

VP6G Story

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A little bit of history

I have been interested in Pitcairn Island for a long time, for two reasons. In the first place, Firstly, Pitcairn Island has a unique history and secondly, it is an interesting location for a DXpedition. If you do not yet know the story, I advise you to read about the mutineers of the Bounty. In December 1787, the HMS Bounty left England to gather breadfruit trees in Tahiti. They arrived in Tahiti in April 1789 where they stayed for six months. After they left Tahiti, there was a conflict between captain Bleigh and acting-Lieutenant Fletcher Christian who seized control of the ship from their captain. Bleigh and 18 crew members were put in an open longboat in the middle of the ocean. Fletcher Christian and 9 mutineers with their 9 Tahitian wives and 6 Tahitian men later settled on Pitcairn on 15 January 1790. The current population of about 50 people on Pitcairn are all descendants of these mutineers. There are many sources of information, and even movies, about Pitcairn.

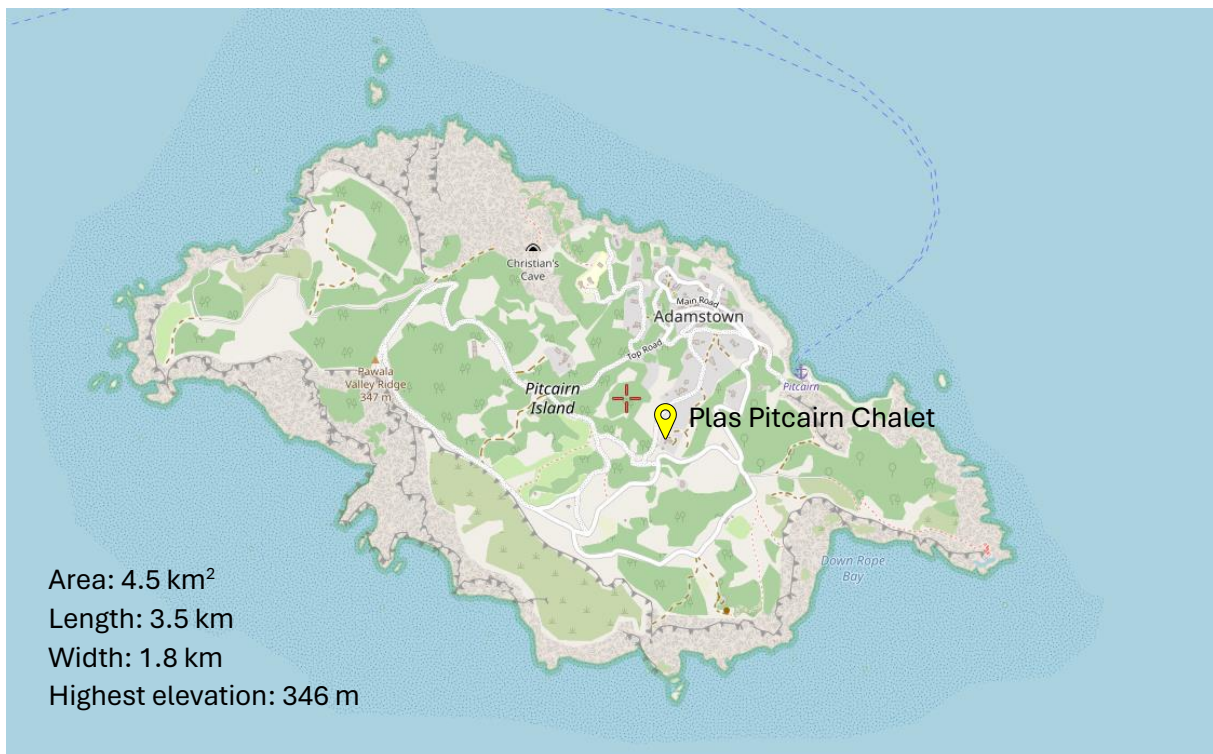


Figure 1 - Pitcairn Island

Introduction

I started to explore what I would need to get there. Two things should go in parallel, i.e. finding and booking suitable accommodation and arranging the transportation. The latter included several flights and a long boat trip.

For personal reasons I could only make concrete arrangements not further than 3 months ahead. The most difficult part was to get a confirmed seat on the MHS Silver Supporter, as it can

only accommodate 12 passengers. First I was placed on the waiting list but soon I got a confirmation. That was the start of organizing the flights and accommodation. The Silver Supporter is the ship that brings supplies 4 times a year from New Zealand to Pitcairn. In addition, they have a more frequent schedule between Mangareva (Tahiti) and Pitcairn. I booked the voyage from Mangareva to Pitcairn that would last more than two days.

