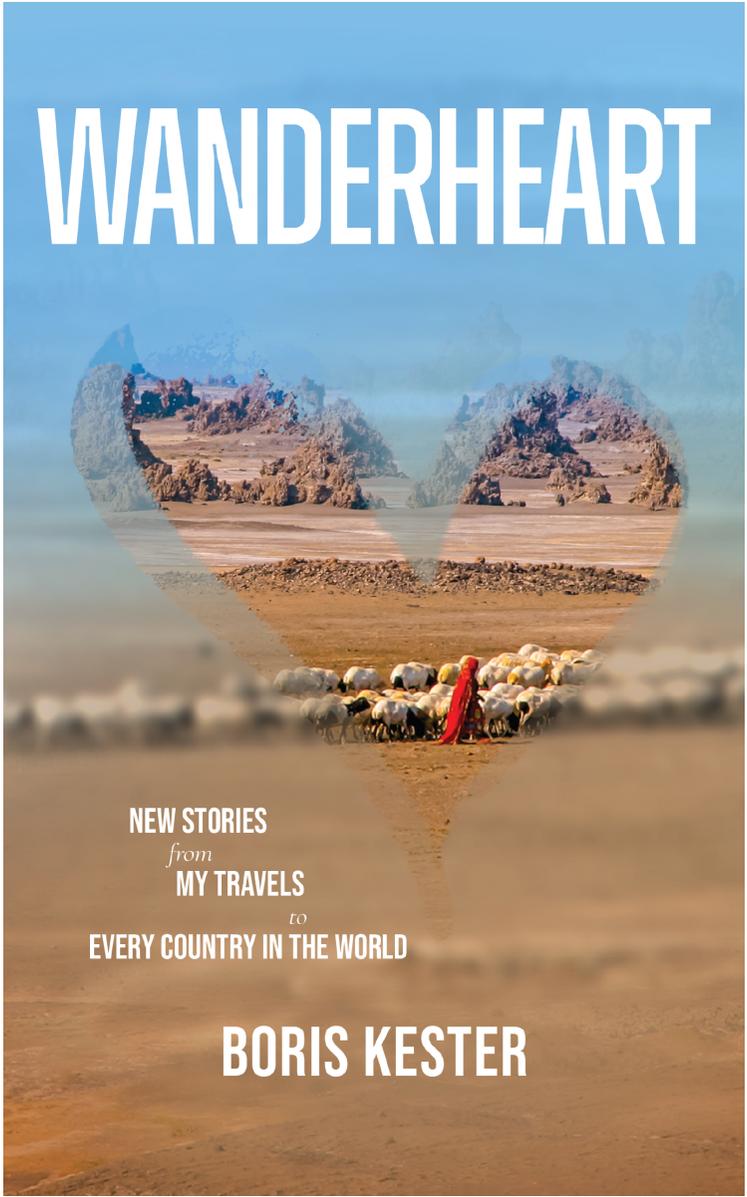


WANDERHEART

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 islands or headlands rise from the sea under a clear blue sky. The overall scene is bathed in a 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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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

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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.

1

THE SIRENS OF THE TRAVELER

Spain/Portugal/Morocco - 1985

Adventure was like invisible sirens, whose irresistible singing promised excitement and elicited from me a yearning for the unknown. They seduced me with a song that was both enchanting and deceptive. Odysseus had himself tied to the mast of his ship to resist the call of the demigoddesses, but I still had to learn to navigate between temptation and danger. For what is adventure if not a leap into the deep, without knowing what lies beneath the surface?

Captivating tales of intrepid heroes—Odysseus foremost, but also Marco Polo and Willem Barentsz, among others—who dared the unimaginable, set my young heart racing. My hunger for adventure was further fueled by the journeys I made with my parents and my sister. It was inevitable: as soon as I became an adult, I would wander too. When the time finally came, I decided to go to the southernmost point of the Interrail network. My very first solo journey. It was also the beginning of my long apprenticeship as a traveler: I was about to learn my first lessons.



As the wheels of the train begin their enchanting concert of steel on steel with the rails and steadily increase their rhythm, an intense battle unexpectedly ignites within me. Homesickness and doubt compete for priority with a fierce longing for the unknown. The overwhelming freedom I feel instills a paralyzing fear: I am completely by myself and hold my own fate in my hands. That suddenly seems terrifying: I feel a strong urge to retrace my steps. Yet I hold back my tears and press on, which will ultimately prove to be a defining moment of my life. How could I have known that the siren call of the uncertain would become the driving force behind my life and eventually lead me to every country in the world? Gradually, I would discover that following my heart isn't frightening but liberating.

On the way to Paris, my desire to discover gradually returns. Beneath the homesickness, beneath the loneliness, and beneath the uncertainty burns a deep yearning and endless curiosity. Curiosity about new places. About the sound of unknown languages. About exotic people. About food I've never tasted. About vistas I've never seen. Curiosity about cities where I've never left footprints.

So from Gare du Nord, I take the famous subway that brings me to Montparnasse station with plenty of time to board the train to Bordeaux. Once there, I transfer to the train to Irún, just across the border, in northern Spain. Two years ago, I had cycled a small stretch through that country from Andorra, but otherwise I have never really been to Spain. When I leave France, I will definitively leave the familiar behind. Then the real adventure will begin. In Spain I want to let myself be surprised by a country of which I really have no idea, other than the clichés of beach holidays, flamenco, and paella.

That evening I sleep as best I can in a train seat. When I stumble sleepily out of Irún station the next morning, I head to the beach with my

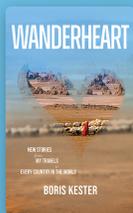
backpack. I lay down far from the surf, rest my head on my luggage, and fall into a deep sleep. The cold sea wakes me up a few hours later when it tickles my feet. I had never realized that the difference between low and high tide is enormous here. So I trudge through the small town, still drowsy, and make sure to be at the station in time for the train that will take me even farther south.

I share the compartment with Paulo and his girlfriend, two Portuguese people my age. We naturally start chatting. That's how it goes when you travel. You see each other, understand that you both want company, and start talking. There's always enough to talk about. *What do you study? Where do you live? Do you have brothers or sisters? What do you want to do in the future?* When the light in the compartment goes out, it doesn't take long before I fall asleep. Meanwhile, the train carries me through the darkness to a country where I've never been before and that I barely know how to imagine.

The next morning we arrive in Lisbon. Paulo has invited me to visit him. We continue talking and I stay overnight before saying goodbye. I want to explore the city.

I walk, crisscrossing through the streets and alleys inlaid with black and white mosaics. Up and down hills, to the Castelo São Jorge, where I look over the entire city. I ride an old tram that works its way up the steep streets with squeaks and creaks, drop by the cathedral and several squares with fountains. I rest, sitting at the quay to watch the Tagus flow by on its final stretch toward the Atlantic Ocean. I have a realization: Portugal is not a Mediterranean country—it faces west, toward that endless ocean that reaches far beyond the horizon. No wonder this country produced so many explorers.

I take the little train to Cascais and wander through the town on Portugal's west coast. On the way back towards the capital, I get off a few stops early and walk to the Monument of the Discoveries. It's built



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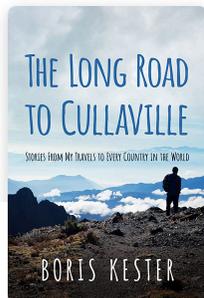
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