

HD2RRC & HD2RRC/4 May 2017

Puna & Salango Islands IOTA expedition by HC2AO, R4WAA, and RZ3FW.

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Part I

A long time friend and Galapagos 2014 DXpedition teammate Sergei Azarov, R4WAA (HC2TWA, HC2WAT, 5H1WW, etc.) and his travel companion Sergei “Yan” Yanovsky, RZ3FW (JT5FW, 5W0FW, 5H1WW, /CE0Y, etc.) urged me to explore possibilities of activating several coastal islands in Ecuador, all in one twelve-day trip. After lengthy talks, we managed to narrow our goal to operate from two islands – Puna SA-034 located in the Gulf of Guayaquil and Salango SA-033 situated just a mile away from Manabi coastline. For the time being Cojimies Isl SA-056 had to be dismissed due to the logistics complexity and time available.

It is essential for any DXpedition big or small to have its goals set. Whether it will be a holiday style, cozy-lazy, when-I-feel-like operation, or all-in, big buck, zillion members, once-in-a-lifetime sortie, or something in between. In order to do so, team has to clearly evaluate the demand and therefore estimate the number of callers and their geography. ClubLog.org is a great source and tool for such an evaluation. In our case we knew that our target audience would mostly consist of IOTA chasers, with a relatively high demand in Europe and Asia proper, like zones 17, 18, 22, and 24. As a DXCC entity Ecuador has been widely represented and available for grabs on all bands for quite a while and hence we expected moderate to none pileups. Another thing to consider is timing, or a season to be precise. Although personally, I consider summer months the worst possible timing for any expedition due to the minimum of mutual darkness with the most ham populated Northern hemisphere, that was the time frame we had available and to be dealt with. Discounting low chances of openings on higher bands and their geography, as well as summer QRN infested 80 and 160 meter bands, it was decided to focus on 3 bands – 40, 30, and 20 meters. 17 was thought of but discarded as not productive on long distances given the current state of propagation pattern. The band choice was also the result of critical thinking of DXCC or better put band slot value of Ecuador. As mentioned before, since there was a little demand for HC as a DXCC entity on any band, the main focus should be placed on logging as many unique call signs as possible, giving a chance for IOTA chaser to bag SA-033 and SA-034.

Our antennas approach was simplistic. We voted against carrying Hexbeam or any other directional antenna that would occupy space, be bulky, and consume precious airfare weight that could be used for something more valuable. Since the operation was to take place from the beach, after discussions and consultations, concluded that simple half-wave dipoles for 40 and 30 would be both practical and easy. My experience with near salt water operation using sloping dipoles convinced me that if there is a suitable support for such an array to be set, there can't be anything better in simplicity versus efficiency approach. Bamboo is common in Ecuador and finding and constructing masts would not be an issue. In addition, Sergei, RZ3FW had a 3 element VDA 20 meter antenna that required only one 35 feet support, something easy to find anywhere.

As for hardware, we were equipped with IC7200 transceiver, ALS800 mobile amplifier, and a laptop.

On top of all, the main asset of our team was experience. All operators involved were skilled operators with good CW skills, and extensive DXpedition history. I was not concerned about our future performance even if we were to face major QRM/QRN or other problems. Even though, we were not going to Peter I or North Korea, psychologically, the team was tight-knit, enthusiastic unit, sharing same values and goals, ready for an adventure.

A month before the set date Guayaquil Radio Club on our behalf requested HD2RRC (Russian Robinson Club) call sign from ARCOTEL for this DXpedition. Years spent in Ecuador taught me that it is always a gamble when dealing with authorities. Nothing is ever certain or on time. I didn't hold my breath and arranged the use of HC2GRC call sign in case ARCOTEL would not grant the sought license on time. To my surprise, it was issued on time without any trouble. Another neat detail was that the ticket was valid for a year instead of solicited ten days. It is worth mentioning that the ham gods were on our side all the time during this event.

