

One Post-Pandemic Travel Plan: Get as Far Away as Possible

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Ham-radio operators look to raise antennas in the world's remotest corners

By JOHN McCORMICK

Of the many post-pandemic travel plans being hatched around the world, few are as extreme as what ham-radio operator Dom Grzyb has in mind.

The semiretired Polish businessman looks to spend tens of thousands of dollars this year to lead a group of eight to Bouvet Island in the southern Atlantic, an uninhabited locale largely covered in glacial ice. The odds aren't favorable.

High winds and massive waves batter ships entering the region. Among travelers who manage to catch sight of Bouvet Island, which belongs to Norway, some never make shore. Slivers of beach give way to steep rock and ice formations that reach 100 feet and higher.

"It's the most remote island in the world," said Mr. Grzyb, 47 years old. "It's also one of the most dangerous places in the world."

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Radio Operators Go Remote

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Bouvet Island also ranks as the second most-wanted place in the world to contact among ham-radio enthusiasts. These destinations lure the most adventurous of the estimated three million operators worldwide to set up temporary transmitting stations.

Ham radios, which connect users across great distances using updated 19th-century technology, work anywhere an operator can tote generators, fuel, amplifiers, antennas and the tools needed to make them work. So-called hams have compiled a list of 340 places that span the toughest to the easiest places to contact, starting with North Korea No. 1 and the U.S. No. 340.

Hams take pride in reaching the rarest outposts. On the other end of the transmission are those who set up the temporary stations, such as Mr. Grzyb, who in 2015 transmitted from the hams' holy grail, North Korea. Their job is simple: Get there, power up, get home alive.

"We are crazy," said Tommy Horozakis, who lives near Sydney, Australia. "To us, it's the thrill, it's the adrenaline rush, of being able to work people on the other side of the world and bouncing your signals across the ionosphere without the internet."

Mr. Horozakis, 53, is making plans to lead a November expedition of about 10 people to an uninhabited island in shark-populated waters of the Coral Sea south of Papua New Guinea.

"I won't be swimming too far away from shore," he said.

The destination is part of the Willis Islets, a group of three small islands that includes two uninhabited sandy cays, and one that is home to a weather station with an average year-round population of four. The islands rank 38th.

The trip will include a roughly 35-hour voyage to ferry the team, along with ham-radio equipment, tents, food and porta-potties. It will cost about \$5,000 a person.

Mr. Horozakis, who owns businesses in telecommunications and pest-extermination, said a spike in Covid-19 cases could block him from traveling between his state of New South Wales and Queensland, where he has booked the ves-

sel. "If it doesn't go ahead," he said, "at least we've tried."

These excursions are called DX-peditions, with DX referring to—in ham-radio jargon—transmitting over long distances. The missions, like most international travel, were largely scuttled last year in the pandemic.

Once activated at the remote locale, the temporary stations make tens of thousands of contacts with far-flung operators, each exchange lasting a few seconds. The prize for those back home is either a postcard or electronic confirmation, plus bragging rights among peers.

Hams spend considerable time and money improving the reach and performance of their radio stations to make rare and distant connections. In a digital world, where almost everything can be replayed, there are no do-overs. Once a DX-pedition ends, there may not be another activation from that spot for years or decades.

Mr. Grzyb spent three days on Bouvet Island in 2001. He tried again in March 2019. The team got within 63 nautical miles when the ship lost its communication antennas in a

The world's most isolated locales lure adventurous ham-radio operators.

storm and had to return to South Africa. "It's for people who are a little bit crazy," he said.

In January 2018, a team sailed 12 days from Chile to Bouvet Island, but rough weather kept its two hired helicopters from flying. After one of the ship's engines failed in a storm, the captain had enough and returned to port.

Adrian "Nobby" Styles expects smoother sailing. The 53-year-old, who lives southeast of London and works in the food-supply business, has set his sights on the Maldives islands—ranked 138th on the ham list because it is more travel friendly. He has already canceled twice because of the pandemic.

"Hopefully, it will happen at the end of September," said Mr. Styles, who will need three flights to get to his Indian Ocean destination with his wife, Maxine.

"She loves to lay in the sun all day and I can't do that," he said, "but I like to play on the radio."



Adrian 'Nobby' Styles during a ham-radio expedition to the Wallis and Futuna islands in the South Pacific in 2019.

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