

VK IOTA Tour – OC-140, OC-164, OC-170, OC-193, OC-193 and OC-220

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My last IOTA DXpeditions were in October as VK5CE/8 OC-198 and in November as VK9AR OC-216 last year. Then in December I was busy doing the new Island Radio Expedition Foundation website irefradio.com and the VK IOTA website vkiota.wordpress.com. So at Christmas it was time to think about 2018. I've been so lucky to do a new (never before) activated IOTA each year in 2014 (VK6ISL OC-294), 2015 (S79C AF-119) and 2016 (ZL9A OC-286) and then the ultra-rare VK9AR OC-216 (claimed by 1.9%) at the end of 2017. The problem was that now IOTA chasers expect a new IOTA or ultra-rare activation every year, they are very passionate which is wonderful and I was receiving emails asking what rare island I'd be going in 2018. The reality is that it can take years to get permission to just get approval to operate from these ultra-rare ones and they can cost up to \$10,000 per person to activate. Its not easy to do one each year and I've put proposals to authorities on the rarest VK IOTAs and now it's a waiting game.

So for 2018, rather than sitting and waiting for permission to do the ultra-rare one, I saw the possibility of doing a big road trip along the southern coast of Western Australia and then going up the western coast of the state. While these IOTA's aren't ultra-rare, its still very important for us activators to still visit the 15-25% claimed groups for the island chasers who have 300, 400, 500 or 600 islands claimed. If IOTA activators ignore the 10-25% claimed islands, then the IOTA program won't grow. I personally needed OC-140, OC-170, OC-193 and OC-199 so I felt the effort was worthwhile.



This 30 day operation comprised of 6 IOTA visits with 14 days on the air and 9600 km (5960 miles) of driving. It was a great adventure as it covered

such a vast distance of remote and rugged Australian scenery and wildlife. The choice of driving over flying was made because of the vast amount of equipment required to operate from six different operating positions which included three uninhabited tent and generator islands, a popular tourist island and two eco-tourist spots still needing a generator. It was cheaper to drive my vehicle full of gear rather than fly, but this added many more travel days and time away from home, family and work.

On Saturday May 26 I started 2 days of driving to the remote Aboriginal community of Yalata where I undertook some aid work there for 2 days. Then it was 3 days of driving (2123 km/1320 miles) in the solitude of the Nullarbor spanning the southern coast of VK6 to Perth. June 2 saw my first CQ call from OC-164 Rottnest Island (VK5CE/6). This IOTA is claimed by 23% of chasers and I had no intentions of going there as I already had worked this island in the past. There were emails from some Europeans asking if I could go there and so at literally the last minute I added it to the itinerary but I didn't have a favourable location to operate due to the lack of preparation time. But I jumped on the ferry and went there anyway. I just did a quick one night visit and I couldn't operate all night as I had a massive drive the next day, this marathon drive was caused by me visiting OC-164 where I'd had to squeeze two days of driving into one day. Nevertheless on 40m I worked 200 stations and 75% of QSOs were from Europe.

After operating on Rottnest Island the previous night, this commenced my feelings of fun and fatigue caused by DXing and driving. I was faced with a 9.5 hour drive north from Perth to Carnarvon and the next day it was a 6.5 hour drive to Dampier. I was now in the lower tropics and it was supposed to be the dry season up there and so weather was never meant to be an issue for OC-199 and OC-140. BUT.....there was a very unseasonal low pressure system pass through the region and I was supposed to start a tent and generator operation the next day. The weather forecast the next day for 50 kph winds and 80 mm of rain stopped that from happening. The boat captain and I devised a plan to delay the operation by one day but still operate for three nights and he would be prepared to evacuate me if the weather became dangerous. Whilst I was stuck on the mainland

waiting to begin OC-199 now the next day, I was able to change my following OC-140 trip straight after OC-199 but I would need to make it three nights there on Thevenard Island instead of 4 nights on Direction Island.

