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The ABCs of IRCs

Just what ARE International Reply Coupons, anyway?

Having worked that new country, IOTA, or whatever you've been chasing, you will quite likely want to get his QSL in written confirmation of the QSO. One of the most convenient ways to obtain your much-wanted card, particularly from a foreign station or his QSL manager, is by the use of International Reply Coupons (IRC).

Unfortunately, much myth and misinformation surrounds what is and is not a "correctly" stamped and valid IRC, which is often compounded by different countries postal administrations' interpretation of the rules, so the purpose of this article is to set the record straight.

An IRC is a device by which a person in one member country of the Universal Postal Union (UPU) can prepay the return airmail postage cost of a letter of a specific maximum weight from a different UPU member country. At

the time of writing and in theory at least, IRCs are exchangeable in all countries with the exception of Taiwan. UPU member countries may decide not to sell IRCs, but their exchange is compulsory in all countries.

There are three types of IRCs in wide circulation: There are two versions of the type C 22 and the more modern type CN 01 (old C 22). The front text of all versions is printed entirely in French, but there is a translated version in English as well as Arabic, Chinese, German, Russian,

and Spanish on the reverse (Fig. 1). The earlier versions of the C 22 (Fig. 2), which was available for sale until the early 1990s (and which are still in circulation today), says that "this coupon is exchangeable in any country of the Universal Postal Union for one or more postage stamps representing the minimum postage for an unregistered letter sent by surface to a foreign country." The more modern CN 01 (Fig. 3) and the C 22 (Fig. 4) both say exactly

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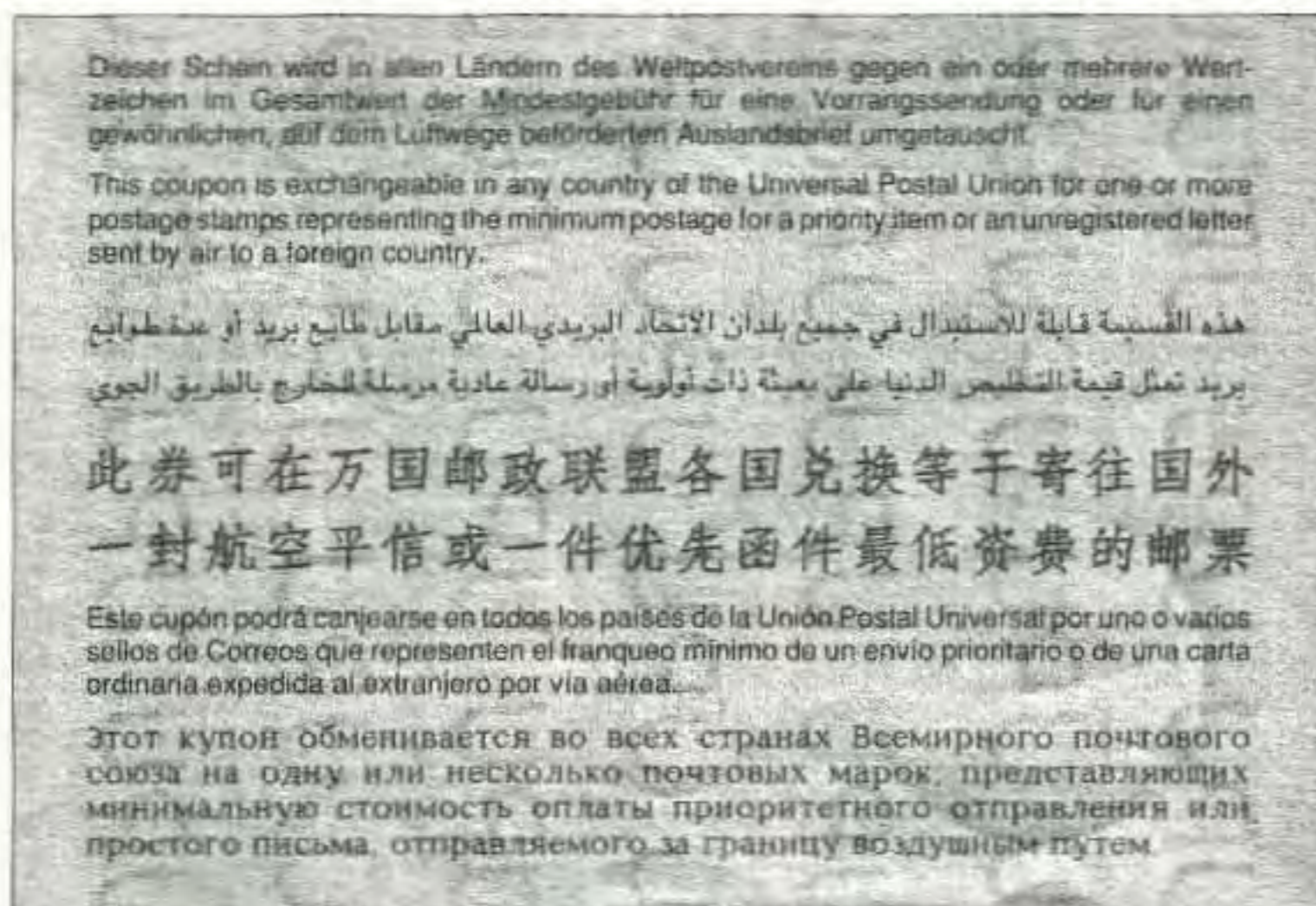


