

# VK5CE/8 North Island OC-198 DXpedition

## Craig Edwards VK5CE

OC-198 was first activated as VK8ISL way back in 1994. The only other activation was by my good friend (and VK6ISL OC-294NEW team mate) Johan PA3EXX who operated as VK4WWI/8 in October 2004. As the years have gone by, the rarity of OC-198 put it at 11.1% wanted in the IOTA Most Wanted Islands list and the 3rd rarest in VK. I'd been looking to activate OC-198 since 2011 when I was living in Alice Springs in the Northern Territory. There were a range of challenges which meant I wasn't able to visit so instead in 2012 I went to Bremer Island OC-185 as VK8BI. We then moved to South Australia so I thought I may have missed my chance.

The Sir Edward Pellew group are a cluster of islands comprised of five major islands and 66 minor islands, islets and rock stacks, situated in the south west region of the Gulf of Carpentaria in the Northern Territory. The island is the traditional home of the Yanyuwa Aboriginal people. It plays an important role in the preservation and protection of their culture and tradition. This is evidenced not only by the stories and culture which still survive today, but also by physical evidence such as large shell middens and human burial caves.

The mainland area located near the Sir Edward Pellew Group of islands is in the extreme outback of Australia's Northern Territory. So just getting to the mainland towns of Borroloola and King Ash Bay near North Island is an expensive and time-consuming adventure. There are no cost-effective ways of flying to the region. Due to the amount of equipment and antennas I needed, the best way of travelling was by driving there. It was a massive journey of 2868 km (1781 miles) from home to get to King Ash Bay, this is the equivalent to driving from 'Paris to Moscow', 'California to North Dakota' or 'Miami to Quebec'. Due to wildlife on the roads such as kangaroos, emus, cattle and camels, I could only drive during daylight hours.

Day 1 was a 10.5 hour 930 km (580 mile) drive from home to the north up to the remote opal mining town of Coober Pedy in northern South Australia. That's the longest haul driving day of the DXpedition and so it was great to get it out of the way without incident, just a few emu's on the road and only one was a near miss. Day 2 was a 6.5 hour 690 km (430 mile) drive from Coober Pedy, heading north again across the SA/NT border through to Alice Springs in the red centre. When I filled up with fuel in Kulgera NT I summoned up all of my strength to avoid having a beer at the Kulgera Pub. That place would be a hoot and a half. Mind you I would've had too much fun and needed to spend the night there. Stay on target !!! Stay on target !!! On the journey from Kulgera to Alice Springs I could see smoke in the distances. Its quite common for fires to

occur in the bush either deliberately or by accident. I was lucky as the fire had just begun to reach the roadside as I passed by. The bush fire fighters were just arriving and about to set up a command station further north so that could have been a significant delay to my journey to Alice Springs.



Day 3 was a 7 hour 720 km (450 mile) drive from Alice Springs in the centre of VK8 north to Tennant Creek and then east to Barkly Homestead which is literally in the middle of nowhere. Fortunately there was some visual entertainment because as I was heading north, the World Solar Challenge was heading south. These teams from around the world were pretty amazing, especially the drivers sitting in a tiny capsule at ground level with the monumental task of driving these solar powered spaceships from Darwin to Adelaide.



Day 4 was a 5.5 hour 490 km (300 mile) drive from Barkly Homestead north along the Tablelands Highway to the very remote town of Borroloola. This was a challenging road as the "highway" was actually a single lane bitumen road of varying quality. So while the distance wasn't too far to drive, I knew this final day would require more concentration. When the occasional upcoming single vehicle approached then it's a matter of having one side of the car on bitumen

and the other on the dirt but when a 53.5m long road train approached then its obviously a case of completely pulling over and stopping. Blind corners and crests in the road made life interesting. I departed early at 7am to avoid as much of the hottest part of the day as possible. Most of the kangaroos had finished their grazing but a few big red kangaroos were visible but they didn't hop across the road. A number of dead kangaroos hit by the road trains were scattered along the highway and this presented another risk. The largest bird of prey in Australia, the Wedge Tailed Eagle, was enjoying this roadkill for breakfast and up to four would be on the road as I approached. These beautiful birds are pretty slow to move and so great care was needed to see which direction they would fly. This is cattle country and much of the Tablelands Highway has unfenced grazing regions. So the biggest risk on this drive was cattle running across the road.