I booked my regular flights to Papeete with KLM and AF. From Papeete you can only fly with Air Tahiti, which goes only twice a week. That flight connects perfectly with the departure of the Silver Supporter for which they use an ATR72, which is a small plane. I had to make sure I got a seat on that flight. Since I had 3 pieces of luggage, I needed to secure 2 extra cases as excess luggage. That turned out to be rather difficult. Officially they tell you that you can make arrangements for any excess baggage at the counter two hours before departure. If space permits, they can take it. Obviously, that was not acceptable to me as I wanted to be sure that all luggage would be on the flight with me. In the end, I did make arrangements with Air Tahiti cargo department (called Fret).

When planning the flights I made sure to build in time buffers in between the flights, in case I would experience delays or other unforeseen circumstances.

After several e-mail exchanges, I found suitable accommodation and made a booking with Brenda and Mike Christian. The accommodation was Plas Pitcairn Chalet, just 5 minutes' walk from Bren and Mike their home, where I would also get my breakfast, lunch and dinner. With that, all arrangements were in place and ready to go.

Station design

I decided to add a new mode to my operation, due to the popularity by the community, i.e. FT8. During the W8S DXpedition I could see how you easily could operate one station with CW or SSB and at the side operate FT8 and therefore I wanted to give it a try.

When going for a DXpedition with high costs, I did not want it to be cut short due to equipment failure. Thus, I planned to have all equipment redundant, radio, power supply, computer and antenna. The SPE amplifier was the only exception as it is too heavy to bring two.

I have a SunSDR2 PRO and SunSDR2 DX, so this was a good setup. The SunSDR2 PRO is a 20W version but for use with the SPE amplifier, you need less than 10W. The SunSDR2 DX is a 100W version and can be run without amplifier.

On the laptops I had N1MM+ for logging and MSHV for FT8. Both laptops and the SunSDR2 radios were connected via UTP to a small router.

To run two radios simultaneously, you need BPFs and place the antennas at a good distance from each other. I built especially for this DXpedition the BPFs designed by DG0SA (SK) and available from DH4YM. These are 200W versions but small and lightweight. Although I tried to judge from Google Earth where I could place antennas, you need to see on the spot what is possible. But to be prepared, I decided I would need 30 meters and 70 meters of coax. As weight is a critical factor, I had been searching for the best solution and finally found the Messi and Paoloni Extraflex Bury 7 coax cable most suitable. It is low loss, can handle high power and 100 meters weights just 6 KG. As a corporate sponsor they donated this cable.

