

VK9XU – Christmas Island 18th February – 4th March



9:00 a.m. Tuesday morning 18th February and myself, Steve VK6SJ & his XYL Julie were pushing trolleys of heavy baggage around in the hustle & bustle of Perth International Airport. We were soon joined by DXpedition leader Günter DL2AWG, team members Elmar DF4GV, Heye DJ9RR, Rainer DL2AMD and XYLs Rosie, Uta & Eleonora as one by one, they each appeared out of the International Arrivals Hall pushing even bigger piles of baggage in front of them to be checked-in for the 4½ hour flight to Christmas Island.

The German contingent had just flown in from Bangkok but unfortunately, not all their baggage had flown in with them and we were missing the squid poles & hardware for Elmar's low band antennas as well as the mast for the hexbeam. Enquiries at the Thai Airways desk soon confirmed the missing baggage was still in Thailand, which meant it would be at least another week before there was any chance of seeing it at Christmas Island, so Steve made a quick dash back home for some extra squid poles to tide us over. Not only that, but one of the German's SPE linear had been quite badly damaged in transit and the owner was not at all happy.

Christmas Island is an hour behind Perth and we arrived at around 4:30pm. Took a fair while to get all our bags through local quarantine inspection, sort out the car-hire then make several trips to & from the airport to ferry everyone and everything to the Divers' Villa which was to be the VK9XU QTH for the next fortnight; so by the time we'd finished, it was well gone 6pm and getting dark already. The Divers' Villa is a traditional wooden 'stilt house' with an internal veranda that slept ten. Recently renovated, it even included an espresso coffee machine that saw constant service for the next 14 days.



THE DIVERS' VILLA – VK9XU QTH

Nevertheless, VK9XU was quickly on the air using Alan's rapid-deploy FT8 station (Icom IC-7000 & Terlin multi-tap HF whip antenna) whilst everyone else had an early night. It had been a very long day, especially for the Germans who had been travelling close to 48 hours by this time. Come sunrise and Alan was close to achieving DXCC and had several hundred stations in the log already. He then continued operating FT8 on 10, 12 & 15 metres whilst the rest of the team got the DX Commander, 30m J-pole and 17m/12m vertical rhombic antennas erected and the three sets of main station equipment set up on a very heavy-duty wooden table in the living room.

By 9 am, there were two complete *Flex* linear stations and a *Yaesu* FT-DX10 plus a *Juma* PA1000+ linear up and running. We were now operating three stations 24/7 via a variety of antennas: The *Yaesu* FT-DX10 dedicated mostly to CW, plus the two *Flex* radios sharing the SSB and FT8 duties. The rapid-deploy rig then went QRT and Alan wandered off bleary-eyed for a shower and a few hours' sleep.



VK9XU IN ACTION. L-R: Elmar DF4GV, Rainer DL2AMD, Steve VK6SJ

Steve had kindly lent the DXpedition a large amount of *Flex* equipment which had been transported up to Christmas Island and Cocos-Keeling Islands separately by ship several weeks previously, so it was already there ready and waiting for us to simply 'Plug & Play'. Most of us had no prior hands-on experience of setting up and operating *Flex* gear, so it was a very steep learning curve indeed and just as well that Steve has a very patient personality! Certainly very different from operating more conventional radios for sure, but once you know your way around them, then *Flex* radios really are a dream to operate, almost akin to driving a Rolls-Royce!

As well as being leader of our group, Günter was also '*Herr Log-Meister*' and kept an eagle-eye on the German 'UCX-Log' logging & CW keying software that we were using as well as our Internet connection to Club Log Live. Very impressive and reliable software indeed and certainly an equal to the well known N1MM logging program.

There were only six of us operators, so that meant a very full-on schedule and the agreed operating plan was a roster system of five hours on, five hours off. This is OK for a few days, but after a while the circadian rhythms start to get all confused. Fortunately, were joined a few days later by Zeljko VK6VY as he and XYL Dragana also happened to be holidaying on the Island. Zeljko is a well respected SSB contest operator and he took over one of the shifts each day as a sorely-needed guest operator, enabling one of the other operators to enjoy an occasional full ten hours away from the radios to catch up on some sleep or go for a bit of a wander somewhere and do some sightseeing.

