

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

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

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.

6

AGAINST THE WALL

Iraq - 2021/2022

The soldier alternately points his machine gun at Husain, Ali, and me. He barks that we must stand against the concrete wall. Another military man opens my backpack. He turns it upside down and dumps the contents onto the hood of our car. My camera and lenses balance precariously against the windshield wipers. The soldier with the weapon snarls that we must turn around. He prods my back with the barrel of his machine gun. Everything inside me screams to look back. I have to force myself to keep my gaze fixed on the gray concrete in front of me.

He continues to rage at us. His nervousness worries me. I saw how he loaded his machine gun and how he keeps his finger on the trigger. His rifle roughly taps against our legs. He shrieks: 'Spread your legs! Keep your arms above your head.' We obey, but apparently he's not satisfied. His voice cracks as he shouts: 'Arms higher!'

A brilliant New Year's Eve day. We should have been at the ancient temple of Kurigalzu long ago, but instead I'm staring at the capricious cracks in the concrete right in front of my nose. I am furious. At Ali who got us into this situation, at Husain who ignored my warnings about Ali's incompetence, and at myself for thinking that a guide and driver would navigate me through Iraq without problems.

When Husain tries to calm me down, I carefully roll my eyes to the left. The corners of his mouth are trembling, the morning sun glistening on the beads of sweat on his forehead and upper lip. Other travelers had warned me beforehand: without a guide, it would be impossible to get past the checkpoints. But here I stand against a concrete wall, with my guide right beside me.



Two weeks earlier, I had reluctantly arranged my trip through Sajjad. The stories I had read had convinced me: without an Arabic-speaking guide, traveling would be impossible in Iraq. After a wonderful week on Socotra, I flew through the extravagance of Abu Dhabi and Dubai to Baghdad. After having enjoyed the unique nature of the Yemeni island, I would now immerse myself in the history of one of the world's oldest civilizations. I had only been to Kurdish Iraq before and had long looked forward to seeing more of the country.

At the airport, I searched in vain among the drivers for a sign with my name. Instead, a uniformed woman showed me a photo of my passport on her phone. It turned out that my driver, Ali, was stuck in traffic, and she had arranged a different one for me. After a short ride and a checkpoint, we reached the Inter hotel, where Sajjad apologized. My guide, Husain, arrived shortly after, and together we walked into the city.

Only then did I realize it. Baghdad! The magical city from the fairy tales of my childhood, of flying carpets and *One Thousand and One Nights*. But also the city of CNN's live coverage of the Gulf War in 1991, of attacks and toppled statues of Saddam Hussein. Yet the city always retained that exotic resonance of ancient markets with spices and copper bowls, flying carpets and hookahs, of a civilization that had already reached full bloom when my own country was still largely underwater.

The reality was more stubborn. Honking cars squeezed themselves through narrow streets. An avalanche of neon light cascaded down from the facades, coloring pedestrians' faces in red, blue, yellow, and green. Husain took me to a café, where women and men sat chatting animatedly at tables. Their gesticulating hands were multiplied, along with the gleaming interior, in the impeccably clean mirrors on the walls.

In the garden, we found a quiet spot. The words flowed naturally; Husain and I turned out to have the same sense of humor. I told him about my first book and my search for Nana. Husain and I clicked immediately, and I looked forward to discovering this country at his side.

We left Baghdad early in the morning. The north beckoned with the promise of a journey: seven thousand years back in time. But first, we had to navigate our way through a sea of honking vehicles that held the city in its grip. Travel sounds dynamic and exciting, but sometimes it's mainly just a matter of patience, even in the cradle of civilization. When the cars finally wrested themselves from Baghdad's traffic stranglehold, we smoothly passed the checkpoints, heading toward Samarra. Only the grey weather worried me: I had hoped to see the ancient city in winter morning light.

A strip of sunlight fell on Samarra's famous Malwiya minaret. Once, the world's largest mosque stood here. A ninth-century wonder, with its unique spiral staircase winding like ivy around the exterior.

We climbed the railingless spiral staircase. The higher we got, the more impressive the view—and the narrower the steps. Below us, we saw the mosque that Hulagu Khan, grandson of the notorious Mongol conqueror, had destroyed in 1278. He left only the minaret standing—even the ruthless leader was thus capable of mercy.

After a cup of tea in the supervisor's cluttered office, we walked and climbed around the deserted Khalifa palace before driving back toward Baghdad. The plan had been to also visit the ziggurat of Kurigalzu, but



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.

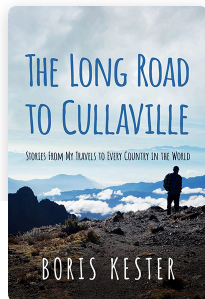
Be the first to know when *Wanderheart* launches in early 2026 — plus receive an exclusive launch week discount!

[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

 Facebook •  Instagram •  Newsletter