

DXpedition to Palestine E44CC  
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After activating several DXCC entities in western Africa, the F6KOP team planned a trip to the Comoros Islands, D6. However, our MDXC friends were also targeting this entity and activated it as D68CCC in autumn 2019. So our focus changed to Palestine, E4. In July, invitations were sent out and the operator list filled within hours. It's not necessary to discuss details of the country's delicate political situation here, Palestine is not acknowledged world wide. But the area offers a perfect touristic infrastructure since it's a pilgrim hot spot. We planned to stay at the Pilgrim Residence Hotel in Bethlehem, less than one kilometer away from the Nativity Church, no less than the world's oldest church.

Palestine used to be a separate DXCC entity with the prefixes 4X1 and ZC6, but it was deleted in 1968. The area counted for Israel temporarily until it was again added to the DXCC list October 1<sup>st</sup>, 1999, after receiving the E4 prefix from ITU. After that, GDXF lists three major expeditions with more than 30000 QSOs.

Callsign	Year	QSOs
E44DX	1999	33000
E44/HA1AG	1999	40000
E4X	2010	80000

We intended to add another entry to this list, and particularly give DXers in North America and Japan the opportunity for a new DXCC entity or band slots, in spite of low solar activity.

But preparations didn't always run smoothly. It was a little annoying to learn that a Russian team planned to be active in Palestine only four weeks before us. After some trouble with customs, the four operators of E44RU achieved 18000 QSOs. Moreover, the French government announced reformatory measures in late 2019, provoking strikes all across the country. This also affected the French railway SNCF and we got worried whether our tickets would actually take us to Paris without trouble. Fortunately, the strikes ended just in time. We didn't get our favorite callsign E47C, but E44C first. It was changed to E44CC later. Oddly, this call appeared on the DX cluster in January, obviously aired by a jester in FT8 mode. Finally, a storm was announced for the day prior to our trip.

But everything went well and the team met February 5 on Charles de Gaulle airport, Paris. We cleared all stations, had an uneventful flight to Ben Gurion airport in Tel Aviv, and found out that our entire baggage had arrived, too. A big coach was waiting and took us to Bethlehem in just over one hour. Next morning, we began installing all antennas on the hotel roof. The building is situated on a hilltop, perfect for unrestricted radiation. Blue skies and mild temperatures were very helpful for our job, so we were finished before it got dark. Our antenna farm included two hex beams, one spider beam, an R5 vertical, monoband verticals for 30m and 40m, a dipole for 80m and an inverted L for 160m. A reception loop for the low bands was also ready and a 40m sloper was added later. Unfortunately, our license didn't allow for operation on 60m. The five stations in our shack, situated in the 4<sup>th</sup> floor, were soon ready for action and logged the first contact with OK2LW on 30m CW.

Tremendous pileups unfolded and after the first 24 hours, more than 8000 QSOs were logged, but we also noted problems soon. The low band reception loop was far from quiet. An infrequent heavy noise occurred, probably caused by the lift drive. The transmit antennas were a bad substitute, QRM was continuously over S9 on these antennas. Regarding the current solar minimum, it was not

surprising that the upper bands were rather useless. Nothing at all on 10m and just a few contacts on 12m were disappointing. On the first morning, 15m provided a beautiful opening into Japan and China, but later our CQ on this band usually remained unheard. Unlike during our activities in western Africa, the 20m band opened just after sunrise and closed at sunset. Consequently, operation of five stations usually meant that two stations had to use one band. Separation was not available, so we had to find out how we could minimize mutual QRM. In some cases, we could only share a shift fifty/fifty. We also tried satellite operation, using portable radio and antenna. But even that was unsuccessful because of the local noise.

For the weekend, the weather changed drastically. A cold stormy wind came up and it rained a lot. This had a direct impact on our operation, as crackling QRN filled our receivers on the low bands. Several coax cables lead through the balcony door into the shack, so the operators of station CW2 and SSB got hit by the cold gusts. Saturday noon we took a break to repair antennas. A fiberglass tube of the spider beam was broken, but it could be repaired and worked fine until the end. The wire of the 160m inverted L antenna was lashing in the gusty wind and had soon entangled with the hotel's TV antennas. Some additional cord provided more distance. The noisy reception loop was also damaged and temporarily removed because a beverage-on-ground (BOG) was being installed in the hotel garden. We could hardly talk to each other in the stormy wind and more rain came down, followed by a beautiful rainbow. But we were happy when all was finished and we could resume operation on the bands.

