

## Karapoti - Part of the NZ Experience

When Japanese outdoor enthusiast Sadao Tsuchiya won free entry for the 2017 Cactus Karapoti Classic, he thought it was a must-do part of his New Zealand experience.

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When I have a lucky feeling, it is usually worth following through and buying the Lotto ticket, entering the competition, or buying a raffle ticket. It usually works out well for me. I had that lucky feeling when I spotted the Karapoti Classic entry giveaway in the Ride Manual #7, but had almost forgotten it until I got an email from Chill Studio in mid-January:

“We have drawn you as a winner. Would you like to accept the prize and attend the race?”

My New Year’s resolution, made just a few weeks earlier, was “hesitation pinches potential” - say yes to everything. Big thanks to Tony, my boss, for giving me the necessary days off at the last minute, even though he would probably end up short staffed over the busy summer weekend. In contrast, Karen, my wifey support crew, had used up all her annual leave so I was to be without my usual luxuries at the finish line. No cup of tea or picnic lunch...

The Air New Zealand flight out from Queenstown was stunning. The remarkable sunrise peeping out from behind the Remarkables promised a beautiful day down south as I was boarding the flight, but Wellington was windy and drizzly as usual, although the landing was surprisingly smooth. At Wellington Airport, I picked up the cardboard box which was my only luggage (my bike), jumped on the shuttle to town and checked in to the YHA Wellington City for the next two nights.

The Karapoti Classic is held about 50km North East of Wellington, through a mix of native and exotic forest at the headwaters of the Hutt Valley. This is the oldest mountain bike race in the Southern Hemisphere, created by the Kennett brothers in 1986. I had heard how hard the race was, and how it is a unique cultural and social event. It was one of the races that I had been dreaming of riding sometime, and I was excited to be pedalling across the Wellington CBD to catch a train on the morning of the race. I jumped off the train at Upper Hutt Station and had a bit of fun riding the 9.5km uphill to the start of the race in the Akatarawa Valley. It didn’t worry me that I had to ride an extra 20km on top of the 50km race - my concern at this point was that I realised I had left my bike gloves behind!

At the start line I was squeezing amongst riders aiming to finish within three and half hours, based on my previous events around Queenstown. The race starts with crossing the Akatarawa River - Karapoti’s LeMans-style start. While I watched the elite and fast riders waves from the bridge above the start line I carefully plotted the best path to wade across the river. We were on our mark, then our wave dived into the river at 10:15am sharp! Even though I chose the shallowest, gentlest and shortest crossing the depth was still up to my waist. I was glad for my university study in hydraulics though, as some riders were wading through water up to their chest.

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The first kilometre after the river is uphill on sealed road, followed by six kilometres of gentle climbing on rough single track that follows the Karapoti Gorge. The track used to be a tram track when logging and sawmilling was in operation before World War II. My 27.5er was a bit of handicap as it doesn’t roll as fast as the enduro 29ers do. My body wasn’t keeping up so well either - maybe lack of training? I had already been left behind by the front of the group by the time I reached The Warm Up - the first hill climb.

Profiling before a race is an important part of the preparation for me. The night before leaving for Wellington, I used rulers and topomaps to measure the course and analysed its profile. I'm glad I knew the Warm Up was such a steep push, even if it is short. A river bed crossing at the Cederholm Creek is followed by The Deadwood, the first main climb for the day. It was a big, long climb and I felt like it took forever. The course description had told me I would be "deep in the heart of the Akatarawa Ranges, flanked by native bush that opens every now and then to huge vistas to the north and south" but given the weather I just saw sea of black cloud. However, as promised in the description, my legs were like dead wood at the top.

The five-kilometre downhill after The Deadwood climb was a big relief, although there are some short uphill spikes which suck your energy. This undulating and meandering farm track suddenly turned off to a technical downhill section - The Rock Garden, so called for the rocks and drops. The section is very technical - I would say grade five or six in some places. Some of them were just unridable. Deep erosion in the middle of the narrow track caused some congestion as riders were forced to manoeuvre around wherever they could walk down and carry their bikes.

After fording two side streams at the bottom of the Rock Garden the track heads up again steeply. This section, the Devils Staircase, was so muddy and slippery that I carried or pushed my bike most of the way. Actually, I would call this is a wall, not a slope. What kind of physical fitness do Wellingtonians have that they set this as an uphill mountain bike course? All I could see in front of me was helmets pushing bikes, and the riders who had slid into washouts in the middle of the track. I was careful not to be caught by someone who had slipped and fallen along the track. It was so dark that it felt as if goblins might come out for me at any time.

The highest point of the race is also the halfway point! After that the Big Ring Boulevard was 10 kilometres of fun riding - wide, gentle and fast downhill with some gravel, mud and tricky rocky patches. I can't remember much about the scenery here, because I was concentrating so hard to make sure my bike was well under control. Not for the first time I was kicking myself for forgetting my gloves. My fingers started cramping and my already sore hands were starting to blister.

I didn't expect Dopers Hill would be such a tough climb, but I didn't have much energy left to ride through. It is a long climb,

and the sun had come out making it muggy. I was sweating out more than I was drinking. It looked like others had the same problem, some lying on the side of the course suffering from cramp or stitch in their side. After spending half an hour getting to the top with tyres constantly slipping, the downhill made me smile with relief again.

After wide and shallow river crossing, I emerged into familiar scenery - the circuit completed and only eight kilometres to the finish line. I tried to speed up, and although my bike started going quicker and quicker it was stressful that I was so tired and I couldn't make my 27.5er keep up with the 29ers, even though the gorge track was downhill. I overtook a guy on a unicycle, competing in the 20km race - Amazing! With a splash I was suddenly on the last sealed stretch. I started to cramp at the last cold, crossing of the Akatarawa River and the short sandy uphill, but I just made it to the finish line right before a thunder storm started and the heavens opened.

My 2017 Karapoti Classic 50km finishing time was 4:24:08 - well under the three and half hours I had hoped for, and showing New Zealand's longest running mountain bike cross country race is certainly tougher, muddier and more challenging than I expected. On the flight back home the next day my cardboard box weighed in way over the limit because of all the extra mud and water my bike and cycle gear had picked up. It took me a good few hours of washing the bike and readjusting all the components on Sunday evening when I got home, but I loved all the components of the race - the Le Mans-style start, the stream crossings, rocky and bouldery descents, bike-carrying uphill and roller-coaster downhills! I will definitely come back in the future, with some gloves and hopefully my wifey support crew for a cup of tea and a picnic lunch. Thanks Stu and Rahana from Chill Studio and Michael from MDJ Media & Events for such a great opportunity to ride and experience an awesome event!

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*Sadao is a mountain biker, a tramper, a telemark/alpine skier and an adventurer, currently living in Queenstown. Born and bred at the edge of Western Tokyo, becoming a forestry researcher in both New Zealand and Japan. Now Sadao is guiding on the Routeburn and Milford Tracks in New Zealand summer, and takes Japanese hiking tours to European Alps in their summer.*

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