

# T42US Joint Cuban/US DXpedition 2015

**A closer look at last October's technological and cultural exchange with the Federación de Radioaficionados de Cuba.**

## Jim Millner, WB2REM

The beautiful and mysterious island country of Cuba is so close to the United States, yet so far away for the ordinary US citizen to visit, let alone to operate Amateur Radio. Attracting me to Cuba was a long yearning to visit the country where my parents honeymooned in 1948. In addition, Cuba's old cars, historic buildings, pristine beaches, and friendly people were a further motivation to take on this task. Given the new relationship between the United States and Cuba, it seemed to be an appropriate time to request permission to operate Amateur Radio on Cuban soil. In February 2015, I contacted the US Department of the Treasury and applied for a general license to take a group to Cuba. Surprisingly, the permission was granted relatively quickly. Then the hard part began. A contact needed to be found in Cuba to sponsor our group, the purpose of the trip defined, a team chosen, visas obtained, and ultimately, a plan had to be made for a large-scale DX expedition/exhibition.

## Planning and Travel

My first inclination was to go through my logbook and e-mail every station in Havana that I had worked over the last 10 years. This method was quite productive, yielding a fast response from the vice president of the Federación de Radioaficionados de Cuba (FRC), Francisco Hernandez, CO2HA. He contacted Pedro Rodriguez, CO2RP, president of the FRC, who asked English-speaking operator Roberto (Bob) Ibarra, CM2KL, to help organize and take part in a joint Cuban/US DX expedition. Bob enthusiastically accepted the challenge as Cuban Team Leader. At the time of this writing, US regulations require visitors to Cuba to have a specific reason for travel. In our case, we chose US Travel Affidavit 515.567(b). This category included "participation in a non-athletic competition," in this case, an Amateur Radio contest.

In preparation for the operation Bob, CM2KL, and I met a number of times on 40 meters to determine the scope of the opera-



The T42US Team are (from left to right): Jorge Luis, CO2PTE; Gordon, WB0TKL; Stephanie, WX3K; Jim, WB2REM; Osmany, CM2OY; Mark, WC3W; Pedro Rodrigues, FRC President, CO2RP; Michel, CL2TV; Bob, CM2KL; Nancy, K9DIG; Juan Carlos, CO2JD; Ruth, KC4BAB; Amed, CO2AME; Alexei, CO2XK; John, KK4SHF, and Jorge, CO2II.

tion. We decided on a multi-purpose event that would include a radio exhibition, demonstration of ham radio to Cuban students, administration of US FCC Amateur Radio exams to Cuban operators, participation as a team in the CQ World Wide SSB Contest, and a banquet for the operators and their family members.

It took from February 2015 until the beginning of June to get an indication from the Cuban equivalent of our FCC, Departamento de Control del Espectro Radioelectrico (DCER), as to whether a license would be issued to our group. Because the United States does not have reciprocal licensing with Cuba, the Cuban government would only issue a group call sign. Bob and I discussed what might be the best call sign to choose for our operation and came up with T42US. Eight Cuban operators and seven US operators were chosen on the basis of their ability to operate in a contest, technical

skills, and acceptance of our mission. As things go, it wasn't until the night before we left for Havana, while sitting in a hotel in Miami, Florida, when we actually received the physical T42US license.

In advance of our arrival to Cuba, we sent a manifest of the equipment we were carrying, including type and serial number. It was our hope that this information would be in the hands of the customs officer on our arrival. When we entered the terminal, in Havana's Martí International Airport, we quickly passed through immigration, but were stopped at the x-ray machine between immigration and the luggage area. It was there, in a polite but stern fashion, we were told that the equipment, specifically the transceivers, being brought into Cuba was considered contraband. Producing a copy of our T42US license had little effect. Out of desperation, in my limited college Spanish, I asked to speak to the chief airport cus-

toms officer. We were directed to proceed to the front area to meet the supervisor. To our relief, the supervisor was able to locate a copy of our manifest. His assistant went down the list, asking us to produce each piece of equipment and verifying serial numbers. The equipment was documented on carbon paper to assure that items taken into the country would be brought back out. Once we had been cleared through customs, we went outside and met Bob and Pedro, CO2RP, president of the FRC, who were patiently waiting for us.

### Setting Up

Bob accompanied us to the Iberostar Parque Central Hotel in old Havana. It was a great choice because it was centrally located near the capital. The rooms were spacious, with balconies overlooking the streets. There was a swimming pool and restaurant on top of the building that offered a panoramic view of old Havana, the sea, and surrounding areas.

After checking our bags at the hotel, we took what would become our regular form of transportation to and from the shack — a green 1956 Chevy Bel Air. At the shack, a ranch house located on Guanabo Beach, approximately 15 miles east of Havana, the Cuban team had just begun to set up antennas. Because beach houses of this type are generally used in Cuba during the summer, a repair crew had to fix the facilities before the team could occupy the house. This delayed the construction of the antennas and setup of equipment. As the Cuban team worked on putting up the antennas, the US team assembled the two operating positions, which included two Icom 706MK2Gs and two Yaesu FT 2100 kilowatt amplifiers. By sunset, we were on the air.

