



# EDXC conference in Andorra

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reports from the Pyrenees



The EDXC has organised a conference for its member clubs, broadcasters and DXers every year (apart from one) since 1967. It always tries to pick a country or city that has not hosted the conference before, but this becomes trickier with this being the 52<sup>nd</sup> conference! The venue chosen for the 2019 conference (6-8 September) was a new one however: Andorra, a small country with an interesting radio history and which many (including me) had never visited before!

The Principality of Andorra is a tiny independent state in the eastern Pyrenees mountains between France to the north and Spain to the south, covering an area of 468 square kilometres. Its two Princes are the President of France and the Catholic Bishop of Urgell in Catalonia, Spain. Population is around 77,000 and the official language is Catalan. Andorra is not a member of the European Union, though uses the Euro currency. Its mountainous terrain is dissected by narrow valleys, and its capital, Andorra La Vella, is the highest capital in Europe at 1023 metres, sited at the junction of the two main valleys. It is not the easiest country to travel to as it has no airport or railway, so conference delegates travelled to either Toulouse or Barcelona before travelling onto the conference by 4-hour coach journey.

A number of delegates arrived in the French city of Toulouse by air or rail on Thursday 5<sup>th</sup> September, so conference organiser Christian Ghibaudo had kindly organised a private EDXC coach to take us south, up the twisting road to the Hotel Golden Tulip Fénix, the conference venue, in Escaldes-Engordany, just north of the capital. There were 34 delegates attending from 12 countries: Finland (12), UK (6), Italy (3), Denmark (2), France (2), Germany (2), Japan (2), Austria (1), Belgium (1), Poland (1), Switzerland (1) and USA (1).

Friday morning dawned bright and sunny, and we walked downtown to the studios of Ràdio i Televisió d'Andorra (RTVA), sited opposite the national sports stadium. We were able to enjoy some of the sites of the Andorran capital en route. RTVA host Josep M. Samper (Head of



Technical Services) made us very welcome and showed us round the radio and TV studios. RTVA, only established in 1991, has two FM stations on air: Radio Nacional d'Andorra on 91.4 and 94.2 MHz and Andorra Música on 97.0 MHz. RTVA also has one local public TV channel, ATV, though many Spanish, French and other international digital TV channels are relayed in the

Principality. In the TV studio we were given the chance to present the weather forecast! Four of our group (Chrissy Brand, Christian Ghibaudo (above), Enrique Fernández Vernet and Tracy Wood) were also interviewed in English, French, Catalan and Spanish by presenter Rosa Alberch for a television news report on our visit, aired that weekend on ATV: "Radio enthusiasts from various countries visit RTVA facilities" :<https://m.andorradifusio.ad/noticies/radioaficionats-diversos-paisos-visiten-instalacions-rtva?>



Françoise Dauge , animatrice.

Following our visit to RTVA studios, some of us took a taxi a few miles north to the small town of Encamp, where there was a photographic exhibition in a gallery at the town hall celebrating the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of radio broadcasting in Andorra (1939-2019). This covered both Radio Andorra and Sud Radio (left). We would return to Encamp the next morning to visit the old Radio Andorra transmitter building in the town.



Back at the conference hotel in the afternoon, we were welcomed to the conference by new EDXC Secretary-General Chrissy Brand who mentioned our love of radio and the international friendship that brought us together for this 52<sup>nd</sup> conference.



Assistant Secretary-General, Christian Ghibaudo then presented a history of Radio Andorra with photos and audio clips. The station was inaugurated on August 7<sup>th</sup> 1939: its founder was Jacques Trémoulet, owner of some private stations in Spain and France, including Radio Toulouse, who set up Radio Andorra as he feared a ban on private stations in France. One month later, France declared war on Germany and broadcasts stopped, only to resume a few months later on April 3<sup>rd</sup> 1940 without hinderance from either France or

