

P40AA Story 2024

This year, my wife Sabine was unable to join me on my yearly trip to Aruba. For this reason, I offered my daughter and her boyfriend the opportunity to fly with me. Although they are not radio amateurs (hams), the cottage is spacious enough for all of us, and they can enjoy Aruba's sun and beaches at very low costs. In my mind, I hoped they could assist me a bit with the antenna work.

Once again, I chose KLM for the flight to Aruba. This year, we booked special Comfort Seats in the Economy class, which provided 2 inches more legroom and a slightly larger recline for the seats. While this may not sound like much, it did result in a noticeable improvement in comfort. The plane was fully booked, indicating continued high demand even after COVID.

As is the case every year, the first adventure upon arrival in Aruba is dealing with customs. This year, I brought a set of materials for beverages, including several boxes and a large spool of RG6 cable. The challenge is to stay below the threshold for import tax. Since some items have already been used or are homemade, and no receipts are available, there is a risk in how customs evaluate them.

The art lies in making it credible that these materials are of low value and not intended for commercial use. Typically, the magic word is "fishing". Goods related to fishing usually do not pose problems. However, this year, declaring the material for fishing purposes was difficult. In case of the worst scenario, I prepared a proforma invoice with a bill of quantity and price estimates for the goods without receipts.

But the officers' attention was diverted by something else this time. Leon, my daughter's boyfriend, had brought a machete in his checked luggage to clear vegetation in the Cunuco if needed. However, the customs officer insisted that the machete was a weapon, which is not allowed for import. Leon argued that it was not a weapon; it's a garden tool and can be freely purchased on the island. After some discussion, the officer offered to deposit the machete at the police station, and we could apply for an exception, or the officer could seize the machete without any additional fine. Well, it was unclear how complicated it would be to obtain permission from the police and whether additional costs were associated. And, of course, plenty of precious time was lost. So, we decided to leave the machete at customs.

After clearing customs, we headed straight to the rental car office and picked up our car. Upon arriving at the cottage, we encountered an issue: the car key lacked power lock functions, and all the vehicle doors except the driver's did not lock after closing and using the key. Despite pushing and pulling various levers on the doors, the problem persisted. Eventually, we gave up and left the car doors open. We trust that Aruba is a very safe place, and its people are honest!

The next morning, my daughter discovered a small button on the driver's door; this button was for the power lock. We had not noticed it the night before. I'm surprised that these days, cars without remote power locks are still sold.

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After unpacking our luggage, my first action was to set up the station. Reconnecting the cables went quite fast, and the CW setup was done quickly too. However, for unclear reasons, the FT8 software switched the PTT (Push-to-Talk), but the sound signal did not reach the K3S via the USB connection. I tested extensively but could not find the root cause. Unfortunately, since I don't have a K3 at home, I'm not an expert in K3 setup. Fortunately, thanks to Ed (WOYK), we discovered the reason after some time of phone and video conversation via WhatsApp. Ed, thank you very much again!

After some initial QSOs (radio contacts), it was time to sleep.

The next morning brought another problem. A small amount of water drained out from the screws of the toilet porcelain support during flushing. Later, the situation worsened, and the brown water did not drain at all. Obviously, the drainage pipe from the toilet to the outdoor tank was jammed. It seemed we needed professional support. We informed John and Cris, but external help naturally takes time. Luckily, Leon's parents own a small mountain cottage in Italy with a similar toilet system. Trusting Leon's experience, we inspected the tank together and found the position where the pipe entered it. However, it was almost dark there and difficult to access. With additional light, some long metallic sticks, and Leon's long arms, he managed to free the pipe from the jam. You can imagine that working half inside the toilet tank is not a pleasant job. I'm truly proud of Leon!"

On the following days, right after sunrise, Leon and I inspected and maintained the beverage antennas in the Cunuco. It is always a hard job to do this along the full length of the antennas, given the thorny and dense vegetation of the Cunuco. Leon's support helped a lot, and it is simply a better feeling of safety to not be alone out there. Fortunately, this year we did not encounter any aggressive dogs in the Cunuco.

The next morning brought another surprise. Leon had left his boots outside the cottage door to dry, but they disappeared. We found one boot near a nearby bush, but the second boot was nowhere to be found. The only explanation we could think of was that an animal (perhaps one of the neighbor's dogs?) had "stolen" the boots during the night. Quite an interesting experience!

The following day presented a new issue. After finishing the inspection and maintenance of the W1 beverage antenna, we left the remote end of the Cunuco and walked back along the street to the cottage. Upon arriving at the cottage, I suddenly discovered that I had lost my glasses! Oh no! I must have dropped them in the Cunuco. But how likely was it to find them in the large and dense vegetation? Despite my doubts, I needed my glasses. I reasoned that I likely lost them in the last few meters of the Cunuco; otherwise, I would have noticed the loss earlier. So, we retraced our steps along the street to the Cunuco exit area. Unfortunately, we did not find the glasses there. What to do now?

Leon suggested walking all the way back into the Cunuco to search for the glasses. I was pessimistic but considering that Leon had accomplished the seemingly impossible the day

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before, I decided to give it a try. And indeed, after walking another 60 feet along the path back, Leon actually found my glasses! I felt relieved and very thankful to him.

In the evening, we contemplated how to retrieve Leon's missing shoe. I then had the idea to place an Apple AirTag in the second shoe and wait for the dog to return for the other shoe. This way, we could attempt to locate the AirTag. Indeed, the next morning, the second shoe was also gone. Unfortunately, there was no signal from the AirTag. Given the limited detection range, we politely explained the situation to our neighbor, who graciously allowed us to search his garden for the AirTag. However, despite our efforts, we were unable to receive any signal from the AirTag. We tried the same with another neighbor, but again, without success. Perhaps it was another dog or a different animal, or maybe the shoes were inside one of the houses where they couldn't be tracked. Now both shoes are lost, along with the AirTag. If, someday in the future, someone with an Apple device walks close to the shoes, we'll receive a message. But for now, we'll take it as a lesson not to leave shoes outdoors.

