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To the Hardy, Lady Liberty's Crown Beckons Anew

By [MICHAEL POWELL](#)

Oh, how he loves that Lady.

Give Don Oral 30 seconds and he'll wax poetic about the grace and meaning of the Statue of Liberty for a city of immigrants. As a teenager in 1966, Mr. Oral hiked the 168 steps to her crown on a summer camp field trip. His recollection is enthusiastic, even if his details are suggestive of the Bataan Death March.

"It's like 114 degrees in there, O.K., and someone's behind is in your face," said Mr. Oral, 56, who now lives in Bayside, Queens, and works for the city. "Up a step, stop. Up a step, stop. I loved it, really."

O.K., Mr. Oral, so you would do it again?

He paused, then asked, "You're saying with or without a doctor's note?"

Pull your schlepping shoes out of the closet. With great fanfare, the Obama administration announced on Friday that the Statue of Liberty's crown, closed to the public since the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, would reopen this summer. Unveiled in 1886 after being shipped across the Atlantic from France in 214 vast crates, the copper-clad [Lady Liberty](#) has drawn tens of millions of visitors over the decades, although for the last eight years none have climbed the staircase to the crown.

Interior Secretary [Ken Salazar](#) was buoyant Friday about the reopening of this aerie. "On July 4, we are giving New York a special gift," he said on [the "Today" show](#), which broadcast from inside the crown. "The economic times we're going through really call for hope and optimism."

So, in just eight short weeks, thousands of peripatetic children and perspiring parents and elderly aunts from Omaha who drew the short straw on their trip to New York will once again be able to work their way up the low-railed and vertiginous, not-so-slightly claustrophobic, 12-story-high stairway to her crown.

Where they can peer through small windows at New York Harbor for a few minutes before beginning a steep descent.

That the lady of the harbor is an iconic beauty is beyond quarrel. The faraway sight of her torch can bring even a jaded native to a halt. And there was something diminishing, even

galling, about the Bush administration's decision to close off the innards of this international symbol of freedom's possibility. (Officials then argued that there was no safe way to reopen the stairway, given the lack of a second exit route in case of emergency.)

It is also an indisputable victory for Representative Anthony Weiner, the perpetually insistent Queens Democrat, who turned public access to the crown into a crusade.

And yet, as iconic hikes go, this one might draw a shudder from even a field-trip-hardened third-grade teacher. The potential for accidents is reasonably high; the potential for tantrums is more or less off the charts. (This correspondent recalls the precise moment his mother ended a July ascent: She gazed at a young son and two daughters expertly torturing one another and at a line that stretched endlessly up; that way, she knew, lay madness).

Mitchell Moss, a professor of urban policy and planning at [New York University](#), recalled his childhood ramble to the crown as a city kid's rite of passage.

"That's back when I could fit up that narrow staircase," said Mr. Moss, now 60-something and perhaps no longer so svelte. "The Statue of Liberty, like a lot of old icons, is pretty hot and really not made for modern tourism, which is very antiseptic."

Ten people will be allowed to occupy the crown at a time; 30 visitors an hour will be expected to walk through. Park officials estimate that 50,000 people will be able to visit in the first year, and 100,000 would be allowed to troop through the following year as security protocols are adjusted.

Their predecessors had long put a dour cast on any suggested reopening. To climb the spiral staircase, Daniel Wenk, deputy director of the [National Park Service](#), told Congress in 2007, is dangerous and a "difficult feat even for people in excellent health and under ideal conditions." (This might surprise the millions of underexercised, wide-beamed Americans who nonetheless managed to plant two sneakered feet on the crown's landing in hazy humidity).

Mr. Wenk then invoked a host of apocalyptic fires, from the Triangle shirtwaist factory in Washington Square in 1911 to the Cocoanut Grove nightclub in Boston in 1942. Three years earlier, Larry Parkinson, an assistant secretary at Interior, went a step or three further, suggesting that memories of the tortuous hike up the statue, perhaps not least his own, were imaginary.

"Most of us think we went to the crown; a lot of us didn't," he told The New York Times in 2004. "I thought I went to the crown, and I hadn't."

Mr. Oral works in billing for the city's Department of Environmental Protection, and his days are long and he is not young, but he is quite positive that his boyhood trek was real.

And despite the sweat and more or less constant views of derrieres, he is ready for another shot at the sea-washed Mother of Exiles.

“You know, my memory may play tricks, but I remember that view,” he said. “And to take my grandkids or whatever up there? I like it high and like it beautiful, and that’s that statue.”

Sewell Chan contributed reporting.