

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 beach. In the background, two large, rocky islands rise from the water under a 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.

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OMOTENASHI

Japan - 1996

I had met Swiss Daniela on a safari in South Africa. A few months and many faxes later, we decided to meet again in Tokyo. We will have two days together, but we could never have known that this short trip would still bring a smile to our faces many years later.

With a body full of jet lag, I head to Daniela's hotel near Narita International Airport a few hours after arrival. Tokyo beckons, with its temples, skyscrapers, old neighborhoods, markets—each with their own story. But something in us resists this abundance. Maybe it's fatigue, maybe intuition, but we decide to seek out the unexpected. We rent a car, turn our backs on the metropolis, and opt for the unknown coast in the direction of Chōshi. It's one of those decisions you make without knowing what the consequences will be.

We navigate using road signs and a piece of paper on which the car rental agent has scribbled “Chōshi” in Japanese characters—no Google Maps, no translation app, no smartphone. This vulnerability would, without my knowing it, become the key to one of my most precious travel experiences and an important lesson in trusting my instincts.

We forget the time difference as we drive. We talk about travels and languages (I thought *I* was a polyglot speaking six languages, but she speaks two more!), about our work and lives. The kind of conversation that can only emerge during a shared adventure. After all the faxes, it feels familiar, as if we've known each other for years.

Time and again I forget how early the night falls in this Land of the Rising Sun. It's already dark when we reach the next intersection. I position the car so the headlights shine on the road sign. We now recognize a word of three characters. On the left, an intricate character with fourteen brush strokes, in the middle, a sort of 7 with a line through it, and on the right a tall cross with an unfinished little rectangle below. By now we recognize this as the Japanese representation of *Chōshi*. We follow the sign and indeed enter the coastal town shortly after.

We cruise randomly through the city, looking for a hotel. One could be hiding behind any facade, but without knowledge of Japanese, we're in the dark. That's Japan: what looks like a desolate door with faded curtains might just be the entrance to the city's best restaurant. But tonight that mysterious side of Japan works against us; we're tired, it's dark, and somewhere in this maze of unreadable signs, there must be a place to sleep. Perhaps there's a gray sliding door without any recognizable sign concealing a *ryokan*, a traditional Japanese inn.

We feel lost among canyons of neon advertisements, where the bright lighting blinds us with incomprehensible Japanese characters. The word *hotel* is nowhere to be seen—even if we knew the Japanese translation, we'd still get lost in this sea of strokes and curves.

Finally, we spot a tall building with *Hotel* in large letters written on the facade. The receptionist, perfectly groomed in an immaculate uniform, quietly points to a price list. Three hundred dollars per night—Japan is still one of the most expensive countries in the world. When we ask him about a cheaper alternative, I see his inner struggle.

He wobbles nervously back and forth, the corners of his mouth twitching in a mixture of embarrassment and discomfort. When he starts waving his right hand, I recognize the gesture of communicative helplessness, the gesture with which he's trying to say "no." In a country where service is sacred, his inability to assist us must weigh heavily on him.

The young man's colleagues at the hotel also prove unable to help us, so we'll have to think of some other way to find a place to sleep. By now it's past nine o'clock, and the situation and time difference have made us punch-drunk.

'I'm fed up with driving around aimlessly.' The words leave my mouth before I realize it. 'I'm just going to ring someone's doorbell where there's a light on.' It sounds absurd, yet simultaneously I feel it's right. Daniela looks at me as if I've gone mad, but when I ask if she has a better idea, she doesn't answer.

A moment later, I see light shining through the curtains of a house on a corner. I park the car in front of the door. My mouth suddenly feels dry. Only later would I learn that precisely these moments, when you follow your heart even though it seems crazy, often lead to the most beautiful travel experiences.

'Are you really going to ring the bell?'

In Daniela's voice, I hear the doubt that I now feel myself. Now that I'm a few steps away from the house, I feel my heart pounding. I curse myself. What on earth have I gotten into my head? It feels foolish to ring here, in the dark, at a stranger's house, in a country whose language I don't speak. But we're tired and have few options.

'Of course! We have nothing to lose,' I say as I get out. I sound more confident than I feel.

With each step toward the door, the idea becomes more inappropriate. What am I doing here anyway? In this country of strict behavioral



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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.

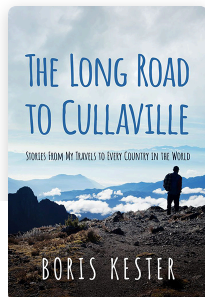
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Available in early 2026

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.

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