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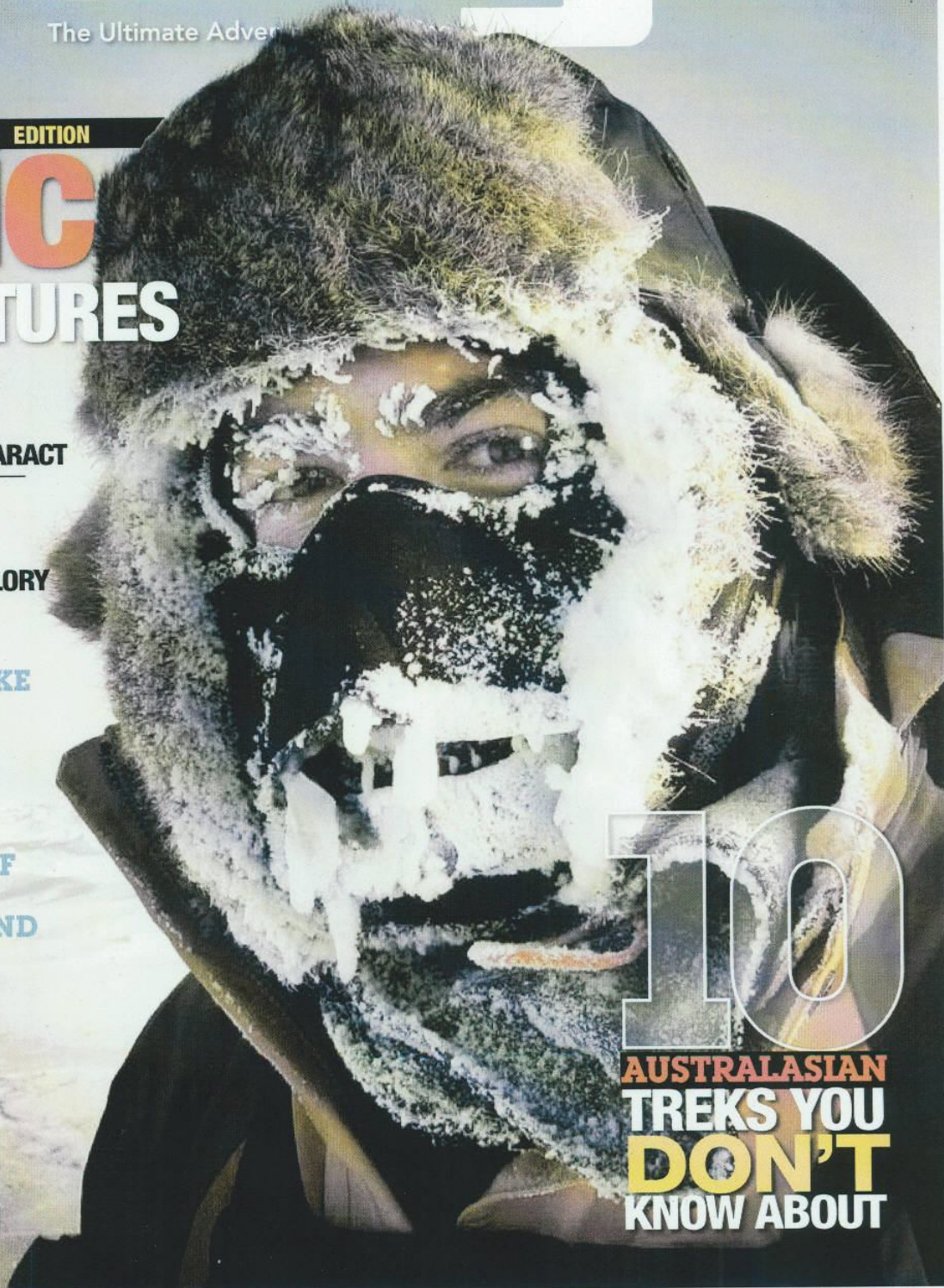
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CAPE CRUSADE

WORDS Chris Ord
IMAGES Travis Deane

Famous for red wine Margaret River may be, yet it's a different drop of crimson being spilt on West Australian soil during the Cape to Cape, a four-day mountain bike event designed for singletrack thrills and plenty of spills.

