Gustave DX expedition 9U4WX and 9U5R Burundi 2023

Burundi, or the Republic of Burundi, is a country in central Africa bordering Rwanda to the north, the Democratic Republic of the Congo to the west and Tanzania to the east and south. In 1890, Burundi was colonised by Germany (under the name "Urundi") and became part of German East Africa (1890–1919) together with Rwanda ("Ruanda"). Then it became a Belgian colony and in 1962 gained independence. The official language is French, but people mainly speak Kirundi and Swahili.

Written by OK2WX

How it all began

Getting to Burundi is neither easy nor cheap. But trying to obtain a licence and bringing amateur radio equipment there makes everything much more difficult. After all, the country's 64th place in the "Most Wanted" list on Club Log is no accident. But let's start from the beginning.

After returning from the 8Q7WX and 8Q7WM expedition in March 2022, in which Karel OK2WM and I mainly focused on the lower bands 160-80-40 m, I was looking for a way to contact the proper authorities in Burundi. I tried to write to the e-mail address I had from Shabu 9U4RI from the UK several times, but never received a response. So, I had no choice but to try to send my application by mail. In Africa, this means DHL or Fedex, because documents sent by regular post rarely reach the recipient. For the service of delivering a letter of ten A4 pages, the Czech DHL branch charged me EUR 196, but gave me a guarantee that it would be delivered directly to the right official.

I waited for a month, but received no response. So, I contacted Antonio IZ8CCW from the last known expedition to Burundi, 9U4M from 2017. He gave me the e-mail address of another official at the ARCT (the telecommunications authority) whom I also tried to contact on social media, which ultimately worked.

Even though I established my first contact, the matter was far from over. After dozens of e-mails in the span of 7 months and after I paid a fee of USD 330, I received a completely useless licence 9U4WX for 1.815–1.848 and 28.500–29.066 CW and SSB. I never understood the idea behind this (maybe they were inspired by the former youth OL licences from the Czechoslovakia many years ago hi).

This meant that the November date for our expedition was off the table, so I had to try once again. It's not just about the licence; you can only import amateur radio equipment to Burundi with a special permit from the ARCT and the OBR, which is a customs authority. To receive your licence, you also need to have a fixed QTH, plane tickets and visas. I received the visa from the Embassy of Burundi in Berlin in three weeks for USD 200. This in itself was a risk, because if they did not grant me the licence or granted it too late, and/or if I did not receive my import permit, the approved (and paid) QTH would be forfeit, and so would be the visa and part of the plane tickets. You basically need to follow a very strict sequence of steps.

Dozens of messages followed with ample help from Antonio, who did as much as he could. After many urgings and after several more fees, the licence was finally issued in early

December 2022, valid for 2 months. Now it was time for the second round of applications for the import permit. To obtain that, you need to submit a detailed description of the imported material and its value. On Antonio's advice, I tried to get the value as low as possible, but still the customs officials calculated the customs duty to be USD 2,000. After several weeks of explanations, we eventually brought it down to USD 900 and USD 400 in processing fees. I added shots against typhoid and cholera to my yellow fever vaccination from last year and waited for my permit, which still wasn't signed and valid.

In the meantime, I received a message that the well-known African traveller, radio amateur and humanitarian worker Elvira IV3FSG had also applied for a licence, 9U5R, and wanted to go to Burundi in January. She contacted me to ask for help with her import permits, but it was clear that we wouldn't able to get it done by January. So, I offered Elvira that if she gets her 9U5R licence in time, she can come with me and we can transport the equipment on my permit. The documents finally arrived and two weeks before our departure, the antennas were transported by Lufthansa Cargo to Bujumbura.

For expeditions with eight, twelve or more members, transporting equipment is a fairly simple affair. Even though airlines differentiate between "overweight" and "oversized" luggage travelling as "carry on", i.e. on board, with so many people it's fairly easy to distribute the weight of individual pieces and ensure you can fit into the corresponding tables.

The situation with a one-member expedition is quite different and resembles a solo ascent of Mt. Everest without the help of Sherpas. In this case, you're responsible for absolutely everything from transport and the raising of the antennas to the radio activity itself, and anything that you don't do by yourself simply won't be done. This also means that carrying 140 kg of equipment with you is out of the question. In the end, there were two two-metre crates with a total weight of 66 kg that travelled before me as cargo, and my two suitcases weighing 30 kg each that came with me. Because sponsors demand everything in an expedition to have backups, I needed two transceivers, two power sources, two keys, two Spiderbeams, 250 m of coaxial cables, 500 m of radial wires and lots of other equipment.

Elvira, who speaks French and has already worked from 12 African countries, thought the situation wouldn't be as tough as it seemed, and packed one more IC7300 and a Skypper antenna for 10 and 6 metres in her bags.