I convinced the team that the first place to go had to be Puna. It required less effort since to me the island had been a familiar destination. A year ago, in 2016, Vasily, R7AA and I went there. However, we were caught by the infamous earthquake and had to leave the island almost immediately. With only 1000 QSOs logged, the island remained needed by some IOTA chasers worldwide and we were to satisfy the demand the best we could on this occasion.

Puna

On May 20th, I met R4WAA and RZ3FW at the airport in Guayaquil. In the past we had had some trouble with bringing in ham radio gear from abroad and now it has become a sort of tradition to pick up travelling hams at the airport to save nerves in case there will be questions asked or additional papers required. Despite certain concerns, Sergeis went through the custom trouble free. We immediately headed to Ballenita, our base QTH. After a couple days of preparations that included degustation of certain imported liquors and delicacies due to some unexpected events we had to change our headquarters to Placido, CO7YM QTH. Placido, CO7YM, a HC resident for a year was on the DXpedition roll but unfortunately he had some dental issues and could not join us. Other HC hams had been invited but due to work schedule or domestic problems were unable to team up with us.

After re-packing our bags and leaving the rest with Placido we were all set to go. We carried 3 heavy bags and were to pick up some bamboo poles for masts in Posorja.



(L-R) Placido, CO7YM, Alex, HC2AO, Sergei, R4WAA, Sergei, RZ3FW

The island has power grid and that was a big relief not to take along a heavy generator. We hired a taxi that took us to Posorja, a town that lies in front of Isla Puna across the Gulf of Guayaquil. (Remark for future travelers. One can get to Puna from Guayaquil. However, I never tried that route. If you decide to go through Posorja from Guayaquil, you just take a bus at the bus terminal in Guayaquil. The bus will leave you 3 blocks away from the embarkation point. If you travel from Salinas area, then you take a bus that will first take you to Progreso, where you will have to get on another one that goes to Posorja). Once in the town, as planned, we easily found bought and purchased bamboo poles, an extra burden but a must since Puna is rather a desert without abundant tropical vegetation.

The straight between Puna and Posorja is a busy place with a lot of maritime traffic. Posorja is a small, dusty town with a can factory and home to several dozen tuna boats and other vessels. The majority of town folks work at the cannery or on tuna boats. Another developed industry in the area is shrimp farming. People we met were friendly and eager to assist.

There are a dozen or so boats that ferry people from the mainland to the island of Puna and it was easy and inexpensive to arrange our transfer. We were seated in a forty feet, tented boat, given safe jackets, and instructed to enjoy the ride. The sea was calm and some thirty-minute journey was pleasant and relaxing.



Departure from Posorja



Posorja



Tuna Boat and Pelican



Posorja Tuna Fleet

After passing through a maze of sandy banks (littered with plastic and other trash) and mangroves (eerie and solemn), we moored at Bellavista a small village on Puna whose only landmark is two arced bridges over the mangroves. From there we had to travel another 2 and half miles to Cauchiche, a township with ham friendly eco hostel on a vast, vacant beach. There was a chance to get a ride through the beach and get with our burdening cargo right to the hostel but we missed it – the tide was high and the only option was to drive on a bumpy road inland. At the time there was no transport available and we had to sit idly. Serge, RZ3FW, our self-assigned photographer, though, didn't waste any time venturing with his camera to explore the surroundings. Beside goats there wasn't much to shoot but goats seemed to be good enough to keep him entertained.



Sand bank at the entrance to Puna



A welcome sign

After an hour of waiting, a driver came forward and offered us a ride. We hastily agreed. The only problem now was how to fit a 20 foot long bamboo into a 10 foot truck. Oh, well... We managed to secure the pole somehow and although the road was far from being smooth, we survived. And the pole did.



Bridges at Bellavista, Puna Island



Sergei, R4WAA watching over our belongings

The truck left us at about half-a-mile distance from our final destination. That had to be covered by foot. A funny moment is that in Bellavista we were told that it was no more than two hundred yards from the bridge where we were dropped to the *hostal*. I remembered that it was way farther than that. My Russian bodies tended to believe locals. After FIVE hundred yards, they changed their mind and every additional fifty yards we passed would ask me, how far more? Glory to heavens - the weather was cloudy and only that saved us from dying young. We didn't realize that the gravity is stronger when you have to carry some 100 pounds of cargo and a few bamboo poles. Finally, shaking and barely conscious we reached our destination.