"It's a ride, not a race," event director Jason Dover emphasises in his welcome to competitors.

Tell that to James 'Willie' Williamson and Robin Adams, pro riders who each won a stage in last year's inaugural Cape to Cape mountain bike event. They didn't have the clock ticking first time round, so no one really knows who won. This year, organisers have incorporated electronic timing. Which begs the question – if it's not a race, then why time anyone?

So this is the grudge match, who's the real champion of the Cape to Cape, the race that's not a race, that is?

For Williamson, a former World 24-Hour Solo Champ, the 'ride' is also a warm down from the previous weekend's team sprints at the Scott 24-Hour race in Canberra. For Robin it's a proving ground: he's also the course setter giving him, some would say – James would say – an unfair advantage.

SITTING AT THE KARRIDALE TAVERN, plunked in the southern back roads of the magnificent Margaret River region, the pie-ride vibe is decidedly relaxed, as though we're a group of mates about to head off on a leisurely bike hike. As though we're here to simply money between, (tomateries and chocolate) that mark the region as a poster destination for epicureans and those wanting to die of sweet (and savoury) alcoholism.

Local culinary delights aside, I'm scoffing pasta like a man bewitched with fear of the coming days, like a man who hasn't trained for the 200-plus kilometres of sand, dirt and potentially blood ahead. As it transpires, there will be blood.

Perhaps because he knows what's ahead, Robin shoulders heavily the responsibility of abating that blood. Giving us an overview of the course and how to ride it, he's adamant about safety, "ride to your ability," is the mantra.

"I'll give you an example," says Robin.

"Last year, a bunch of elite riders – us – got to a section where there's a massive middle across the ride line. Without exception we all got off and liposed around it, much to the disgust of the cameraman staked out to one side. He was hoping for a killer splash shot. He still got it when a less experienced rider with a hero wish came flying through and over the handlebars as the water grabbed his wheels. It was messy. Like I said, ride to your ability."

STRUNG BETWEEN TWO

LIGHTHOUSES at the foot of Western Australia is the most famous stretch of countryside, and most visited, in the state. If some from this part of the world hasn't passed your lips, you haven't lived. And haven't suffered here, you haven't lived. And if you haven't set foot along the walking trail that links the Lerochin lighthouse with its sister up north on Cape Naturaliste, you really haven't lived. But there's another, lesser-known offering that the Cape to Cape event is only now exposing to the world: some of the sweetest single track to be found in Australia.

Fear not you uber-eco trekkers, the event only follows the Cape to Cape walking trail (see 'Top Trails' page 54) route for about fifty metres, the organisers being super careful to blaze their own way – in a Leave No Trace manner of course – through Karri forest trails and along the wild, desolate beaches of the south west.

There's no doubt that what I'm counting on but my gut through is stunning countryside. The trails underfoot, set to butt me at every turn, are what mountain bikers blithely call fun. But they are, apparently, a mere taste of what this event will grow to be. Only two years in, organisers are still battling with every event manager's bane: bureaucracy. There's councils and parks organisations to deal with, the local constabulary and of course the insurers, conservative people whose view from a desk elicits a frown at the thought of barely-protected riders willingly

throwing themselves and their bikes down precipices and over logs. Their tut-tuts over office canteen teas are heard as a roar that translates into super premiums, paperwork and posturing on what can and can't happen.

Thus, this year, the Cape to Cape course has less singletrack along its length than it might otherwise. Indeed, as it transpires we'll be forced to change the last day's route on a last minute change of heart by park authorities, enforcing a bout of binumen that would daunt any mountain bike mindset.

