

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. The background shows a wide, flat expanse leading to two large, rocky, reddish-brown islands or hills under a clear blue sky. The overall scene is bathed in warm, golden light, suggesting a sunrise or sunset.

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.

13

FIFTY

Ukraine - 2014, 2023

Shuffling, I walk up the sloping road on the northern side of Independence Square. A long row of small altars has been set up here, and I pause briefly at each one. I gaze into the serene face of a woman or man. Below each photo is the person's name and age, and a blue-and-yellow flag, next to which a candle burns in a red glass. Many of the people are not even half my age. Ukrainians call them the Heavenly Hundred.

Eight months earlier, these people were mercilessly shot by snipers. They had participated in demonstrations for freedom and independence, and against dictatorship. It appears that this Revolution of Dignity has largely succeeded. The ostentatious dictator has been driven away, a new government installed, and peace restored. Behind me, high above on a white column and golden capital, the protective goddess Berehynia holds a laurel wreath above her head. This Monument to Independence was erected in 1991, after the country regained its independence from Russia. On the horizon and under Berehynia's watchful eye, a hopeful future dawns for Ukraine.

However, the revolution was too much for Russia to bear. Merely four days after the 2014 Olympic Winter Games in Sochi had ended and the Olympic torch extinguished, Russia sent soldiers to the eastern part of Ukraine. They quickly annexed Crimea as well, thus illegally taking a large chunk of the country. Then, a few months later, MH17 was shot down, indirectly involving my own country in the war. The world looked away from these flagrant violations of sovereignty by the largest nuclear power, and the conflict simmered for years.

A week before visiting the monument in Kyiv, I arrive early in the morning in Lviv, a city that has also been known as Lemberg, Lvov, and Lwów. Since 1991, the city is finally Ukrainian. She is still sleeping, and I find myself at the eighteenth-century Lychakiv cemetery, where history rests beneath ancient trees. Among the elegant tomb monuments, I cannot imagine that nine years from now, I will comfort a mother here who lost her son to Putin's cruel war.

After the overwhelming Renaissance and Baroque architecture of Lviv, which distantly reminds me of lavishly decorated cities like Prague and Vienna, I yearn for nature. I decide to climb Hoverla—at 2,061 meters: Ukraine's highest mountain. It's unusually cold for the time of year. The roadside is white with frost, and snow lies in the dark folds of the mountain, even though it is only the end of October.

The climb becomes always more challenging, the higher I get. My hands regularly grasp at trees for support as I work my way up over frozen snow and mud. Once I reach the roof of Ukraine, plants are wrapped in white crystals, and icicles hang from their leaves. I also see crosses, piles of stones, and a large blue-and-yellow flag fluttering in the icy wind.

The descent is more like one big slide. Fortunately, I find a sturdy stick that helps me keep my balance in this wintry landscape. At some points in my descent, I let myself go, and slide down while sitting.

When I finally return to Yaremcha, dusk is turning into night. My last adventure as a forty-something has ended well.

You see, I had come to Ukraine to celebrate my fiftieth birthday. The idea initially had emerged just before I turned thirty. My birthday falls on October 30, and I decided to celebrate this milestone on the corresponding latitude. From Rio, I flew to Porto Alegre, straight through which the thirtieth parallel runs. Ten years later, I celebrated my fortieth in Aranjuez, on the fortieth parallel, after which I flew on to Copenhagen. There, Nana was waiting for me with a cake full of *Dannebrogs*, Danish flags.

As my fiftieth birthday approached, I had already spent six years traveling to all countries in the world. It seemed obvious to celebrate this half-century in a country I hadn't visited yet and through which the fiftieth parallel runs. My eye fell on Ukraine, one of the last countries in Europe I hadn't been to. When I took another good look at the map, I noticed that the thirtieth meridian also runs through it. I typed 50N, 30E into Google Maps, and the software zoomed in on a field in Palianychynsi, a village about sixty kilometers, as the crow flies, southwest of Kyiv. Perfect.

After visiting the historic Kamyanets-Podilsky with its enormous castle and thousand-year-old city, people I meet in the street invite me home for a hearty Ukrainian borscht. Then I drift into my birthday to the rhythm of the night train. Early in the morning in Fastiv, I leave my luggage in a locker. I walk along a local tree-lined road towards Palianychynsi. Along the way, I fill a plastic bag with pine cones for the coming winter as they give a nice scent to my fireplace.

After walking for over two hours, I arrive in the village on the fiftieth parallel. I want to see how close I can get to that field I saw on the satellite photo. To my surprise, there's no fence next to the garden. There's not a



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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.

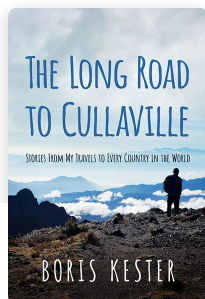
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Within its sixteen stories, *The Long Road to Cullaville* takes you to Yemen, Congo, Nauru and Afghanistan, amongst other places. Thanks to his rich descriptions, the author shows you what it's like to travel in unusual countries.

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