Fig. 1. The reverse side is a translated version of the front text in English as well as Arabic, Chinese, German, Russian, and Spanish.



Fig. 2. The front side of the earlier versions of the C 22, which was available for sale until the early 1990s.



Fig. 3. The front side of the more modern CN 01.



Fig. 4. The front side of the more recent versions of the C 22.

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the same, except that the word "surface" has been replaced by "air."

The present CN 01 style was on sale until 31st December 2001. On 1st January 2002, a completely new style of IRC was introduced — also known as the CN 01. This new type of IRC is larger than those presently in circulation and will remain valid until 31st December 2006. The name of the country of origin will be printed on these coupons as a matter of course. Also printed on them, amongst other things, will be a standardized UPU bar code containing the ISO code of the country and the date of printing. Each country's postal administration will have the option of printing the selling price on the coupon itself.

There is, at present, no theoretical

limit to the period of exchange for IRCs, although postal officers can, not unreasonably, satisfy themselves as to their genuineness, particularly in respect of the older versions. In my own experience and if properly stamped, either type is generally accepted without question in exchange for the current minimum airmail postage. This may change in the light of the new style of CN 01.

IRC's can be bought "new" over the counter of the larger post offices at a current cost of £0.60 each and may be hand-stamped in the left-hand box by the issuing office. This box is marked "Empreinte de contrôle du pays d'origine (facultative)." This means: "Control stamp of the country of origin (optional)." Some IRCs have the name of the country of origin preprinted in red in the left-hand box (Fig. 5). Even with this preprinted information, there

can be a hand stamp from the issuing office over this writing. Contrary to popular opinion, the hand stamping by the issuing office or the overprinting by the country of origin is optional and the lack of this detail does not invalidate the IRC. Ideally, and where used, the hand stamp should include the date of issue, but this is not essential. For some unknown reason, IRCs issued in France do not always bear the date of issue, but merely the name of the issuing office (Fig. 6).

When presented in exchange for postage stamps, the receiving office should legibly date-stamp the right-hand box. This is a mandatory requirement to validate the IRC. This box is marked "Timbre de bureau qui effectue l'échange." This means: "Stamp of the office making the exchange." One IRC is currently exchangeable in the U.K. for £0.45 worth of postage stamps or an aérogramme.



Fig. 5. Some IRCs have the name of the country of origin preprinted in red in the left-hand box.



Fig. 6. Some IRCs issued in France do not always bear the date of issue — merely the name of the issuing office.



Fig. 7. The issuing office may affix a postage stamp in the middle box, but only to indicate or supplement the price of the IRC.



Fig. 8. This IRC is potentially worthless as it bears no hand stamp from the issuing office.

The center box is intended to show the price paid for the IRC and is marked "Prix de vente (indication facultative)." This means: "Selling price (optional information)." The post office may fix a postage stamp in this box, but only to indicate or supplement the price of the IRC (Fig. 7) — not a date stamp such as would be used in

the left-hand box. The price of IRCs in the USA recently rocketed from \$1.05 each to \$1.75, and the U.S. postal authorities are using up their old stock by fixing additional stamps to make up the value. In many countries this value is already preprinted, usually in red; in others, it is left blank. Either is acceptable.

Unfortunately, many of the post office employees in many countries do not understand the rules and stamp the wrong box by mistake, fail to stamp any box at all, or refuse to exchange IRCs (whether or not they are correctly stamped) for postage stamps. The official policy of the UPU is that "if the IRC is incorrectly stamped, the

