with a good selection of experienced testers, pilots, PhDs and even musicians in the group. There was a lot of banter, solving several of the world's most pressing problems.

On our return, I took a solo swim in the deep, clear waters. Life didn't get much better than this.



Some of the towers at PJ2T.

¹³ W0CG.

¹⁴ PJ2/ZS6EZ.

¹⁵ N7IR.

After a brief nap, the contest started at 20:00 on Friday night, just after sunset. I spent a few minutes on 10 m before deciding that 80 was a better place to be. I had results almost immediately. The totals started stacking up gradually. It took some time to get all the right information onto the screen, as the logging software leaves a lot of information unseen if the operator doesn't ask. Eventually, I could see the score summary and found a lot of motivation in the scores from the adjacent bands. 160 m provided a strong incentive to stay ahead—it would be disgraceful to fall behind that far more difficult band. But the easier bands of 40 and 20 m also served as bait, pushing me to work harder and harder on the multiplier. I alternated with my band captain, Andy Catanzaro¹⁶, in shifts of three to four hours. By sunrise, we had over 600 contacts and 80 countries in the log. I was overjoyed to see that our country multiplier had passed that of the other bands.

I got some sleep soon after breakfast, being woken up by a thunderstorm and returning mid-morning for my next shift, soaked to the skin from the short run through the storm. As I entered, everything was dark. The municipal power supply was off as a result of a lightning strike. Geoff got the generator running. Eventually, after what felt much longer than the few minutes it actually took, we were able to restart the radios and the computers. The amplifiers remained ominously quiet. The generator wasn't up to the task of running the amplifiers, so we had to operate 10 and 15 m with only 100 W. I wasn't too fazed. Being a South African, far far away from everyone, I'm used to being the weakest on the band. I fired up and started running on the frequency Andy had been using. Pretty soon, healthy rates were showing up on the meter. Momentary rates exceeded 300 contacts per hour on occasion, providing the necessary adrenaline rush to stay very focused. My three hour shift ended with over 400 contacts, despite losing the first few minutes without power and operating the entire session with low power. There was definitely something to this Caribbean contesting thing.

The rest of the contest had its challenges. There were some inter-station interference issues. We had terrible thunderstorms after sunset, making low band operations extremely painful. Last but not least, we lost our Internet connection early on Sunday, depriving us of the ability to see new multipliers showing up on the band. However, we managed to compensate to some extent by effective multiplier passing between 10 and 15 m. It was very exciting to hear the multiplier bell ring on the one band, and again a minute later on the other band.

Mark Beckwith¹⁷ not only proved an effective partner on the adjacent band, but also provided some great conversation during off times. He is a retired opera singer who now runs a charity. During one of these discussions it became evident that at least three of us owned grand pianos. When Mark asked me how long my Steinway Model O was compared to his Model R, a snide remark was heard from the kitchen to the effect that it was quite inappropriate for us to be discussing the size of our



instruments like this. I don't agree. Size is not all that important, and my technique is not good enough to play in public anyway. I did relate, though, how I'd started with an upright in my youth, later graduating to the horizontal grand piano.

Mark and Chris at the 15 and 10/80 m operating positions.

¹⁶ W9NJY.

¹⁷ N5OT.

Much too soon, the contest was over. We ended up with a shared meal, satisfied with almost 13 000 contacts and 31 million points. As always, the main question was who the other contenders would be, and what scores they would come up with.

I now started thinking about the remaining two days of my trip. When I heard that there would be a car going to the airport at 06:00 on Monday morning, I started packing. The final phase was about to begin.

Whirlwind tour

The next day started in familiar fashion. When I got to the airport, the ticket offices for several airlines were closed. I tried to get information from the remaining ones, but most of the flights were fully booked. Monday is apparently not a good day to be looking for short-notice flights.

I had to obtain cash, because much to my chagrin, the only airline that could help me was the famous Insel Air. I stood in a long line in the airport bank, obtained cash and bought the tickets. I could only leave in the afternoon, so my visits to Bonaire and Aruba would be very rushed indeed.

