

# WANDERHEART

A heart-shaped cutout in the center of the cover reveals a landscape. Inside the heart, a shepherd in a red robe stands with a flock of sheep on a sandy plain. In the background, two large, rocky islands or headlands rise from the sea under a blue sky.

NEW STORIES  
*from*  
MY TRAVELS  
*to*  
EVERY COUNTRY IN THE WORLD

**BORIS KESTER**

BORIS KESTER

# WANDERHEART

New Travel Stories from  
My Travels to Every Country in the World

TRAVELADVENTURES.ORG

“Tell me, and tell me the truth. Where have you been, and through which countries have you traveled? Tell us about the peoples themselves, and about their cities—who were hostile, cruel and uncivilized, and who were hospitable and humane?”

– Homer, *Odyssey*

“Why must we listen to our hearts?” asked the boy.  
“Because that’s where you’ll find your treasure.”

– Paulo Coelho, *The Alchemist*

“Wherever you go, go with all your heart.”

– Confucius

# CONTENTS

Introduction	9
Prologue	11
1. The Sirens of the Traveler - <i>Spain/Portugal/Morocco</i>	13
2. Funeral among Birch Trees - <i>Sweden/Finland</i>	29
3. Under the Olive Trees 1: Hati - <i>Denmark/Spain</i>	45
4. Omotenashi - <i>Japan</i>	61
5. Under the Olive Trees 2: Sunny - <i>Spain</i>	71
6. Against the Wall - <i>Iraq</i>	89
7. Under the Olive Trees 3: The Ladies - <i>Spain</i>	109
8. Pride and Prejudice: Beyond the Fence - <i>Haiti</i>	125
9. Under the Olive Trees 4: Farah and Luigi - <i>Spain</i>	149
10. Becalmed - <i>Saudi Arabia/India/Bahrain</i>	161
11. Stayin' Alive - <i>Panama/Nicaragua</i>	183
12. Mountains of the Moon - <i>Democratic Republic of the Congo</i>	201
13. Fifty - <i>Ukraine</i>	225

## INTRODUCTION

**A**t twenty-three, I quit a promising IT job. My colleagues asked about my new position and especially the accompanying salary. But my resignation stemmed from a deeper realization: the rigid pattern of office life would never truly make me happy. I yearned for freedom and wanted to explore the world.

I started traveling—always more and always farther—went to university, and then started working for an airline. Each journey and every adventure fueled my desire for more. Eventually, that insatiable hunger led me to visit every country in the world.

Along the way, I discovered what traveling is really about. It's about people who surprise and move you with their unexpected hospitality. About prejudices that disappear when you take the time to look deeper. About finding humanity, even—or perhaps especially—in places where you least expect it. About pushing your own boundaries. About learning to trust your intuition, especially when it leads you to places others would avoid.

Too often, I see people arranging their lives according to society's expectations, the presumed norms of their environment, or self-imposed limitations. We set aside our passions and dreams, make decisions out of fear or convenience, and thus hold ourselves back from much beauty before we've really begun. We listen too little to our hearts. Why? Out of

fear of failing to achieve what we truly desire? Out of fear of letting our dreams become reality?

After my decision to step away from my promising career, I learned to listen more keenly to my intuition. As a result, I naturally started taking more risks. Each time, my confidence that things would turn out well grew, and I dared to go one step further. My heart proved to be an excellent guide. Not just for traveling, but for life in general. It strengthened my determination, it urged me to see things in perspective, and it taught me not to be afraid. Travel is like life in miniature.

In *Wanderheart*, I invite you to live all kinds of adventures together with me. From my very first trip to Morocco as an impetuous youngster still trying to find my way, to a moving glimpse into the reality of the devastating war in Ukraine. Come with me as I knock on the door of a stranger in Japan who will immerse me in unexpected hospitality. Travel with me through impoverished Haiti, feel my wonder as I climb the Mountains of the Moon in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and experience with me one of the most precarious moments of my wanderings in Iraq, in addition to many other adventures. Interwoven throughout these episodes is the story of my search for a lost love to bring her my first book, *The Long Road to Cullaville*.

