

Living, Working and DXing in the Caribbean

Tropical DXing just wasn't in my vocabulary until my job took me to St Croix in the US Virgin Islands.

John Reisenauer Jr, KP2/KL7JR

It was early October 2004, when my boss asked if I could stand a few months in the Caribbean. I couldn't blurt out "yes" fast enough; I was packed and on a jet the very next day. I packed light since I knew there were RadioShacks and hardware stores on St Croix that I could rely on for coax, mast material, wire, hose clamps, PVC pipe, a soldering iron and all the other items for antenna building.

It didn't take long to construct a G5RV and get on the air from a rented bungalow on the beach. Lush verdant foliage, crystal blue waters, sugar sand beaches, dramatic sunsets and sunrises and calypso music just about everywhere you go here warms the soul. The US Virgin Islands are truly an American paradise! The scenery was awesome and the weather divine as I settled into "island time," the laid-back way of life on remote islands.

My DX Hotel in Paradise

A couple of weeks before I moved in to my private DX bungalow, I tried DXing from my hotel on the beach. My location was on the southeast corner of the island. I had neatly packed my TS-50 transceiver, RT-11 tuner and PS-20A power supply in my briefcase, and my suitcase carried a 24 inch CB vertical antenna with whip tips for 10 through 20 meters. For my first attempt at Amateur Radioing from here, I used the modified vertical attached to a mirror mount CB connector that was bolted to a 5 foot mast section stuck in the sand. Three or four ground radials were alligator-clipped to the connector and spread out on the sand. I used the 20 meter stinger and my tuner on the 10, 12, 15, 17 and 20 meter bands. I was



just too lazy to change tips for each band, as the antenna would work fine with my tuner according to my previous experience with this setup.

I worked HB9, OM5, 7X5, PA3, AZ4, EA8, FS, GØ, YV4, 8R1, DJ3, I8, PW7, F6, PY2, IR4, 9A7 and others, but only one US station (W3). It soon dawned on me that all my contacts would be DX, excluding any local I'd work on St Croix! This partially quenched my thirst to be on the "pileup end" from a remote tropical island.

Did the modified CB antenna break any DX records? No, but it sure was fun to use, a snap to set up and easily transported. I've also used this setup on a mag mount on the roof, or on a short mast mounted in the trunk, when I didn't want to drill holes in the vehicle. With the trunk lid open, I merely duct taped the mast to the hinge of the trunk for stationary use.

From the Caribbean, I was able to contact about 75 percent of the stations I called. Half of them gave me 59 reports and a few chuckled when I described the modified CB antenna I was using. My TS-50 rig and RT-11 tuner worked well together. Most of my contacts were on 17 and 20 meters. This peanut-whistle setup works DX!

Quite to my surprise, on October 24 a curious passer-by knocked on my patio door. I thought perhaps it was hotel security checking on a television interference complaint (thoughts of no more ham radio disappointed me immensely). It was Mike



I modified a CB antenna, and set it up in the bushes outside my rented bungalow. Don't laugh — I worked over 40 countries with this modest antenna!

Authement, KD5APY, who recognized my antenna partially hidden in the bushes outside my hotel room. He was totally amazed by all the contacts in my log book. Mike left with a sketch of my antenna and mounting method for his next homebrew project. What a small world, especially since we both were doing consulting work at the local refinery.

Antennas

I was really impressed with the results from my half-size G5RV with apex at 15 feet above ground on a sloping lot. Fashioned out of scrap PVC pipe from a nearby abandoned building, the mast also served as the center insulator for my G5RV dipole. One leg of the antenna was tied to a coconut tree and the other end to a discarded broomstick spliced to another length of PVC pipe lashed to a concrete wall. I used whatever materials I could scrounge for my antenna.

All wire connections were hardwired, soldered and covered with electrical tape to keep out moisture. The antenna actually was oriented for stateside work, which made it run uphill. My DX shack was less than 50 feet from the ocean, but elevated about 30 feet above the saltwater, which no doubt provided an excellent ground plane. I also worked many stations on 75 meters (Frank Jordan, KA4FHW, Michael Hodges, KG4VEW, Leige Burrows, C6AFO, Tom Tucker, N4QFL, and Juan Barcelo Mora, KP4AET, to name a few) just to see if I could.

I had a new Solarcon A-99 vertical shipped down for 10, on 12 and 17 meter work (Radio Shack no longer stocks base CB antennas). I've had several of the A-99 antennas over the years, and I just can't say enough good things about them for use on the ham bands. The vertical works on 10-20 meters; however, it's been my experience that the A-99 is somewhat of a compromise on 20 meters. In my opinion the \$49 price tag is hard to beat for a multi-band base antenna that takes about 10 minutes to install and will withstand just about any kind of weather.

