



# THE LONG ROAD TO CULLAVILLE

STORIES FROM MY TRAVELS TO EVERY COUNTRY IN THE WORLD

BORIS KESTER

SECOND EDITION

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# DEDICATION

An té a bhíonn siúlach, bíonn scéalach  
*He who travels has stories to tell (Irish saying)*

In memory of my cousin Sander and my friends Walter, Mark & Marilyn, who had the misfortune of being in the wrong place, at the wrong time.

Special thanks to Corona. Without you, I would have never found the peace and time to write this book.

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# PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

Step into the world of adventure, travel, and exploration with *The Long Road to Cullaville*. As the author, I can tell you that writing this book was a journey in itself. It was a labor of love, with countless hours of writing, rewriting, and polishing, but the moment I held the physical copy in my hands, I knew it was all worth it. And to see people lining up to buy the book and ask for autographed copies in my hometown of Leiden was a surreal experience.

Readers from all walks of life embraced my story, sharing how they were deeply moved by my tales of travel and self-discovery. Many readers told me the book made them laugh, cry, inspired them, and ignited a desire to step out of their comfort zones and explore the world. A few said they limited themselves to only one chapter a day, not wanting to end the book too soon. Some called it a travel thriller, filled with educational insights about our planet and its inhabitants.

I was humbled and grateful for the opportunity to share my writing with the world. Readers showed their appreciation by asking for autographed copies and many even asked for a second book. As I saw my book on bookshelves and libraries, I felt like my journey had come full circle. It was incredibly heartwarming to know my book was read the way I intended and that it touched my readers.

The response from the media was equally extraordinary. I was interviewed by newspapers, magazines, and radio, and was even given the opportunity to teach students at National

Geographic how to write travel books. The recognition and support are a huge inspiration for which I'm deeply grateful.

One of the most exciting suggestions came from a travel friend, who suggested the book should travel to every country in the world. From that moment on, I've asked readers to send me messages and photos of their book copies on location, and to date, it has traveled to 172 countries, with 21 more to go.

The process of publishing this first book also turned out to be an experiment that taught me a lot. I discovered some minor mistakes that needed correction. I found competent people to help me with all that is needed to publish a book and increase its visibility. I realized the book deserved a fresh start - and you are holding the result in your hands right now. I am even more excited about this second edition of my book than I was about the first.

And yes - I am writing that second book. Not only do I have many more travel tales to tell, my first book also turned around my life in unexpected ways. Bringing a copy to the protagonist of the first chapter turned out to be a bizarre adventure, which is a story that needs to be told. I started writing the second book only weeks after the first one came out. I have no title yet, but I know it will be about travel and love. I won't stop writing until I think it is at least as good as *The long road to Cullaville*. You can follow progress on [BorisKester.com](http://BorisKester.com) (sign up for the mailing list).

As I embark on this new chapter of my writing journey, I want to express my deepest gratitude to all the readers. You are my ultimate travel companions who have supported me and this book. Your unwavering support and open hearts have made this journey all the more rewarding. Thank you for allowing me to share my stories with you and for being a part of this fantastic adventure.

I invite you to sit beside me, and travel with me to places in the world you might have never heard of. Enjoy the read, enjoy the ride along *The long road to Cullaville!*

Leiden, March 2023

# PREFACE

April 1965. The world consists of 124 countries and I'm just over five months old. My parents put me in a pram and take me on a journey. For the first time in my life, I cross an international border. We travel through Europe by train and take a boat to Crete. My parents discover the island on foot – with me in tow. On the way, the Greeks stuff me with treats, we sleep in a different place every night and I pose on the ancient stone throne of King Minos. My mum holds me while my dad takes my very first travel photo. Before I can even sit, walk, or talk, I learn the basics of travel. Transportation. Encounters. Discoveries. Adventure.

