

Mini DXpeditions on a Cruise with MARCO

Jay Garlitz, AA4FL

Before COVID-19, ham radio operators were able to enjoy the hobby without the complexities of the pandemic, specifically travel for DXpeditions. The Medical Amateur Radio Council (MARCO) is an amateur radio organization consisting of people who are professionals and ancillaries in the healing arts, and have an interest in issues related to patient care (physicians, dentists, nurses, pharmacists, veterinarians, psychologists, EMTs, etc.). Many of our members have been

active in nets that discuss the pandemic, bringing a medical perspective to fellow hams in the early days, when information was difficult for the public to obtain due to rapid developments in the medical field.

When MARCO's annual business meeting isn't being held at the Dayton Hamvention®, the location is chosen by the organization President. As President in 2019, I chose Tampa, Florida, for last year's meeting.



The Medical Amateur Radio Council (MARCO) used a cruise as a chance to operate from Belize, Honduras, and Grand Cayman in 2019.

▲ Bob, K4RLC; Mike, K9AJ; Maria, KI4WAX, and Chuck, N8CL, operated ZF2D in Grand Cayman using Eden's, ZF1EJ, guest station.

▶ Keith, N3IM, and Chuck, N8CL, operated HQ9D in Honduras.



The location gave us the flexibility to hold a 4-day business meeting from April 24 – 28, 2019, followed by an 8-day cruise out of Tampa's port from April 28 – May 5. Because this meeting was scheduled prior to the pandemic, members from all over the world attended. (During COVID-19, cruise ships are available for travel, however, if you plan on traveling on one during the pandemic for a DXpedition or otherwise, be sure to take precautions and follow the CDC's safety guidelines, which can be found at <https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/notices/warning/coronavirus-cruise-ship>.)

Travel Logistics

Our cruise ship, *Carnival Miracle*, made four ports of call, in Belize, Honduras, Grand Cayman, and Mexico. MARCO was able to get through the logistics needed to operate DX on land in three of those ports, excluding Mexico. A group DXpedition was novel to our group, and this addition to our annual meeting was attractive to members whose schedules allowed it.

This DXpedition took 10 months of careful planning. First, our travel agent initiated a discussion with Carnival cruise lines. Once our trip was approved, I worked directly with Carnival's event-planning department regarding details of the radio operation, due to needing customs approval for items such as portable HF stations, planning boat-to-shore transport, and use of a 2-meter handheld transceiver aboard the ship.

Customs and public health clearance were required in each port. As expedition leader, I was on standby with ship staff in each port prior to departure as they met with local authorities. The approval process was unremarkable, with just a cursory exchange of information.

I spent 2 months arranging the on-land locations for our operations. International Amateur Radio Permits (IARP) were conveniently obtained through ARRL for on-ship 2-meter handheld transceiver use on the Panamanian-flagged vessel. Other licensing efforts started 6 months in advance. For Belize, we were required to obtain individual licenses at \$20 each for a special call sign issuance for the group. The process was done via email, and a certificate of importation for radio equipment was provided. For Honduras, the Radio Club de Honduras handled and submitted our



Chip, N5RTF, and Etsuo, JA0BXP, operated V31D in Belize.

license request for a 1-day special event operation, which was approved at no cost to us. The Cayman Islands were also a pleasure to work with, as authorities handled the details by email and only required me to receive a local call (ZF2FL) and serve as a trustee for the special event group call and its participants. Both licenses and a certificate of importation for our equipment cost a total of \$80.

Radio Operation

On April 28, 2019, 24 hams and spouses embarked with all the documentation needed to hold operating events in Belize as V31D, on the island of Roatán in Honduras as HQ9D, and on Grand Cayman as ZF2D. For our operations to occur, we needed cooperation from the weather, customs, cruise ship tenders, propagation, security, and many factors that would enable us to get back to the ship on time. The cruise ship was in port for 7 – 9 hours at each location. However, factoring in time for disembarking/embarking, tender time, transport to the operating location, and station setup/breakdown meant we only had 3 – 5 hours of radio operation at each location.

We didn't pursue any on-ship operation other than 2-meter handheld use. This allowed us time to enjoy social activities on the ship and focus our HF efforts on shore as DX adventures in three of the four ports visited.