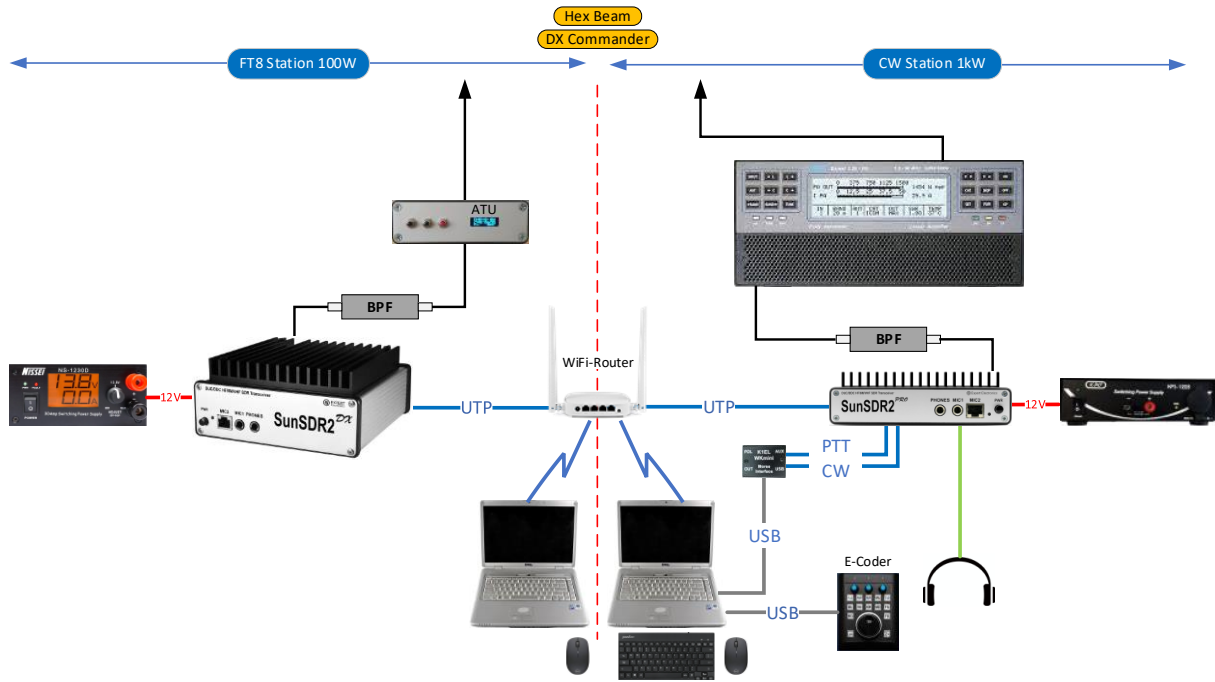


Figure 2 - Complete station setup.

I spent quite some time figuring out how I could squeeze all the equipment (and little personal things) into 3x 23KG bags/suitcases. Because of the length of the Spider pole for the DX Commander being 120 cm long, I needed at least one “odd size” bag. For that purpose, I purchased a golf bag. That could contain the DX Commander pole, the Hexbeam and the 100 meters of coax. This equipment combined weighed 23 kg already. One suitcase held the SPE amplifier, the base plate of the Hexbeam, one power supply unit and all the wires of the DX Commander, another 23 KG. All other equipment such as radios, power supply, cables, router, tools, etc. plus some personal stuff went into the second suitcase, yet another 23 KG.



Figure 3 - 3x 23KG plus backpack (not shown here)

I announced my DXpedition and created some pages on my web site (dx.to/vp6g/). At the same time, I started to approach DX Clubs and Foundation for support of this rather expensive DXpedition. Fortunately, several clubs and foundations responded positively.

The journey begins

On Sunday 31st of March I departed from AMS airport at 8:00 LT to CDG airport in Paris. From CDG I flew to LAX (AF24) and from AF28 to PPT. In LAX I learned that one suitcase (the most important one, was left in Paris. After consulting Air France staff, I was told that the suitcase would be on the AF28 flight, and I would get it in Papeete once I arrived there myself.

At the baggage drop-off, where I also informed them about my missing suitcase, I could watch a TSA agent unpacking my golf bag. Everything went out, and probably was surprised to see what he found in a golf bag. Everything went back in the bag and it was transported in a lorry to... my plane?

Yes, the golf bag made it to Papeete, but the other suitcase was still not in Papeete. I went to the Air France office to see what they could do. The lady there told me it would be on the next flight AF26, arriving at 05:30, which was only one hour before the departure of my next flight at 06:30 to Mangareva.

I went to the Air Tahiti service counter to discuss the case. The staff went to speak with the supervisor, and I was promised they would do the max to make it happen. With nothing more I

could do, I went to get some sleep. Around 19:00 I went to the airport to change money as I needed to pay for the extra luggage in Mangareva for the return flight, which can only be paid in cash.

I woke up at 03:00 and went down to the lobby to get my golf bag from the locker, paid my bill and waited for the taxi. The taxi came at 04:00 as promised and a little later I was at the airport. I went to the Air Tahiti counter that was still closed but opened about 15 minutes later. I explained the situation and the staff were very understanding. I checked in two pieces of luggage. I was told I had excess baggage so had to pay. I showed him the invoice that I paid already in advance. He consulted his manager and came back saying that it was paid to Fret (the cargo department) so I had to check-in the extra luggage at the Fret counter. He showed me the way. When arriving there, everything was closed, and he told me they would open at 06:00. I realized that would not work for me as after checking 1 golf bag, I would need to run to the arrival hall to catch my suitcase from the AF26 flight and come back to them.