I landed at Bujumbura airport on 1 February; Elvira was supposed to arrive the next day from Rome. The expedition was officially scheduled to start on 4 February, so you'd think there was a lot of time. The next few hours showed it wouldn't be so easy. My cargo agent was waiting at the airport to arrange all the formalities concerning the cargo; the antennas were already in our QTH. I had the original copies of the ARCT permits to import the equipment, another permit for release to circulation and a permit from OBR. But officials are all the same wherever you go. Even though I had all the valid permits, I spent several hours at the airport, and despite patient explanations from my agent and ARCT officials, the local customs officers refused to release my suitcases. So, I left for the hotel with my hand luggage and malaria medication to spend the night.

The negotiations continued the next day, but were made more complicated by the fact that the registration system was down. Elvira arrived in the afternoon. Her suitcases were also immediately confiscated by the customs officials and after a difficult day, we met in the evening at the hotel. We had antennas, but no radios and coax cables.

On Friday afternoon, 3 February, one day before the expedition was to start, I finally received my suitcases back after many urgings and we could start setting up the antennas. By the evening, we only managed to put up a dipole for 30 m. It was not advisable to go out after dark because of mosquitoes carrying the malaria parasite Plasmodium falciparum. On Saturday 4 February, instead of launching the expedition, we started setting up our 5 Band Spiderbeam and the verticals for 40 and 80 m. We managed to tune the verticals correctly on the first attempt, but the Spiderbeam turned out to be trickier. It behaved strangely and its PSV values were curiously high. But dusk fell again, so we had to retreat behind our mosquito nets.

At night, I contacted Rick DJ0IP from Spiderbeam Germany and sent him data from the analyser in .asd format. We were both racking our brains to figure out what was going on, but the answer was ultimately very simple. Our local “engineers” who helped us set up all the parts of the Spiderbeam decided to make their job of stretching the wires easier by simply shortening the resonant lengths of emitters. But because it was already dark when we were assembling the antenna, no one noticed. So, we had to take it down, fix everything and put it back up again.

In the meantime, Elvira applied to the ARCT and OBR for her equipment import permit. Fortunately, we now had two transceivers and two power sources and could start working under our callsigns. It turned out that the 40 m vertical can be very well tuned to the 15 m band, but without filters on the upper bands, we interfered with each other. So we started to rotate in 3-hour cycles. After dark, we could simultaneously operate on 20, 30 and 40 metres without interference. On the 80, we were still unable to get our “Beverage on ground” running, and it was also set up in an inconvenient direction.

Another complication was caused by the hippos who live in Lake Tanganyika and who are very dangerous. They can reach speeds of up to 45 km/h and are one of Africa’s biggest killers. When I mentioned to ZS1HF that there was a hippo at our antennas, he was horrified and recommended we do not leave the ham shack.

The local security team always placed red flags in the sand and we had to patiently wait for the hippo to walk back into the water so we can work on our antennas. I was afraid of crocodiles, in particular the legendary Gustave after whom we named our expedition, but the hippo is by far the most feared.

On Monday 6 February, we’re finally active on all bands except for the 80 where the Beverage is still acting up. We experience a massive pile-up and many stations, in particular from southern Europe and Russia, turned out to have an atrocious discipline. Sometimes I pigheadedly insisted on contacting a station that had been patiently calling at any cost. This is of course counterproductive and a big waste of time, so I soon stopped. I repeated a single station sign ten times over to make a QSO. This is while many “big guns” keep calling and

snuffing out everything around, making all filters completely useless. When I feel I have had just about enough, I turn on FT8 and open a bottle of wine. Despite the poverty, you can find some excellent imported wines from France and South Africa in Burundi.

A tropical storm came on Tuesday 7 February, and I was really worried. I sent a video to Cole from dx-world, which also appears on FB. The storm and downpour last until the morning. As soon as I woke up, Elvira started reporting the damage. Everything survived. Our 18-metre vertical for 80 was bent, but thankfully did not break. We repaired the antenna and send out regards to the engineers of Spiderbeam Germany for using such good material.

Because Elvira has some contacts in Bujumbura, we are invited for lunch with Raymondo and Irene, an Italian couple who used to live in Congo, but have been living in Burundi for the last 30 years. Raymondo has two restaurants and a ranch, and gives us a quick tour of the city's surroundings. Above us there are majestic mountains; the highest peak of Mt. Heha, 2,684 m, is some 20 km away. Everywhere you see begging children, often orphans, who are trying to get money or at least some food at crossroads. Soldiers are also a constant sight, sitting on the backs of lorries with loaded weapons. Sometimes you see a white UN jeep with exhaust sticking over the roof. Our guides tell us that the country is peaceful now, but no one knows for how long. Proximity to the border with the Democratic Republic of the Congo means that there are constant attacks of armed Red Tabas, who in September 2019 attacked a plane taking off from Bujumbura airport with grenade launchers. Fortunately, our hotel is surrounded by barbed wire and guarded by soldiers.

