

What on earth are you doing?

This is the most frequent question we get asked when operating our Amateur Radio station in a public place. It would be tempting to answer “Searching for Extra Terrestrials”, or “Detecting Paranormal Phenomena”. Certainly this description fits the picture of the strange equipment, antennae and the weird sounds emanating from the station. The simple and honest answer is: “We’re just having fun using our Amateur Radios to make new friends.”

What is Amateur Radio?

It’s a way to have fun and make friends with lots of people from all walks of life; from all over the world. It’s a licence to have a conversation with anyone, on an equal footing, without any introductions. You just pick up the mic and go!

How do you meet people on Amateur Radio?

You can have a casual on-air conversation with any Amateur Radio operator anywhere. However, some will soon become your best buddies and then you’ll want to chat with them every Tuesday night, meet them face to face, have BBQs, swap radio gear, go to Hamfests together, introduce your children to their children etc, etc... It gets a bit complicated from there on in. But that’s life, I guess.

Isn’t Amateur Radio just for nerds?

Amateur Radio is both fun and technically challenging. Amateur Radio is for anybody who wants to have fun on the air with radios. You can talk all about your pets, your garden, your motor bike or your mortgage. But you will also hear serious technical conversations about transmitters, antennas and something called “ionospheric propagation”. There is actually a lot of technology “under the covers” in Amateur Radio. Your Amateur Radio licence will ensure you know enough about Amateur Radio to operate your station safely and responsibly. From then on, it is up to you to decide how technical things get. And, yes, if you are a nerd: Amateur Radio is for you too!

Isn’t Amateur Radio out of date?

Not at all: Amateur Radio is using new technologies and techniques all the time. Amateur Radio is always evolving. Not so long ago we were all using vacuum tubes, now we’re into Software Defined Radios. Keep up with the latest technologies: Get into Amateur Radio today.

Isn’t Amateur Radio boring?

Never: There are always new people to meet and new things to do. Even our shortwave bands have a habit of behaving in unexpected ways. For example: “Today it was good to talk to Tony in New Zealand. But this evening, Vladimir in Russia was just booming in. Tomorrow I think I’ll try to bounce my signals off an aircraft or a meteor shower.” With Amateur Radio the sky is no longer the limit! To find out about all the new things to do and details of upcoming events just tune your Amateur Radio in to the weekly Amateur Radio news broadcast.

Is Amateur Radio a sport?

Actually it is! There are lots of friendly local and international on-air contests which Amateur Radio operators can enter. Some contests work from home; some while camping in National Parks; some involve bushwalking to a mountain peak to set up a radio station from your back pack! In fact, whenever you talk to an Amateur Radio station in a country, county, mountain, park, island, lighthouse or museum, there is an Amateur Radio contest with an achievement certificate in it just waiting for you. Why not give it a go?

Is Amateur Radio challenging?

Well, how about making a contact with say the Azores (only 25,000km away) using less power than the light bulb in your fridge? Better still, do it with a 9 volt battery using Morse code and a “squid-pole” antenna down at your local beach. Well that’s been done. So how about, making up your own Amateur Radio challenge? It’s your turn!

Is Amateur Radio for Blokes?

Definitely. How else can you: Chat with all your new mates without leaving home or having to invite them over; camp out on a hilltop with them during a crazy weekend Amateur Radio contest; meet them down at the local Amateur Radio club rooms and show them your new BIG RIG; or get them all to come over and help you paint your house? Answer: Amateur Radio. Well, maybe not that last one.

Is Amateur Radio for Sheilas?

Absolutely: Join the Australian Ladies Amateur Radio Association (ALARA) and call in on their weekly on-air nets, go to luncheons and coffees with the other “YLs”. Successfully fight off a “dog pile” of blokes scrambling to call YOU during an Amateur Radio contest!

Is Amateur Radio for Kids?

You bet! Show your friends your new Hand Held radio and call sign. Of course it is bigger and much more powerful than a mobile phone. That's because you can broadcast to Amateur Radio operators anywhere with it. Talk to other Amateur Radio operators on-the-air as an equal, because now you've got your Amateur Radio licence too. Show the old-timers a thing or two about making hundreds of contacts during an Amateur Radio contest. You can do it too and it's fun!

Is Amateur Radio for Retirees?

You can never be bored or alone at home with Amateur Radio – it's a fact. Many operators as they get older never put down the mic: Even in their beds at a retirement home! There are many Amateur Radio operators in your age group right now and many are new to the hobby, just like you. Why not re-invent yourself with Amateur Radio? Challenge yourself to get on the air. You can join a net or even start your own net. Meet new friends and talk about old times. You'll find people who were in the same line of work as you and people like you who want to do something different in their retirement. Learn new stuff at the Amateur Radio club rooms and pass on some of your own life-long skills to the younger ones.

Is Amateur Radio accessible to the Handicapped?

Yes. Join with many others who find that Amateur Radio is a liberating experience with equal opportunities for all. Travel the world through Amateur Radio - it is a lot safer than crossing the road.

Is Amateur Radio for Rocket Scientists?

Yes. In fact many Amateur Radio operators have built their own rocket, helium balloon or kite etc and sent it aloft with real-time GPS tracking and Amateur Radio telemetry systems. The question is, why haven't you?

Can anyone become an Amateur Radio operator?

Yes, there are no age-limits or barriers. Just get your licence and go for it.

How do you become an Amateur Radio operator?