My childhood hero was Odysseus. His stories inspired me to dream about marvelous and dauntless travels to unknown places and about never giving up until you reach your goal. I wasn't even ten years old when I started keeping track of how many countries I had visited. Whenever we traveled to a new country, I would draw the flag in my diary with a multi-color pen and proudly add the country's number. Looking back in those notebooks, it's striking how happy I was when we visited a new place. New frontiers fascinated me intensely. Different people, different customs, different food, different money, a different language, and sometimes even a different script: every new country was a thrill. The rule at home was that you should have visited at least as many countries as your age. As a child, that wasn't difficult. On my tenth birthday, I had visited more than twenty countries in Europe and Asia.

Once I started traveling by myself, I made good use of Interrail. I traversed Europe to explore every corner. Travels to Africa followed. While it was fashionable to say that the world was getting smaller, mine just kept expanding. The famous paradox ‘the more you know, the more you realize how little you know’, is equally applicable to travel. The more I traveled, the more I became aware that there was so much more to discover. That realization made me restless and unsuitable for an office job. I resigned after four years. I then spent a year wandering through Europe and Africa to discover more new countries. After that, I also became restless inside university lecture halls and applied to be a flight attendant. This career enabled me to travel every week in between my lectures. After completing university, I decided to pursue a career in aviation because the irregular and unpredictable lifestyle suited my restlessness and wanderlust well.

Thus, my world expanded to include North and South America, the Far East and Oceania. Little by little, I conquered the planet. My yearning for the unknown made me explore countries that were new to me every year. The Internet enabled me to share my experiences and photos through my website: a continuation of the travel diaries I wrote as a child. In the meantime, I kept track of how many countries I had visited. To make things more complicated, new countries were born along the way out of a changing world order.

I had visited 117 countries when, due to a major earthquake in my personal life in 2008, I decided to travel differently. Instead of visiting one or two new countries every year, I decided to travel to all the countries in the world. I gave myself ten years to complete the remainder. The idea seemed absurd, but once it settled in my head, I realized that I had always had that goal – I just hadn’t been aware of it. Hadn’t I already started keeping

track of how many countries I'd been to as a nine-year-old? It had just taken me more than thirty years to find out that it would be my quest to visit them all.

The half-century between my first and my last country was packed with travel, full to the brim with adventures, and chock full of encounters with a diverse range of people. In Mogadishu I ate gingerbread cookies with Somalis while my four bodyguards kept a close eye on the area, their right hand on the trigger of their machine guns. Muslims got me drunk a stone's throw from the dizzying buildings of Samarkand, from where Timur Lenk once ruled an empire and where he is now buried. I sailed with betel nut traders on a boat down the pitch-black Sepik River in Papua New Guinea, under an infinite sky with so many shooting stars that my wishes were exhausted faster than I could think of new ones. On my way to the Central African Republic, I narrowly sped past a group of gorillas on the back of a motorbike. I came face to face with a brown bear in the wild Tian Shan mountains of Kyrgyzstan, got malaria three times, was trapped in a military base in Iran and crawled out of a car wreck with only minor injuries after a serious accident in South Africa.

June 2017. The world now comprises 193 countries. Just under Cullaville, I cross the last border of a country I have never been to before. I have visited all the countries in the world.

Soon thereafter, I realize that I have done something special. Even though I have many photos and stories of my travels published on my website [traveladventures.org](http://traveladventures.org), I decide to do more justice to some of those adventures by writing a book. Once more, my restlessness plays tricks on me because I

inevitably also continue to travel. After all, I know more than ever before that there are still so many places left to explore. It's thanks to the pandemic of 2020 and the associated lockdowns and travel restrictions that I'm finally forced to stay put and find the peace of mind and time to write this book.

For those who want to see images with the stories: go to [BorisKester.com](http://BorisKester.com), or scan the QR code on the back of this book.

