

French Polynesia 2018: TX0A (OC-113) and TX0M (OC-297)

by Cezar Trifu, VE3LYC

The DXCC entity of French Polynesia includes about 100 islands and atolls within a large area of southern Pacific, extending approximately 2200 km in the NW-SE direction, and up to 800 km perpendicular to it. These islands are grouped in 12 IOTA references. Except for Morane (OC-297), which is a new IOTA reference, the Actaeon group (OC-113) is the rarest. There was only one operation from OC-113, carried out in April 1990 from Marutea Sud, one of its atoll counters. Ranked #6 on the Most Wanted IOTA List, this reference is in demand by 98% of IOTA members.



Operating and sleeping tents on Morane

After searching transportation to the Actaeon group for many years, I was finally able to find Jean-Yves Lepage and his wife Sandrine, who were planning to visit French Polynesia aboard their yacht L'Ile d'Elle, and agreed to work with a small team of radio operators. While in Tahiti, they shopped and purchased all the materials we requested. This included a Honda generator, in addition to the one they had on board and offered to lend us, two deep cycle batteries and a charger, as part of our contingency plan, sealed drums, tents, food and water supplies, etc.

The operating team included Adrian (KO8SCA) and I. For the OC-113 reference we targeted Maria Est, located 153 km to the northeast of Morane (OC-297). Both atolls are small and uninhabited, with land areas of 3.75 and 2.85 km², and fully enclosed lagoons of 7

and 11 km², respectively. Landing and leaving their reefs required well planned and executed logistics. We met Jean-Yves and Sandrine in Gambier Islands, where we flew in on November 4, 2018. The skipper brought with him two dinghies, planning to pull one of them with us in it close to the reef, from where we could paddle to it. However, his local long-time friend Bernard didn't favour this strategy, and offered to join in and help us out.



Lagoon of Morane

Given the wind and sea conditions at the time of our arrival in Gambier, the skipper decided to sail first to Morane, and then to Maria Est. On Morane, Bernard swam to the reef and tied one end of a long rope to a huge boulder, while the other end was attached to an anchor. This allowed the operators and the equipment to be brought in safely at high tide with a dinghy, over several transports.



First Transport to Morane

We operated from Morane as TX0M between December 6 and 10. The equipment consisted of IC-7000 and K3 transceivers, KPA-500 and SPE Expert 1.3K-FA amplifiers, and multi-band verticals, powered by Honda generators. The log includes 7514 QSOs with 4727 stations in 99 DXCC on 6 continents. About 23% of the contacts were on each of 40 and 30 m, 35% on 20 m, 18% on 17 m, and a few on 15 m. Almost 90% of the QSOs were in CW, with the rest in SSB. The continental distribution was AS 29%, EU 31%, NA 36%, OC 2%, SA 2%, and AF <1%, while the top five DXCCs by QSOs and number of stations were K, JA, I, UA, and DL.



Cezar after a night on the air

As the wind direction changed, departing the atoll as we came in was deemed too hazardous, and the decision was made to transport everything across the lagoon, and leave the reef from its opposite side.



Departing Morane from the opposite site

Safer, this option required a sustained effort from everyone, and took much longer than landing. Once on board the yacht we set sail to Maria Est right away, where we arrived after a 15-hour voyage. Landing on this atoll was done by driving the dinghy and pacing it against the ocean swell to go over the edge of the reef. The submerged and dry parts of the reef had razor-sharp edges, so everything had to be carried by hand about 200 m to the shore.



Landing on Maria Est

Radio activity from Maria Est was between December 12 and 16. The TX0A log has 5135 QSOs with 3446 stations in 79 DXCCs on 6 continents. About 35% of the contacts were on 40 m, 18% on 30 m, 26% on 20 m, and 21% on 17 m, with almost 95% of the QSOs in CW, and the rest in SSB. The continental distribution of QSOs was AS 22%, EU 33%, NA 39%, SA 3%, OC 3%, and AF <1%, while the top five DXCCs by QSOs and number of stations were K, JA, I, DL, and UA.



Operating site at Maria Est

Despite having no propagation conditions from mid-morning to mid afternoon, high temperature and humidity made it impossible for us to sleep during the day. As such, we spent that time strolling around and visiting the remains of the old seasonal settlement used for copra production many years ago, or resting in the shade. It should be no wonder that we served little of the food brought with us on the island. That's because Bernard's great fish and lobster catching and cooking skills were no match to it.



Operating tent (with GDXF logo)

Similar to Morane, weather and ocean conditions obliged us to depart from across the lagoon. However, since the atoll sits a little higher above the sea level, all the hardware had to be carried out by hand for close to 1 km, a much longer distance. And this included the dinghy! Exiting operations took 6 hours, extending well past the high tide window, an exerting effort under a burning sun.



Departing Maria Est

Since propagation conditions on 20 m to EU were poor, particularly for the western and northern areas of the continent, we decided to focus on 30 and 40 m to give more hams in Europe there a chance at contacting us.

Worth noting, conditions on 20 m improved a little toward the end of our stay on Maria Est. we focused on 17 and 20 m for AS and NA. A total of 173 DL stations made 210 QSOs with TX0A (142 on 40 m, 51 on 30 m, and 17 on 20 m), and 202 stations made 267 QSOs with TX0M (163 on 40 m, 51 on 30 m, and 53 on 20 m).

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