

Hell's Gate awaits BMW duo

Saturday 14 February will be a time for romantics everywhere to celebrate St Valentine's Day, with gifts of flowers, chocolates and jewellery lavished upon loved ones. Not so for BMW Motorrad Motorsport's 'extreme' riders Andreas Lettenbichler and Gerhard Forster, who will be far from their own loved ones on this day and quite literally waiting at the 'gates of Hell' as punishment for competing in one of the world's toughest 'extreme' enduro races.

Hell's Gate takes place at Il Ciocco in the beautiful northern Tuscany region of Italy, and is the brainchild of international enduro champion Fabio Fasola. It attracts around 100 of the world's best extreme enduro riders, who come together for a series of tests that start early in the morning and end at night, taking in rocks, waterfalls, dark forests and near-impossible hill climbs.

Andreas Lettenbichler and Gerhard Forster will be competing against some of the best names in extreme enduro, including last year's winner, Tadeusz Blasuziak, Simone Albergoni, Alessandro Botturi, Mario Rinaldi and 12-times trials world champion Dougie Lampkin. 'Letti' competed in the 2006 and 2007 events, finishing in a respectable sixth position two years ago, so is really looking forward to returning to the infamous wooded Italian hillside next weekend with the BMW G 450 X.



"The first time I competed was in 2006 and it was very, very hard – after the race I was completely destroyed," said Andi. "As a 'warm-up' to this event, the first part is a four-hour enduro with three special tests – and that's just to qualify! The best 35 riders from this then go forward to qualify for the 'extreme' four hours, which consist of a supermotard start and four laps, which take around one hour each! If you are more than half an hour behind the leading rider at any point then you are out."

In the past, lightweight trials bikes have competed alongside enduro bikes, but for this year, the rules have changed so that trials bikes are not allowed. Andi is confident that the BMW sport enduro will be competitive at Hell's Gate.

"The G 450 X is good for all the different enduro events we compete in," he said. "It's a four-stroke, so the weight is a little higher than on a two-stroke but we've much more grip on the back wheel. I've been training and preparing for this event simply by riding, riding, riding!"

Someone who knows a thing or two about Hell's Gate is one of BMW Motorrad Motorsport's new recruits – David Knight – who is a three-times winner of this extreme

enduro. Although he won't be racing alongside Andi and Gerhard this year, the Manxman has some special advice for the two riders.

"Hell's Gate is unique in many ways, but mainly because of the way the event is run. After the traditional enduro, which serves as qualifying for the main event, the real challenges start. The main race is really tough, especially when it gets dark, and the weather can be either cold and icy – or wet and muddy. The final hill is what really makes the event different from all others – it's impossible to explain how steep the climb to the finish is. It's impossible to ride to the top, which is where the spectators come into play, and help the riders get their bikes to the top."



As a past winner, David believes that the BMW G 450 X is well suited to this event, as are both of the riders: "The bike's strong power will certainly help both Gerhard and Andi deal with the many steep climbs they will encounter. The best advice I can give them is to conserve energy wherever possible. Although the morning race is important – as they need to qualify for the main event – there's no point using too much energy, because they'll need to be as fresh as possible for the main event."

All the action kicks off next Saturday 14 February and more information (in Italian and English) is available by visiting the www.hellsgate.it website.