My gratitude I offer, first and foremost, to the tens, hundreds, thousands of people I met along the way. To them, I was a stranger, a curiosity, perhaps an intruder. Yet, they almost always lent a helping hand. Told me about their country. Showed me around. Protected me. Advised me. Offered me shelter, food and drinks. Even though they were often poor, they shared what little they had and allowed me, if only for a short while, into their lives.

Fortunately, I found many people willing to help me with the editing. Everyone who read along thus had a contribution to make to the realization of this book. I would especially like to mention the following friends. Marieke, who gave me precise feedback and made me realize the importance of formulating accurately. Sasha, who convinced me that long sentences do not make for great readability and who made me hunt for sentences of over 28 words. Gonneke, who was able to pinpoint sections which needed improvement and who gave me confidence in this book as a literary expert. Renata, who read along into the wee hours and proposed improvements at various stages of the manuscript. Maya, who posed questions regarding the content, which enabled me to improve the preface and introduction. Margreet, René, Francine, Steven and Suzan who all read one or more chapters and who pointed out potential

problems and improvements. Several travelers whom I interviewed about the risks of traveling.

For this English version, I want to express my gratitude to native speakers who graciously read my first translated manuscript. Thank you, Carol, Maya, Mary, Sandra, Rose and Phil, Adam, and Jake, for the time you took to read and give me valuable feedback.

My sister Leila, brother-in-law Matthieu and niece Maite gave honest advice that made me look at the manuscript with different eyes. Finally, this book would by definition not have been written without my parents Caroline and Gerard, who passed on their travel gene, who taught me to look at the world with an open mind, never to give up, to throw myself into adventures and to trust in a happy ending. And that deserves my greatest gratitude.

Leiden, September 2021

# INTRODUCTION

*A ship in harbor is safe, but that is not what ships are built for.*

—John A. Shedd, *Salt from my Attic*, 1928

*You can never cross the ocean until you have the courage to lose sight of the shore.*

—Christopher Columbus

‘Isn’t it dangerous to travel to all those weird countries?’ That is the question I’m most frequently asked (after ‘what is the most beautiful country in the world?’). Perhaps an obvious one to ask someone who has visited every country on earth. To me, it’s all a matter of perception. My motivation to travel is fired by an unbridled curiosity for unknown places, for people with very different lives and for cultures that are remote from mine. I’m elated when I cross a border to a new country and can crave for all the new things I’m going to see and do. I can be intensely happy when I meet extraordinary people and when I encounter natural or man-made beauty that overwhelms me. When strangers invite me wholeheartedly into their lives. My heart starts to beat faster when I embark on something without having a clue how it will end. Where others might see danger, I see adventure.

After I decided to travel to all the countries in the world, I compiled a list of the 75 remaining. I used the only objective definition of ‘country’: the one used by the United Nations. At the time, it consisted of 192 countries; South Sudan was added a few years later. As soon as you divert from this list, you

quickly get bogged down in a subjective, complicated, endless, and often politically charged discussion – which can be entertaining and exhausting at the same time.

Among the remaining countries were destinations that many would consider ‘dangerous’. Somalia, Iraq, the Central African Republic and several others that, according to all current travel advice, had been colored deep red for years, and where you were advised not to go. ‘Don’t travel to Somalia. Are you there now? Leave the country as soon as possible [...] Serious crime occurs in this country; including armed robberies, kidnappings, murders, explosions, and sectarian violence.’ I have read more compelling promotional holiday brochures. Nauru, Tuvalu and São Tomé & Príncipe: although not on the red list, I had never heard of them either. Where were those countries really, and how could I get there?

I quickly realized that I had set myself a goal of which I could not foresee the consequences. I wasn’t even sure whether it was feasible. Excitement took possession of me. It was clear that I found myself at the beginning of the greatest adventure of my life. The more I thought about it, the more enthusiastic I got. It would certainly be exciting. But dangerous?