Casual DXing from Paradise

It was incredible creating pileups almost every time I got on the air on most bands. My operating time was not limited to only weekend stints — most every night

after work around 2100 UTC, I was on 14.260 giving out NA-106 or a new country to some ham on 12 or 17 meters, until around 2330Z when the bands died. Some days I'd hang out on the 247 DX Net (14.247 MHz) working many US stations and other DX stations. After 20 meters faded, I changed over to 40 meters to work the 3905 Century Club 40 Meter Early Net. Going for WAS on 40 meters presented a challenge I couldn't resist, especially with the broadcast interference at S9 most of the time!

Several times I'd check in to the Puerto Rico WX Net on 3.920 MHz. Net control Juan, KP4AET was very cordial. A few times I was relayed in to the Friendly Carribus Connection Net on 14.283 MHz, as net control Aubrey Nelthropp, KV4BT, on the next island over (St Thomas) could not hear me. On the weekends, I'd concentrate on 10, 12, 17 and 20 meters hopping back and forth following propagation changes.

In mid-November I worked Arnold Sayre, W8WVM, in West Virginia on 10, 12 and 17 meters back-to-back with favorable reports each way. A few days later, Alvin Sharp, K8YG, worked me on 10, 12, 17 and 40 meters on the same day (and on 20 meters a week later), and Jose Carrion, KP4E, logged me on 10, 12 and 17 meters, as well. It was nice to slow the pace and see if I could work others on multi bands.

Other DX worked on 17, meters includ-

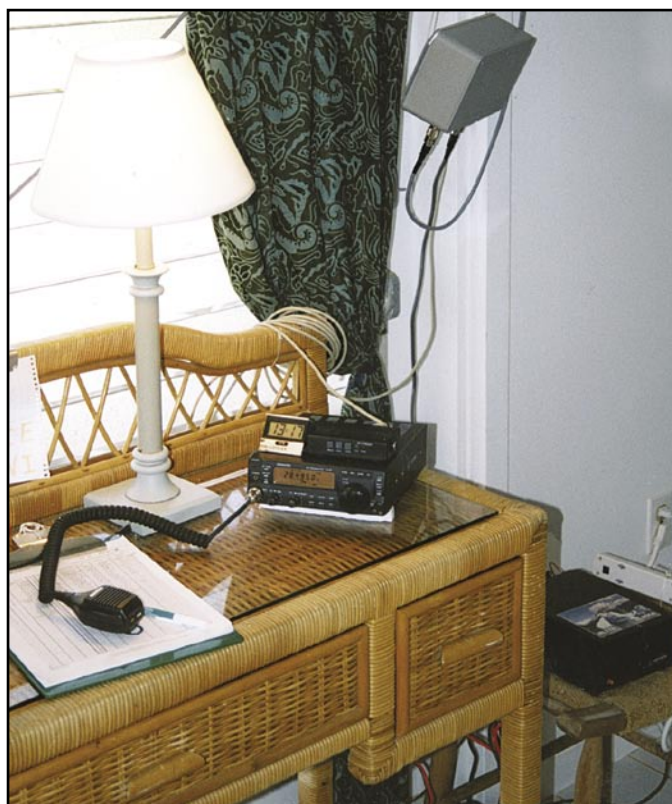
ing US stations, as a prelude to upcoming ARRL contests included HE3, VA3, ZP4, KG4, HK3, HC5, XE1, 6Y5, 9Z4 and TG9. On 12 meters I snagged ZD8, LU8, XE2, CT2, ON9, F5, F6, DJ3, CX3, CP6, PT7, VE5, EA8, ZS6, TI4, I8, HP3, VP2, IV3, HK6 and others. On 10 and 20 meters it was pretty much the same, including YN9, 6Y5, 8P6, CO8, HK4, C6, VE6, 9L1, VK4, LU8, LW6, WP2, WP4, KH6, V51, TI2, TI7, ZK1, 5U7, TG9 and many others.

By now I only need a couple of states for WAS on 10, 17 and 20 meters. On November 27, I worked my friend Al Severance, K7LQY, on 10 meters. He was kind enough to give my wife, Claire, a landline (as he usually does on my portable outings). He mentioned they were chasing the A92 all weekend and asked if I heard him. I replied with, "A92GR (Mohamed Al-Buflasa) called me on 12 meters about three hours ago and we had a nice chat." He was surprised we were able to talk on two bands with his low dipole antenna.

The next day Don Search, W3AZD and Jose Luis Izola, PY3JZ, worked me on 12, 17, 10, 15 and 20 meters back-to-back with favorable reports both ways. I am certainly having a ball with Amateur Radio in the Caribbean! Some evenings on the radio got a bit uncomfortable when little biting bugs decided I made a good snack. One night, a flying cockroach attacked me out of nowhere, but he did not win the battle!

Speaking of Bugs...