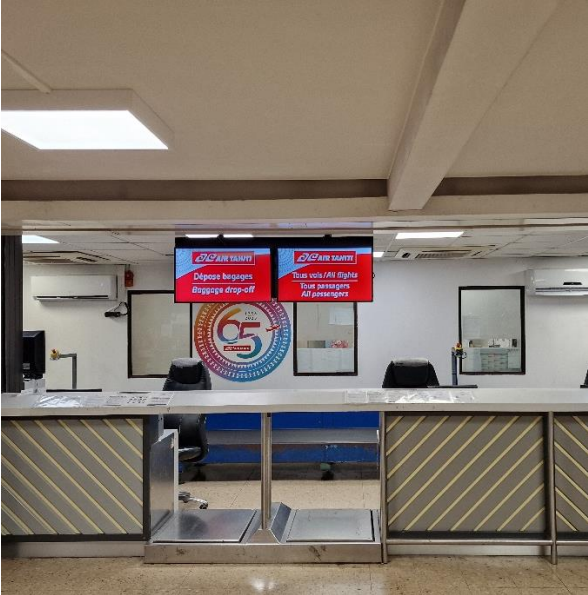


Figure 4 - Air Tahiti baggage drop-off

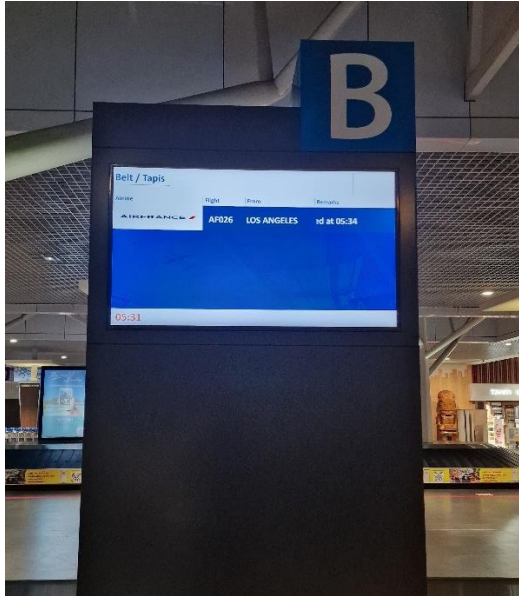


Figure 5 - AF26 baggage coming!

Therefore, I went back to the AT counter, checked-in the golf bag and paid excess baggage for two pieces. Next, I went to the arrival hall and waited until the AF26 arrived. I had already noticed that it would arrive 15 minutes ahead of schedule. I could hear the plane landing and I went into the arrivals hall. I was met by the lady of AF who was helpful and together we waited at the belt for my suitcase. She was already contacted by Air Tahiti who told her that 06:10 was the deadline. I think a few hundred suitcases went by until we saw my suitcase at 06:05. I grabbed it and rushed to the exit. There the AT staff were waiting for me and guided me to their counter to deliver the suitcase and put me through security. After that was done, I could walk straight to the plane. What a relief it was. The flight was first to the island of Hao where we stayed for about half an hour to refuel. Finally, we arrived in Mangareva.

In Mangareva I saw for the first time all 3 baggage together. I had to meet a police officer who was stamping my passport because I was about to leave French Polynesia.



Figure 6 - Transport to the Silver Supporter

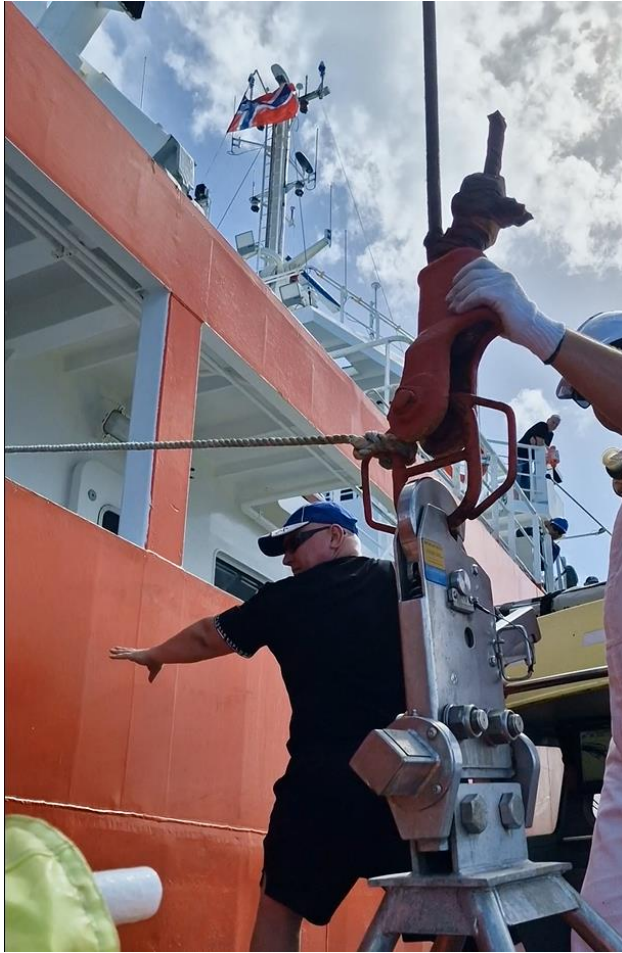


Figure 7 - Winching the small boat up to deck level

We went aboard a boat that brought us to the main island where we were welcomed by people from the M/V Silver Supporter.