On the day of the DXpedition I spoke to the boat captain and unfortunately due to the tides at North Island we couldn't leave the mainland until 2:00pm local time (0430 UTC). It was an interesting boat ride as the first hour was meandering through the winding McArthur River with thick mangroves and sandbars to dodge. Then we transformed from the river to the open sea and the waves became pretty rough. It was white knuckle stuff for an hour hanging onto the hand rails tightly with the water in your face bouncing up and down on the waves. The maximum we could do was 15 knots with those waves.



With great excitement North Island appeared and we cruised onto the wet sand. The captain and I unloaded the boat in knee deep water and the captains wife was the official crocodile spotter to make sure we'd be safe during the process. After 30 minutes of unloading gear in the 35C heat and high humidity I was pretty buggered and it was now 5:00pm (0730 UTC). The good thing was that there was a fishermans tin shed on the island that I was able to use so I didn't need to put up shelter. The problem was that it was only 1.5 hours until dusk and to put up antennas I needed to be on the high tide mark of the beach where the captain reported many regular crocodile sightings.....hmmm.

My contingency of putting up quarter wave verticals on the first night worked very well because they are the quickest and least physically demanding to erect. I first put up the 40m vertical so that I'd have something for the evening but I really needed something for 20m aswell. The bright orange sun had begun to hit the horizon and so I quickly put up the 20m quarter wave vertical right on the waters edge. The boat captains wife was on lookout again for me to watch for crocodiles at this dangerous time of dusk. At the moment the last sliver of the sun disappeared behind the horizon I stopped adding radials because it was too dark and dangerous.



I then my turned attention to putting together the station inside the fishing shed. As I was doing this, the captain called me over. Right where I was putting up the verticals, there was a crocodile floating in the water literally 10m (30ft) from where I was putting up the 20m vertical. The captain estimated it to be 2.5m long (8ft) and he reckoned it would have been checking me out whilst I was on the beach. The crocodile was bigger than me (and that's saying something!!!!).



I decided to go on 40m first to see if there were any North Americans around and I made my first QSO at 0947 UTC but most contacts were with Japan and there was very little to NA. I persisted until 1130 UTC to cover sunrise across the eastern half of NA but it really wasn't worth it. So at 1130 UTC I ventured to 20m for Europe and immediately had a pile up which was pretty

ferocious and I was very relieved to see 20m open to EU. At 1500 UTC the pile up began to lose control and I later realised it was because another DXpedition had started operating 20 kHz below my transmit and its split was so wide it included my transmit frequency. Very frustrating.

After a tiring set up and then 5.5 hours on air it was 1:30am local time and the temperature in the operating shed was 30C on my temperature gauge, so it was time for a quick 30 minute break. At 2:00am (1600 UTC) I went to 40m and after about 20 minutes later a nice pile up to Europe occurred until 1900 UTC or 4:30am. Time for some sleep, well just a little bit of sleep. I wanted to be up in a few hours to try out 20m long path to North America. So after less than 3 hours sleep I was up at 7:30am or 2200 UTC and I rang my wife on satellite phone so that she could spot me on the DX cluster. Even though signals were not great, it was wonderful to have a nice run for an hour where I called 'NA only' and put a bunch of east and middle NA stations in the log.



At 0000 UTC or 930am local time it was time to finish the antennas, it was already 35C! The tide was out so it was safe in terms of no nearby crocodiles being around the antenna area. I analysed the beach quickly on the previously afternoon so I could confirm that the vertical antennas were on the high tide mark with a water path to Europe short path and North America long path, hence why 20m worked well for these two paths. The big problem was the short path to North America. Whilst the island itself was not too hilly, the problem is that the beach is at the base of a steep embankment around 500m long.

So after spending time thinking about the situation I decided that with my short path to North America blocked this meant it really wasn't worth putting up a yagi on the 8m high mast because the purpose of that antenna would be short path North America. In addition to this I couldn't spin it around in the 0900 to 2000 UTC period because of crocodiles on the beach. So I moved the 20m vertical closer to the long path North America high tide mark and this would be my antenna for that path. This would be better for long path NA as a vertical

with a high tide water mark will out perform an 8m high yagi. West coast North America was now going to be an issue, but DXpeditions are full of compromises.

I added another quarter wave vertical and this meant I had a 40m, 15m and a 20m (which could be modified to 17m by swapping some aluminium pipe lengths during daylight hours!). I also added more radials to the antennas. By now it was 40C outside and 37C in the shade and it felt like no matter how much water I drank I couldn't rehydrate. I actually didn't urinate until late that second night.