On a positive note, Verona and Leon truly enjoyed the island and its beaches while I was busy with radio pileups. It was a great experience for them, especially during the German wintertime. A real win-win for all.

We also had a nice dinner with Eric (KB1EHE) and Elsie (KB1IFZ) at the Marina Pirata restaurant. Verona, Leon, and I really enjoyed the interesting conversation. Eric is a writer and is currently working on a novel with a story set in Aruba. Elsie, a biochemist, had lots of interesting things to share as well.

Our next antenna task was to install the 85ft Spiderbeam vertical. Unfortunately, during the first few days, there was a lot of wind and rain. We prepared the vertical support, guying, and the complete set of radials, and initially set up the pole for 30m operation. Thanks to the 32 60ft radials, the antenna performed very well on 30m.

After a few days of 30m operation, we extracted it for 60m operation. The 60m band also worked very well. The K3S, even without the amplifier, generated good pileups. We even managed to log a number of ZL stations.

Now we had to extract the pole to its full 85ft height. That was more difficult than expected. We noticed that some plastic clips on the guying ropes had reduced internal friction and, in some cases, caused loosening of the guying. They needed to be replaced. Adjusting the thin top-level guying was sometimes challenging, and of course, Leon and Verona were not very experienced with the procedure. More importantly, compared to the last fully extracted operation in 2020, it appeared that the segments required much more force to extract and were sometimes difficult to retract. The reason seemed to be that the steel angle support at the ground was not exactly vertical, so the slightly bent segments were always under mechanical tension. For next year, I need to find a solution to achieve a perfectly vertical support angle.

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While working, Leon suddenly felt unwell. In recent days, he had a minor cold, but perhaps the exhausting work exacerbated it. And to top it off, the weather worsened.

So we had to stop work and wait for the next day.

The next morning, Leon felt better, and we resumed. However, we noticed that the top segment was bent over by the weight of the four thin top hat wires, but the flexible top segment did not stand up on its own. Normally, the weight of the top hat wires and the lightweight plastic guying is small enough, but apparently, I fastened the top hat connector a little too high on the very thin, flexible top segment. To fix this, we had to fully retract all the segments, fasten the top hat connector a little lower, and extract all the segments again. It took some time, but now the top hats remained on top, and the top segment did not bend. Just 1ft lower made the difference!

A few minutes later, as we were about to lift the last segment, we noticed that the top hat connector had detached from the top segment. Frustrating! Obviously, the reason was that the vertical transmitting wire was taped too tightly at the segments, causing the swinging segments to tear the connection apart. The solution was to provide some more margin when taping the vertical wire.

During the third attempt to extract the segments, Leon fell unwell again, and time for the contest was running out. In this situation, I decided to rely on the existing vertical c-dipole. The performance of this antenna is very good, and I expected no significant disadvantage. The SWR this year was excellent in the relevant portion of the band, so I was almost ready for the contest.

Verona and I then installed an additional temporary beverage towards VK/ZL. Since all the material was well prepared, that was done quite quickly. The only disturbance came from the neighbors' dogs, which barked a lot as we walked near the fence to pull the wire.

Regarding propagation, I mentioned that 30m and 60m were fine. However, 40/80m and 160m were poor almost all the time. I only managed to work ONE JA station on 160m during my entire stay. But that is certainly normal during the Solar Cycle Maximum.

At least the highband conditions were excellent; every day, I had a large and enduring JA pileup on 10m and 12m.

The contest itself started with surprisingly normal conditions. There was the usual one-way sunset opening, where EU was audible very well, but EU could not hear the Caribbean. US callers came soon after, with good signals. Unfortunately, EU later called in only sporadically and with very weak signals. There was no significant improvement at EU sunrise, and thereafter, the usual good opening to the US West Coast simply did not happen, and the band was almost dead. After the first night, I had not even 500 QSOs and missed a lot of easy EU mults like SV, LZ, YU, etc.

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The next night started poorly again. Not many US callers remained, and EU signals remained weak. It wasn't too enjoyable during that time. However, close to EU sunrise, the band opened up a bit to EU, and suddenly, it became lively. My mood improved immediately!

Some smaller pile-ups helped improve the score, better than I feared after the first night. The highlight was working ZL3IO with an easy-to-copy signal. Here, the VK/ZL Beverage paid off.

After EU sunrise, there were only a minor number of QSOs.

Okay, finally, I had 841 QSOs, 51 S/P, 64 DXCC, and 0.958M Points. Unfortunately, that was the worst result ever, but the experienced PJ2T team had just 5% more points and even two fewer mults. It seems the result was not that bad under the given conditions.

Interestingly, the conditions between EU and US seemed less affected by the generally bad conditions than the path from the Caribbean to the rest of the world. P33W had 15% more points, and OK7K was 5% ahead of me. P33W is always a top station, but normally plain EU stations have no chance to beat the Caribbean. Okay, there are other years more in favor of P4.

On Monday evening, we invited JP and Cris to the usual Post-Contest dinner. This time, I chose "The Flying Fishbone" beach restaurant. We arrived just at an impressive sunset. I did not know this restaurant before, but the quality of the food and the service was excellent.

The day after, we left the cottage late in the afternoon and arrived safely home the next day.

It was again a great stay on Aruba. John & Andy, many thanks for letting us live in your cottage and use your excellent equipment!

Mathias DL4MM