Germany as the Principality of Andorra was neutral during WWII. After the liberation of France in 1944, Radio Andorra survived, despite lawsuits against its owner for wartime collaboration, with the French RDF jamming its transmissions in 1948 and closure of the French border to prevent records and equipment being transported to Radio Andorra. In the 1950s Radio Andorra regained its popularity amongst listeners, despite the French government wishing to silence the station. The French government countered by setting up a new “radio périphérique” to compete with Radio Andorra, Radio des Vallées (which later became Sud Radio). The competition between Radio Andorra and Sud Radio continues in the 1960s and eventually Sofirad, the French state-owned company that ran Europe1, RMC and Sud Radio gained the upper hand. In 1971, owner and founder of Radio Andorra, Jacques Trémoulet died. The station declines with

an aging transmitter limiting coverage, losing audience and advertising revenue to Sud Radio. In March 1981 it was ordered to close by the Andorran government who removed the concessions to broadcast it had given in 1961 to both Radio Andorra and Sud Radio as it wanted its own national station. Sud Radio continued broadcasts, then retreated to French territory, but Radio Andorra closed at 21hrs on 2<sup>nd</sup> April 1981.

It was not until 1991, after 10 years of silence, that the new state-run Radio Nacional d'Andorra took to the air in Catalan, on FM only, from the former Radio Sud studios. The studios of Radio Andorra were destroyed in a fire in 1991. But the tall MW masts which had broadcast Radio Andorra across Europe, and the transmitter building are still standing today, though now silent, on the shores of Lake Engolasters - we would visit these the next day! Christian recommended these two websites with much more information on the history of Radio Andorra, including sound clips, videos, photos, publicity ephemera etc covering forty years: "Aqui Radio Andorra" <http://www.aquiradioandorra.com> and <http://f5nsl.free.fr/> (which also covers Sud Radio).

We learnt a lot about the original Radio Andorra from Christian's presentation, then had chance to chat to fellow delegates over a welcome drink, courtesy of the Golden Tulip Fenix hotel.



*left: turret on Radio Andorra transmitter building. right: Dave Kenny with balun transformer at Encamp.*

Saturday morning, and after a short journey by coach north again to the town of Encamp we visited the transmitter building of the original Radio Andorra. Housed in a striking stone building with a turret (above left), we would see its transmitters (both MW and SW) and generators etc still in situ after the station's closure in 1981 as if frozen in time, perhaps a unique scenario in the radio world! Our guides were Mrs Berna Garralla (Culture Heritage Department, Government of Andorra) and Mr Claude Benet (President of L'association Velles Cases Andorranes). The building is currently being renovated to be converted partly into a radio museum, and partly as offices for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This is still work in progress, but we were given special access to the building. The building is constructed in 1930s neo-roman style and inspired by

Andorran religious buildings, with stained glass panels in the windows with the Andorran coat of arms and wrought iron window grilles with the Radio station's initials "RA". The MW masts of Radio Andorra could still be seen on the mountain above. The transmitters we saw still at Encamp were:

**SFR MW transmitter** (1939), originally 60 kW, increased to 125 kW in 1960.

**Brown-Boveri 400-kW MW transmitter** installed in 1964 (last used on 702 kHz).

**SFR SW transmitter** (1939) 25 kW.

**Two 10 kW Brown-Boveri SO 59/10K short wave transmitters** (last used on 6220 kHz, including for AWR and WMR).

Returning to our coach, we saw the modern 160m long road tunnel next to the site, opened in 2011, is named after the station: "Túnel de Radio Andorra"!

Driving north of Encamp, and up a narrow twisting road of hairpin bands, we reached the Mirador Roc del Quer, where there are amazing views of the mountains and valleys below from a 20m walkway jutting out from the valley side. At the end of the walkway, a sculpture of a giant seated man gazes out at the view: "The Ponderer" by Catalan artist Miguel Ángel González (*photo right*).

Down in the valley in the village of Merixtell we visited the old Romanesque church there largely destroyed by fire in 1972 but restored with a new Sanctuary built alongside designed by architect



painted red and white seem well-maintained from our side of the lake – originally in 1939 a



Ricardo Bofill, a blend of the old and modern. Our Lady of Merixtell is the patron saint of Andorra. In the village, postcards picturing the old Sud Radio aerial masts in the snow on Pic Blanc, Port d'Envalira were quickly bought up by our party to the surprise of the souvenir shop owner! Sud Radio's aerials became the highest in Europe when erected in the 1960s, surpassing those of Radio Andorra whose publicity had previously claimed "L'antenne La Plus Haute d'Europe".

The 125m high twin Radio Andorra MW masts are still standing alongside Lake Engolasters (1616m above sea level), which was our next stop on our coach trip. Now unused, the masts,

radiating element stretched between the two masts. When the new Brown Boveri transmitter was installed and power increased in 1964 to 400 kW, one mast was modified to become a vertical radiator (the other mast was then just a reflector). Lake Engolasters in the summer is popular for its hiking trails: we walked part way around the lake to enjoy lunch at the restaurant “Llac I Cel”!