Another 1200 yards on foot from here



Alex, HC2AO finally crossing the finish line

A short break for beer helped us to regain strength and get ready for the station deployment. While Sergei, R4WAA busied himself unpacking and setting the station, Sergei, RZ3FW and I were making a mast out of bamboo. The first mast came out about thirty five feet and we hoisted a 40 meter Inverted V dipole and a 30 meter half-wave sloper on it. Though we had two 150 foot lengths of coax, there was no suitable support to be found close to the ocean and the mast had to be put some 60 yards away from the tide. One more aerial was to be set. It was a 3 element wire Vertical Dipole Array for 20 meters. Another mast was crafted from bamboo leftovers and some odd wood pieces found on the beach. Least to say, the mast looked weird but measured the wanted 35 feet and therefore was functional. We discovered an extra length of coax and therefore the VDA was placed about 30 yards from the tide, the closest we could.



30 & 40 Meters Mast



HD2RRC site, view from the beach

The team returned to the cottage to test SWR of newly erected arrays. SWR was just fine on both antennas. I gave a CQ on 15 meters since other bands sounded empty and got a call from EA4AYD. Then nothing for 20 minutes. We changed to 20 meters. After a few CQs I heard DL7JAN calling. I replied and asked him to send a spot to the DX cluster. A few minutes later there appeared a steady stream of callers, mostly NA and EU folks.

Date	Time	B...	CallSign	Mode	f
22.05.2017	21:27	21.0	EA4AYD	CW	
22.05.2017	21:44	14.0	DL7JAN	CW	
22.05.2017	21:47	14.0	DL6KVA	CW	
22.05.2017	21:48	14.0	EA6VQ	CW	
22.05.2017	21:48	14.0	DK3DG	CW	
22.05.2017	21:49	14.0	WJ4T	CW	
22.05.2017	21:50	14.0	UA3KW	CW	
22.05.2017	21:51	14.0	K3WWT	CW	
22.05.2017	21:51	14.0	WB8FSV	CW	
22.05.2017	21:52	14.0	DK1FW	CW	
22.05.2017	21:52	14.0	W0OGH	CW	
22.05.2017	21:53	14.0	SP3CJS	CW	
22.05.2017	21:54	14.0	OK1DH	CW	
22.05.2017	21:54	14.0	DL3JON	CW	
22.05.2017	21:55	14.0	K2NRA	CW	
22.05.2017	21:57	14.0	NE8Z	CW	

I could tell that we weren't strong, or as I put it "didn't have a commanding signal". Every third QSO required a double or even triple repetition to be logged. People didn't hear us well. That was a bit unnerving. The Reverse Beacon Network RBN would be the tool to have now but we didn't have the internet access and were unable to see how strong our signals were worldwide. After 40 minutes of struggle it was decided to pull out the amplifier, a mobile, Ameritron ALS800.



Alex, HC2AO smoking his pipe while Sergei R4WAA fixing the power supply

To our dismay, the amplifier's power supply was hard wired for 220V grid and in order to re-wire it for the available 110V a soldering iron was needed. Something we didn't have. That was not cool. Our options were few: forget about it and run barefoot with IC7200, rush to Posorja to an electronics shop if such even happened to exist, and finally ask the local staff if per chance someone nearby had a soldering iron we could borrow. We summoned the caretaker, Javier and explained our situation to him. He said, okay, and vanished. Not to lose time, and the sun was going down, we went on the air again. This time on 20 meters. First stations were logged and a tiny pileup appeared.



30 m Sloper

Suddenly, a man showed up at our cottage and handed a bag with a soldering iron and tin. That was nearly a miracle! I called our technician, R4WAA and soon the fix was made. We plugged the amplifier and turned it on. No explosions, no smoke... All good. We hooked it up to the Icom and the show began. One could tell the difference! 500W versus 100W was day and night. We tried 20 meter VDA. It worked just

fine. Not much of directivity as predicted, but a lot of strong signals from North America, Europe, Asia at the same time. The noise level at S1 made us hear even the most ghostly of signals.