All it takes is a fun weekend group training session (\$35); often with lunch and afternoon tea provided. Read the book "Your Entry into Amateur Radio" (\$26). Pass a simple multi-choice test and a practical on-air assessment (\$70). Pay an annual licence fee (\$73), get your own call sign (\$5) and you're good to go! In fact it is much easier and cheaper than getting a motorcar licence! You don't even need a radio.

Why not just use a mobile phone?

- (a) Because you can't fit 3 million new contacts into your mobile phone;
- (b) because your telephone company charges you to make a call, and more for time and long distance;
- (c) because it is your right (not a privilege) to communicate by your own means despite your telephone company's marketing strategy; And finally
- (d) do not expect your mobile phone to work during periods of civil unrest, a natural disaster, poor network coverage or network congestion. You can, however, always depend on your Amateur Radio station because you built it yourself and it just works.

Why not just chat on the Internet?

Because on the Internet you can never be sure who you are talking to or which way the conversation may turn at any moment. It is a real security concern. However, Amateur Radio operators are bound by their own code of practice as well as the Radio Communications Act. All radio conversations are public and in the open. Unacceptable on-air behaviour is swiftly dealt with or reported. Amateur Radio operators are licenced by the Australian Communications and Media Authority and are registered so you can easily verify their identity.

Do you have to buy an Amateur Radio to use Amateur Radio?

Not really. You could just use a smart phone app called Echolink to get on the air. But having your own radio is even more fun. It can be inexpensive and it doesn't rely on your phone company or the Internet.

How much do Amateur Radios cost?

From \$50 for a hand-held VHF/UHF transceiver, often provided with many features not found in similar CB or commercial radios.

Do you need to have a big ugly antenna at home?

No. A small vertical whip or a 20m long wire antenna will work just fine. Anyway, who said antennas were ugly? To Amateur Radio operators they are more like status symbols! The bigger the better, I say (STCA).

Can you use Amateur Radio in the car?

Yes, unlike mobile phones, Amateur Radio is legal to use while driving, but you still need to drive safely at all times. There are also many Amateur Radio “drive-time” nets, which have the advantage over broadcast “talk-back” radio stations of *always* letting you have your say. Frankly, I never listen to broadcast radio any more. Using Amateur Radio when you are travelling makes long trips shorter, safer and more enjoyable.

Can you use Amateur Radio on holidays?

Yes, you can take a portable radio with you, talk back home, or more likely take advantage of your exciting new location to attract some rare stations from overseas. In fact holidays are pretty boring without Amateur Radio.

Can you use Amateur Radio while hiking or camping?

Yes, just pack a small Amateur Radio, antenna and rechargeable battery in your backpack. Recharge it using a solar panel or from the car. Check in with your mates back home from camping grounds or mountain tops, near lakes or streams, anywhere really. Talk to overseas stations from the Australian outback or the bush. Country areas are so free of electrical interference that you will be able to contact many stations you simply can't hear in the city.

Can you join an Amateur Radio club and meet others?

Of course. There are many Amateur Radio clubs. Hopefully one close by you. They have monthly meetings, weekly coffee shops; they organise group training, outdoor activities, contests, practical Do-It-Yourself sessions and sometimes, you-guessed-it, the mother of all meetings: The Hamfest!

Can you build your own Amateur Radio gear?

Yes you can, with a few limitations. Part of the fun of Amateur Radio is building your own gear: There are DIY kits for beginners and more adventurous projects for experienced constructors. Amateur Radio clubs can help with “Homebrew” groups and club projects. However, for safety reasons beginners are not permitted to build their own transmitters, until they get a more advanced Amateur Radio qualification.

What do Amateur Radio operators do at a Hamfest?

Secret Amateur Radio business! Actually it is the BEST FUN EVER for Amateur Radio operators: There are trade shows, presentations, demonstrations, stalls and tables, BBQs, tea and coffee, door prizes and BARGAINS galore. You often meet people that you have been talking to for months for the very first time. I would be very surprised if a newly licenced Amateur Radio operator couldn't go to a HAMFEST and get all sorts of useful stuff and information for free! Some have even walked away with a whole working Amateur Radio station for just a couple of bucks.

Can you talk around town with Amateur Radio?

Yes, Amateur Radio works in the car or on the tram, train, bus, bicycle or even “pedestrian mobile”. OK, it doesn't work in tunnels! You have to say: “Hang on I'm going through a tunnel. Back on-the-air in a minute”. Hand-held radios can work up to 100km around big cities using absolutely free Amateur Radio repeaters.

Can you talk to other countries with Amateur Radio?

Yes. Either on the shortwave Amateur Radio bands with a simple wire antenna or with a VHF/UHF Hand-Held radio via the Amateur Radio Internet Repeater Linking Project. Why not ask your overseas relatives to visit their local village Amateur Radio operator to set up a scheduled contact?

Can you talk to The Moon with Amateur Radio?

Yes, or at least you can talk to overseas Amateur Radio stations by bouncing your signal off the moon. It is a bit of a challenge, but thousands of contacts are made this way every year.

Can you talk to Astronauts with Amateur Radio?

Yes. Of course many astronauts started their careers as Amateur Radio operators and some are still on the air. You can also, at certain times, communicate using Amateur Radio with the International Space Station.

Can you talk to Aliens with Amateur Radio?

Yes, but for some reason they have not called back yet. Amateur Radio signals travel deep into space at the speed of light. It would apparently take years for your signal to reach another solar system capable of supporting life. I guess the first thing an Alien civilisation would probably say is: “Your planet is very noisy, isn't it?”