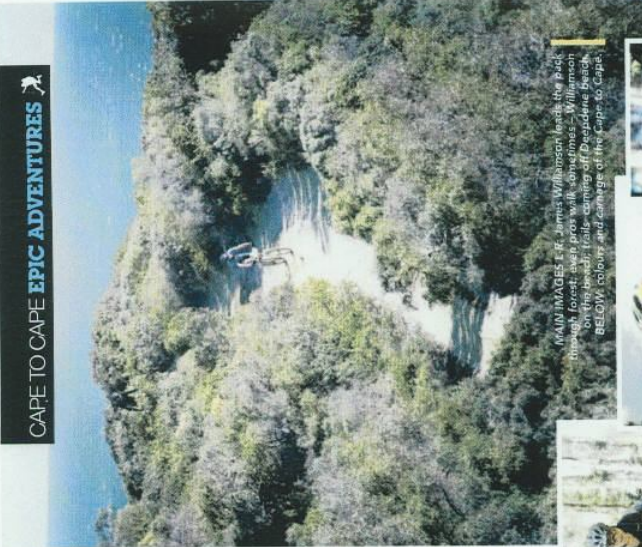
There is hope, however, and a tease for those riding this event. Some ripping singletrack lies like a snake, weaving its way through the forests nearby, waiting for nobbled wheels to come along its back. The mountain bike fan is strong here, and passionate enough to get its hands dirty having spent years establishing quasi-legal trails. The 'quasi' element was enough to prick the ears and hopes of race organisers who this year could only eye it covously as they dress up route maps. Next year things could be very different, especially if Nicola Bowman, National Director of the International Mountain Bike Association's new Australian chapter has anything to do with it.

"THE SOUTH WEST IS A RICH, lush landscape that lends itself to fantastic mountain biking," says Nick. "There is an astounding amount of unauthorised trail in the region that, given the correct advocacy approach, could well be incorporated into the event. One thing is for sure, the trails here are world class."

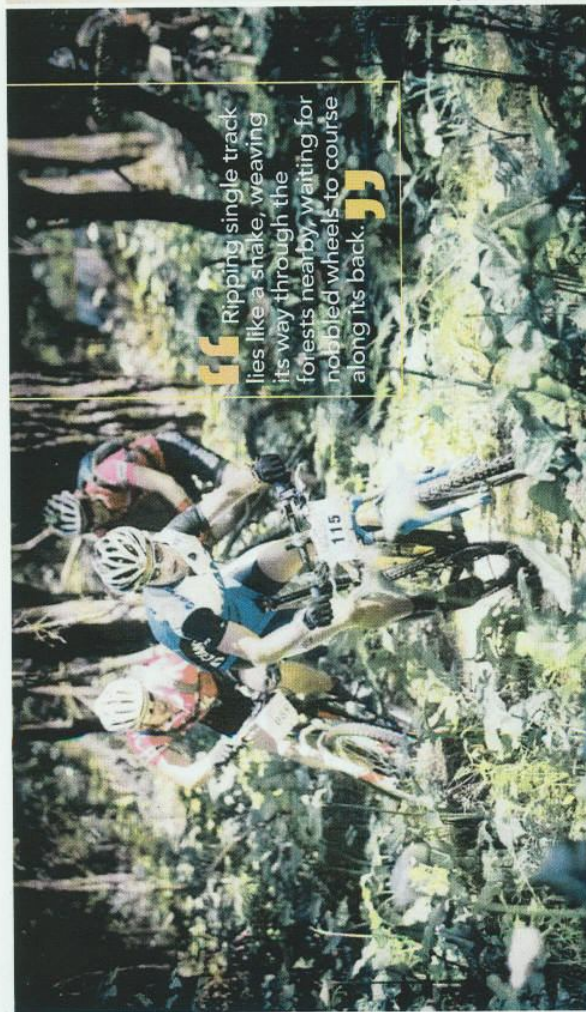
As is the beginning of the Cape To Cape, which has in the case of the most disingenuous short lines in the history of mountain biking. There we sit, sun blanketing us in false security, the sky a blue hue that suggests all is well in the world, whitewashed lighthouse standing guard over a headland and beaches that would make a photo postcard drover Steve Parish weep with reverence. Riders lounge on the grass scoffing



Tense moments for a rider as he flies over a jump that claimed 10 scalps



MAIN IMAGES: E.P. James/Wilderness Week, the 2014 Cape to Cape Epic; photos by Gregor Williams/Photo Sports; inset photo: copyright of Deirdreine Patrick



“Ripping single track lies like a stake, weaving its way through the forests nearby, waiting for nobled wheels to course along its back.”

lunch. You think it'd be energy bars and gels at 10 paces but no, comes with cream, goodness it is such whipped toffins appropriate given what's ahead? Of course, stage one's 40km doesn't sound like a death roll to even a weekend road rider, but throw in a killer climb about, ooh, a some's throw from where we sit, a fast-downhill through scratchy forest, a wink in the face of adversity, before BANG, off your bike-chump, unless you have legs of steel and a heart not clogged with cream and jam. Up, up, up. Up. Pretty tea-trees. Watch the roots. And limestone rocks. Hope I kitted some spare tubes. Up. Up. How far we in? Five kays? Oh, Oh oh.

