

# Contesting

**M**y introduction to contesting was as part of a group – it's where I first caught the bug.

Whether it's a windswept hilltop for a VHF contest or a rare HF multiplier from an overseas island, travelling and operating as a team can be hugely rewarding. It offers the chance to share experiences, learn from one another and build lasting friendships around a common objective.

Of course, enjoyment alone isn't the only aim. Success matters too. This article looks at how to combine those ingredients effectively and improve the chances of a good result. The steps below are not strictly linear; most will be revisited several times as plans evolve.

## Planning

I have always regarded planning as the single most important part of any contesting venture. The first question to ask is: *What is the objective?* The second quickly follows: *What is required to achieve it?* Many of the themes covered in earlier Contesting columns [1] will quickly become relevant during the planning and operating stages.

Before long, real-world constraints make themselves known – cost, time, operator availability, equipment and logistics – which inevitably lead to the critical question: *What is actually possible?*

In many cases, planning benefits from a 'bottom up' approach. Rather than starting with a fixed ambition and trying to force-fit the resources, it can be wiser to assess who is available, what skills they bring, what equipment can be sourced and which locations are realistically accessible.

From there, a well-matched and achievable contest operation can take shape.

## Form a team

Most amateurs who enjoy working DX have dreamed at some point of being the DX. Turning that dream into a successful contest operation depends heavily on assembling the right team.

While it's tempting to invite people primarily for the equipment they can contribute, the most important factor is mindset. Everyone involved should share the same desire to do well in the contest. Compatibility matters too – people getting on together is important in any team and it greatly enhances the enjoyment.

Operating from rarer locations often means sustained pileups, which can be mentally demanding over long shifts. A healthy mix of



**PHOTO 1:** CQ World Wide 2023 travelling to the Seychelles. (from left) Martin, GW4XUM; Paul, G4PVM; Mike, G3WPH; and John, G4IRN.

experienced contesters and those still developing their skills can work extremely well, provided expectations are aligned. Newer operators gain invaluable experience, while experienced operators benefit from fresh energy and enthusiasm.

Someone might be designated 'Team Leader' but more important is having clearly defined roles and responsibilities so that everyone knows who is doing what. Logistics, station build, software configuration, antenna work and administration all need ownership.

The Team Leader (or Project Manager) provides oversight and keeps the operation moving forward.

## Choose a location

Earlier articles in this series have explored operating locations [2] and operating contest strategy [3] but when travel is combined with contesting, the most enjoyment often comes from sustained pileups — in other words, being in demand. Understanding the contest rules is therefore key to choosing the right destination.

In CQ World Wide, for example, a rare zone or DXCC entity will attract attention from across the globe. However, several practical factors need careful consideration: difficulty of travel – routes, cost, and reliability; ease of entry – visas, entry requirements, or special permissions; licensing – how straightforward is it to obtain a callsign?; geography – distance from major population centres can affect activity levels.

For less experienced travellers, the Islands on the Air (IOTA) Contest in July offers some distinct advantages. It is largely European-centric, reducing travel complexity, and Europe offers an abundance of qualifying islands.

Summer brings longer days and generally more forgiving weather. Together, these factors make IOTA an excellent introduction to travelling team operations and often a gateway to bigger ambitions.

## Equipment

During the planning stage, it's best to get together as a team and work through the station design. This should include hardware, software and factors such as ease of use. Drawing a schematic diagram of how the station will be connected is strongly recommended.

If a multi-radio environment is planned, try to make each operating position the same. This makes it much easier for operators to swap stations during the contest and reduces mistakes under pressure.

Thought should be given not only to the big items – radios, amplifiers, laptops, antennas – but also to the smallest pieces of kit: co-ax leads, ethernet cables, plug adapters, soldering iron, solder, ferrite clamps and spare fuses.

Draw up a comprehensive equipment list and, ideally in a matrix format, identify who is responsible for bringing each item, tested and known to be working.

## Project management

Keeping track of equipment, planning to-do lists and ensuring tasks are completed lends itself to someone on the team acting as Project Manager. This does not necessarily have to be the Team Leader; in many cases it's better if it isn't. What matters is organisation, communication and attention to detail.

Project management also involves identifying risks, thinking about what could go wrong and how those risks can be avoided.