*left: the 2 masts were linked to the Encamp transmitter by two 1km feeder lines. Last frequency being used before its closure in 1981 was 702 kHz.*

We returned to Hotel Golden Tulip Fénix in the afternoon for more informative presentations:

“International SW frequency coordination” – Arto Mujunen had attended the High Frequency Coordination Conference (HFCC) hosted by RAE in Buenos Aires at the end of August, representing the U.S Agency for Global Media (USAGM, until 2018 BBG). He explained the activities of the HFCC in trying to minimise interference, although some countries do not participate and only register their seasonal frequencies with the ITU. The conferences are held twice yearly, having first being held in 1990 in Bulgaria. Arto mentioned the registration of “wooden frequencies”, jamming, still crowded bands (e.g. in Africa and Asia in local mornings) and the International Radio for Disaster Relief (IRDR) frequencies: already seven frequencies are kept free for IRDR 24hrs: 9430, 13620, 15650, 17500 18950, 21840 and 26010 with the aim of adding to these in the lower frequency bands. Delegates heard a talk on the LRA36 Antarctica station and visited the General Pacheco transmitter site (only 870 kHz currently active).



Photo: Chrissy Brand (left) & Ydun Ritz.

“MediumWave Info: A DX resource since 1998” – Ydun Ritz described how her well-known MW website <https://mediumwave.info/> came to fruition, when, encouraged by her late-husband, she first set it up in 1998. She had edited a MW section in the

DSWCI magazine in the 1990s and her website was originally called Ydun's MW page, before changing name to Medium Wave Info in 2002. Since 2009 the site has had 226,000 visitors, most from the UK and most visiting her news page. As well as News and a News Archive, Ydun's website also has a MW loggings section. Ydun also brought greetings from (and a photo of) former EDXC Secretary-General Tibor Szilagyi to the conference.

"The Free radio scene in different countries" – Jan-Mikael Nurmela has already QSLed 250 different pirate stations and gave us a trip around Europe describing the pirate activity in different countries. He explained there were two main types of pirates: those playing music with programming to listen to and QSO stations just contacting each other. Today there are maybe 20-30 countries with pirate radio stations, the most prolific probably being the Netherlands. He mentioned some German pirates pretend to be Dutch also! Some recordings were played and I was impressed with Jan-Mikael's reception of UK station Vibes FM in Finland 7 years ago. Even former eastern bloc nations such as Serbia and Russia today have much pirate activity.

Tracy Wood (right) enlightened us on "Spain's broadcasting scene". Although from the USA, Tracy we discovered was pretty fluent in Spanish, which obviously helped him with this topic! As well as the REE external service, RNE has 5 domestic services, including Ràdio 4 in Catalan. Tracy also mentioned the two US FM military stations on Spanish soil (Rota and Morón). He also mentioned radio across the border in Gibraltar and Radio Euzkadi, born in the Spanish Civil War in 1936 and now a communications group in the Basque country with 5 radio channels (as well as TV). It's history is told in the book "La Historia de Radio Euzkadi" by Leyre Arrieta. Tracy closed with greetings from Kim Andrew Elliott, former host of "Communications World" on VOA.

We then linked (via Skype) to Brian Powell, Production Engineer at RFA (Radio Free Asia) in the USA who described "Radio Free Asia (RFA) today". RFA is a USAGM station set up in 1996 whose remit is to broadcast news and information in 9 language services to Asian countries where access to news is restricted. Mandarin and Cambodian SW services were due to close in 2020. RFA broadcasts suffer jamming. We saw photos of the damage wrought by Super Typhoon Yutu's 180mph winds on RFA transmitter sites in Saipan and Tinian in the Mariana Islands in October 2018. This caused RFA the loss of 62 hours daily but Brian said they were now all back.

On Saturday evening, EDXC delegates enjoyed the traditional EDXC Banquet in our hotel, a 3-course meal with wine, including a commemorative EDXC cake. Thanks were given to previous EDXC Secretary-General Kari Kivekäs and Assistant Secretary-General Jan-Mikael Nurmela and his successor Christian Ghibaudo for organising this conference in Andorra.