“THE CLIMB OUT OF THE FOREST is the most challenging of the whole event,” reads the ride guide. And it is. If you quit on the first day, Whoever wrote the guide is an obscene optimist. There are many more killer climbs over the coming days. Still, there's some payback in the form of stunning views from atop private property overlooking Deepdene Beach, which looks pretty as a peach. Then you sling down into it's hinterland. Here the dirt gives way to sand. Deep sand. Not quick sand, but quicksand. It grabs Machiavellian-like at your tyres, wrenching your wheel left or right: anywhere but where



you had it pointed. This is where you dismount, willingly or otherwise, to lug your bike 100 metres over dunes that radiate energy-sapping heat. But it's okay, you tell yourself: the Cape to Cape is the only mountain bike race in the world that furnishes a bar full of beer at each day's finish line. It's the only thing getting me through as I peer down the beach to see... each and every rider walking their bike. The organisers had told us fables of tumbling the beach run at the correct tide for the sand to be firm and rideable. I quote: “Participants can easily ride the hard packed sand just above the low tide mark, needing to watch for the odd surging wave.” Bollocks. The sand monster remains and any attempt to ride simply ends in sunken hubs.

Not even the lead pack is immune: all walk but one. Robin Adams manages to pedal the entire length of the beach, clipped in and clean, much to the chagrin of Willo and fellow puny end pro, Joel Read. Back in the pack - even further back than you're thinking - I get a few short beach sports on, passing a few riders, before my chuffed-mess loses all its wind with a puncture just as I rise atop the dunes and back on to rideable trail.

like Metlin on wheels - we won't say elderly, we'll say distinguished looking - his white beard flowing in his tailwind as he pulled off a mighty manoeuvre, jumping and lifting his back wheel to sail over another rider downed on the track. Magic, Metlin, pure magic. Another rider wasn't so fortunate, sealing his own fate when he reached around for some energy gel sustenance, fingers squeezing the front brake over so gently when the trail dropped and sped up. The rider dropped, too, kissing a rock and leaving skin dangling from his chin.

There was the rider who busted his AC joint coming off a jump. “What doesn't kill you makes you stronger,” he quipped while overtaking, leaving me in his cloud of incision. I gritted teeth later on, again, as another rider skinned past, the pressure too much as I bit sand, front wheel turned. I bit in and then bit the grainy stuff.

No blood and the bike survived. Which is good, because it's not mine and it's no longer the rental I began with. Mechanical problems with what I deduced to be a tank of a bike better suited to shop runs induced sympathy from race director, Jason. “Use mine, no problems.” Thing is, his was once the steed of current leader Robin Adams, a specialised S Works that when new was worth thousands in many multiples

and was (and still is) an elite level bike. Never under the illusion that it would actually make a rider of my skill-less nature actually go faster or further, I did hope it would at least be a talisman of luck given it once won races with Robin at the bars. Then again, its new owner, of a skill level more akin to mine despite being a brigadier of a mountain bike event, had only ridden it a handful of times, most recently testing an agonously steep section of the Cape to Cape route. His facial grazes were still weeping.

AT THE POINTY END, where rider skills more appropriately matches super-spec bikes, the racing remains fierce. Willo snatches a slim lead, in the final, steep downhill kilometres into Prevely Park. Robin is second making it 1-1 at the halfway mark.

Aiming to be Australia's mini-version of South Africa's Cape Epic - an eight day 722km monster ride being ridden by Team Outer Edge riders Rebecca Locke and Naomi Hansen in March - the Cape to Cape does weave a seriously social element into the mix, not least lubricated by that finish line bar at the end of each day. Top end riders mingle with the rest of us mere mortals at dinner gatherings each night

where the buzz is all bike talk and plenty of show and tell prompted by a graze here and a bruise or three there.

As much as it has a social heart, the Cape to Cape also has a conscience. Day Three is marked the Margaret River Special Stage, supported by Zaidée's Rainbow Foundation, an organisation dedicated to creating awareness for and bolstering sign-up to organ and tissue donation. A pertinent cause given the number of serious biking accidents requiring serious hospitalisation.