I've been bitten by the QRP bug recently. I guess it was the next thing in ham radio for me to delve into, and I thought the ARRL November Sweepstakes contest would be a good place to start. I used my club call, K7ICE (North Country DX Association), to kick off the first of two contests I entered as QRP from the US Virgin Islands. Big gun contest station WP2Z (Island Villa Contest Club) was my third contact of the contest. The op chuckled that I was QRP (I later learned that our shacks were only a mile or two apart). Conditions were disappointing, as interference and fading signals prevailed. It was going to be a rough time for my peanut-whistle station for sure. For the next 5 hours, I beat myself up to make 60 contacts. Going QRP at the bottom of the sunspot cycle in a contest was surely suicide, but I worked

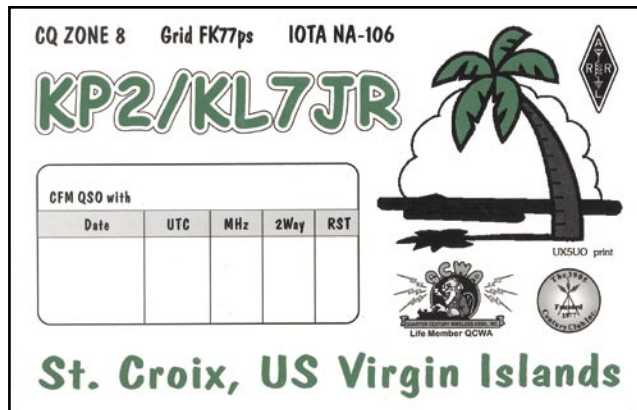


When traveling, you need to remember to carry light. This was my station while on St Croix. While there, I worked over 60 countries.

43 multipliers early on. The next morning was better, as I had a good run on 10 meters. All in all, I racked up 248 contacts with 65 multipliers in the most challenging contest for me to date.

I used the A-99 vertical on 10 and 15 meters, and on 20, 40 and 75 meters the proven G5RV came through for me. Sweepstakes contest DX was limited to KH6, VE3, VE4, KP2 and KP4. Several hams thanked me for a “new one,” which made it all worthwhile, bringing back fond memories of past Sweepstakes contests from the Yukon. I had a couple of weeks to prepare (get my voice back!) for ARRL’s 10 Meter Contest, which I also enjoy on my favorite band.

On December 11 I was calling in the ARRL 10 Meter Contest. This band never ceases to amaze me from up north, so I was excited to see what I could experience down here. Mr Murphy paid me a visit one hour before contest time — I couldn’t get any audio out of my rig. At first I thought it was the hand mic and commenced to tear it apart three or four times, only to be further frustrated. I’m in no way an expert on microphones, and all the wires appeared to be connected. I thought maybe the finals went out on the rig. Then I remembered the intermittent trouble I had previously with the remote control head for the RT-11 tuner, and I immediately took it out of line. Bingo! That was it! It’s a good thing my A-99 was resonant on 10 meters, as I really didn’t want to take it down to trim the tip. I was now a happy camper, since I had been looking



The QSL card I used when I was in St Croix.

forward to this contest for a long time.

South American stations dominated 10 meters for the first several hours, until state-side stations were heard. I did the “hunt and pounce” routine and stopped a few times to call CQ throughout the contest. I worked 60 stations (CE, LU and PY mostly) before 10 meters gave out on day one.

I was back at it with several “runs” of my own operating QRP early the next morning. I did far better than I thought, based on my previous experience in the Sweepstakes contest. I worked hard all day to nail another 200 contacts, and many more new multipliers. I heard from the Caribbean Contesting Consortium, PJ2T, then Fernando Reyes, CB5A, and Alexis Deniz Machin, 4M5DX, finally made the log; I’d been chasing him all day, as he was pointed stateside. Juan Pablo Merce, LU4DX, George Fremin, K5TR, and Ed Gray, WØSD, dominated the band most of day two. I racked up 650

contacts total with 81 multipliers in what turned out to be an easy contest to work for this peanut-whistle station. DX worked included YV, F6, HC, TM, T42, 9H6, 5U7, VP8, VK, ZL, WP, DL, IT, CN and all over South America, to name a few. Will I go QRP again? Maybe, when the cycle is at its peak again.

DX Memories to Last a Lifetime

At anytime of the day from my elevated porch just 50 feet from the ocean, I could enjoy the awesome view while being mesmerized by the crashing surf. This is

truly a remote paradise, unlike anything I’ve experienced before. At night, the sounds of the sea hurried me off to sleep, leaving me to ponder the radio activities and wonderful experiences of that day. I know that when I leave here, a part of me will stay, and when I adventure in Alaska and the Yukon, I’ll take a part of the Caribbean home with me.

Photos by the author.

John Reisenauer, KL7JR, was first licensed in 1978 as KA7BKI. He is the founder and past program director for the US Islands (USI) awards program. John counts building wire antennas, island activating and “contesting from the North” as his favorite Amateur Radio activities, while camping, fishing, travel, photography and writing take up the rest of his time when he’s not working as an electrical consultant. Currently the activities manager for the North Country DX Association, John lives in Pasco, Washington with wife Claire, WL7MY, and son John III, KC7FVA. He can be reached at kl7jr@yahoo.com.

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