DXpeditioning for Fun on Malta

by Andrea Panati, IK1PMR/9H3MR

There are many different kinds of DXpeditions. I have had the opportunity to experience some of the big ones, the type that involves years of planning, logistical problems, and 15 to 20 operators traveling with containers full of equipment. (T33C was one of these, and I had the honor of joining this great international team and learning from them). Then there are medium-size expeditions, which involve four to ten operators often traveling to semi-rare DXCC entities with a decent set of antennas in the baggage. Finally, there are one or two person DX-vacation trips; these usually involve nice and easy-to-activate places that offer a good mixture of relaxation and DX operating.

When I came back from a wonderful DXpedition experience in Somalia (as member of the 6OØCW team), I was definitely looking for a "where to go next" place of this same kind!

After returning from Somalia, at first I didn't touch the radio for few days, as usually happens to me after two weeks of huge pile-ups. In addition to recovering from the intense radio activity, which I quickly did, this time I also had to suffer through the unusually cold weather we still had in late February in northern Italy. Thus, the idea of a mini-DXpedition to some warmer place immediately came to mind. I wanted to organize it in a very short time, or the escape from winter weather would no longer be a motivation! Also, this time my YL Claudia, K2LEO, wanted to join in, after being left at home for the 6O operation due to the team's concerns of security.

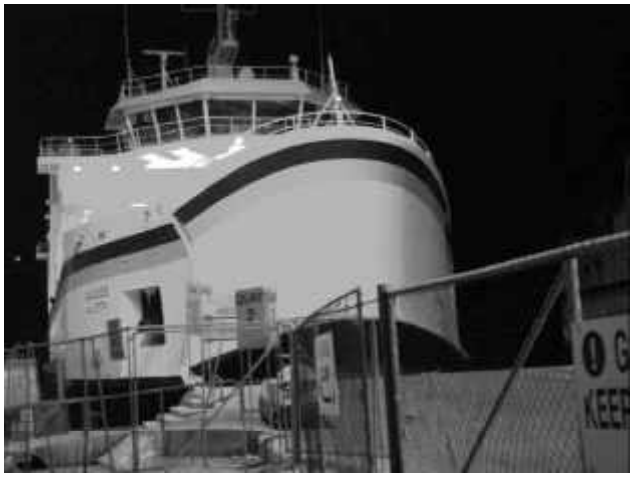
Therefore, the choice was limited. I had to select a place that would be warm in March, easy to activate, and would not pose any licensing problems (both for CEPT and FCC licensed amateurs, since Claudia doesn't have an Italian callsign yet).

The QSL card for 9H3MR/9H3LEO

We had spent a week on Malta in the past, and I also had operated as 9H3MR in 2003. Licensing is no problem on Malta, and the country allows great fun in contests and on a few bands/modes, such as 80 meters, 30 meters, and RTTY. Most important, our good friend Joe, 9H5JO, offers good, inexpensive accommodations and help with antennas on Gozo, a greener and smaller island of the Maltese archipelago. Two phone calls (to Joe and Alitalia airlines) were enough to arrange for licenses, accommodations, and airline tickets.

Goals and Setup

For a DX-vacation, a lightweight setup is desirable. On the other hand, Claudia was now ready to operate on her own, so we had to plan for two complete HF stations. This had several implications for the baggage! Would it be possible for two people to transport two complete HF stations for 100 watts and all the necessary antennas, power supplies, masts, coax, and accessories without spending any money for extra weight allowance on the flight to Malta? We were allowed only 20 kg per person, plus 5 kg of hand baggage, which was not much. Nevertheless, the answer was yes, with a helper!



The ferry boat ready for boarding

The RTXs were an Elecraft K2/100 (2.5 kg for a high-performance, 100-watt, all-mode transceiver with DSP and PC interface) and a robust TS-440S. Both were accommodated as "hand" baggage, together with two light ThinkPad laptops.

Two switching power supplies were not a problem in my bag, at 0.6 kg each. Then we had to think about antennas. Our friend Sil, I2YSB, helped with a light aluminum box and an excellent 30/40/80-meter vertical antenna that fit inside the box, together with radials and fiberglass masts. This was our second 20-*kg bag*!