### On the Air

The station was located approximately 100 yards from the beach. Our antennas consisted of a three-element and a five-element tri-band beam, a two-element 40 meter mono-bander, a vertical, a four-element 6 meter beam, and a long wire. Due to problems acquiring tower sections, the maximum height of any of the rotatable antennas was no more than 5 meters and was turned by ropes attached to them. A third station was set up for the WARC bands, digital modes, and 60 meters. This was the first time in Cuban history that the government gave permission for hams to operate on the 60 meter band, and therefore we



T42US used this beach house on Guanabo Beach as their shack.

offered many 60 meter enthusiasts a new country. Lastly, a VHF/UHF station was put on the air, mainly for local communications. Unfortunately, due to poor conditions on 6 meters, no contacts were made outside of Cuba.

As the Sun set, we began to notice a high level of static on all frequencies. It was only later, after the contest was over, did we realize that the power lines outside and around the house were arcing due to what we suspected was salt from the ocean being deposited on the electrical lines and mixing with condensation. The equipment worked nearly flawlessly throughout the contest period, with some minor exceptions. Overall, the competition was a huge success from a technical and logistical standpoint, and we accomplished our goal of working as a united Cuban/US team.

During the contest, we were visited by the chief of the Departamento de Control del Espectro Radioelectrico (DCER) and the Cuban Vice Minister of Communications, as well as other government dignitaries. They listened to our operation through companion headphones and closely followed our activities. We thank them for allowing this unique operation to occur.

### More than Contesting

A number of other events took place during the contest. On Saturday morning, seven

of the Cuban operators, for the first time in Cuban history, took the US Amateur Radio FCC exams on Cuban soil. This was a very exciting moment for the operators, many of whom spoke little English, but had good technical skills. It was hoped that with some studying they could overcome the language barrier that the exams presented. Unfortunately, after the first round of testing, six of the operators failed the Technician exam. Bob, CM2KL, passed his Technician and General class licenses and nearly obtained Amateur Extra class.

Another activity on Saturday was a radio exhibition presented at the shack by Cuban and US team members. This exhibition was open to the public, and drew approximately 35 Amateur Radio operators from the Havana area. Topics at the exhibition included remote control linking, RFI interference, and Bob's, CM2KL, experience in arranging the expedition. Nancy, K9DIG, demonstrated Amateur Radio to Cuban children. We also had the opportunity to visit the Federación de Radioaficionados de Cuba (FRC) building and CO2FRC station, located in central Havana. This is the equivalent to our ARRL and W1AW. It had a well-equipped radio shack with a log-periodic antenna. There was a lobby where awards from contests were displayed, a number of offices for the FRC officials and a server for their computer system,



Pam, KA2MGR; Mary, the wife of Gordon, WB0TKL; Bob, CM2KL, and Nancy, K9DIG, in front of the Federación de Radioaficionados de Cuba's building.



Nancy, K9DIG, with the 1956 Chevy Bel Air that brought us from the hotel to the shack every day.

which allows Cuban hams to receive e-mail. Outside in the back area, a few hams could be seen socializing while working on recovering electronic parts from old computers. There was a small café where FRC members could buy a sandwich and a cup of coffee for about 25 cents, as well as a small parts store.

After the contest was over, the Cuban operators had one last chance to re-take a different form of the US exams. Despite being dead tired from the contest operation, the Cuban operators pulled an overnight study session, led by Bob, CM2KL. On Monday morning, the six Cuban operators who initially failed their Technician test retook

their exams, and Bob, CM2KL, retested for his Extra. The ARRL VE team, consisting of Nancy, K9DIG; Stephanie, WX3K, and myself, waited for all examinees to the finish their exams before scoring them. Bob's Extra exam was scored first. To all of our excitement, he passed. There were wild screams and hugs from all the team members, who rejoiced in his success. This happened six more times, with all of the other Cuban operators passing the Technician class license exam. When the testing session was completed, it was time to start tearing down the station and preparing for a banquet that was going to be held at a beachside restaurant a few blocks away from the shack.

The banquet consisted of traditional Cuban food. There were three large red snapper fish, vaca frita (a salty type of fried beef), and fried chicken. Highlights of the banquet included playing pool with team members, watching Pedro Rodriguez, FRC president, and other Cuban operators dance the salsa, and socializing with the other team members and their families. The T42US team had accomplished its goal of becoming a single entity, a united team. We were no longer the joint Cuban/US team but simply the T42US team.

### Home Again, and Looking Ahead

Leaving Cuba with our equipment was a little easier than we thought it would be, although a little disconcerting. Both Nancy, K9DIG, and myself were stopped at immigration and asked to have our bags inspected. They compared the entry documents listing our equipment with what we brought out of the country. Luckily, all was accounted for, and we left Cuba without incident.

In summary, this was an excellent adventure for all involved. We can't help but feel that we, as Amateur Radio operators, have helped in our own way to improve relations between our two countries and possibly open the door to future joint Cuban/US radio operations.

Photos courtesy of the author.

The T42US USA team leader, Jim Millner, WB2REM, is a published *QST* author who has been licensed for over 50 years. Bob Ibarra, CM2KL, Cuban team leader, is active in the FRC and has been licensed 25 years. Both Jim and Bob are avid DXers and contest operators. Bob plans to host other US Amateur Radio operators in Cuba. If you and your family are interested in coming to Cuba and visiting the FRC, meeting other Cuban hams and seeing the sights, contact Bob at [cm2kl@frcuba.co.cu](mailto:cm2kl@frcuba.co.cu). Jim can be reached at [wb2rem@amsat.org](mailto:wb2rem@amsat.org).

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