I did the tent and generator operation from late in the afternoon on June 6 and was operational for 3 nights. This IOTA was claimed by 18.3% of chasers and was last on the air in 2012. East Lewis is an uninhabited island protected by the Parks and Wildlife, Western Australian Government. Spiderbeam verticals were used on the beach and I needed to use a rather sheltered position due to the weather, I would have preferred a more open location with better water take offs but safety was the captain's decision.

In the local afternoon around 0500 UTC European long path (and some west coast NA) would start on 20m but with band conditions being so terrible I would need to keep swapping to also 15m and 17m to keep the EU runs going and to hunt for any small band openings to the more difficult paths. The JA's would always be around to keep me company.

An hour before sunset at 0900 UTC the propagations to Europe would be gone on 20m, 17m and 15m and so by 1000 UTC I'd go to 40m for a slow steady stream of JA and NA. Runs wouldn't last very long though and in the 1000 to 1800 UTC period there would be no EU, NA or AS/JA openings on 20m which is usually the most important path for IOTA DXpeditions in VK. There would be a lull in openings on 40m from 1200-1400 UTC. The interesting thing in VK for 40m is that I made all of my EU contacts in the 1500 to 2000 UTC period (11pm to 4am) period as the sun sets across EU but later at 2200 UTC at my greyline there were never any EU signals around, just VK and YB. I found myself very sleep deprived trying to hunt for any possible opening on 40m throughout the hours of darkness. NA and EU long path on 20m was non-existent almost with just a handful of stations in my local mornings at 2200-0200 UTC, I would usually just work JA at this time. For this activation QSOs were 49% on 40m and the rest on 20m, 15m and 17m. It was 43% with EU, 29% with AS, 19% with OC, 8% with NA.

I went QRT and packed up in the pre-dawn period of June 9, jumped in the boat at dawn, rushed to the nearby mainland, threw everything in the car and was driving 3 hours south that morning from Dampier to Onslow. Then the tour operator was kind enough to meet me at my personally set time

and we rushed to Thevenard Island which thankfully was only a short distance from the mainland. On the boat I was falling asleep in my chair as I was so sleep deprived.

In the late morning I arrived on Thevenard Island OC-140. This IOTA is claimed by 17.4% of chasers and was last on the air in 2003. Thankfully a shack existed on the island and so I didn't have to set up the life support side of the DXpedition. I used verticals on the beach again was lucky to be on the air ready for 20m EU LP that early afternoon.

OC-140 is just a few hundred km from OC-199 and propagation on both islands were very similar, statistics show better conditions to EU especially on 20m, probably due to the slightly better water take-off in that direction on Thevenard Island, results were QSOs 41% on 40m, 33% on 20m and the rest on 15m/17m. 55% with EU, 19% with AS, 19% with OC, 6% with NA. The increased amount of Oceania QSOs compared to past IOTA activations was my need to spend half of my time on 40m where the VK rag chewers would call me and there were lots of Indonesians on 40m contacting me. This was great but they didn't understand me when I asked them to stand by for a weak North American signal trying to make a contact.

After 3 nights of OC-140 in woeful band conditions it was time was now over. At 3am local time (1900 UTC) once 40m closed I packed up the inside station, had 3 hours sleep and then put the antennas away ready for the 9am departure. Upon my arrival at lunchtime in the hotel it was like Shangri-la – a beautiful soft bed to catch up on sleep, a few cold beers and some real 'non-DXpedition' style food. The next morning I did the marathon 970km (600 mile) drive south from Onslow to Geraldton. Then the next day it was a 415km (260 mile) drive further south from Geraldton to Perth in VK6 where I ensured I was in bed very early. The following day it was a 477km (300 mile) drive in the pre-dawn dark from Perth dodging wildlife on the road and then I jumped in the boat for the quick boat ride to Cheyne Island OC-193.