I hope *Wanderheart* inspires you to follow your own heart, even when the path is uncertain. Because life can be just as surprising as you dare to make it.

Leiden, May 2025

## PROLOGUE

I should arrive in a few kilometers. The realization hits me with increasing intensity: this might be the most exciting of all my adventures. Waves of unbridled eagerness and gnawing doubt surge through my body like a wild cocktail. Yet deeper inside, I also feel a calming certainty. The conviction that I cannot do anything other than what I'm about to do, simply because it comes straight from my heart.

I'm on my way to bring Nana a copy of my book, *The Long Road to Cullaville*. She plays a defining role in the first chapter—without her, the book probably would never have existed. After the dramatic end of our turbulent relationship more than thirteen years ago, we never saw or spoke to each other again.

Nana doesn't know I'm coming—just as I don't know if she'll be home. I have no idea how she'll react when she sees me—that is, *if* I can even find her, because I only vaguely know where she lives.

## 10

### BECALMED

*Saudi Arabia/India/Bahrain - 2020*

Ten days ago, I was skiing in Austria. The mountains were wrapped in an exemplary layer of snow, the air so clear that you could see not only the next valley but also the white giants rising beyond it. It was one of those winter days so perfect it felt unreal.

Among the fluorescent jackets and frost-crystal-covered beanies, one figure stood out: a heavily bundled woman wearing a surgical face mask under her ski goggles. Not only did the mask look absurd with the rest of her gear, but it also seemed completely pointless as the icy mountain wind howled around us. ‘Who could you possibly infect while racing down at sixty kilometers per hour at an elevation of two thousand meters?’ we joked.

I did occasionally catch the word *corona* in conversations on the ski lift, between stories about fresh snow and the most beautiful descents. But it sounded like something far removed from our reality, just another one of those epidemics in Asia or Africa like there had been before. There would be some local restrictions; the problem would be contained as it had been with SARS, MERS, and Ebola. Very unfortunate for the people there, but for the vast majority of the world, a mere curiosity.

Yet this solitary woman with her face mask was a harbinger of a world that was about to become unrecognizable and unimaginable, a world in which that face mask would no longer be absurd but a symbol of a new reality.

It's now the end of February, and my companion Lisa and I meet up in Saudi Arabia. I've been here several times before but always for work: until a few months ago, it was virtually impossible to visit the country as a private individual. We are among the first travelers to enter on a tourist visa after leader Mohammed bin Salman has decided to diversify the economy and allow tourism.

Soon after arrival, I am amazed to see how rapidly Saudi Arabia is changing. Things that were forbidden and unthinkable in this strictly conservative country are suddenly permitted. Lisa is wearing a t-shirt, and her head is uncovered; the previously mandatory *abaya* is now optional. As she steers our car through traffic, I watch the men in traditional white *kandoras* in the cars around us. They turn their heads and stare at her with a mixture of bewilderment and disapproval but also fascination. I remember how, during previous visits, I wasn't even allowed to sit in a taxi with female colleagues. The idea that they would be allowed to get behind the wheel of a car had been unthinkable. So this is what a revolution looks like, unfolding before our eyes. Who knows what else might change in this controversial country?

From Jeddah, we head straight east, toward Taif. At some point, we see a colossal tower looming above the landscape in the distance. As we get closer, we think we even see a clock at the top of the enormous building that increasingly resembles Big Ben. What on earth can that be?

We are using a navigation app, which, as often happens, has calculated an unfathomable route via B-roads that apparently results in a shorter distance to our destination. This route directs us straight into

Mecca. Who would have ever thought we could drive into this city? At one time, a non-Muslim's entering Islam's holiest city was punishable by death. We see an enormous road sign showing a black cube on a white background. The Kaaba. We exchange quick glances. This is exactly what my wanderheart lives for. The curiosity that drives us as travelers once again pulls us across the threshold of doubt.

