

FROM THE **SUBLIME** TO THE

ridiculous

BY ROB GREENAWAY

ABOVE:
Cyclic Saga. Above Akaroa
Harbour on the Summit Road

IT'S NOT OFTEN YOU SEE TRADITIONS BORN. I FEEL CONFIDENT THAT TWO HAVE COME INTO BEING IN THE PAST FOUR YEARS: THE BIG COAST AND THE CYCLIC SAGA. THEY ARE TWO MOUNTAIN BIKING EVENTS AT COMPLETELY DIFFERENT ENDS OF THE SPECTRUM. IF ONE IS HELL-RIDING, THEN THE OTHER HAS TO BE HEAVEN. WHAT THEY HAVE IN COMMON IS THEIR ABILITY TO KEEP MOUNTAIN BIKING GROWING AND EVOLVING.

Traditions usually live for a long time, and events in New Zealand generally don't get to a ripe old age unless they are original, well-managed and jolly good ideas. You can promote an event to death (and several have been—remember Sesqui?), but unless there's something to capture the imagination you're wasting your time.

So what makes these two events traditions in the making?

The Big Coast is the mountain bikers' big easy. There is nothing like it in New Zealand, and probably in the Southern Hemisphere. This year, in late February, 1000 riders cycled about 100 kilometres over two days. Most of it was off-road and not a

prize was won—not even a spot prize. The oldest participant was almost 70, and the youngest in a bike seat. When the event began in 1992, 300 riders turned out to peddle over the Rimutaka Range and around the windswept Southern Coast to finish in Eastbourne near Wellington. The event has just kept on growing.

How do you get 1000 people to ride around a mountain range for no particularly good reason? The easy answer is: feed them, entertain them, carry their gear, provide all the mechanical support imaginable and organise it smoothly. The hard answer is the X factor—the motivation that gets a large group of interesting and

Adam Hollingworth clipping a control below Okains Peak on the Cyclic Saga.

diverse (but not necessarily fit) people to strike out on an expedition; to camp in a field with people they have probably never met (although one couple did meet on the event and later got married—that included me); **S** to go where most of them have never gone before in what **U** is occasionally not the best of weathers. There is no answer, and so The Big Coast must be a very good question.

The Cyclic Saga, on the other hand, is hell on wheels—at least that's what the organisers would have you believe. A team of mountain bike enthusiasts, led by the cycle clothing company Ground Effect, have created what has to be one of the more difficult events to ride and most painstaking to organise. It is mountain bike orienteering over an especially large and lumpy piece of terrain—Banks Peninsula. Each year the course is completely different, involves land owned by about 50 different farmers and lifestylers, and many of the controls (destinations marked on the ground by a nylon devise that resembles a kite) are placed in extremely remote locations.

Each rider is delivered a map moments before the event begins, and in a few minutes must devise a strategy that will get them to as many controls as possible over two days. After heading off from Akaroa, the riders spend up till 3.00 o'clock gathering points by ticking off the controls—the more remote the control, the more points it is worth. However, should they get too far off track and not make it back to camp by 3.00pm they start losing one point for every minute they are overdue.

The course is rough, and the organisers kindly remind entrants that no search


parties will be mounted until riders are very overdue, since being late is not unusual. Bags are checked for compulsory equipment like compasses and survival blankets. Teams must be of two riders at least, to ensure there is support in case of injury. For the truly sadistic, an elite class requires entrants to carry all their over-night gear—tents, food, sleeping bags, the lot. Touring class entrants hand their gear to the organisers who transport it to the overnight campsite.

It is the sort of event in which legends are born. Whether they are true or not is irrelevant, since not many people will be watching—once you've left the start you're pretty much on your own. Event co-organiser Guy Wynn-Williams describes the event: "People lie around on the grass at the finish looking totally shattered, but with that absurd sense of elation that only comes with having done something extreme."

Real mountain bike races will always maintain their place in the event calendars. Where would mountain biking be without the Karapoti Classic, for example? But for mountain biking to be forever in the forefront of outdoor recreation, to keep winning more members and keep a place in the popular media it's going to take the imagination



The Big Coast. Day Two - dropping into Fitzroy Bay heading towards Pencarrow Head - and a headwind

and organisation of the likes of The Big Coast and The Cyclic Saga. They are original, totally enjoyable, well-organised and there for the taking. 

BIG COAST,

Wellington—February 15/16

CYCLIC SAGA,

**Banks Peninsula
—March 15/16.**

***Further details in Event
Calendar***