One thing you quickly notice at Christmas Island are the feral chickens; never mind the Island's famous little red crabs - there are wild chooks everywhere as well! Not only chooks, but there's also some real *monster* crabs lurking out there in the rainforest covering most of the Island and some of them looked like they could easily double up as cable-cutters or remove one of your fingers!



CHRISTMAS ISLAND CABLE CUTTER

Next day, Elmar & Rainer got the 30m J-Pole operational and Steve was able to use his local business contacts to borrow a couple of sturdy 3-metre sections of lattice mast that the hexbeam could be mounted on; so with a bit of a team effort, we had that up and running pretty quickly as well, which also gave us a 6 metre capability.

Having been on a fair few myself, seems to me that one of those unwritten laws of DXpeditions is that someone nearly always suffers some kind of accident. In our case it was Elmar who had a nocturnal disagreement with the DX Commander guy wires one night which resulted in a sprained wrist and a fairly bad scrape to one of his knees. Fortunately it didn't require stitches and a visit to the local pharmacy for some antiseptic ointment and large sticking plasters was all that was necessary, although he was left with a painful looking limp for the next few days.

The second weekend, a group of us went on a tour of the island's interior with one of the local tour guides – learn about the local phosphate mine, visit the blow-holes on the south coast, see the giant robber crabs in the jungle *etc.* On the way back, we happened across an Abbott's booby in some distress by the side of the road. This is a very rare bird species with a wing span of about two metres that's endemic only to

Christmas Island. They roost up in the tree canopy and are unable to take-off from the ground. This one looked like a juvenile that had become exhausted during a trial flight and had opted for a crash-landing on the road so we carefully coaxed it into the back of the minibus and headed straight to the local bird sanctuary where a wildlife ranger gave it the once over. It was just as well we found it when we did as the ranger mentioned there were still a few feral cats roaming the Island and they would most likely have had it for supper! The young booby soon made a full recovery and was back in the air a few days later, so seems DXpeditions are not always the danger to local birdlife that some make them out to be after all!



ABBOTT'S BOOBY

The missing baggage eventually showed up seven days later on the following Tuesday flight from Perth, so Elmar was finally able to test out the 160/80 metre vertical he'd designed and built, This was a base-fed 18 metre squid pole with a 2m steel rod extension and capacity hat arrangement at the top plus two raised ground radials which had been designed to be an exact $\lambda/4$ at the CW end of 80 metres. A homebrew loading coil & capacitor arrangement that Elmar had also designed could be quickly switched in for 160 metres, making band-changes a breeze. It resonated and performed very well indeed on both bands and gave out quite a few 80 & 160 metres ATNOs over several grey lines and late night/early morning shifts – certainly a testament to some impressive antenna design skills. Elmar had specifically designed his low-band antenna to be lightweight and portable, so might prove popular with future DXpeditions and will no doubt need a name – the '*Elmar-Vert*' maybe, or simply the '*Elvert*'?

Up until now, it had been largely self-catering at the Divers' Villa with the *haus frauen*, Julie, Steve & Alan all turning their hands to various soups, pasta dishes, curries and 'special' cottage pies, so one evening a group of us ventured out to try and find a restaurant that was actually open for business. We failed dismally; plenty of restaurants around, but they were all closed! Christmas Island is definitely not geared up to cater to tourists, that's for sure; but we did come across an open-air cinema with a very prosperous looking Chinese temple next door.



CHINESE TEMPLE

Tuesday 4th March was moving day; all the antennas had to be taken down and everything packed ready for the late afternoon flight to the Cocos-Keeling Islands around 1,000 km further west. The 100 Watt rapid-deploy rig was hooked up to the DX Commander and continued logging FT8 QSOs right up until the last minute as everything else was carefully dismantled, weighed and packed ready for ferrying back up to the airport. Virgin Airlines runs the twice-weekly Perth-Christmas-CocosK service and are notoriously strict on baggage allowances, so particular attention was paid to how much each bag weighed. Even so, we still ended up having to book several lots of excess baggage in order to get everything we needed over to Cocos-Keeling.