“Our seven-year-old daughter Zaidée died suddenly in 2004 from Cerebral Aneurism,” explains her father, Alan Turner, who is accompanying the event as it tracks north up the coast.

Zaidée donated her organs and tissues at the Royal Children's Hospital as were her wishes at the time. She was the only child in Victoria under the age of 16 years and one of the youngest Australians to donate. She was one of only six children nationally to donate their organs that year. We were shocked at that statistic and so set up the Foundation to increase awareness of the need for organ and tissue donation.



RIGHT: Gritted teeth at the pointy end as Robin Adams (left) fights off James Williamson (right) and team mate Joel Road

LEFT: Robin Adams flies across the sand. BELOW L-R: Willo jokes with Robin at the start of day three; getting air in the Keri forests; gasping for air over the dunes.



The rainbow symbol is one of hope for those waiting on a transplant and it's what every Cape to Cape rider wears in the form of rainbow shoedares for Day Three. Throughout the stage, these flashes of colour burst through the bush between Praelly and Margaret River, weaving in and out of pine forests and along a single track, dominated route that accretes not only with the speed of the pros but with the heat of the hottest October day on record for the region.

THE THOUGHT OF ZAIDEE'S wish for organ donation is rushes into my mind at an instant along some of the most tenacious single track, where my crunk and cog catch firm on a high bog, roll over. I know this is going to hurt as I catapult over the bars smashing face first into the dirt below. Lucky for me the only surgery needed is to the bike – the expensive borrowed bike – as a shock lever breaks clean through.

While I'm coughing up worms, there's just as much drama up front with Willo, Robin and Joel still surging at each other, Joel being credited with doing most of the pace setting legwork. Willo eventually breaks away until a wrong turn, with only kilometres to go, sends him astray, courtesy of some vandalised signage. Robin then tangles with a tree, allowing a hard-chasing (and sweating) Willo ahead once again, but Joel is already munching on his ham and cheese by the time the pair straighten their wheels across the finish in second and third.

Noting Willo's misdirection (and noted integrity in pointing the sign the correct way for the benefit of the remaining pack), officials slice a minute or so off his finishing time to set up for an ultimately final stage. In auditive times putting him on exact par with Robin for the lead.

Just as determined to get the best time possible is the rider who, with a puncture 200 metres from the end, shoulders his bike and runs the final stretch eliciting a hearty applause from recovering competitors milled around on the grass.

Out in the field still is Tony, a character who becomes a shining light for all of us feeling brutal pain with another day and sixty-one kilometres still to go. Wind filters through him, a long, long last, he calls his wife on the mobile – for sympathy perhaps. He gets none. She promptly berates him for being too old for such nonsense as a four-day mountain bike race. But he's adamant: "It'll be an honour and a privilege to finish last in the Cape to Cape," he says.

Tony's determination doesn't go unnoticed by the course sweepers – those charged with covering the course at the end of the day to ensure no stragglers have been left behind to the whims of the dark night. Come race finish, they present Tony with the Sweep Trophy: a broomstick.

Another award on offer is the Johnny Waddell Beacon Award, a prize for a rider representing the 'spirit of the ride' and named after the downhill mountain bike legend who suffered horrendous injuries in a 2003 World Cup downhill race. A colourful character whose slow speech belies a quick wit, Waddell spent 26 days in a coma, waking up to discover he had to learn how to walk and talk again. He not only mastered those basics, but in no time was back on the bike again turning his skills to endurance racing as an alternative to the dangers of downhill. He is now a regular fixture on the 24-hour mountain bike circuit and no slouch; he stays with the pro pack for most of the race.

WADDELL'S FIERY SPIRIT, the same that undoubtedly pulled him back from the pit of death, rears again on the final day. A long section with plenty of flat farm terrain, Waddell chooses a tight spot to overtake Robin. Too tight, as it happens. He clips him and is sent sprawling; the gravel track drawing blood like a

grater on his skin. Ever determined, Waddell is pumped to continue racing. Ever professional, Robin, Joel and Willo hat racing mid paddock in order to hold him up until race officials arrive at the scene to take the bleeding, brooding and cow-pat splattered Waddell to hospital. X-rays show bone and rock floating around inside his elbow. For the record, Johnny makes it back to the finish line in time to wear his eponymous prize to Bruno Wiki, the Magic Merlin Man.