Thanks to extensive help from Jan OK2ZAW, we finally manage to get a new "Beverage on ground" up and running a bit further away from our ham shack and all the radials, which means 50 more metres of coaxial cable. In the evening, we get our first Japanese callers, one after another on 100 W. That was an amazing feeling. We spend the next few days trying FT8 on the 80, the first time since 2017, and the interest is enormous. DS5TOS writes us to say that South Korea does not allow the use of frequencies 3567 and 3573, but only up to 3550, so we're running our FT8 on South Korean QRG 3547 kHz.

VK4DX somewhat angrily reminds us that there's not just Europe and that we're ignoring VK in the narrow window on the ten. So in the morning between 0500–0700 UTC, when I would normally be asleep, I set up my alarm after a long night and still in my pyjamas went to turn the antenna to the Pacific. FK8CP and a few other stations appear. The heading goes directly towards the mountains, but hopefully it will pass through somehow. After breakfast, I turned the antenna back to the EU and the regular morning pile-up on 10 and 12 metres begins.

On Thursday 16 February, after 2 weeks, Elvira finally gets her bags back. To prevent interference, she relocates to the bungalow some 200 metres away. No more handing over antenna connectors to each other. We set up a Skypper antenna for 10 and 6 metres and the folded multiband dipole. We're monitoring the opening of 50 MHz with ample help from Steve HA0DU who keeps bombarding us with messages while Elvira makes the first contacts with Europe. Bernie VK4KX writes to say that there are many stations from VK on 50.313 asking for skeds. But we do not manage to connect with Australia on 6 metres.

An inspection from the ARCT Frequency Spectrum Department is announced for Friday 17 February. They want to see our operation and equipment. When they arrive, it becomes quite clear they don't know very much about the field, but are keenly interested. As usual in Africa, they let themselves be invited to dinner and drink many bottles of local beer.

We have major issues with pirates who are working under the 9U4WX callsign on the frequencies where I'm not. They even use the QO-100 satellite for which we do not have the equipment. I get various messages from HAMs with printscreens of the cluster, which are quite incredible. Antonio immediately publishes everything on our website, and so do dx-world and dxnews. Many stations contact me to say they called, but were not in the log. We remind everyone that the only relevant log is the one on our website and and later on LoTw. If they're not there, they were unfortunately working with a pirate.

The weather deteriorates dramatically after 20 February. It's overcast, raining all the time, and there are frequent thunderstorms, day and night. The rainy season in Burundi usually starts in March, but this time it apparently arrived earlier. The lower bands are unusable for CW and SSB; listening is very difficult to impossible because of strong atmospheric QRN. Because the rains "retune" the vertical upward, I take advantage of the opportunity to make my last QSO on the 80 on SSB. With 100 W, this is quite a challenge, but I do manage to make a few connections with JA and EU.

The mosquitoes are also thriving. After the rains, they hatch like crazy and leaving the door to the ham shack open in the evening is a terrible idea. Because we're slowly running out of repellent, we switch to day mode with FT8 overnight. The room has special dimmed lights in the blue spectrum, but we still need to leave the door slightly open for the coaxial cables for the antennas.

My cargo agent reminds me that I need to submit my application for a re-export permit to get my equipment back to Europe. I also need similar documents from ARCT and OBR, this time for export, not import. I never figured out why they require these permits and I don't like it, but there's nothing I can do about it. I'm starting to worry about the Elecraft K4, because it's quite an expensive radio compared to the IC7300. Even Elvira is worried, and she's not one to get upset easily. I'm glad we don't have the PA Expert 1.3 with us, because in that case I probably wouldn't be able to sleep.

I also don't know if we'll be able to get our cargo back to Europe and if we get our deposit back. On Friday 24 February, we received both permits to export our ham radio equipment from the ARCT. Now it's time for the customs officials. For the last three days, we work as much as we can. In the meantime, we start looking into our options for shipping the antennas back, but the cost of air freight together with the unreturned deposit are more than USD 2,000, which is more than the value of all the antennas combined. Antonio gets in touch with his powerful compatriot Alfredo who tries to find a cheaper way to send the antennas to Italy on a container ship.

On Monday 27 February, we make our decision. The antennas will be taken down the next day and will stay in Burundi. I spend all of Tuesday taking down and packing the antennas, which is a lot of work for one person. In the meantime, Elvira keeps working on 10 and 6

metres. She decided to stay for another week in Burundi because of all the time spent negotiating with authorities.

