

Only Mad Dogs & “Scotsmen” Go Out In The Karapoti Sun

Scottish mountain bike junky, Andy Cotgreave celebrated redundancy with Kiwi cycle tour that culminated at Karapoti. This is his story.

It's done! And it rocked. And I am in one piece. The biggest injury is the bruise on my shoulder from all the carrying of the bike. And the great news is that I came 26th in my class, from a field of 300 starters in the Masters class alone! I completed the ride in 3hr30min, and was completely stoked to get a time like this, on that course. It was as tough as any race I have done before. While it may 'only' have been 50km, there was almost no flat, and virtually no easy sections, up or down.

I got picked up at 7am by Tama and we got to the start area an hour later. The pros would start at 10am, and the master at 10:20am. It's a funny thing that no matter how much time you have before a race, you will fill it with faffing around on all sorts of tasks. Whether you have 20 minutes or three hours, the tasks will take that much time.

Following the race briefing, which essentially told us to be careful - watch out for the washed away bridge in the gorge, the huge rut in the first climb, where most of the track had been washed away, the 8ft deep holes in Big Ring Boulevard, the boulders in the Rock Garden, and the axle deep bogs. Wonderful !

Finally, it was start time. This being a tough race, instead of cycling over the bridge to get to the track, the first thing you do is carry the bike across a 30ft wide river crossings. Normally, you would stand waiting for the start on a riverbank, but this had been washed away in the recent bad weather so we stood waiting in cold calf-deep water.

And then we were off, to huge cheers from the crowd on the bridge. I promised to myself not to start off too fast, and was pleased to find that even though I wasn't going too hard, I was moving through the field quite easily.

The first 5km are a wonderful, almost flat, blast through Karapoti Gorge, a narrow, bush-lined gash in the mountains. There was no time to appreciate the landscape as I pushed on through to the first climb.

The climbs in the Karapoti are all pretty similar. Granny gear or walk. They are relentless, loose and brutal. And it was on these climbs that I think I made most of my time. It was incredible how easy it felt to climb without a trailer pulling me backwards. That said, I couldn't get up everything on the bike, and was reduced to walking on a few occasions. But, I was still passing a lot of people walking huge sections of the climbs.

By the end of the first hour, I had topped out on the first climb. The next stage is the infamous Rock Garden. Normally, this is a very rocky, narrow double track with rocks the size of your head and a couple of 4ft drops. Normally, there's one sort of line to get down it, but it's very technical and a mistake here is going to hurt.

That, then, is the 'normal' state of the Rock Garden. Four weeks of torrential rain had decimated it. The organisers told us it was the worst they had ever seen it. And boy, it was a nightmare. I walked probably 60% of it, in awe of the few who rode by me, apparently floating over the rocks. I am amazed by the XC riders who have the skill to get a hard tail down something so scary with so much grace.

After a while of walking, bouncing, stuttering, slipping and generally arsing down, it was time to cross yet another river, and begin the climb up Devil's Staircase. Earlier, I mentioned that most climbs in the race were granny gear or walk. Well, this climb was absurd. I felt like I needed climbing ropes at some stages as I carried or pushed up huge clay steps, over massive rocks and through knee deep bogs.

At the top, I was pleased to feel tired but still with lots in reserve for the pleasure of Big Ring Boulevard - 10km of downhill on fast gravel road. There wasn't too much chance to relax, the gravel was loose, there were tight corners, and some monstrous holes to avoid. I nearly wiped out a couple of times, as my front tyre couldn't really cope with the conditions.

With only one climb left to go, I knew I was going to have a good time. A lot of people walked this again, but a few of us managed to clear most of the 5km of Doper's Hill. I was tiring, but there seemed no point to hold back any energy.

I was pooped at the top, and couldn't concentrate at all at the start of the descent, but once I got some breath back I let fly and hurtled down the 5k of sweet bush-lined double track.

The final 5km of single track back through Karapoti Gorge were a thrilling sprint through gravel tracks, tight corners, water-bars, then the final couple of river crossings... and that's it, it's over!

I was battered, but euphoric. The Karapoti course is incredible, and the race had been amazing fun; with no easy sections, it had taken everything out of me. The winners clocked less than 2hrs 30min, which is unbelievable.

I spent the rest of the afternoon grinning to myself, eating, chatting to other riders, having a wonderful massage, and relishing the aches.

If you love mountain biking, you **MUST** do the Karapoti !