With the amplifier on, life was good. But. We discovered that the power supply was generating QRM on 30 and 40, poor filtering or something. A wide S2-S3 QRM would cloak good portion of 30 meter band and we had to over-extend the split in order to cope with it. On 40 meters, the noise was even higher and signals, although expectedly weaker. Partially, that must be attributed to the low mean height of 40 meters array and its geometry – the apex was only at 36 feet and the array was V shaped. First, we wanted to improve the situation by endorsing extra length of bamboo, making the mast higher and by moving it closer to the ocean or turn the dipole into a vertical with one radial, which should have worked as well. However, thinking twice, we decided that 40 was not essential, since 20 and 30 were quite productive and an extra band would not help to score more unique calls considerably. So, we decided to leave everything the way it was and go with the flow.



Sergei, R4WAA marvels at the new concept in antenna design – eco post modernistic trend

On the left 20m VDA, on the right 30/40 m dipoles

North America and Japan were absolutely blasting on all three bands. If with North American colleagues it was obvious given the distance and the easy, omnipresent South-North path, strong signals from Japanese callers were somewhat odd. They would appear way ahead of their usual sunset/sunrise time. The same is true for UA0s from zone 19. Europeans were coming in variably. Some strong, some weak but the good news was that they were coming. The propagation on 20 meters band would open to Europe as early as 12 UTC, at the same time with JA and North America. On 30 meters Europe began to call starting 21 UTC and would last deep into their sunrise. Although windows of opportunity for zones 17, 18, 22, 24, and 26 were short given both our inferior setup and inappropriate season, we managed to log some good DXs. VU2ABS made it on 40, as well as UN7AM. HS0ZIV worked us on 2 bands. A65CA and A92GE both were strong and easy to log. R0AZ, R8IA, UA9MA and other 17ers and 18ers made it to our log.



3 element 20 m band Vertical Dipole Array (eco friendly version)

The resort we stayed at and called *Ecohostal Cauchiche* is rustic but decent place for anyone who loves the ocean and solitude. The compound consists of 3 two bedroom, on bathroom cinderblock houses on an immense beach with very little human presence. The island is safe. No alcohol is sold other than light beer. There are a dozen or so villages scattered on Puna, each forming a *comuna* with land in common property of its dwellers and run by the *communa* council. People are extremely friendly and helpful. There are very few tourists due to the lack of advertisement. Prices are modest. The place feels like being lost some ten years in the past. One can still witness slow, rural life. The main sources of income for islanders are producing watermelons, cherimoya, and goats. It is said that there are 99 shrimp farms on the island. Nearly everything is brought from the mainland. In the local stores which are nothing but a room in someone's house the variety of goods are scarce and limited. There is cellular phone coverage on the island but we didn't look into it and were left with no immediate access to the Internet.



Puna Scenes



Church in Cauchiche



RZ3FW & R4WAA posing next to Casa Comunal

On the matter of supplies. We had an option of food delivery right to our house. A three dollar lunch, that would consist of soup, a second plate usually rice with either chicken or fish or meat, and a bottle of lemonade had to be ordered in advanced and delivered at the time arranged. A bottle of beer would go for 2 dollars. We ventured twice into the village to get some smokes and night time munchies and honestly had a hard time locating one. For a more serious and demanding effort, a team should get provisions in Posorja and had it brought to the island.

We stayed in Cauchiche 3 nights from May, 22nd till May, 26th. Roughly 5426 QSO were made with 88 DXCC entities on all continents save Antarctica. We were toying with the idea of staying longer but after hesitation forced ourselves out. We closed down our station on Puna and ventured up North to Salango.



R4WAA and Puna's inland

The way back was a wee bit more difficult. We had to use buses and it was a National holiday with tons of people travelling, nonetheless, we got to Placodo's (CO7YM) home safe and sound.

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