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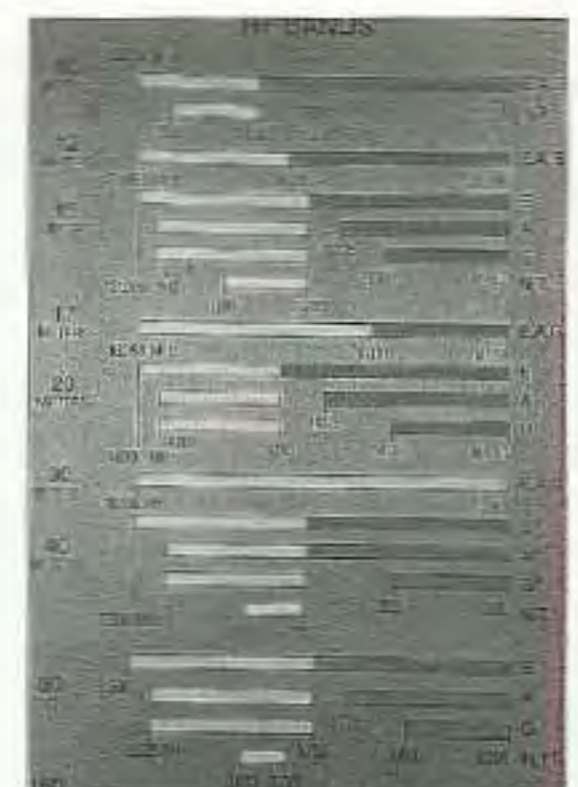
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Fig. 9. This IRC is potentially worthless as it has been stamped in the right-hand box.

validity or otherwise of the coupon has to be examined on a case by case basis." However, it is fair to say that unstamped or incorrectly stamped IRCs are generally worthless and, under normal circumstances, cannot be exchanged for postage stamps. Local and unofficial exceptions to the rules do exist, but do not expect to receive a direct reply if you use worthless IRCs. Examples of potentially worthless IRCs are shown in Figs. 8 and 9.

Some administrations, such as in Germany, require the actual postal items to be handed over the counter at the same time as the IRCs and will not merely exchange them for loose stamps.

To account for variations in international currency exchange rates, administration costs, etc., "new" IRCs generally cost over 70% more than the

face value of postage stamps for which they can be exchanged. The actual selling price is fixed by the postal administrations concerned, but must not be less than an internationally agreed minimum value. IRCs purchased new in the US for \$1.75 can still only be exchanged for \$0.80 worth of postage stamps. Secondhand IRCs circulate widely in the US for \$1 each. Recently, I have had several American amateurs approach me to buy "secondhand" IRCs at about \$0.90 each! However, this only becomes economical when large numbers of IRCs are involved.

QSL managers will usually filter out and dispose of incorrectly stamped IRCs, but will offer for sale correctly stamped and valid "second hand" IRCs. Such "secondhand" IRCs are sometimes available from U.K.-based



Fig. 10. An IRC originally issued in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1969 which was sent to me in 1998 for a 9MØC QSL.

IRC's originally issued in 1963 and 1969! See Figs. 10 and 11.

Some difficulties arise in deciding exactly how many IRCs to send with an application for a DX station's QSL card, as the definition of "minimum postage" varies widely between postal administrations. In the U.K., it currently means 20 grams to a European destination or 10 grams to an intercontinental destination. In the U.S., it currently means 0.5 ounces to an intercontinental destination. Other criteria apply in Germany and Japan, for example. The best approach is to include a minimum of one IRC if you require a single card from an address in the same continent, and a minimum of two IRCs if you require a single card from an address in another continent. If you make more than one QSO or require more than one card, then you should increase the number of IRCs accordingly on the basis that each additional one- or two-sided QSL will weigh approximately 5 grams and a four-sided one approximately 10 grams. If you are in any doubt, then include an additional IRC!

Alternatives

The upshot of all this is that IRCs are not a particularly good value for the money, especially when bought over the post office counter and even on a "secondhand" basis. You cannot then rely on them being accepted for



Fig. 11. An even older IRC, issued in Vancouver, Canada, in 1963, also sent to me in 1998 for a 9MØC QSL.

QSL managers at around £0.55 each. These circulate widely within the amateur radio community as "ham currency," without ever being exchanged for postage stamps, and it is not uncommon to receive IRCs with date stamps several years old. In 1998, whilst processing the 9MØC QSL cards I received some

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exchange for postage stamps in the foreign country. Consequently, many people use U.S. dollars (often euphemistically referred to as “green stamps”) instead. A very broad rule of thumb says that buying a new IRC costs almost exactly the same as US\$1. Although U.S. dollars are not so readily available as IRCs outside the U.S., they can be purchased from most High Street banks or bureaux de change, although they do attract a small surcharge as commission. Some U.K.-based QSL managers currently offer surplus US\$1 bills for sale at around £0.70 each.

Generally, all QSL managers prefer to receive U.S. dollar bills than IRCs, as they can be turned into cash rather than postage stamps. Quite apart from anything else, no one is likely to argue that a \$1 bill is not valid! However, the new \$1 coins and low-value hard currency notes other than U.S. dollars are especially unwelcome, simply because such notes as 1000 Italian lire, 25 Austrian shillings, and the like are of so little value that they are not accepted for exchange by the banks and are thus worthless to the manager. Applications containing such currency are sometimes returned via the bureau, with the money and an explanatory note included.