

## 2003 - NZBike Magazine - Epic Ride

Wellington is the unofficial home of mountain biking in New Zealand, and it is also home to one of New Zealand's toughest mountain bike rides and races - "Karapoti".

Wellington has more mountain bikes per capita than anywhere in New Zealand. By default that must mean it has more mountain bike riders and more mountain bike trails. Certainly New Zealand's Capital City is also the mountain bike capital of New Zealand. At the forefront of all this has been the Kennett Brothers, who between them have influenced mountain biking more than anyone else in New Zealand. In 1986 they founded a race that has become one of the epic rides of the mountain biking world.

Based within the rugged splendour of Wellington's Akatarawa Ranges, 10km north of Upper Hutt, lays the Akatarawa

Ranges. Within this mixture of native bush and pine forest is the Karapoti Gorge, the gateway to the Ranges and an uncompromising, some say cruel, 50km of 4WD trails, gnarly single track, wheel sucking sludge, raging river crossings, wall to wall wilderness and huge hills that have you grinding a granny ring up but grinning like a goon on the way down.

Every year on the first Sunday in March 1000 riders take on this challenge in New Zealand's premier mountain bike race, the Karapoti Classic. But this epic route can be ridden at any time, and regardless of when or how many times you ride it Karapoti never fails to inspire.



### Something for Everyone

As a ride, Karapoti has almost everything. Starting from the Akatarawa Forest car park on Karapoti Road you get a brilliantly scenic 6km warm-up through Karapoti Gorge. Set in native bush, the gorge is mainly flat, with views down to the Akatarawa River 100m below. The track is two riders wide, with just a few tricky bits to warm up your skills. The only one to watch for is "the washout" at approximately 3km where a stream has torn away a bridge, leaving a big drop in and out of the streambed. It's rideable, but more than a few people have sailed over their handlebars.

At the end of Karapoti Gorge you come to a clearing. From this clearing Karapoti is a loop that ends up back here 34km later. For now you take the right hand track, which it has to be said is where the course starts getting tough. Essentially Karapoti is three huge climbs split by awesome downhills and single track. The first climb is Deadwood, but just about anyone who has ever ridden Karapoti has first been suckered by the "Warm Up" climb.

### Warmed Up Yet?

The Warm Up climb is the first of four increasingly long climbs at Karapoti. But it is the steepest too. It's 10min or so to the top, then a steep, rough downhill into a streambed that many people mistake as the Rock Garden. But be warned - this really was just a "warm up" for what's to come.

Next, climbing 300 vertical metres in 3km, Deadwood Ridge is a case of lactate acid tempered by awesome scenery. The gradient is tough enough, but the track itself makes it even

tougher with loose stones and sometimes ruts and skinny ride-lines.

At the top of Deadwood you get a nice respite. Between approx 14km and 19km the course undulates along a ridgeline. The terrain is a saner, the track is better than anywhere else on the course, and the views out over the Akatarawa Ranges are supreme. Then you come to a clearing in which you need to look hard left for the next turn off. You might want to stop and lower your seat post here, because you're about to head down, down, down.

### Welcome To The Rock Garden!

If you're a good rider... no, scrap that... If you're a truly talented technical rider the next 2km is 100% rideable. Everyone else, be warned: this isn't dubbed the "Rock Garden" for no reason!

When you start this 3km single-track descent you'll be thinking, 'this is cool, just technical enough to be challenging but nothing too scary.' But don't let your ego run away because things get progressively gnarlier until about a third of the way down you're into rocks the size of soccer balls and drops off the size of your bike. And even when you can get some bike speed up a sharp corner or stray tree roots is likely to send you flying into the bush... If it sounds like fun, that's because it is!

The Rock Garden brings you down into a deep river gully that is at the same time eerie and inspiring. There's a sort of secret hideaway appeal about it. Breaking out of dense bush you're all of a sudden confronted by a river lit up by a hazy

light filtering through the bush canopy above. On your left lying across the river is a huge tree that has been washed down by a flood. If you ride Karapoti in winter chances are you'll have to tip-toe, bike on shoulder, across the log. Otherwise simply wade across the river, and just as suddenly as you came across the river you've disappeared again into the dense bush.

But first, stop for a bite to eat and drink and to soak up these surreal surrounding. If nothing else you'll need to rest up for the hell ahead.

### Devils & Downhills

Devil's Staircase is nothing if not hell. It's a 1.5km grind that marks the mental if not physical halfway of this epic ride. It a series of huge bogs broken up only by an endless line of steps cut into a clay track that climbs to 600 vertical metres. Bike carry is not an option; it's a forgone conclusion.

As hellish as Devil's Staircase is, there's an indefinable something about breaking out of the bush at the top that makes it worthwhile. The wrap-around views across the

Akatarawa Ranges and Kapiti Coast are amazing. It also marks the start of "Big Ring Boulevard", which is 15km of great riding that ends with 8km of non-stop downhill to Doper's Creek. With only problem being your brake finger cramping up as you hammer downhill at 60km/hr you just can't help but let out a war whoop. Watch out for rocks and ruts though, because nothing puts a damper on your day like hitting the dust at 60 clicks!

Of course in mountain biking whatever goes down quite often goes back up. Thus, Doper's Creek marks the start of the final climb; a 3km haul up to the 531m high Dopers Hill. Many consider this the toughest climb of the course, but knowing that it's the last climb makes it that bit easier. Once you're over the top you get another 5km of downhill too, finally breaking out of the bush for another river crossing.

Crossing the river it will quickly dawn on you that you're back at Karapoti Gorge. From here it's just 6km of gently downhill single track back through to the finish... It's during this scenic spin back to the car park that it dawns on people just what they have achieved.



### The Karapoti Classic

Typically, the great races stem from someone's personal adventure or favourite training route. Karapoti is different in that it was founded as the basis of a classic race and later became an epic ride.

More than merely a race, the Karapoti Classic is a very real event. New Zealand's premier mountain bike event in fact. Winners include some of the world's best - names such as Olympians Kashi Leuchs, Kathy Lynch and Susy Pryde. First and foremost, however, this is a people's race attracting 1000 starters.

Karapoti is an occasion, with the post-race atmosphere more akin to a rock concert with thousand's of people lounging under the late-summer sun, listening to live music, checking out the event expo, partaking in unique competitions like bike throwing, tyre changing & blind slalom... or simply chilling out with an espresso.

Indeed, after almost 20 years the Karapoti Classic has become something of an icon. American cycling magazine VeloNews ranks it amongst the top-25 mountain bike races in the world, and for many recreational riders it is the only race they do. Little wonder then that Karapoti is known as "the one race on every mountain biker's wish list!"