A smaller boat brought 4 of the passengers with all the luggage to the Silver Supporter and came back to collect the remaining passengers. When you arrive at the Silver, they winch the whole boat up so you can easily step onto the main vessel. Finally, the smaller boat was parked on the vessel.

The Silver Supporter is a Norwegian vessel, hired by the Pitcairn government. It has a very diverse international crew. Captain from Latvia, Engineer from Russia, Cook from Philippines. 8 people in total.



Figure 8 - M/V Silver Supporter

The passengers all were assigned a hut, some were sharing. I shared a hut that had two separate sleeping cabins. In the shared room, there was a small desk, and a toilet/shower room. All perfect.

Lots of food, three meals a day and always snacks and drinks.

Passengers: One young Russian guy, Simon from Scotland, Mona from the US, another man from the US, the police officer from New Zealand who came back from holidays, Melva returning home after a visit to the US, etc.

We arrived at Pitcairn when it was dark, and we had to wait until daylight before disembarking could start. The Pitcairn people came alongside with their longboat we were watching how to get off the Silver. Obviously the longboat is lying a lot lower than the deck of the Silver, so all luggage was handed one by one from the deck to the people in the longboat. For the passengers they had a rope ladder from which you had to climb down into the longboat. Wearing a life vest, they hooked everyone on a safety line during the descent.

Once all people and luggage were in the longboat, we went quickly to the harbor where most of the Pitcairners were welcoming us. The travelers were a mixture of people visiting for 3 or 11 days, people that came back home or people that came to Pitcairn for their business (like the only policeman on the island).



Figure 9 - Pitcairn with the harbor visible and where they are waiting for us.



Figure 10 - The longboat that would bring us ashore.



Figure 11 - Using a rope ladder to get into the longboat.

I was greeted first by Meralda VP6MW after which Brenda Christian welcomed me. I rented the chalet from Brenda and Mike Christian, so Brenda would take me and my luggage to transport to the chalet, which would be my “home” for the next 11 days.

After I arrived at the chalet, I examined the environment and had to decide where to place the antennas. Originally, I wanted to have the antennas separated by some 80 meters but given the circumstances, I had to change my plan. I guess they finally were just 20 meters apart.

It was still early in the day, and I went on to put together the DX Commander. After that, I assembled the Hexbeam. At that moment I needed some help to erect the DX Commander and to fix the 6-meter-tall pipe to the veranda and place the Hexbeam on top of it. Both antennas were up and ready for operation late afternoon.



Figure 12 - DX Commander



Figure 13 - The Hexbeam with clear view towards the Ocean (north)

Before operating, I checked the SWR of both antennas which was OK.

The next step was to put together my radio station, which would comprise of two stations, one for CW and one for FT8. I was quite sure that operating two radios at the same time, even by using BPF's, would not be feasible. However, on one occasion, I was able to operate CW on 20m and FT8 on 15m but further, I had to operate CW or FT8.

I experienced some RFI on the USB cable of the K1EL miniWK resulting in losing the COM port of the miniWK. I had brought a box with clip-on ferrite beads and applied several on the USB cable which solved the problem.

I received messages about FT8 Intermittent TX problems. I was informed by a DXpeditioner that they had a similar problem, and it was related to the SPE. Later people pointed to the radio as the problem. Therefore, I switched radios but that did not solve the problem. Others indicated it was related to the software, but I did not want to re-install software as it could end up in bigger problems. Consequently, people were experiencing problems, but overall, 7,827 QSO's were logged. I apologize for any trouble I have caused.



Figure 14 - Operating position with two complete stations.

The electricity supply was excellent. Not so long ago, all homes in Pitcairn installed an advanced electric power solution, comprising solar panels, batteries, and an inverter. This was also the case for my chalet and therefore I had very stable and clean 240V AC, 24 hours a day.

For many years, Pitcairn had basic internet services provided via an Inmarsat ground station. Recently they started to replace this with a Starlink terminals at each home. Soon, telephone services via Starlink will be available too. With this new development I always had good internet available.