The Medical Amateur Radio Council

The Medical Amateur Radio Council (MARCO) was created in 1966, and its purpose is to promote good will and fellowship internationally, among amateur radio operators who are professionals in the healing arts or have an interest therein. This is accomplished through on-the-air contacts; the MARCO newsletter, *Aether*; annual meetings; scholarship offerings to hams pursuing careers within health-related fields, and projects that benefit the public.

On-the-air network operation is an integral part of MARCO and is conducted for the purpose of discussing medical and technical information, and, when necessary, assisting in medical emergencies and other priority traffic.

Additional information about MARCO, including a membership application, can be found at www.marco-ltd.org. You can also visit their social media pages on Facebook (www.facebook.com/HealthCareHams) and Twitter (<https://twitter.com/>



Each DX location had a different set of operators. North Florida DX Association (NFDXA) members were on standby in Florida and many contacted us, with some of the best signals heard.

We activated V31D at a rental unit in Belize about 8 miles north of port. The station was set up on the rooftop under the cover of a three-story building with dipoles gently sloping down to trees on the property. Station 1 was an Icom IC-706MKIIG for 20-meter phone and CW operation. Station 2 was an IC-7000, primarily used for FT8 on 17 meters. Ropes were pre-positioned in the trees for antenna support and we had help on the ground for hanging the antennas.

We were on the air for nearly 5 hours. Propagation on 20 meters was poor and noise levels were high until conditions improved later in the day. FT8 on 17 meters was active, with signals decoding throughout. At this first port of call, we made 114 contacts with hams in 19 countries. The operators were Chip, N5RTF; Etsuo, JA0BXP; Jay, AA4FL; Chuck, N8CL; Maria, KI4WAX; Bob, K4RLC; Mike, K9AJ, and Susan, K9XYL.

HQ9D was a short operation in Honduras at a diving and economy lodge 35 minutes from port, which is on the south side of Roatán. There's usually poor signal takeoff to North America due to being at the base of a mountain, however, our location on the coast afforded great takeoffs for North America, South America, and Europe. Operating time was less than 3 hours due to a short stay in port. Our operation was set up on the balcony of a second-floor cabana facing the water, and lodge staff assisted with the antenna placement. Prop-

agation was better here and afforded us 122 contacts in six countries. The operators were Jeff, K6JW; Etsuo, JA0BXP; Jay, AA4FL; Chuck, N8CL; Maria, KI4WAX, and Keith, N3IM.

ZF2D in Grand Cayman was a very different operation. Eden, ZF1EJ, offered to let us use his guest shack, which is also the club station of the Cayman Island Radio Club. We brought along our IC-7000 for 17-meter FT8, but had two of his radios for 20-meter CW and SSB. Three stations were on the air at a time and each had its own tower and multiband antenna. A log-periodic antenna at 100 feet and a Mosley Electronics Pro-67-B antenna at 70 feet were accompa-

nied by a Pro-67-C-3 antenna somewhere in the 50-foot range. In 4 hours, we made 315 contacts in 24 countries. The operators were Bob, K4RLC; Dave, NN4DF; Etsuo, JA0BXP; Susan, K9XYL; Mike, K9AJ; Jay, AA4FL; Chuck, N8CL, and Maria, KI4WAX.

Conclusion

Executing the DX portion of the trip as a bonding experience for a group of medical hams was invaluable, and the publicity generated getting on the air from DX locations made the amateur world aware of our organization.

This mini-DXpedition took a lot of effort and was a challenge in both planning and execution, but it was a memorable trip. Plus, new MARCO members have already joined after hearing about our unique journey!

All photos by the author.

Jay Garlitz, AA4FL, is a retired dentist. He earned his license in 1972 at age 13, and earned his Amateur Extra-class license in 1975. While in school at the University of Florida, he served as President of the Gator Amateur Radio Club and later became the faculty advisor. Jay is currently trustee of their club station, W4DFU. He is the Immediate Past-President and current Secretary of the Medical Amateur Radio Council (MARCO), CEO of Connected World Internet Ventures, Inc., and a past Vice Chair of the Council on Communications of the American Dental Association. Jay can be reached at jay.aa4fl@gmail.com.

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