



SWEET AS

Feeling the burn, feeling the flow, and feeling intoxicated in Rotorua.



After the mind blowing experience of last year's jaunt to Rotorua, NZ the temptation to return and cement this journey as an annual pilgrimage proved too strong. Like mad singletrack junkies, we needed a fix. This time around we had another excuse to justify the hit to our bosses, partners and pets; Rotorua was hosting the notoriously quirky (and boozy) Single Speed World Championships, an event that we'd been told had to be experienced to be believed. The SSWC was to be the crowning jewel in a week of cycling madness dubbed the Rotorua Bike Festival. So with single speed glory in our sights we assembled a motley crew of eight, booked our flights and began

making excuses for our lack of training (a theme that was to continue right up to, and during, our week in Rotorua). The Death or Glory, Off the Couch Tour of Rotorua was born!

This town needs no introduction; we've crowned these trails as some of the world's best, and after another week of sampling their sublime serpentine flow that assessment stands. For travelers, the trails' proximity to town makes it the perfect place to get in a lot of sensational riding in a short time frame. Things have been made even easier now that international flights (at this stage ex Sydney, only) are touching down on the newly lengthened runway at Rotorua airport. In the same time that it takes to drive to

Canberra, you can be hitting the tarmac, just a couple of kays from Kiwi-gold. The rumours are that two more international carriers will begin flights to Rotorua soon, too, with departures from the major eastern cities.

Landing on a glorious spring afternoon, the familiar sulfurous whiff of Rotorua's many hot pools, geysers, steam vents and other geothermic menaces had us intoxicated with excitement. Intoxication would prove to be a theme of the week as the organisers of the SSWC, true to form, had ordered enough beer for more than seven litres per rider... But tonight we would be keeping our sober hats on, as tomorrow held a challenge to make or break us. The legendary beast of a marathon race that is the Merida Whaka 100km!

WHAT'S LONG, HARD AND IN THE BUSH?

Now in its fourth year, the Whaka 100km (remember, in Moari the 'wh' is pronounced as an 'f') is a real motherwhaka of a marathon race. Race director, Marcus Diprose, had spent a good couple of months warning us that this one may prove a little challenging on a single speed, but it wasn't until we saw the course map that we understood what he meant. The profile looked like a mouth of shark's teeth, peaking at ridiculous heights before plunging down and shooting straight back up again. For the DOGOTC crew, our quads became collectively nervous.

Rotorua has hills, proper hills, and with 3,500 metres of vertical climbing en route, we would be tackling them all in this race. Fortunately the monster climbs meant glorious descents, and after grinding up the fireroads, we were treated time and time again to dream singletrack downhill that seemed to go on forever. By the time you'd reached the bottom (sometimes after 20 minutes of sailing downhill), the pain was a distant memory and the prospect of doing it again was enticing, rather than depressing. Leaving barely a speck of trail untracked, the Whaka took us to hidden delights of the Whakarewarewa Forest that riders rarely see. Gems like cruising along the edge of the stunning Green and Blue Lakes and tackling the slippery, far flung luge ride of No Brains in the forest's distant reaches.

The overall race numbers were refreshingly limited compared to the gargantuan turnouts at most of the big Australian marathon races nowadays, leaving you in solitary singletrack heaven much of the time, and our DOGOTC crew was strung out through the length of the field. A couple of us finished, thankfully, before the heavens opened up, but the tail end of the crew (the Off the Couch portion) copped a cold, sideways rain that turned the final singletrack descent down Hot X Buns into a wild slide. Our final two riders, Jordan and Llew, somehow found the legs to sprint each other off for the line... perhaps our team rule that the last place rider would be getting a sack, back and crack wax had something to do with it? Despite the fact that even Llew's eyelids were in cramp, there were smiles all round, as the buzz of riding that much incredible singletrack in one session overwhelmed the agony of a long, long day in the saddle.

PEDALLING IS THE DEVIL

With the forest within easy riding distance of the Digestive Dungeon (the name given to our granny flat accommodation; man, 100km worth of gels and energy bars can do bad things to your guts and between eight men we sure did our bit to help global warming) it was back into Redwoods as soon as the legs had recovered. Still slightly scarred from the Whaka (some of us literally;



A. Little Red Riding Huck is one of the trails best enjoyed with the shuttle service so you can save your energy for the hundred odd jumps on the way back down. Oli gets it flat on right hip number 20-something. **B.** There are a few jumps that let you get really radical, but for the most part you can keep the wheels on the ground if that's your style. **C.** Keeping it low and feeling the flow; you can trust the perfect berms to catch you, even at Mach 2. **D.** The trails of Taupo are buff, and a fantastic alternative to Rotorua in the wet or once you've had your Redwoods fill. Two-up down Coaster.