A typical project plan will include:

- A list of team members with contact details, emergency contacts and any health considerations
- A full equipment list, including spares, attributed to team members
- Baggage weights if flying to avoid excess charges
- Travel details, accommodation information and licensing authority contacts
- A checklist of tasks to complete on arrival, including station build and testing

At some point an operating rota should be drawn up. In a 48-hour contest it's vital that operators get time to eat and sleep and that seat time is shared fairly. Individual strengths and preferences should be considered – some operators favour certain bands or modes – but flexibility is essential.



**PHOTO 2:** Many antennas can be packed into a small space but watch out for inter-station interference, Note the rubble bags filled with sand to act as guying points.

### Preparation and testing

Preparation is a prerequisite to success, not only to ensure the equipment is ready but also to ensure the operators are ready to hit the ground running.

Research the planned operating QTH. Has it been used by amateurs before? Can they share their experiences? Satellite imagery can help plan antenna placement, co-ax lengths and access routes. If operating from private property, make the owners aware of the planned activities — they are often very supportive when included early.

Once the station design and contest software are agreed, individual components should be built and tested where possible. End-to-end antenna testing may be difficult but attention should be given to connectors, adapters and cable lengths.

As items are tested, they can be ticked off the equipment list.

Operators need preparation too. Learning contest software for the first time when sitting down at a rare DX station is far from ideal. Ideally, team members will practise using the chosen software beforehand, preferably in real contests.

### Licensing and permissions

Many countries are signed up to CEPT Recommendation T/R 61-01 [4], allowing visitors to operate during short stays using their home callsign with the appropriate prefix. However, this applies only to individual licences, not club callsigns.

Otherwise, a local licence must be applied for in advance — sometimes months in advance. The best approach is often to contact a local amateur or the national IARU society [5] for guidance; they can frequently smooth the process and be helpful on the ground.

Once the licence is in hand, permission to operate from the chosen QTH must be obtained. This may involve hotel management or, in some countries, local authorities or police. Pre-planning avoids unpleasant surprises.

### Travel

Air travel introduces constraints, with baggage weight and logistics being the most prominent. Equipment should be distributed across team members' allowances so that no single lost bag can jeopardise the operation. Customs procedures should also be investigated in advance.

Before flying, I photograph every item placed in checked baggage and carry equipment lists and licences. A note placed inside each bag explaining that it contains amateur radio equipment, along with contact details, can also be helpful.



**PHOTO 3:** Hiring an existing rental shack can ease the baggage and planning difficulties. The PZ5V rental shack is well suited to multi/single or multi/two operations. Photos: G4IRN.

### On-site setup: The first 24 hours

A structured build order helps. Antennas first, then feedlines, then radios, computers and finally software integration, though the 'inside' work can often be done in parallel with the 'outside' work.

Leave time for a full end-to-end test, including stress testing the mains power supply, logging, networking, and keying. Solving problems before the contest starts is far easier than doing so during peak rate periods.

### Operate as a team

Once the contest starts, teamwork becomes paramount. Clear handovers between operators, disciplined logging, and good communication help the score.

Operator changes should include brief updates: current band conditions, run or search strategy, and any technical quirks. Mistakes will happen. How the team reacts to them matters more than the mistakes themselves.

### Lightweight travel and low-impact stations

Very successful contest operations have been mounted with relatively lightweight equipment, often using fibreglass poles supporting vertical antennas near salt water.

Lightweight stations reduce travel stress, speed up setup and often provide surprising performance. For many teams, they are not a compromise at all — they are the enabler.

### Conclusion

Travelling to operate as a contest team combines technical challenge, strategic thinking and shared experience in a way few other aspects of amateur radio can match. It develops skills, builds friendships and creates memories that last long after the contest is over.

For many operators, it becomes the highlight of the amateur radio year and, once tried, it's hard to resist planning the next one.

### References

- [1] [rsgb.org/main/radio-sport/radcom-contesting](http://rsgb.org/main/radio-sport/radcom-contesting)
- [2] Station Locations: *RadCom* Contesting column, May 2025
- [3] Contesting Strategy at HF: *RadCom* Contesting column, January 2026
- [4] CEPT Recommendation T/R 61-01 - [/docdb.cept.org/download/4541](http://docdb.cept.org/download/4541)
- [5] IARU Member Societies [iaru.org/reference/member-societies](http://iaru.org/reference/member-societies)

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