VK9CU – Cocos-Keeling Islands 4th – 11th March

Our accommodation for the third and final week was the *Beachcombers* Family Accommodation on West Island, just a short walk from the airport terminal. Another minus thirty minutes time difference and again, it was past sunset by the time we

actually got all our bags past quarantine inspection so the DX Commander was quickly deployed in the backyard next to the beach and the rapid-deploy rig was pressed back into service again calling CQ on 15m FT8 to let everyone know that VK9CU was QRV already. In the meantime, everyone else headed the 200 metres or so back down to the airport bar as Tuesday night is 'Pizza Night' on Cocos-Keeling and we'd all had enough of the Christmas Island 'self-catering experience' for the time being.

The VK9CU QTH was in stark contrast to the old-world charm of the Divers' Villa that had served us so well back on Christmas Island and was a modern family home with all mod cons; same as you'd find in any of Perth's more affluent suburbs. It also had a large front lawn and conveniently backed onto a large grassed area around the back that overlooked the beach so there was plenty of room for all the antennas to go up with a decent amount of spacing in between.



BEACHCOMBERS – VK9CU QTH

All the various antennas soon went up early the following morning. Life on Cocos-Keeling is pretty laid back, to the extent that even the next door neighbour was perfectly happy with Elmar's 160/80m vertical being installed on his front lawn, just so long as the guy wires were festooned with fluorescent safety tape as a hazard warning to anyone walking back home from the pub late at night.



VK9CU ANTENNAS – 30M J-POLE & DX COMMANDER

We soon established a rhythm again with the 5 hours on 5 hours off shift routine and with the coffee machine again working overtime. The tail-end of a cyclone was passing nearby and we had a couple of very heavy downpours and a couple of instances in the small hours where the antennas had to be disconnected due to nearby lightning, but apart from that everything ran like clockwork.

Statistics

These days, DXpeditions seems to be largely judged by their performance statistics. How many bands, how many QSOs, how many dupes, how many ATNOs and so on. In that respect, both VK9XU and VK9CU performed well above average and well beyond what we were expecting to achieve.

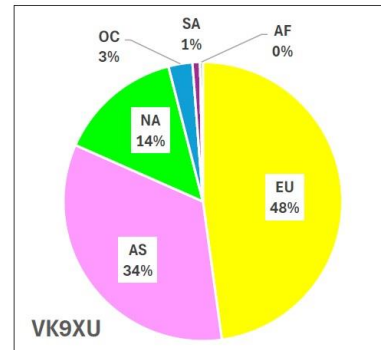
We were active on all bands 160m to 6m and averaged well over 3 QSOs per minute over the 500-odd hours that our three stations were on the air. Sure, we didn't keep everybody happy, but we kept many DXers around the world happy for much of the time, which is about all any DXpeditioner can reasonably expect to do.

So, here's how we did according to *UCX-Log*:

VK9XU

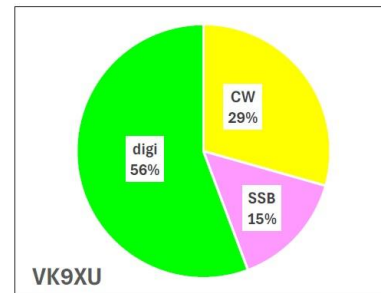
QSOs per band and continent

	Total	1.8	3.5	7	10	14	18	21	24	28	50
EU	27798	111	1101	2213	2718	4326	3516	4646	3837	5330	
AS	19639	424	603	1147	1710	1964	3167	3604	3519	3380	121
NA	8365	3	99	269	716	1163	1813	1629	1549	1124	
OC	1616	25	79	206	136	172	225	306	201	257	9
SA	505		2	46	46	87	81	84	86	73	
AF	193		2	9	18	29	38	31	30	36	



QSOs per band and mode

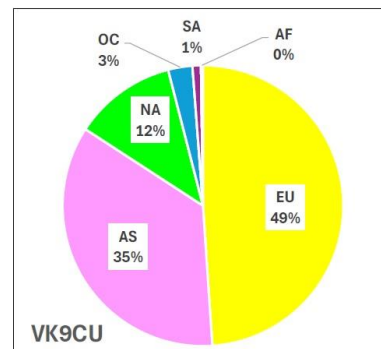
	Total	1.8	3.5	7	10	14	18	21	24	28	50
CW	17090	84	1042	794	1652	1984	1917	3619	2833	3165	
SSB	8658			589		1012	2217	1486	1401	1953	
digi	32381	479	844	2507	3694	4748	4708	5199	4989	5083	130
total	58129	563	1886	3890	5346	7744	8842	10304	9223	10201	130