There wasn't enough time to take a trip into Willemstad, so I just sat in the airport until the time came. After more passport control, a short flight and yet more passport control, I was met at the airport exit by Steve Telenius-Lowe¹⁸. Steve is a prolific author, and a former neighbour to my long-time radio buddy Don Field¹⁹. We'd met several times in the past, but never in these exotic surroundings. He showed me around a part of the island, including the Transworld Radio foursquare array and the salt pans. There were also reminders of a previous era, when slave quarters were not exactly optimised for comfort.



Steve with the mansions built for others from Africa in another era. No, Steve is not a giant.



Eva, Steve, Scott and Brad.

We then went to Steve's place to meet his novelist wife Eva and the PJ4Q crew²⁰, Scott Robbins and Brad Brooks. Robert Kasca had already left that morning.

We spent some time chatting while Scott and Brad were checking their supplies, ready to go back into storage. The contest had been operated field-day style from the house adjoining Steve's, and most of the antennas had already been taken down again. A little later, Peter de Graaf²¹ arrived. He is the landlord and the storer of equipment for PJ4Q and a keen VHF operator. I took about half an hour out to play with the radio, resulting in contacts with three continents.

¹⁸ PJ4DX, formerly G4JVG, 9M6DXX and others.

¹⁹ G3XTT.

²⁰ W4PA, WF7T and S53R.

²¹ PJ4NX.

We then went to Peter's place to store the equipment. His antennas showed the signs of small-island winds, with several elements not quite as straight as they'd started out. We packed the shed and spent a few minutes chatting on the porch.

I was anxious to get back to the airport to ensure that I did not miss my flight. Everyone else was quite relaxed. They were eventually proven right. I got there much later than I would have preferred, but still spent over an hour just sitting and waiting. At least the food was more affordable than at Curaçao, where I'd cracked up laughing when they demanded \$ 9 for a sandwich. I wasn't going to spend my weekly food budget on a single sandwich! I nibbled on some not-too-ghastly cheese pies while waiting. The two back-to-back flights through Curaçao were both on time, and I found myself arriving in Aruba on schedule. The passport control line was very long, and I finally emerged from the terminal building about 25 minutes late. Emily was waiting for me. We were immediately off to the P40L contest station. It was fun to meet the guys, including Trey Garlough²², whom I'd already met on two other continents this year. John Crovelli²³ also arrived. We spent about two hours chatting, until Emily dragged me off around midnight.

On Tuesday morning, I was up early to try out the bands. I fired up on 20 m CW using low power and worked a string of stations. Although I worked three continents, there wasn't a single North American. Perhaps they were all at work.

I was impressed to learn that Ceres fruit juice is quite common on the islands. I'd noticed the advertising on Bonaire, and Emily had several containers of this South African product in her fridge.

Soon after, Emily dropped me off at the airport, complete with a lunch pack for the road. I was saved from the \$ 9-a-sandwich airport! I headed back to Curaçao for my flight to Europe and South Africa. It took around 36 hours to get home, consuming all of Tuesday and Wednesday. I arrived home at midnight and walked into my office first thing on Thursday morning.

What next?

This trip didn't go according to plan at all. However, despite losing three full days, I managed to achieve my objectives. I operated from South America, with over 2000 contacts. I added six new countries to my personal list, taking me to the top of the standings in South Africa.²⁴ I finally managed to operate from a competitive station in the Caribbean, working with a wonderful crew and ending with a competitive score. I enjoyed my first ocean swims as a competent swimmer, and meeting some old friends in their native habitat.

My long-term objective is to visit 100 countries. This trip reduced my deficit from 23 to 17. It was my best annual progress since 2011. There is obviously still some work to do, but there is no rush. However, there is definitely one high-priority project left. Oceania remains a blank on my list, and I'll have to put it on the air in 2016. A pile of maps and guidebooks is already accumulating on my bedside table.

²² N5KO, whom I'd met in Florida in July and in Pretoria in October.

²³ W2GD and P40W, who had operated separately as a single operator low power entry.

²⁴ <http://zs6ez.org.za/lists/dxhc-zs.htm>