Running two stations also meant we need more antennas and bandpass filters. Two sets of filters for the "usual" bands plus one for the WARC bands were loaned to us.

In the end our baggage was in excess of some 10 kg per person, but this "issue" was easily solved in our usual way. My father (who is also licensed as IW1CPG) accompanied us to the airport and kept our two extra backpacks with the RTXs, so we proceeded to the check in at the desk with only the laptops and accessories as hand baggage. Because the airline rules say that laptops are "personal items" allowed in addition to the 5 kg of hand baggage, we were now in full compliance with check-in requirements. Later, of course, we remembered our radios and went through security without any problem with over 15 kg of hand baggage each!

The evening flight was so short that I had no chance to sleep well. Taxi transportation on Malta was arranged by our friend Joe, such that at 8 PM we were at the Malta harbor waiting for the ferry to Gozo. This was a 20-minute sea trip, nothing compared to the two days it had taken to reach Banaba! It was just the time for a drink when we reached Gozo.

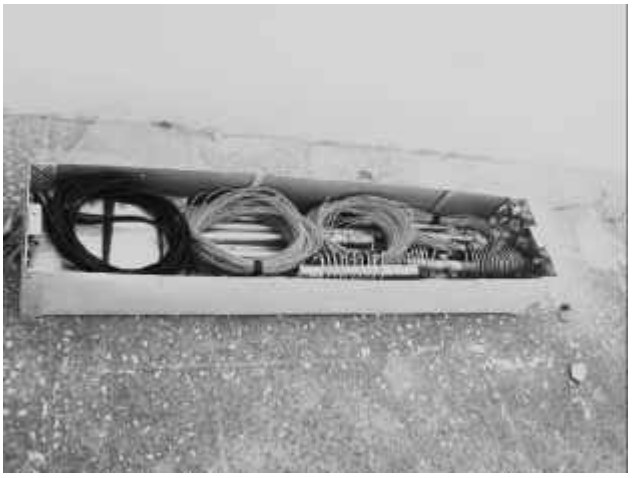
Again, Joe was there with his lovely daughter Melissa to help us. However, our antenna box didn't fit into the boot of their car by just 2 cm. We had to put the box in the passenger's area, and then we put out feet on top of it. This as no problem on the island, especially at night!

The apartment was the same I had used two years before, so I knew all the details and it was easy to determine coax lengths and adapters needed. Joe also had already prepared a wire vertical antenna for 20 meters, supported by a fiberglass mast. He knew that we wished to be on the air immediately the first night, so this was a great gift and surprise for us.

Joe, 9H5JO and Andrea, IK1PMR/9H3MR in Victoria

After a quick dinner, we unpacked our gear and 9H3MR was QRV on 30 meters CW for few QSOs, which helped me to feel at comfort and sleep well in the new place!

The next day was Friday, just before the BARTG RTTY contest, in which we planned to participate, so we had to work hard to set up our stations. We spent the morning on the roof terrace assembling the 30/40/80-meter vertical, a 10-meter long modified HF2V (the same we had used in Somalia the prior month). From 11 AM to 3 PM the



The neatly packaged low band vertical

sun on Malta would be too strong for antenna work on the roof, so we had to hurry. Claudia had her very first experience assembling and erecting an antenna. I'm not a great antenna installer either, but everything went smoothly, despite Claudia's fear when she had to hold the vertical and the wind made it bend a lot. Finally we "fixed" it with some large stones placed around the antenna mast, a very simple but effective method.

There was not enough space on the roof for "linear" 80-meter radials, so we placed them as best as possible; 40- and 30-meter radials were no problem, and the efficiency on these bands was excellent. We also installed a 40-meter dipole, but the vertical proved to work much better in this location, so close to the sea and with a minimum of manmade noise.

