

A Vacation Visit to SVALBARD and JW5E

By Jeff Briggs, K1ZM/VY2ZM

As most of my FOC and DX friends know, my wife Miriam and I live on Prince Edward Island in Maritime Canada and we operate as VY2ZM and VY2HH. We have a house that faces due North to the rear and we are at 46'28" North. This is actually far enough North to be able to see visible aurora when the SFI A/K are off the charts but each time this has happened, we have cloud/rain/fog to the North. Thus in 17 years, we have never seen aurora from VY2ZM. It does happen but, so far, not for us!

This past summer we decided to plan a visit to Norway in order to see some of the Northern lights and, initially, a cruise was planned from Oslo to Tromsø and return. I cannot remember exactly why but Miriam in the end decided against the cruise and we started thinking about a stay on JW (Svalbard) instead. We figured that if you cannot see aurora from there – well you are never going to see it – but it is actually a bit too far North for reliable aurora we learned later. Oops!

I have a 6M friend in JW7QIA and I wrote to him inquiring about a visit to include some time in the chair at JW5E which is the club rental station there. It was lucky indeed that Peter is one of the trustees of the club. I also wrote to Sander JW4PUA who is the curator of the museum on Svalbard and Miriam and I have worked him on FT8 several times over this past year.

Peter made some inquiries on my behalf and a date was set to rent JW5E for one night during a six day visit to Longyearbyn that was planned for late January 2019. We made a reservation at the BASECAMP Explorer Lodge for our stay and booked our flights. The trip was ON!

By way of background, I really did not know much about Svalbard except that the global seed vault is there tucked into a bunker inside a hill. Apart from that, I had not done too much homework about the place. So my expectations were incomplete thinking that I might find a few quanset huts and not many services – eg: just go to see the aurora so to speak.

Well boy was I ever wrong....After touching down and on the bus ride from the airport to my amazement I spotted a Toyota automobile dealership. Whoa! What a surprise to see that there.

Soon I learned that Longyearbyn is a thriving city of 2,200 full-time residents who (except for the perpetual darkness at this time of year) lack for nothing in terms of lifestyle and creature comforts. It surely was not a Spartan lifestyle with the following services and amenities observed:

- o The place is at 79 degrees North but it is warmer than VY2ZM at this time of year.**
- o There was a giant supermarket with fresher produce than I can usually find on PEI**

o There were high-end boutiques and shops along the walking mall outside our hotel – enough to occupy any woman’s shopping cravings – if your pocketbook could stand the expense.

o There were at least 7-8 top restaurants within a 5 minute stroll from our hotel – with some great entrees around \$40 apiece (which is similar to prices on Nantucket these days).

o For those with lesser appetites we found several places which had some great burgers and pizza.

o Our hotel had a restaurant called KROA where I had a wonderful pepper steak one evening. The Bullmers hard cider was great also – along with the local craft beers.

o There was a hospital, a university, and a museum to explore. JW4PUA is the curator of the museum and gave us a wonderful tour while we were there.

o There was a local bank and when we went inside we found an ATM machine that had a flashing banner which said “WELCOME TO THE NORTHEASTMOST ATM MACHINE IN THE WORLD”. Now how neat is that!!!??

o We also discovered the Performing Arts Center and were treated to a jazz festival the last night we were there – with seating for about 500 patrons – and the entertainment and venue was first rate – with some dancing, Broadway show songs and even some rock for our listening pleasure.

o We took a tour inside a coal mine which is the means they use to heat the city – and to provide steam and hot water.

o As with most cities, there were gradations in housing and neighborhoods. We learned that the “upper crust” residents lived up on a ridge aptly named “BEVERLY HILLS”!

o In spring and summer one can visit Isifjord Radio which is about 2 hours away by zodiac boat – or 3 hours by snowmobile. There is a wonderful hotel there from which JW7QIA often operates on 6m in the summer – complete with a 5 star restaurant and great chef.

Polar night is a bit weird – it was always dark while we were there but the town was lit up like daytime by streetlights and home lighting. Around 10-13 hours local time, if you looked to the South one could see some white nights type of sky as the sun will break the horizon by March I believe.

We took a tour to a “trappers lodge” for a great supper one evening and after were treated to some spectacular aurora which was why we came! I am providing a few photos so you can see what we were lucky enough to see first hand – up close and personal.

A number of interesting facts were learned while we were there:

o The locals are among the friendliest people you will ever meet – and they love talking to visitors in order to learn where you came from

o Svalbard and Bear island are loosely affiliated with Norway and as such anyone can go to live there. Visitors and non-Norwegian citizens cannot vote in LA elections. Jan Mayen (JX) is a true part of Norway. JW is not....

o There are two Russian outposts to the North that are also inhabited on JW – one of them is less than 90 minutes to the North

o Women in their last 6 weeks of pregnancy must return to the mainland part of LA to give birth – after which they may return.

o Elderly people usually return to the mainland also – so this place is for younger folks who are healthy and really want to make a living and lifestyle there. I asked a guide how he liked it there and he said “If I did not like it here, I would not stay” and we heard that from a number of residents.

o There was little snowfall while we were there – some drifting along the permafrost roads. Studded tires are “de-rigeur” on all the vehicles!

Operating from JW5E

I had timed our visit to include one night’s operations in the CQ 160m CW contest from JW5E. Unfortunately there was a solar storm going on and condx were really marginal.

Late in the afternoon I was tuning around and heard OK7K at about 349. I knew things were awful because this station is usually 599+40db all the time at VY2ZM.

As the contest unfolded for me, all I could hear was UA4M and UA1OMS. In fact for almost the whole night, that was all I usually heard.

After perhaps an hour of just “hiss” occasionally it would open for 5-7 minutes and some really interesting contacts were made. I heard KV0Q in Colorado, worked Pat N9RV in Montana – and managed to work Eric NO3M and Peter N0FW.

I was especially looking for my brother Peter K3ZM but I never heard ANYONE from the east coast of the USA. No K1DG/no AA1K/no RHR Maine node stations/ no W2GD/no N5DX nothing at all!

I operated for 14 hours and worked about 25 stations – with almost nothing from central Europe either – no G/DL/I/EA – it was all UA4M and UA10MS all night long! With a JW5E rental cost of 100 Euros, that works out to 4 Euros per QSO.

(I just came back from V84SAA and we usually managed 25 qso’s on 160m in less than 10 minutes from there by way of comparison!)

During the night things would revert back to hiss for an hour or so – then a quick 5 minute opening would again occur with only super weak esp-level stations and then the band would close again for another 45 minutes. So this was not a high rate contest for me – HI!

In all I worked 12 DXCC countries and only 6 stations in NA – all not on the East coast.

If any of you reading this piece want to visit a surprisingly interesting place, I recommend it. There is perpetual sunlight for 6 months of the year and that is when the cruise ships all go to JW – and one can also book time at Isifjord radio during the summer months. In summer the usual high temperatures observed top out at about 9 degrees Celsius

which is not all that bad. We experienced temperatures of about minus 7-8 C while were there – but it does go lower from time to time – to around -15/-20C.

Thanks for reading and good Dx'ing to all. Cu soon from VY2ZM I hope – and/or VY2HH (Miriam) on FT8 most of the time!

73 JEFF VY2ZM/K1ZM

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