On Wednesday morning, 1 March, the situation is critical. The OBR still hasn't issued the permit to export the radio equipment. The plane leaves in the evening and I need to leave for the airport around 1600 UTC. Our almost friends from the ARCT, including their boss, accompany me to the airport, expecting trouble. My cargo agent promises that the permit should arrive any minute. After several document inspections, I make it to the first security check. The suitcases go into the X-ray tunnel. The official points his finger at one of them that he wants to see opened. He sees a bunch of coaxial cables and wires. He looks into the papers and motions for me to close the suitcase. The OBR permit arrives in time, and also makes it to my WhatsApp at this moment.

At the check-in desk, I run into trouble because my suitcases are too heavy, so I need to pay USD 280 extra. Thankfully, they didn't think to weigh my hand luggage, which is at least two times heavier than the allowed 8 kg.

Then I simply wait in the departure lounge for my plane to Entebbe, Uganda. Before midnight, I leave from Uganda to Brussels, and the next morning by the first Austrian Airlines flight to Vienna. XYL was waiting for me at the airport and happily took me home.

The adventure was over. At the time of writing, I already know that Elvira also made it safely back to Italy, so I can publish the final results of our joint expedition.

Over 20 days, we two operators made a total of 60,000 QSOs, of which 16,000 were CW and SSB. There were more than 1,000 QSOs on the 80, of which more than 300 on CW and SSB. Everything without PAs, only bare transceivers and 100 W out.

At this point, I must thank everyone who participated in the expedition and without whom it would not have been possible. These are in particular:

Jean-Marie and Florentin from ARCT for the licence, Arsene Cargo Agency for all the import and export permits, hotel managers Rodriguez and Exode who were extremely helpful, Alfredo the hotel owner who has been living in Burundi for over 30 years, knows the local conditions and provided us with valuable support, my QSL manager Antonio IZ8CCW, president of the Mediterraneo DX-Club and an experienced DXman, with whom I was in daily contact, Francesco IK0XBX for technical assistance with FT8, Claudio IW1QLG for his efforts in making sure data was correctly transferred to the online log, Marco IZ2GNQ and Rick DJ0IP from Spiderbeam, Dario IZ4UEZ and OK2ZAW for help with Beverage antennas, Steve HA0DU for online monitoring of the conditions on 6 metres and lots of useful information, Ivor OK2VWX for preparing the coaxial cables and radial wires, Bob OK2BS for making the holders for radials and baluns, Mirek OK2BUH for valuable technical advice, Michal Novák from ACW Air Cargo Worldwide s.r.o. for transporting the antennas to Burundi, Prof. Rastislav Maďar Head of Department of Epidemiology at the Faculty of Medicine, University of Ostrava for consultations concerning malaria prophylaxis in Burundi and of course my wife Pavla for her unending support.

We also wish to thank all our sponsors: Mastrant, Spiderbeam, Mediterraneo DX Club, German DX Foundation, Swiss DX Foundation, European DX Foundation, DX-World, DX-news and Hotel Club du Lac Tangayika.

From individuals, we thank

4X6FB – AB3CV – AD3C – AD8FD – BD4VGZ – DL1ATZ – EA3Y – HA0DU – HB9EXQ – HL4GAV – K0AIZ – K1CP – K1JX – K5WRE – DL1ATZ – LA5LJA – JA1AGG – JA8UIV – JK1HIY – JR1CAD – M0DAZ – NH6T – NW7US – OE6IFG – OE7DMT – OH1JP – ON8AH – OZ1KZX – SP5XMU – W0PSY – W2ODH – W3XY – W5HVV – W7IB – W9AJ – WD0FYV – WE2DX – VK5PN

Technical equipment of the expedition

TRX:

1 × Elecraft K4
2 × ICOM 7300
Antennas:

80 m quarter-wave vertical + 16 radials 20 m
40 m quarter-wave vertical + 16 radials 10 m
30 m dipole 2 × 7.5 m
TF2FD – wideband folded dipole
Spiderbeam 5 band 20-17-15-12-10 m
ALU mast 10 m
Skypper 10 – 6 m
Fiberglass pole 7 m
RX antennas:
1 x Beverage on ground (BOG) 80 m EU/NA/VK
7ANT switch with OK2ZAW preamplifier
1 × loop K9AY

Summary:

Total number in the log is 60,148 QSO in 3 weeks with 2 operators without PA

You can find detailed statistics for 9U4WX on the website https://mdxc.support/íučwx/log-search/

9U5R is at https://clublog.org/charts/?c=9U5R#r QSL manager IK2DUW

The full QSL policy for 9U4WX is available at https://mdxc.support/íučwx/log-search/