Sunday morning and Risto Vähäkainu's told us of his travels in February with three fellow Finns, to the 32<sup>nd</sup> SWL Winter festival in Plymouth, Pennsylvania, USA. After this, his aim was to visit the eight US states he hadn't yet visited! The 4,000 miles road trip (over 10 days) included some radio stations. From his photos it looked cold and snowy, but Finns are used to such weather! Their route took in Nevada, Utah, Wyoming, Colorado (including WWV Fort Collins), Kansas, Nebraska, South and North Dakota, Montana, Idaho, and Washington before ending in California where they met up with Risto Kotalampi who runs the well-known Hard Core DX (HCDX) website.

Next, Chrissy updated us on EDXC matters and read messages from Kaj Bredahl Jørgensen and his wife Else from Denmark who unfortunately had to cancel their trip to Andorra at the last minute. Also greetings were received from Anker Petersen in Denmark and Alexander Beryozkin of the Saint Petersburg DX Club. EDXC has fifteen member clubs as well as individual members. They have a weblog at <https://edxcnews.wordpress.com/> plus a Facebook page and a Twitter account @DXCouncil. Kari Kivekäs continues as EDXC Treasurer and gave an update on the



healthy EDXC bank balance. The EDXC country list (updated 2017) can be accessed from the weblog home page. Four locations had been suggested for the 2020 conference: Bucharest, North Macedonia, Tartu (Estonia) and Luxembourg. Member clubs will vote on these shortly.

A visit to Rádio Nacional da Amazônia by Martin Butera was presented to delegates by Chrissy. This report with photos appeared in the September and October 2019 editions of Communication.

Our final presentation was by Alfredo Cotroneo, founder of NEXUS-IBA, well known for SW station IRRS (Italian (now International) Radio Relay Service) which launched in 1988 with two 10kW former Swiss transmitters. This was in the days before social media, mobile 'phones and when the Berlin Wall was still standing! Before that, in 1979, Alfredo had started an FM station in Milan relaying English programmes from international broadcasters (BBC, VOA, DW etc). In 1990 NEXUS was designated a non-profit organisation – Nexus is Latin for 'link' or 'point of connection'. It remains non-profit, 100% volunteer, non-denominational association – it moved its shortwave site from Italy to sites in other countries (locations not confirmed by Alfredo, though we saw photos) and uses 7290 daily plus 9510 at weekends with 150 kW (full details at <https://www.nexus.org/>). Programmes include "World of Radio" and "Wavescan". Non-denominational programmes are broadcast as EGR (European Gospel Radio). It also broadcasts on 846 kHz to NE Italy (previously on 594 kHz). In 2016 an office in Dublin opened a base for Milano Ventures Ltd, a cloud, media and broadcasting company.

So, after an extensive conference programme, Sunday lunchtime we said our farewells in the Golden Tulip hotel in Andorra. This was September 8<sup>th</sup>, National Day in Andorra with many flags draped on balconies etc, but few people about as all shops were closed. A group then headed south by coach into Spain, then north to Llívia, a Spanish enclave inside French territory, with an area of 5 square miles and a population of around 1,500. Just time for a brief walk around the old town and some Llívia beer before heading north to France's fourth largest city, Toulouse.

On Monday morning, Christian had organised a guide who gave us an excellent walking tour of Toulouse, sometimes called "the Pink City" because of its coloured bricks. Besides the River Garonne we said more farewells as others headed home. Our hotel in Toulouse was very close to the railway station, very convenient for myself and Dave Kenny as it turned out, as we had to return to England by rail due to the British Airways pilots' strike!

Many thanks to Christian and Chrissy for organising a brilliant 52<sup>nd</sup> EDXC conference! (AP)



Above: Radio Andorra transmitter hall at Encamp with (left to right) SFR SW and MW transmitters dating to 1939, and on the far wall, the Brown Boveri MW transmitter from 1964.

Below: The transmitter building at Encamp. The SW log periodic aerial was sited here, but lies dismantled next to the building. (Inset: Andorran coat of arms in stained glass in the transmitter hall windows)



Below: Dario Monferini (left) from Italy <https://playdxblog.blogspot.com/> and Dave Kenny (British DX Club) studying a rare QSL from Equatorial Guinea at the EDXC Conference in Andorra.



(‘EDXC conference in Andorra’ text & photos © British DX Club October 2019)