After less than 3 hours sleep I needed a rest and laid down for a couple of hours during the middle of the day. In the period of 0500 to 0630 UTC I'd go on 15m to work the JA's and then had a shower and early dinner at 0630-0730 UTC (4-5pm) to prepare for the long evening ahead. 15m was good for Asia but pretty slow for Europe, so I announced on air I was QSYing to 20m. I didn't want to waste my time on 40m after the previous nights struggle there, especially as it was Friday and on Saturday 1200 to Sunday 1200 there was the Scandinavian contest and so I wanted to make the most of a contest free 20m.

As soon as I went to 20m, CT4NH worked me immediately and the pile up to Europe was on again. As with the previous night, I would ask Europe to stand by for 'UK and Scandinavia only' or 'NA' and 99.5% of the pile up was well behaved which made it usually pretty efficient. Pile ups were pretty thick into Europe and wouldn't you know it, THAT DXpedition with its monster split went right on top of my transmit frequency again at 1500 UTC just like the previous evening. Fortunately I was able to talk on air with OE6IMD and he stood by as we found a better frequency and then he spotted me there, then it was business as usual for another 1.5 hours until the band died. It was 1630 UTC (2am local), that morning 20m was open to the long path at 2200 UTC and so I wanted to wake up earlier to try and make the most of it.

So I went to bed and woke up 4 hours later at 2030 UTC/6am. I phoned my wife on the satellite phone to say all was OK and she spotted me on 20m, unfortunately 2100 UTC was too early for LP NA and it was just JA's except for HI3RWP who was very loud.....where was everyone else? At 2200 UTC a slower trickle of LP NA stations appeared so that was great but still not a lots of them. Then Bruce N9BX called in to say I was a good signal in MS and I was able to let him know about the short path NA blockage and that I would be on 40m over the weekend for NA. I was also starting to log a few west coast USA stations on the long path which is pretty rare, but a welcome surprise. Around 2300 UTC I tried 15m just to see if any W6 or W7's could make it and they did, albeit slowly, the regular stream of JA's helped keep me awake during these quiet times until I stopped at 0000 UTC/930am to check antennas.



You'll see the common theme of me referring to the temperate and humidity, well that's because it was tough, really tough. The operating position was a tin shack, the generator powered a fan but it just felt like an air conditioner set to maximum heat blowing on me. The typical daily temperatures were above 35C for the majority of the day. In the shack, my digital thermometer showed a maximum temperature of 42.5C during a JA pile up on 15m and the temperature NEVER dropped in the shack below 30C, it once got as low as 30.0C. It not a dry heat either, the humidity was high and so this meant that with the sleep deprivation, it was a very draining experience. I was needing to drink 6 litres of water each day to stay moderately hydrated.

On Saturday and Sunday I would use 0000-0600 UTC (930am-330pm) to rest, eat and drink so that I'd be as awake and 'fresh' as possible during the more productive 0600-0000 UTC period. For both Saturday and Sunday night I spent more time on 40m to give North America a chance, but it wasn't very productive, in fact I worked more Europeans on 40m early during their daylight prior to 1200 UTC than W/VE – a great example of the importance of water paths with verticals. So my rate ended up being slower by spending so much time on 40m on Saturday and Sunday, but at least it gave some more W/VE IOTA chasers a chance for a new one.

On the Sunday night the Scandinavian contest ended at 1200 UTC so I could enjoy a nice steady run of Europeans on 20m until the band closed at 1600 UTC and the static levels on 40m were terrible with the approaching stormfront. So at 2am I went to bed as I needed to wake up at 5am to try and take down antennas before it got too hot. The pack up was uneventful and the boat was loaded by 9am. The boat ride was very rough and wild and it was a great relief to reach the McArthur River with smooth water. Three hours after leaving North Island I had loaded up my car and sat in the drivers seat with the biggest smile of relief I can recall – AIR CONDITIONER YAY!!!!!! I was sleep deprived but I thoroughly enjoyed the 1 hour drive from King Ash Bay to Borrooloola. A welcome shower and meal in an air conditioned room was a great relief. Then I uploaded the DXpedition to club log. My goal for a VK IOTA is always 1000 QSOs per day with 60% Europe, 25% Asia and 10% North America. Considering the band conditions were horrendous, I was pleased with the 2967 QSOs over 3.25 days of operating (912 QSOs per day) with 52% Europe, 33% Asia and 7% North America.



Thankyou to those who sent in contributions before and after the DXpedition. Without your help, these DXpeditions would never happen.

73s de Craig VK5CE

Edited for GDXF by DJ9HX