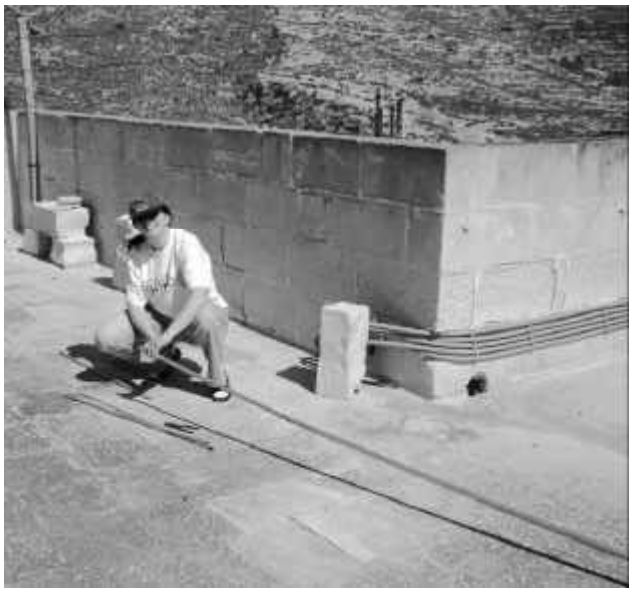
In the afternoon we worked on the station setup, which in the end turned out to be suitable for a Multi-Two contest entry. All of this was placed on the kitchen table! When it was time for dinner, we realized that there was no way to temporarily move the station, so we moved two small tables from the bedroom (not designed as kitchen tables for sure) into the kitchen and used them for our meals. After this rearrangement of the apartment, there was absolutely no space left in the kitchen, and our four coaxial cables crossing the room did not allow us to close the terrace door for two weeks!

It also happened that the light bulb in the kitchen became faulty; the owner of the apartment, a helpful woman, was kind enough to immediately come with a new one to replace it. I will never forget her face when she entered the kitchen and saw three tables inside and the large one full of our equipment! However, I explained our story and told her we were not as crazy as it looked. She quickly recovered from the initial shock, moved a laptop to make some free space on the table, and then climbed on top of the table to replace the faulty bulb (without any comment).

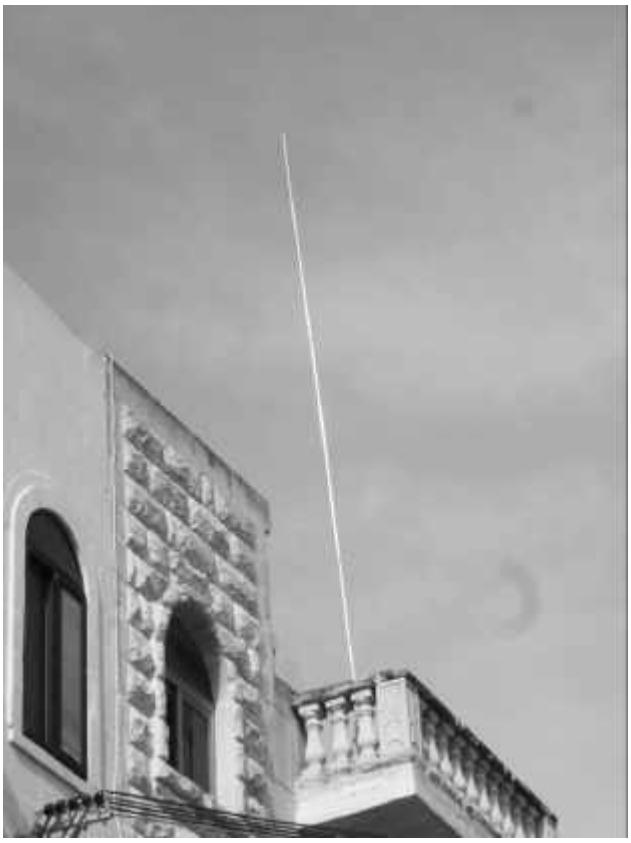
Multi-Op Contesting from 9H

We had to decide between running a Multi-Single station or two single-band single-op stations in the BARTG RTTY contest. A Multi-Single was possible for our setup, which included antennas for all bands and two laptops with networking and WriteLog. We chose the Single-Op category, which allowed each of us to run at his/her convenience without any "single TX" rule to comply with.

Twenty and 40 meters were for the best bands, given our antennas and the actual propagation conditions (low solar flux). Our bandpass filters, ferrites, and other anti-RFI measures allowed us to run 40 and 20 meters at the same time on RTTY! Claudia operated as 9H3LEO on 20 meters RTTY, and I was active as 9H3MR single band on 40 meters in the contest. We took it easy, with the main goal to have fun, and we did. Claudia was on her first contest expedition, and she found that operating as 9H3LEO with a wire antenna was much more fun than operating as I1/K2LEO with a 4-element Yagi. There are plenty of I stations in all contests, but not many 9H hams active on RTTY. I think we were the only ones active from 9H in the contest, so she had good pile-ups on 20 meters, making over



Claudia had no trouble assembling the low band vertical on the roof.