Figure 15 - The Hexbeam nicely attached to the veranda

6m operation

There were many JA stations looking for a contact with Pitcairn and I received several e-mails with suggestions and advise when I could best work Japan. I spent quite some time looking out for JA, which was just during dinner time. I skipped my dinner several times for that reason.

My first QSO on 6m was with Meralda VP6MW. What a surprise. Meralda is located at the center of Adamstown at a lower altitude and a bit closer to the sea. Between her location and Japan, there is a mountain – the same situation I was in. However, Meralda was able to make QSO's on 6m with JA's and I couldn't. It was strange that that many JA's were receiving me, but I did not receive any JA signal. That was a real pity for all those JA stations that were watching my activities. I was able to work other stations from TI, XE, PY, W, etc.

Both VP6MW and I were using a Hexbeam for the 6m operation.

Weather

During my stay, we had a few rain showers. I experienced an increasing SWR on the Hexbeam during these rain showers. My conclusion was that rainwater was probably filling the space between the two square aluminum pipes that form the feedline of the Hexbeam. To overcome the problem, I went out to the veranda and kicked the antenna mast which resulted in raindrops falling from the antenna. I could see that this improved the SWR, but still I started to use the tuner of the SPE.

Propagation

I had prepared propagation charts and Jari OH6BG was so kind to provide me with a “short-path and long-path point-to-point HF propagation predictions” for VP6G which was also available from my web site.

Scandinavia turned out to be one of the more difficult areas from a propagation perspective and therefore needed extra attention. However, reality proved that I could work OH, SM, LA and OZ stations on several bands and they showed up in the pile ups like all others. Often the difference was that OH and LA station were presented with flutter.

Interestingly, sometimes I could hear the propagation moving from East to West over Europe. First the stations from Russia were loud, and next this moved to HA, OH, OZ, DL, F, etc. Nice experience.

With the solar cycle nearing its top, and long openings on the higher bands as a result, I wanted to work as much as I could on the higher bands. In the coming years this may be much more difficult, and focus will move to the lower bands.

Results

My aim was to make between 12,000 and 15,000 QSO's but I finally managed to get 16,241 QSO's in the log. As a CW-man, I'm happy that I was able to make more CW QSO's than FT8 😊.

Operating Time

First QSO: 2024-04-05 05:38:41

Last QSO: 2024-04-13 22:21:18

Number of days: 8.70

Band/Mode breakdown

Band	CW	FT8	Total	Total %
40	344	870	1214	7.5%
30	510	966	1476	9.1%
20	1289	1285	2574	15.8%
17	1144	2425	3569	22.0%
15	606	939	1545	9.5%
12	2335	699	3034	18.7%
10	2185	595	2780	17.1%
6	0	49	49	0.3%
Totals	8413	7828	16241	

Figure 16 - Band/Mode breakdown

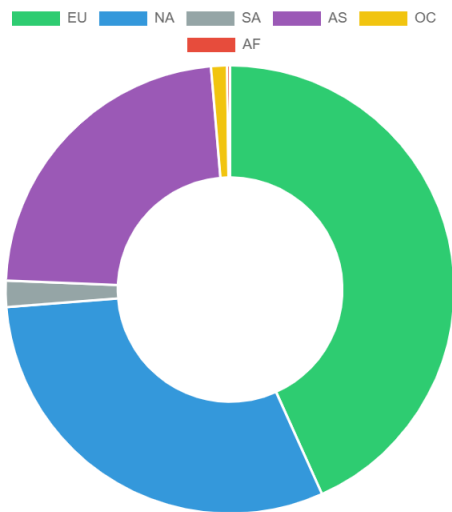


Figure 17 - Distribution by continent

There is a good balance between the three main continents, despite the critical notes on the DX clusters.

Sponsors

I'm very happy that 11 clubs and foundations were willing to sponsor my DXpedition, which helps to lower my personal investment in this rather expensive DXpedition.

These sponsors are: Clipperton DX Club, German DX Foundation, Swiss DX Foundation, The UK DX Foundation, Twin City DX Association, International DX Association, KC5WXA, Danish DX

Group, Willamette Valley DX Club, Southern German DX Group, Northern Ohio DX Association and Messi & Paoloni.

I would also like to mention the donations made by individuals before the DXpedition, as well as those who donated a little extra on top of the fee for the QSL card/LotW. A big thank you to all the above!

Back home, the work of the QSL has started already. Charles M0OXO is my QSL manager. He provides a great service, which some people underestimate in terms of the work involved, and the fact that it is all done on a voluntary basis.

More information: www.dx.to