

WANDERHEART

A heart-shaped cutout in the center of the cover reveals a landscape. In the foreground, a shepherd wearing a red robe stands with a flock of sheep on a sandy, brownish ground. In the background, two large, rocky, reddish-brown islands or mountains rise from a body of water under a clear blue sky.

NEW STORIES
from
MY TRAVELS
to
EVERY COUNTRY IN THE WORLD

BORIS KESTER

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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

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INTRODUCTION

At 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.

STAYIN' ALIVE

Panama/Nicaragua - 2022

A few hours after I land in Panama, Gabriella also arrives, and I head toward her gate. Eleven months ago, she sent me a message asking where in Italy she could buy my book. Gabriella had also set the goal of visiting all countries in the world, and she was curious about my stories. I sent her a link, and that seemed to be the end of it. Half a year later, we got back in touch. Eventually, we were sending each other dozens of messages every day, so we decided we should meet in person. We chose the Greek island of Folegandros, where we discovered we indeed had the connection we had felt in our messages. Since then, we've made several trips together.

I arrive at Gabriella's gate on time, and when the stream of passengers from the plane starts to flow, I spot her immediately. She radiates energy and joy among the gray crowd that has just arrived with her from Paris. We spend a few hours in the lounge before heading to the gate for our next flight. We're on our way to Managua and will celebrate the holidays in Nicaragua. I was there more than twenty years ago and am curious if I'll recognize anything of the country. We wait in an overcrowded hall in the old terminal of this Central-American hub. In a few hours, we'll be there. Nothing suggests that the coming twenty-four hours will become

a chain of unpredictable and moving moments that will stay with me for a long time.

As always, I've done my homework. There aren't many flights, and they all seem to be overbooked. Not just tonight's flight, but those in the coming days as well. It is, after all, a few days before Christmas. I report to the counter, and the lady warns me that it's unlikely I'll get on with my standby ticket. They often say that—to avoid giving false hope. I count on my luck with the optimism you need when traveling with these kinds of tickets. Ten minutes later, a voice comes over the speakers. They're looking for passengers willing to give up their seats.

Inside, I'm starting to feel uneasy, but at the same time, I try to stay positive. The cacophony of all the people around me and the fatigue from a long journey are getting to me. Gabriella is an eternal optimist and says I'll eventually get on, even if it's on a crew seat. Indeed, that's sometimes an option, but I don't know if Copa Airlines would offer me one. Again, the announcement sounds, now more urgent. I notice they're promising passengers they'll be booked "on another flight to Managua," not "the next one." No one comes forward at the gate, and my apprehension begins to drown out my optimism.

As always, well before the door opens, a long line forms with people eager to board. I've never understood this hurry to voluntarily join a long queue. Passengers then disappear one by one through the terminal opening. When the hall is much emptier about twenty minutes later, I return to the counter.

It no longer surprises me when the ladies say there's no space for me on the flight. It's time to show my ID and ask for a crew seat. The ladies barely look at it and immediately say they won't issue crew seats. I explain that I'm crew myself, that I'm familiar with the procedures, and that my girlfriend has a reservation for the flight. I tell them we're traveling to

Managua together. But the ladies aren't impressed. They don't even pick up the radio to ask the captain if I can come along. Resignation sets in: I can't make something out of nothing.

But Gabriella hasn't given up yet. She shows her boarding pass and says, 'Let him travel in my seat. I'll sit on the toilet. Or in the cockpit.'

I look at her: where did she get that from? At the same time, this is how I've come to know her: she's determined, likes to keep things in her own hands, and doesn't give up easily. The Copa lady also looks surprised and shakes her head. 'No, that's not possible.'

'But he has to come with me! This is the start of our vacation!' I hear panic in her voice.

'Ma'am, the flight is overbooked. We've already had to look for people to give up their seats. There's no space for him. He'll have to try again tomorrow.'

'No, no. He must come! You have to think of a solution!' She now sounds desperate.

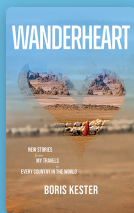
'Again, I cannot let him on this flight. However, I need to ask you to board now. All other passengers are already inside, the flight needs to leave.'

'Then I'll stay here too,' she says decisively.

My stomach tightens when I hear the desperation in her voice. For a moment, the thought flashes through my mind to just grab her and never let go, but I know I have to be sensible.

'No, sweetheart, that's not a good idea. Tomorrow there's only one flight, and it's already overbooked, too. If you don't leave, we risk both being stuck here. You really need to go now. I'll find a way to get to Nicaragua, and it's much easier alone than with the two of us.'

Now I see, for the first time, tears streaming down Gabriella's face. She looks at me, and through her watery eyes, I see deep sorrow. After months of hard work, she had been looking forward to traveling



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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.

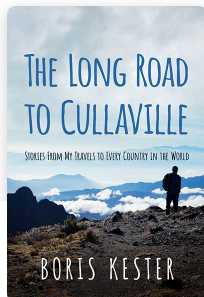
Be the first to know when *Wanderheart* launches in early 2026 — plus receive an exclusive launch week discount!

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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.

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