A view of our low band vertical from street level

400 QSOs while operating with 50 watts into a wire dipole in the late mornings/afternoons only.

Forty meters was much harder for a low-power RTTYer, as crowded and noisy as they usually are. I managed to make only 235 QSOs. Both of us worked five continents in the first few hours of operating.

As a funny contest story, I can tell that I saw Claudia, 9H3LEO, calling CQ and getting replies from two other LEOs: UA3LEO (whose real name is Leo!) and ON6LEO. It seems that LEOs prefer RTTY!

DXing

We spent two weeks on Gozo, so we had time to operate all bands and modes. I focused on CW, the most efficient mode. I ran 100 watts maximum, and often less. I verified (again) that it is possible to work all continents even at a 10-watt power level with a wire antenna from a decent location, and this happened on all bands from 80 to 15 meters.

Claudia focused on RTTY, mainly on 20 meters, which is her favorite band because she knows its behavior (she often operates on this band from my station at home, where antennas work definitely better on 20 meters).

In my modest experience as a mentor for new hams, I think it's a good strategy for newbies to initially focus on a single band so that they can eral times) and start understanding how HF propagation works without being confused by too many frequencies and too many "special" propagation methods. Operating styles and people also change from band to band, so one gets to know them easily by focusing on a single band.

I think it's important for a new ham to find the more suitable band and mode for him/her. It's important initially that newbies feel comfortable and have fun. If they find it too hard to make the first QSOs, maybe due to a combination of QRM + QRN + poor propagation, the interest in DX may fade away before they can even understand and realize what they're missing. From this perspective, I usually advise 20 meters as the first band to try. Fifteen meters is also a nice band, but it's not always rewarding in these times of low solar activity, so a newbie could become disappointed and frustrated if conditions are poor. Forty meters is not a good choice for a newbie, because too often one has to "fight" for limited space (in IARU Region 1). Eighty meters is a nice band, but for night souls only!

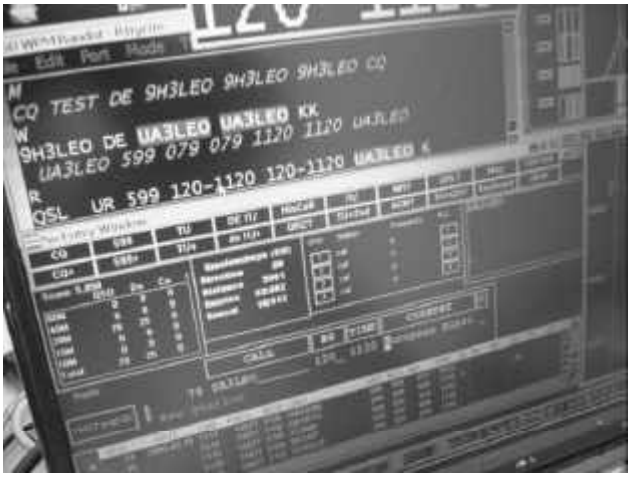
Andrea and Claudia operate from their "twin" stations in the kitchen/shack.

The second weekend on Gozo was time for WPX SSB, and again we operated as two Single-Op All-Band stations. Claudia was mainly on 15/20 meters and I was mostly on 40/80 meters. A few times I had to call for several minutes on the low

Claudia operates the BARTG RTTY contest

bands to get through with low power, but it was a good break from CW/RTTY. My SSB signal was probably very weak on 80 meters, because even some good friends of mine had trouble recognizing my callsign and my voice! Over 500 QSOs was okay for me; it was not many, but probably enough to claim first place low power for 9H.

Besides contests, we realized that our antennas, even if tunable on all bands, didn't work well on 17 meters, which still offers great DX openings. Therefore, we decided to make a new vertical dipole for 17 meters and erect it on a new fishing pole. It was easy and quick. The result was we were able to work several U.S. stations on 18 MHz CW and RTTY with our small K2 radio.