VK9CU

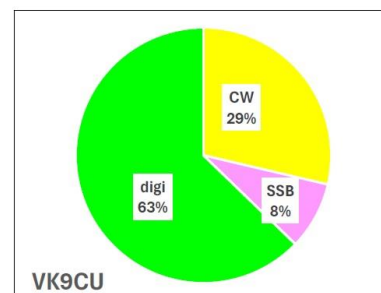
QSOs per band and continent

	Total	1.8	3.5	7	10	14	18	21	24	28	50
EU	17042	29	620	1075	1328	2585	1485	3300	4007	2613	
AS	12275	204	439	628	851	1264	1513	2614	2197	2559	6
NA	4116	13	116	472	517	774	595	847	421	361	
OC	974	24	70	60	64	100	106	212	185	152	1
SA	338		18	53	70	81	34	37	26	19	
AF	81	2	3	10	8	10	11	17	13	7	



QSOs per band and mode

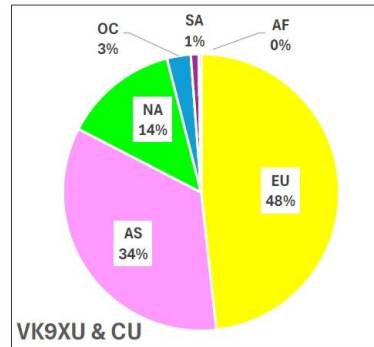
	Total	1.8	3.5	7	10	14	18	21	24	28	50
CW	9983		230	549	863	1245	950	2047	2028	2071	
SSB	2980					408	403	986	619	564	
digi	21863	272	1036	1749	1975	3161	2391	3994	4202	3076	7
total	34826	272	1266	2298	2838	4814	3744	7027	6849	5711	7



VK9XU & VK9CU (sum)

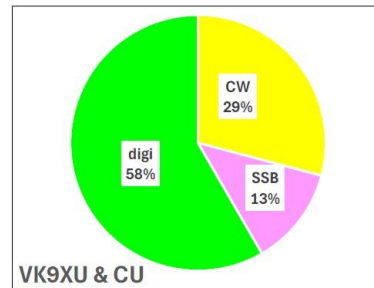
QSOs per band and continent

	Total	1.8	3.5	7	10	14	18	21	24	28	50
EU	44840	140	1721	3288	4046	6911	5001	7946	7844	7943	0
AS	31914	628	1042	1775	2561	3228	4680	6218	5716	5939	127
NA	12481	16	215	741	1233	1937	2408	2476	1970	1485	0
OC	2590	49	149	266	200	272	331	518	386	409	10
SA	843	0	20	99	116	168	115	121	112	92	0
AF	274	2	5	19	26	39	49	48	43	43	0



QSOs per band and mode

	Total	1.8	3.5	7	10	14	18	21	24	28	50
CW	27073	84	1272	1343	2515	3229	2867	5666	4861	5236	0
SSB	11638	0	0	589	0	1420	2620	2472	2020	2517	0
digl	54244	751	1880	4256	5669	7909	7099	9193	9191	8159	137
total	92955	835	3152	6188	8184	12558	12586	17331	16072	15912	137



A total of 92,955 QSOs. Another day or so, or slightly better propagation conditions and we'd easily have passed the 100,000 mark. That's a pretty good show in anyone's book, however I prefer to judge a DXpedition's performance or 'success' in more human terms – who I made friends with, what we did, what we learned and most importantly, how much fun we had.

Günter, Elmar, Heye and Rainer are all very experienced, disciplined and seasoned DXpeditioners who were well-organized and knew how to focus & work together to achieve a common goal - they were really great guys to go play radios with. Sure, it was hard work at times, especially those 2 o'clock in the morning shift changes, but it was *viel Spass*/great fun and we also got to see lots of chooks, crabs and the occasional Chinese temple!

Many thanks to all our sponsors who contributed equipment and/or donated to the DXpedition to help make it happen, especially Steve for all the logistics work he did in the background, his practical solutions to missing items as well as his enduring sense of humour and patience in sorting out all of our various finger-troubles with the *Flex* radios.

Finally, thanks to Julie for her friendly support and '*Vielen Dank*' to Eleonora, Rosie and Uta for all keeping a straight face and not laughing too much whenever they heard me practicing my high-school German!

Alan VK6CQ