“THE BUZZ OF RIDING THAT MUCH INCREDIBLE SINGLETRACK OVERWHELMED THE AGONY”

use chamois cream, kiddies!), the prospect of climbing held less appeal, so Rotorua's legendary shuttle service was engaged. For a few dollars, the Southstar Shuttles service will take you to the peak of the forest, leaving you with a web of options to descend; choose from Little Red Riding Huck, Corners, Split Enz, Coaster, the National Downhill, Billy-T or any of dozens of descending trails. With the service running every fifteen minutes and the price per uplift getting progressively cheaper the more shuttles you purchase, it's easy to see why so many visitors scrap the idea of pedalling up once they discover the shuttles. A quick look at the uplift trailer showed that the singlespeed influx had begun in preparation for the next weekend's race, with one-gear bikes aplenty strapped in.

The greasy conditions from the rain, coupled with a bit of over-confidence jointly in our abilities and the grip on hand from our low-profile tyres, meant we did our fair share of dirt sampling. Fortunately, aside from plowing into a tree, it's pretty hard to do serious damage in the Redwoods – there's barely a rock to be seen and the ground is covered with leaf litter that welcomes

you like a feather mattress when you exit stage left from the bike. For the Rotorua virgins in our mob, today was a real eye opener and you couldn't keep the grins off their faces.

A BIT OF PUMICE

As fast-draining as the Rotorua soils are, rain was winning the battle and the puddles resting in the bowls of every berm were getting deeper. The call was made to head to Taupo and the Craters of the Moon trail network there, in search of drier territory. With even more pumice-based trails, the wet weather rideability of Taupo's trails is legendary. We arrived at the Crater's of the Moon trails in the Waireiki Forest just outside Taupo right as the sun burst through the lingering clouds. In a matter of minutes the singletrack was dry, as if the rain had never fallen, leaving behind the kind of Hero Traction that mountain bikers dream of.

There's over 80km of singletrack to titillate you in Taupo, but the DOGOTC crew were still feeling the odd twinge to reminded us that kicking off the week with a 100km race had been a big ask on an untrained body. Trail map in hand, we formulated



WHERE TO NEXT?

Unlike the regular, boring World Champs, where there's an extensive application and bidding process to establish the venue from year to year, the SSWC take a slightly more hands-on approach to decide which country gets the dubious honour of hosting the event next. This year, five countries put their hands up for 2011: Canada, South Africa, Australia, Ireland and Italy. The winner had to prove themselves mentally and physically...as well as physically proving that they were mental. Competing nations first headed to Agroventures (a kind of action themepark) where they raced each other on the Schwebb pedal-monorail, speed-milked a cow, had to balance a cup of water in a hurtling jet boat, water bombed their team mates from a giant swing, and tried to float for the longest on the simulated skydive. The following night the remaining four nations - Australia bombed out - took part in a gameshow where the buzzers were loaded mousetraps (seriously, which twisted bastard came up with that idea?!) and contestants had to fit as many clothes pegs to a team mate's face as possible. Finally, Ireland and South Africa faced off for a game of horizontal bungy. In the end the Irish dug deepest, scraping out seven metres more than South Africa on the bungy, and will host the chaos in 2011.



a three hour loop. Like Rotorua, the trails weave and pump constantly and you spend more time on the side knobs of your tyres than you do pedalling. The new Outback Loop-to-Luge connector was a highlight, along with the vaunted Coaster - perhaps the most train-friendly trail on the planet - which had us pedalling up time and time again to come ripping back down, tyre-buzzing each other as we flew through in a bunch. We couldn't linger long though, we had to a World Champs event to get to.

BIG MEN, LITTLE BIKES

A little known fact is that there were two World Championship titles up for grabs during the Rotorua Bike Festival. Sure, the SSWC were important, but the title that really mattered (at least to us) was to be decided on a grassy sheep poo-riddled paddock behind town. We're talking about the 16-inch World Champs! That's right - big men racing bikes designed for four-year-olds down a slalom track that held serious potential for injury. Throw a conspicuous lack of rules (or helmets) into the mix and you've got a recipe for madness.

A fleet of unsuspecting 16-inch kids bikes was assembled. You couldn't help but feel sorry for these little machines, completely oblivious to the fact that their time on this earth was limited as they were about to be turned into twisted scrap beneath oversized riders hell-bent on airtime and World Champs glory.