This IOTA is claimed by 14.9% of chasers and was last on the air in 2007. This is an uninhabited island protected by the Parks and Wildlife, Western Australian Government. A tent and generator operation was done with Spiderbeam verticals on the high tide of the beach. As this was a rarer island I stayed 4 nights there instead of 3.

Nothing 20-0430. 0430 some wNA and EU LP, needing to visit 15 and 17. This time very little EU on 15m and 17m with oc170 and 193 being an extra 1000km further away from the tropics and equator. In the 15-20 period apart from 40m SSB I'd also try 30m PSK31 into EU. 1430-1530 and 1400-1530 on 20m last 2 nights of OC193

OC-140 and OC-199 are located just in the tropics but are still not that close to the equator. Conditions on OC-193 were basically very similar to OC-140/199 but the main difference was it wasn't anywhere near the tropics and this meant 15m gave virtually no EU QSOs and 17m gave very small amounts. So it was mainly 20m LP NA and SP NA (west coast) in the 0430 to 0930 UTC period, 40m NA during 0930 to 1400 UTC and 40 EU 1500 to 2000 UTC. The big surprise was finally seeing an opening on 20m into EU in the 1400-1500 UTC period on two of the four nights. QSOs were 45% on 20m, 41% on 40m and the rest on 17m, 15m and 30m. It was 56% with EU, 25% with AS, 9% with NA, 9% with OC.

The weather was very good on OC-193 for this tent and generator trip and so it was an easy station dismantle and trip back to the mainland in the morning and then I headed to the tourist town of Esperance for a night off the radio and some well needed sleep. My next IOTA was OC-170 Woody Island, it is claimed by 23.1% of chasers and was last on the air in 2012. There is eco-camping available on the island and I was able to use a comfortable shack and the tour operator had a very comfortable boat going to the island daily. This is not rare at all and is visited quite often but I missed the previous operations and so I needed to go there. I just did 2 nights as I figured not too many people needed it. The accommodation is not located on the beach and so a Spiderbeam yagi for 20m/17m/15m was used up on a Spiderbeam 10m aluminium mast.

Band conditions were exactly the same as Cheyne Island OC-193 but I could tell that not many people needed this less rare IOTA. The first day and night was fun but then it was like pulling teeth on day/night 2 as most people who needed it had either worked me the first night or on previous operations. Thank goodness I only went there for two nights. QSO were 46% on 40m, 44% on 20m and the rest on 17m/15m. It was 59% with EU, 24% with AS, 8% with NA, 8% with OC.

After getting back to the mainland in Esperance on June 22, I was now in cuckoo land with fatigue and sleep deprivation, so it was just a 2 hour drive

to Norseman to stay the night. Over the next two days it was a 1000km drive east heading closer to home across the Nullarbor from VK6 to VK5. On Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday I was doing more aid work in remote Aboriginal communities. Then there was a quick stopover to St Peter Island OC-220. This IOTA is claimed by 26.0% of chasers and the only reason I visited this island is that it's on the way home and I knew someone who had a boat in Ceduna. I knew the island well as I conducted a major DXpedition there in 2015. So during this casual last island visit I mainly spent time on 40m in the local evening for NA/JA at 0900 to 1300 UTC and then EU at 1500 to 2000 UTC. In the 1200 to 1600 UTC there would be teasing little openings for 15 or 20 minutes on 20m into EU but they would no sooner disappear.



Unfortunately when getting out of the boat on my journey to OC-220 I took a tumble out of the boat and lost my camera in my top pocket into the water, never to be seen again. Hence no photos on the QSLs, website or this article. Oh well, I'd rather lose the camera than my phone or laptop with the logs!!! The last day was a marathon 10 hour 860km (530 mile) drive from Ceduna home to Hindmarsh Island and that's it, my marathon 5 week driving/DXing tour was over. It was done in some of the worst band conditions imaginable and the signals from even the big guns were very weak. But it was still a lot of fun and I look forward to the next when in a few years when the sun starts to wake up again.

73s Craig VK5CE

Edited for GDXF by Uwe, DJ9HX

