



# THE NEW FACE OF MOUNT RUSHMORE

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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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Blame it on [Cary Grant](#): The climactic chase in [Alfred Hitchcock's](#) 1959 thriller [North By Northwest](#), when he and [Eva Marie Saint](#) are pursued by Communist villains across the iconic faces of [Mount Rushmore](#), is one of our indelible pop culture images of America. The scene was actually shot on a Hollywood studio set, but today the first question that occurs to even the least adventurous visitor to South Dakota is not why the Pharaonic monument was carved, or even how, but: *How do I climb up there?* It's not such a sacrilegious question. In his original vision in the 1930s, sculptor [Gutzon Borglum](#) had conceived of a grandiose stone stairway for the public leading up to the presidential heads, along with a giant carved tablet that recounted in heroic terms the first 150 years of U.S. history, but his plan was shelved when the builders ran out of good granite, not to mention time and money. In fact, since work ended on there in 1941, climbing the memorial has been officially prohibited.

Which is why an invitation from the park superintendent to "summit" Mount Rushmore with a "VIP group" is not something you can turn down.

And so, early one crystal August morning, led by a clean-cut park ranger named Darin Oestmann, I joined six other lucky hikers setting off from the Visitor's Center along a trail through the sweetly-scented ponderosa forest in the [Black Hills](#), America's most ancient mountains. My fellow VIPs were members of a barbershop quartet from nearby [Rapid City](#) - a cheery bunch of retirees in biker's jackets and baseball caps, as well as their manager and his wife, who were scheduled to perform at Mount Rushmore's evening sound and light show, and now wanted to sing patriotic American songs on the presidents' heads. Although they seemed a bit nonplussed that an Australian didn't know many of the lyrics, they were willing to accept an outsider on the jaunt. We proceeded through the forest in silence, a little taken aback by the tangible evidence of history scattered along the path - rusting nails, wires, and lengths of the original air-compression pipes used by the 400 or so local laborers who, from 1927 to 1941, followed this route, by wood stair and winch cart, to conduct their Promethean task.

Oestmann paused on the trail to point out a rarely-seen view of [George Washington's](#) profile, gleaming in the morning light. Mount Rushmore has not looked so good for over six decades: In 2005, a German cleaning company gave the four presidents their first high-tech facelift, using 60-degree Celsius water blasted through hydraulic hoses. Sixty-four years worth of dirt and lichen fell from the memorial, including slabs of mushroom-like fungi that were over three inches thick. Oestmann was personally involved in cleaning “about three quarters of the first President.” “You see that dot in Washington’s left eyelid?” He pointed to a broken drill bit that stuck in the stone. “You couldn’t see *that* before.”

This was definitely not your typical manicured tourist path. We scrambled over a few boulders, slipped between pine branches near mountains of rubble, then passed the high-security wire fence that rings the monument. Steep metal steps rose into a granite crevice until, directly behind the presidential heads, the sun revealed a carved opening in the rock - an oblong sliver, looking for all the world like the entrance to the tombs in Egypt’s [Valley of the Kings](#). This was the Hall of Records, a vault that Borglum had originally planned as a repository for the [Declaration of Independence](#) and other key American artifacts. Worried that future generations might find Mount Rushmore as enigmatic as Stonehenge, the sculptor also wanted information stored on the four presidents - Washington, [Abraham Lincoln](#), [Thomas Jefferson](#), and [Teddy Roosevelt](#) - as well as an explanation of “how the memorial was built and frankly, why.” The vault was never finished, for lack of funds. Today, it’s an ever-narrowing passage that runs about 25 feet into the rock, and you can run your fingers over granite walls still honeycombed with drill marks.

But the climax of our climb was yet to come. Oestmann led us up the last steep stairway, and we burst from the shadows into a brilliant blue South Dakota sky - on top of George Washington’s head, no less, more than 650 feet above the Visitor’s Center and some 5,500 feet above sea level. As I wandered jelly-kneed over to Jefferson and Lincoln’s brilliant white pates - thankfully, relatively flat rather than round - the sense of space was exhilarating: Our view across the craggy, pine-covered Black Hills seemed endless.