During one of my many Interrail wanderings, in my early twenties, I overheard a few young Americans exchange experiences about their travels across Europe. The sights not to be missed, the best food, the most beautiful cities. Barcelona, Venice and Athens were all high on their list. Then they talked about where you should avoid going. One of them mentioned Amsterdam. He had heard several stories of people who had been robbed. A girl supported him: she too had been told that it was unsafe. The others nodded in agreement. In no time, they labeled Amsterdam as the most dangerous city in Europe and decided to steer well clear of it.

I could hardly believe what I was hearing. They were

talking about my city! I lived in Amsterdam, cycled through it day and night without ever feeling threatened or unsafe. Yes, a junkie once stole my bike. But to call that dangerous? It made me realize for the first time how biased and unreliable the advice and warnings of others can be, how easy it is for people to frighten each other and how a bad reputation, once obtained, is very difficult to erase.

How often have I been warned during my ramblings about the people in the next village, the next region, the capital or (especially!) the neighboring country. They're all crooks, they're unreliable, it's dangerous: don't go there! Only to discover on the spot that the inhabitants received me like a prodigal son with the corresponding treatment. But when I left, they would warn against the residents of the next village. They *really* couldn't be trusted!

What is that about? Is there an ingrained sense of superiority in people? An aversion to everything different and odd? Fear of the unknown? The unknown is precisely what the traveler longs for, which drives him to go on and on to the next place he wants to discover. Granted, the unknown by definition also entails risk. But risk is not necessarily the same as danger.

By nature, humans are equipped to assess risks and make decisions when facing dire situations. Those decisions are by no means always rational. Our brains have set up a beautiful system in which fear, an expected reward and emotion work together to assess and act on risks. Confronted with acute danger, we have the well-known freeze, fight or flight reaction. That has helped humanity to survive for many centuries in all kinds of frightful situations.

In recent decades, we have done everything we can to eliminate as many risks as possible and make life as safe as we can. We have created labels, warnings, regulations and much more to achieve this which, in many cases, has certainly been useful.

For example, cars, airplanes and trains have now become so safe that we use them without even thinking about possible dangers, convinced that we will arrive safely.

Gradually, we have come to think that we can fully control life and that we can exclude all risks. We have forgotten that certain risks are inherent in life and that destiny still has the final say. Besides, taking risks doesn't always have to be negative. Look at it from the other side: if we never took risks, everyone would stay in their comfort zone. Many inventions and discoveries would never have been made. Columbus would never have crossed that ocean. We would never improve in our lives; we wouldn't dare to ask that girl or boy that we have set our eyes on for a date.

Travel and adventure go hand in hand. They don't exist without taking risks. Images and reports about terrorist attacks and insecurity flash around the world in a matter of milliseconds. They enlarge the risks, feed the fear and put the 'Dangerous' stamp on a country. Once obtained, it's very hard to get rid of. It's because of those images that people ask me if all that traveling isn't dangerous and if I have gone mad.

Reality on the ground is always different. Often very different. Especially because of the people I met on the way, I realized that the large majority of people around the world are kind to their visitors. This also applies to countries that are supposedly dangerous – or even more so there. Man is apparently keen to welcome the stranger and to protect him. That helped me a lot to have confidence and bring my travels to a happy conclusion. Was I scared? No. Fear is a bad counselor, especially for the traveler. This is certainly the case for the adventurer who wants to visit all the countries in the world.

In this book, I will take you along on travels where risk was unavoidable. In every chapter, situations arise where I had to make choices, often without overseeing the consequences.

Some stories are situated in countries that are generally labeled ‘Dangerous’. Others describe adventures with people I met along the way and obstacles I had to deal with to achieve my goal, as well as moments where I was plain lucky – or not. The bottom line is that I rarely opted for the easy way. I leave it to the reader to judge the sanity of my decisions.

Allow me to take you to Somalia and Yemen, Cameroon and Kyrgyzstan, Nauru and Afghanistan – and other destinations that are probably very different from what you would expect beforehand. Just like those countries surprised me when I traveled there. And I always came back safely.