**A**

A. The 16-inch World Champs were hilarious. People racing in their socks, plenty of carnage (of both body and bike), a track with proper jumps and sheep poo, all made for a memorable afternoon of racing. **B.** It's a special kind of race when victory is decided by beer drinking prowess - the truly pro didn't even stop rolling to down their lager on the way through the beer tent.

**B**

“LIKE ROTORUA, THE TRAILS WEAVE AND PUMP CONSTANTLY”

The format was simple, with no timing, just old-school head-to-head elimination. The winner progressed to the next round, the loser was relegated to the beer drinking gallery and cheering duties. Plastic pedals and mud covered shoes, plus rapidly deconstructing bikes, made it more a game of chance than skill, and more than one rider came unstuck thanks to pedals snapping out of crank arms or handle bars coming loose. 16-inch bikes are clearly not designed for the kinds of velocities that riders quickly reached either, and the look of panic in competitor's eyes as they rounded the first berm fighting a wildly wobbling bike was priceless. Apparently the bikes were to be donated to a local kindergarten post race... or at least what was left of them.

950 GEARS

As Saturday and the main event drew closer, Rotorua became trendier by the minute as the town filled with tattooed, mutton-chopped, one-gear riders. The buzz was tremendous – and we're not talking about the sound of expensive freewheels on the amazing assembly of boutique bikes – with every one of Rotorua's bike shops a 'hive of activity. Zippy's coffee shop had a line out the door, the Pig and Whistle heaved with revelers and riders from 31 different countries hit the forest. The pre-race briefing set the mood with Dean Watson, Race Director, telling the crowd the race would start "10:30ish" and "I can tell you to drink responsibly. After I've done that, I don't really give a f#%k." For those thinking about taking this race seriously, the message was clear: "don't."

If you had to pick the perfect conditions to put on a gorilla suit and go for a 40km bike ride, you'd

probably have preferred slightly cooler weather than the glorious blue skied mid-twenties day that greeted riders on Saturday morning. For the rest of the riders, those in slightly less asphyxiating attire, the day could not have been more perfect. Speaking of attire, the assortment of bizarre, creative and should-be-illegal costumes was mind bending. Rolling into the event centre felt like entering some kind of CS Lewis inspired hallucinogenic realm. There were vikings, gimps, pimps, drag queens, Muppets, Marilyn Monroe, super heroes, whores, police women, yetis, skeletons...all rolling on two wheels. Rumours circulated during the week that riders not in costume would be paintballed had been effective, and even those fast riders at pointy end of the field were dressed up.

Of course, to get to the pointy end and stand a chance at a result you first had to get a good start, and this is where things got really interesting. You see, at the SSWC it's customary to ensure every rider is equally handicapped. In the past this has meant that bikes have been hidden, or wheels taken off and stashed, but this time around the race organisers looked towards sheep herding for inspiration. Riders were corralled into a start loop, all 950 odd of them, and told to start circulating in a clockwise direction. For a few minutes it was complete chaos until the mob started to find its groove, spinning around the start loop shoulder to shoulder, like a giant mixing pot of freaks. A scantily-clad local lass counted down the start, holding up round cards like a boxing match, and doing her best to keep everyone distracted. Then suddenly, it began. The circle was opened and riders spilled out onto the course and straight into the first climb. It was pure luck of the draw – if you



HOT SPRINGS

No trip to Rotorua would be complete without a visit to a thermal spring of some kind to refresh those aching legs and make your hair smell like sulfur. You've broadly got two options; one is to take the au naturale path and make for one of the natural hot rivers and pools in the area; the second is to check into a dedicated spa or thermal pools facility. We did both. If you're after the more relaxing experience (and the assurance that no one is stealing your wallet while you soak), check out www.polynesianspa.co.nz



THE EDITOR'S CHALLENGE

A new activity recently added to the Rotorua's arsenal of adrenal gland-withering experiences is go-karting. With the editors of three magazines in town – Caleb Smith from Spoke, Carl Patton from NZ Mountain Biker, and AMB – we decided it was time to settle the score once and for all, and battle for supremacy on the kart track. Although we all got completely, humiliatedly thrashed by the MTB Stig, AMB just edged out the competition to take the Rotoura Single Speed Society Editor's Challenge Cup. Victory! www.offroadnz.co.nz



THERE'S ONLY ONE

Jeff, owner of event sponsor Kiwi Bikes, is the man behind Jefferson bikes. For the SSWC he hand crafted something very special to be drawn as a lucky door prize. This gorgeous 26" single speed is never to be repeated. www.kiwibikes.co.nz

THE BOOK OF SHAME

Excuses are like belly buttons. Everybody's got one. Or, in our case, lots of them... Excuses, not belly buttons. In fact in the lead up to the Whaka 100km there were so many pathetic excuses being bandied about to pre-explain one's poor performance that we decided to keep a ledger. The Book of Shame was born. Whoever had amassed the greatest number of excuses at any time would wear the Shame Shirt (a disgusting 1990s fluoro sprint car racing t-shirt from Drew's impressive collection of bogan attire), and a strap-on ponytail. What we failed to take into account was that amongst the fashion freakshow of the singlespeed fraternity, the Excusee actually looked quite well dressed. Bugger.