We decide to follow the signs and see where we end up. The closer we get, the more I wonder if this is really a good idea. On the other hand, it isn't indicated anywhere that we aren't allowed to proceed. Prophet Mohammed believed that God's house should be accessible to everyone; prohibitions were only thought up later by the authorities. So, we drive on.

A bit farther on, a forest of minarets appears before us. From all directions, a stream of people flows toward those slender towers. Buses are parked on both sides, with even more people getting out and joining the flow. By some miracle, we manage to park in a side alley.

Lisa has just arrived from Eritrea and had been in Somalia before that. She bought a black abaya there, which she now puts on over her clothes. With her Asian background, she looks like one of the many Malaysian or Indonesian Muslim women walking around. For a pittance, I buy a snow-white prayer cap in a shop on the corner, and I immediately feel less out of place when I put it on my head. Once we join the enormous river of people, there is no turning back, and we are immediately guided toward the Grand Mosque.

In front of this holy place lies an enormous square. To our left, we see the huge tower we spotted on our way. It turns out to be the Makkah Clock Royal Tower, at 601 meters, the fourth-tallest building in the world and, at sixteen billion dollars, also one of the most expensive ever built. The four enormous clocks, the highest in existence, are visible from twenty-



## Enjoyed this preview?

*Continue your journey through the complete book*

# Wanderheart

13 Chapters • Follow Your Heart to Extraordinary Places

 **Coming early 2026**

*"The adventures had me heart racing. From Iran to Cuba, I was on the edge of my seat." — Reader praise for Boris Kester's travel writing*

### **Get the COMPLETE First Chapter FREE**

**Loved what you just read?** Get the full first chapters of both *Wanderheart* and *The Long Road to Cullaville* when you join our reader community

*Plus: Browse 27 more 3-page previews from other chapters (no email required)*

[Get Full Chapters](#)

### **Get Notified at Launch**

In *Wanderheart*, Boris Kester takes you from the hospitality of a Japanese stranger to the unique history of Haiti, and from the treasures of Iraq to the battlefields of Ukraine. Woven through these adventures is the compelling story of his quest to find a lost love. Boris Kester takes you from the hospitality of a Japanese stranger to the battlefields of Ukraine. Woven through these adventures is his quest to find a lost love. With his keen eye for detail, Kester writes about unexpected encounters you only experience when you dare to stray from the beaten path. Every page breathes pure travel passion and invites you to push your own boundaries.

**Be the first to know when *Wanderheart* launches in early 2026** — plus receive an exclusive launch week discount!

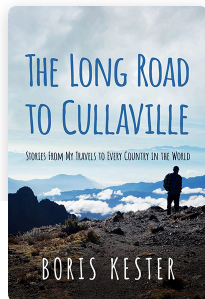
[Join the Launch List](#)

Available in early 2026

Paperback ISBN: 979-8896943174 • Ebook ISBN: 979-8896943167

## Also by Boris Kester

---



### **The Long Road to Cullaville**

Within its sixteen stories, *The Long Road to Cullaville* takes you to Yemen, Congo, Nauru and Afghanistan, amongst other places. Thanks to his rich descriptions, the author shows you what it's like to travel in unusual countries.

His stories are compelling and entertaining, breathtaking and moving. Meanwhile, he makes you think about the risks of travel and the pre-eminent influence of fate. The book caters to both experienced globetrotters and armchair travelers, inspiring wanderlust and curiosity in all.

**Winner of the 2023 NomadMania Best Travel Book Award**

**[Learn More & Order →](#)**

---

### **Follow Boris's Travels**

 [traveladventures.org](https://traveladventures.org)

 Facebook •  Instagram •  Newsletter