On Sunday, the Minister of Telecommunications visited us in the hotel, accompanied by press and television. Every operator received a booklet with collective stamps. The visitors also checked out the shack and were amazed by the five stations in full operation. A report on the Palestine TV channel was announced for the afternoon of the same day, but we could no longer watch the channel in the hotel – maybe a result of the storm. On Wednesday, a part of the team went to Ramallah to visit the Ministry of Telecommunications. They were received by Minister Ishaq Sider and his staff, namely Mr. Esbah, Mr. Abu Alrub, Mr. Maher Ebeid, Mrs. Nassar und Mr Khaseeb. The Minister appeared familiar with the useful aspects of amateur radio and asked us for support with foundation of a national radio club and implementation of license exams. We were happy to promise support by the F6KOP radio club and thanked the Minister and his staff for the friendly support of our expedition.

On Tuesday, two power outages occurred within a few hours. A generator supplied many functions in the hotel, but unfortunately not our stations. We had to wait until grid power returned, but fortunately it didn't take long.

As mentioned above, we were eager to work distant areas like North America and Japan. When we noticed good signals from these areas, we tried to work them exclusively. However, it was sometimes straining to tell the European callers that they should take a break in such a moment. Often, just one big signal from Europe in the middle of the split range was enough to quiet all the other small signals from the DX area. In rare and short time periods, we were able to work the US west coast. As soon as callers from eastern and central USA noticed that we were calling W6/W7, they showed more willingness to take a break and give others a chance.

We participated in the WPX RTTY and ARRL DX CW contests. The main idea behind this was the activation of an additional multiplier, not a serious contest effort. Especially the ARRL contest was meant to be another opportunity to work Palestine from North America. However, the strong participation from Europe and the bad propagation on a difficult path allowed only for a poor result.

Of course, we also took the opportunity to visit the local attractions. We visited the Nativity Church in two groups, supported by local guides. Every team member even received an official pilgrim

certificate. Some of us also visited others parts of Bethlehem, as well as Jerusalem's Wailing Wall and Mount of Olives.

Getting closer to the end of our activity, the intensity of pileups decreased significantly. The weaker propagation was probably also responsible for this. Most of the time, we had run two CW stations, one SSB, one RTTY and one FT8 station. Then the transceiver of the RTTY station failed and we had no replacement. So the second CW station temporarily switched to digital modes, mostly FT8. Reception on the low bands remained our main weakness until the end. The main reason was the man-made noise of the densely inhabited area around us, which also kept us from installing a more effective reception antenna. Maybe the flu contributed a little bit, it caught every team member more or less intensively. Yet we exceeded our goal of 50000 QSOs with a satisfactory share of contacts with continents outside Europe.

Our hotel, usually lodging tourist groups from Russia, provided an excellent operation base with three meals per day. Unfortunately, we were forced to spend the night before the ARRL contest in another hotel. Only the shack room was not affected. The hotel manager provided relief by taxiing the operator groups between the hotels as long as needed. On the evening prior to our departure, he expressed his excuses, accompanied by a nice bottle of Vodka.

All stations went QRT around noon on February 16, all equipment went back into the respective bags and suitcases. Next morning at three o'clock local time, we were ready to leave. However, a much too small coach showed up, involuntarily reminding us of transportation in western Africa. Luckily, and once again with support by the hotel manager, a big coach could be organized and took us to Ben Gurion airport in time. Our luggage attracted a lot of attention and cost us time and effort, but we made it to our flight. We arrived at Paris Charles de Gaulle on schedule, but this time two suitcases were missing. One was forwarded to its owner after a few days, but contained a damaged K3. The other one took two weeks, and two notebook computers plus a 30A power supply were missing. In Charles de Gaulle, the team parted for the last phase of the trip home. Just a few weeks later, the spreading Corona virus caused Israel to oblige incoming visitors to a two-week quarantine. It remains unknown whether radio stations were qualified for this...

We are looking back on a successful expedition and besides a big logbook we brought home many impressions from a culturally rich region. Considering the numerous activities affected by or canceled due to the Corona pandemic, we were very lucky. We hope we gave many DXers the opportunity of a contact with a wanted DXCC entity. In the course of support of amateur radio in Palestine, there will be further activities by the F6KOP team, hopefully in better conditions to distant areas. At this point, we would like to thank all persons and institutions who supported us, especially the F6KOP team and the sponsors of equipment and funds.

Some statistics:

Band	CW	FT8	SSB	RTTY	Total	Total %
160	1344	944	0	0	2288	4.40%
80	3730	1514	1156	423	6823	13.20%
40	5420	2180	3626	656	11882	23.00%
30	3602	2158	0	1137	6897	13.40%
20	5907	1012	4199	995	12113	23.50%
17	4458	1302	2130	713	8603	16.70%
15	1630	440	615	303	2988	5.80%
12	14	6	2	0	22	0.00%
Totals	26105	9552	11728	4227	51616	

Please visit our website for further information: <https://palestine2020.wordpress.com/>

An edited video is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ofg53o3pHQ8>