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One thousand fit, dedicated athletes sprint into chilly waters, but this isn't the Ironman. There is plenty of cycling and a bit of mountain running, but this isn't the Coast to Coast either. Occasionally, lycra-clad figures somersault through the air, but this sure ain't ballet. We're in the Akatarawa Ranges, north of Wellington, for the 10th anniversary of the Southern Hemisphere's biggest mountain bike race - the Karapoti Classic.

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In 1986, 45 bushshirt-clad fanatics turned out for the New Zealand's first national Karapoti Classic. Some went away describing the Karapoti as sheer lunacy, while others actually enjoyed themselves. Tim Galloway and Anne Butler won it, with Butler riding a skinny-tired touring bike while Galloway offered his rivals apples from his backpack on the last climb.

Today the Karapoti Classic is a phenomenon; easily the Southern Hemisphere's largest mountain bike race, attracting over a thousand riders from throughout New Zealand and overseas. They are drawn to this particularly unforgiving event for the usual reasons - atmosphere, camaraderie, serious adrenalin, scenery second to none and superb organization - but more than anything they are here for the challenge.

At the start and finish riders must ford the Akatarawa River, despite the new road bridge just a stones-throw downstream. They rocket through bushy tunnels on a track clinging precariously to the side of Karapoti Gorge, and are then faced with three huge climbs and descents.

The first climb is called "Deadwood," an apt description of the way one's legs feel upon reaching the top. This leads to the "Rock Garden," a single-track descent littered with large, sharp, loose boulders. Fear hangs in the

air and many expert riders get off to run the gnarlier sections.

Riders who find all this a bit tough will likely have a cry at the foot of "Devil's Staircase", a series of slippery, soul destroying steps and wheel deep bogs that must surely have been designed by the devil himself.



At the top, however, it's pay-back time in the form of "Big Ring Boulevard" - eight heavenly kilometres of downhill, bound to bring out the speedster in the most timid rider.

The third and final climb, Dopers, is the most rideable, but for many the most difficult. Long and steep with several false tops, that can steal the joy out of thinking you're nearing the finish.

The descent that follows, however, proves to be the sweetest of all. Steep, fast and fun, it leads riders back to the Karapoti Gorge.

*Karapoti Gorge - 1995*

Even for the most exhausted, the gentle descent down the spectacular Karapoti Gorge is easy on both body and mind. With one final river crossing before the finish back at Karapoti Park, this exhilarating final 7k is the icing on the cake. They have met the challenge and the finish line awaits.

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