FALLING FOR YOU

There's nothing to bond two friends like sharing a near death experience. May we recommend sky diving? Apparently from 15,000ft (higher than you can do a commercial jump in Australia) you can see 14 different lakes around Rotorua. We'd like to say we spotted them all, but unfortunately we were distracted by our own screaming and the rapid approach of terra firma. This is something everyone should try. www.nzone.biz

HEAVY LOAD

Direct flights from Sydney to Rotorua make it easier than ever to duck over, but Air New Zealand, and their generous baggage allowances, make the journey pain free. Anyone who has traveled with a bike before knows that it can be a real battle sometimes, a constant wrangling with check-in staff to avoid excess baggage charges. On all flights between Australia and New Zealand, Air New Zealand allows you to transport a bike (properly boxed, of course) of up to 23kg for just an extra \$20 on the outward journey, and \$25 on the return. This is in addition to your 23kg of regular checked luggage. So, for \$45 you can bring one regular bag up to 23kg, plus a bike box up to 23kg, plus your carry on. It's amongst the most bike friendly luggage allowance we've ever encountered. www.airnewzealand.co.nz



A



C



B

A. Heather Logie gets the needle! The winner's tattoo is obligatory; you don't want the tattoo? Then don't win! B. Local hero Garth Weinberg charged to victory, hitting the beer tent to put 30 seconds into reigning champ, Ross Schnell. Garth now proudly bears the ink of four single speed championship tattoos - two NZ Champs, one Aussie Champs and now the World Champs too! C. Elaborate costumes are one thing. Heels and a gown on a single speed tandem is another.

"VIKINGS, GIMPS, PIMPS, DRAG QUEENS...ALL ON TWO WHEELS"

were at the point of start loop close to the opening you got away quickly, others found themselves hundreds of riders back.

It's often said that you've got to be cruel to be kind, and the course setters clearly took this sentiment to heart. The first climb was very, very cruel...but geez, it made that first beer stop refreshing! For the uninitiated, single speed races usually involve a beer shortcut of some description; take the beer and you save a little time, but get set to pay the price with a frothy, foaming bellyful determined to eject itself all over your handlebars. Over the course of the two 20km loops there were four beer stops, each of which could save you around thirty seconds if you had been practicing your gullet control. It didn't take long for the beer tents to have a dramatic thinning effect on the field, with a large chunk of the race making it to the first stop and deciding to call it a day there. Possibly a wise move - with three beers in the belly before noon, climbing became a battle and descending was a little bit fuzzy.

Those who'd decided to pull the pin joined the crowds in cheering on/hectling the remaining racers. The race had drawn hundreds of people out of town into the forest, and flocks of spectators lined the course at all the likely points of carnage (especially the final river crossing that sent at least a quarter of the field in for a swim!). Cat calls, cheers and encouragement echoed through the trees, the crowds screaming their appreciation for an unplanned dismount or an extra special

costume. The vibe out on track wasn't just laid back, it was hilarious.

In the end, appropriately, it was a beer stop that decided the victor. Last year's winner, Ross Schnell, opted to give the third beer tent a miss, while local rider (and two time Kiwi single speed champion) Garth Weinberg put his faith in the power of the brew. Downing his Speights in double quick time, Garth opened up a gap and held Schnell at bay. Canberran, Heather Logie (in an adult's only police woman uniform), out paced New Zealand cross country superstar, Nic Cleary, for the win in the women's. Both Garth and Heather now have something to show their friends, accepting the obligatory winner's tattoo like true champions.

If you want to find out who placed where, don't bother - beyond the top five there were no results recorded, because really, who cares? This race isn't about results, lap times or bragging rights. A lot of people mistake the singlespeed culture as being puritan and deliberately obtuse, and certainly there is that element, but overwhelmingly it's about being a complete idiot pishhead and having a laugh. If you think that sounds like you, give it a try.

We may not have left with the winner's tattoo, and the searing pain caused by riding uphill behind a man in a leather g-string during the SSWC may haunt us eternally, but we'll sure have something to tell our grandkids about. The return journey is already in planning stages! **AMB**