Using WriteLog, Claudia logs the QSO with UA3LEO in the BARTY RTTY Contest... his name was "LEO"

Local Hams

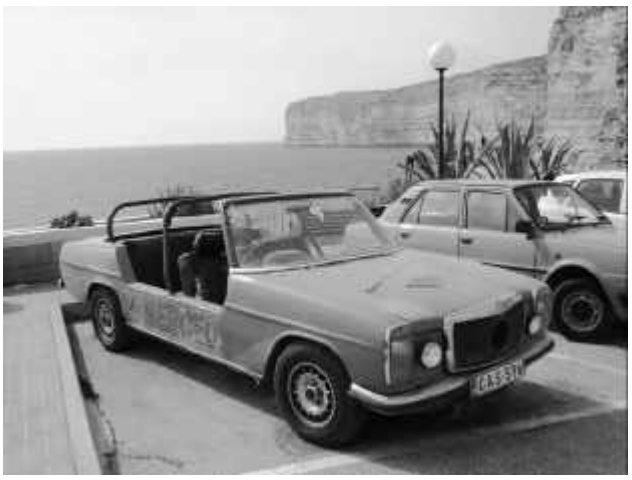
Before departing for Gozo, our only ham contact on the island was Joe, 9H5JO. One morning, while listening to a Pacific expedition on 20 meters SSB (yes, we also worked the Pacific with a wire) I found a terrific signal and it was clearly a neighbor. In this way I met Mike, 9H4DX, and he immediately turned out to be a very friendly and helpful ham.

Mike invited us to his shack, and of course we were happy to accept. The next day we took a bus to Nadur, and we had the pleasure of spending a few hours with Mike and his wife, who also speaks Italian (Italian television is commonly viewed by many Maltese people)!

We visited Mike, 9H4DX. He was active as 9H2NCC forthe World Carnival held on Gozo in May 2005.

Mike has a state-of-the-art shack, clearly specialized for SSB (his preferred mode). There are at least four desk microphones ready to push-and-talk on his table. This was a surprise for me, given that I had never had a desk microphone in more than 15 years of all-mode DXing. I show up on SSB mostly to work new countries, new islands, or multi-mode contests, for which I prefer a headset with mic. I never thought about a desk microphone, but I can say that there are nice ones at 9H4DX.

I didn't want to appear anti-social, but Mike insisted on offering me the opportunity to operate his station. I listened to the bands for few minutes and realized there was a good opening on 12 meters—a good opportunity to use his large beam on a band for which I have no antennas! In that way we made our only contacts on 24 MHz from Gozo. Public relations always pay off!



Complete with roll-bars, I had to have a picture of this "funny car"

Mike was then active with a very special prefix as 9H2NCC to celebrate the World Carnival, which was scheduled to take place on Gozo in May 2005.

Back Home

Unfortunately, the nice DX-vacation came to an end very quickly. We had to dismantle all antennas on the roof, and that was the only day we had some rain, of course!

From our apartment we had this view of Xlendi bay

We had to run to the harbour to take the ferry at the very last minute. Melissa was a great driver, and Joe helped us with the last important step by putting our antenna box on top of the (already closed) truck which contained passenger baggage. Everything else had to be carried by hand in order to embark on time.

When I returned home, I heard Mike, 9H4DX, again; it's always nice to hear friends on the air and

Alas, all good things must come to a close. Claudia wheels our luggage into the airport to return home.

remember their faces, their QTHs, and their shacks.

We received a lot of messages and QSLs with "tnx for the new one," especially on RTTY and 30 meters from North America and Japan. This means that despite Malta having several active hams, there is still demand for activity on such modes/bands from DX operators (probably most of them are newcomers, but I also recognized old timers in this group). Most Maltese operators are not active on the digital modes and CW, and few of them take part in contests.

Claudia designed two QSL cards for our operations (see www.ik1pmr.com) and we printed them as digital pictures, given the small quantities required. If you plan to visit Gozo for a quiet vacation, Joe, 9H5JO, and his family are always happy to help you set up a station in a nice location by the sea.

Of course, now we're planning a new trip, and our radios wish to come with us! —

73 de Andrea, IK1PMR/9H3MR,
and Claudia, K2LEO/9H3LEO

DX