# CHAPTER 11

## OPERATION PEPERNOOT

*Somalia – 2014*

If there was one single country that I was reluctant to visit for years, it would have to be Somalia. Since 1991, there has been a civil war in which various warlords and (later) an African peacekeeping force have been active. Al-Shabaab, a self-proclaimed sister organization of al-Qaeda, has also entered this complex mix of unrest. Their logo: an opened Quran with two crossed Kalashnikovs in front of it. They take this logo quite literally. They frequently stop buses and anyone who can't recite a few verses of the Quran gets a bullet through the head, on the spot.

The capital Mogadishu is formally in the hands of African Union troops and what is supposedly the country's federal government. Al-Shabaab is trying to show, by carrying out irregular attacks, that it has no intention of giving in. Besides, they are taking revenge on the Kenyans, who are part of the international forces in the country, by carrying out major attacks in neighboring Kenya.

The Americans suffered a humiliating defeat in the early stages of the civil war when they intervened in 1993. Together with Malaysians and Pakistanis, operating under the UN umbrella, they tried to eliminate warlord Aidid and ensure that

humanitarian aid ended up where it was intended and not in the pockets of the warlords. The Cold War had just ended and the hope was that the UN would be able to play a more active role in protecting vulnerable people around the world and improving their lot. But *Operation Gothic Serpent* ended in colossal failure. This bad start on the international scene by the then newly elected President Clinton contributed, six months later, to the fact that he, along with the rest of the world, looked on passively when the massacre in Rwanda took place. No one dared to mount a humanitarian intervention after the Mogadishu debacle. Warlords now ruled, unchallenged. Somalia was left to itself and slid into an unstoppable spiral of violence, death and destruction.

According to the travel advice of Foreign Affairs, you absolutely should not go to Somalia. But if your goal is to travel to all the countries in the world, you can't escape going there as well. While most other travelers choose to go to Somaliland, the safer north part of the country, I decide to travel to the 'real' Somalia. It's clear that this will be an unusual journey. Traveling around on your own is impossible in Mogadishu, there are no guidebooks for the country, and travel organizations don't include it in their packages.

While researching the possibilities of visiting Mogadishu, I came across Ahmed, a Somali returnee from London who offered tours of the city. His website was full of sunny pictures and promotional texts: if you didn't know better, it looked like a city trip to Madrid instead of Mogadishu. Besides showing you the city and its surroundings, he could also take care of all the hassle. In Somalia's case, that meant not only a visa and a secure hotel, but also armed guards. I had arranged everything online and through emails. Sometimes, I got restless when I

didn't hear anything for a while. Occasionally, I would receive answers every day, but often I wouldn't hear from him for weeks. When I closed my front door to go to Mogadishu, I wasn't at all sure I would be allowed to enter the country.

Given the country's bad name, the lousy security situation and the strongly negative travel advice, my strategy for the trip to Somalia is entirely different from all my other travels. Because of all the practical limitations and impossibilities, this trip wouldn't be how I would like it to be. I will fly there, try to see and do as much as possible in as short a time as possible and then return. I approach it as a military operation and name it *Operation Pepernoot*, because I'm arriving on 5 December (Pepernoot is a ginger nut which people in The Netherlands eat on that day to celebrate Sinterklaas).

I also decide to make it a secret operation: I inform almost nobody about my upcoming trip. My father, girlfriend Anneke, colleague Martin and neighbor Eric are the only ones who know about it. They are sworn to secrecy because I want to prevent other friends and relatives from getting overly worried during my absence. While I'm packing the day before my departure, I hear that there has been a serious attack near Mogadishu airport. There have been so many victims that it's even on the news back home.

The phone is already ringing. 'Hi, it's Martin. Have you seen the news?'

'You must mean the attack in Mogadishu? Yes, I saw it.'

'I take it you're not going anymore?'

'Uh, my plan still stands. I leave tomorrow morning, on the 11:30 flight.'



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