The unexpected hold up, along with an extra 4km stage tacked on for pros only, means the back of pack gets a fleeting glimpse of just how fast these guys are. When they occasionally arrive up and return to pace. It is as though a pack of Speedway cars are thundering down on you. Barely do I have time to look around and see the pack – Willow, Robin, Joel and young gun, 16-year-old Rohan Brown – blister past. By the time I hit the last Heartbreak Hill – which breaks more body parts than just my heart – the race is long over for these guys. Willo reigns as King of the Cape. For the rest of us, the event turns back into a ride, one where jelly legs add a final obstacle to getting down the other side of Heartbreak to the finish line.

The event's final howl is left to Tony the 'Sweeper' whose tur-tuning wife must long have given up on him "the old fool". But it's no fool that pushes up that last hill into the grounds of Caves House to be met with a roaring applause the loudest from podium pack Willo, Robin and Joel, who greet him like a long lost team mate. "Thing is, nobody told Tony that the Cape to Cape is not just a ride. Although last, he remains a winner on another level. Let's hope his wife sees it that way when he tells her his prize just for going the distance is free entry next year."

The Cape to Cape will be back with more single track than ever in October. If you're riding, it'll take you roughly 14 hours over four days. If you're racing, it'll be nine in the saddle. If you're Tony, it doesn't matter how long... just so long as you get there. capesprint.com.au

1 Spotters Comic sunglasses
Features polarised high-contrast bronze lens for visual definition and wild colour clarity. Perfect for crossover between active use where high definition is required and lifestyle. "I know... looking good at the winery." [RRP \\$220](http://RRP $220)
spotters.com.au

2 Vuade Silver shirt
Ultra-soft, high breathability polyester fabric is ultra-cool, color resistant and super quick drying – great for the Cape's blistering hot days. Flatlocked seams and a mesh-lined collar kept me comfy and the zip let the breeze through. UPF 50+ rating, a bonus and a hidden on-seam pocket held a much needed gel for that final Heartbreak Hill. [RRP \\$99](http://RRP $99)
vuadecycling.com.au

3 Isekbreaker GT tops
At a 150 weight, the GT SS Velocity Zip is designed for extreme action. And it got it. Technical features are the business – eyellet gussets give extra ventilation, seams are sewn to reduce friction and there's a handy stash pocket on the hip. Held the sweat a little more than the Vuade, but still breathed like a champ. [RRP \\$129.95](http://RRP $129.95)
isekbreaker.com

4 Vuade Syncro MTB bike shorts matched to Vuade padded bike pants
Over 14 hours in the saddle meant one particular region of my body coped a battling. But the combination of padded bike shorts worn under these tough, as well as MTB-specific shorts saw me through. Vuade's Syncro MTB bike shorts have panels meant movement of feet legs was free and easy and excellent breathability allowed for super wicking. [RRP \\$220](http://RRP $220)
vuadecycling.com.au

5 Time TXT Cycling Shoes
A casual styled shoe suitable for friends or casual use, rec'd the award for best value for money. You can't go wrong with a Time TXT. I like me just getting used to wearing clean shoes. [RRP \\$140](http://RRP $140)
bikeexchange.com.au



6 2008 Specialized S-Works Epic Carbon
Using the top of the line Epic, for me was like a learner driver hopping into a Ferrari. But the ride was a blast. The technology in the 11kg dual suspension bike, the technology in materials and fittings all working toward keeping you upright and at speed. Where I floated over the new single track in the forest, others – especially hardtail riders – came away frustrated with some bumps and lumps. I'll be honest and say, as the owner of an entry-level Giant Anthem (for \$5,000), I didn't see the point in spending our \$65-10k on a bike. [RRP \\$3800](http://RRP $3800) second hand / [\\$10,499.95](http://$10,499.95) new 2010 model!
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HANDLEBAR Specialized low rise XC 2014 Alloy
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DRIVE TRAIN SRAM 3600 9 speed
CASSETTE Shimano XT
CRANKSET Truvativ Noir Carbon
RIMS DT Swiss 4.2
TYRES Specialized Fast Track LX

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