

# PREFACE

April 1965. The world consists of 124 countries and I'm just over five months old. My parents put me in a pram and take me on a journey. For the first time in my life, I cross an international border. We travel through Europe by train and take a boat to Crete. My parents discover the island on foot – with me in tow. On the way, the Greeks stuff me with treats, we sleep in a different place every night and I pose on the ancient stone throne of King Minos. My mum holds me while my dad takes my very first travel photo. Before I can even sit, walk, or talk, I learn the basics of travel. Transportation. Encounters. Discoveries. Adventure.

My childhood hero was Odysseus. His stories inspired me to dream about marvelous and dauntless travels to unknown places and about never giving up until you reach your goal. I wasn't even ten years old when I started keeping track of how many countries I had visited. Whenever we traveled to a new country, I would draw the flag in my diary with a multi-color pen and proudly add the country's number. Looking back in those notebooks, it's striking how happy I was when we visited a new place. New frontiers fascinated me intensely. Different people, different customs, different food, different money, a different language, and sometimes even a different script: every new country was a thrill. The rule at home was that you should have visited at least as many countries as your age. As a child, that wasn't difficult. On my tenth birthday, I had visited more than twenty countries in Europe and Asia.

Once I started traveling by myself, I made good use of Interrail. I traversed Europe to explore every corner. Travels to Africa followed. While it was fashionable to say that the world was getting smaller, mine just kept expanding. The famous paradox ‘the more you know, the more you realize how little you know’, is equally applicable to travel. The more I traveled, the more I became aware that there was so much more to discover. That realization made me restless and unsuitable for an office job. I resigned after four years. I then spent a year wandering through Europe and Africa to discover more new countries. After that, I also became restless inside university lecture halls and applied to be a flight attendant. This career enabled me to travel every week in between my lectures. After completing university, I decided to pursue a career in aviation because the irregular and unpredictable lifestyle suited my restlessness and wanderlust well.

Thus, my world expanded to include North and South America, the Far East and Oceania. Little by little, I conquered the planet. My yearning for the unknown made me explore countries that were new to me every year. The Internet enabled me to share my experiences and photos through my website: a continuation of the travel diaries I wrote as a child. In the meantime, I kept track of how many countries I had visited. To make things more complicated, new countries were born along the way out of a changing world order.

I had visited 117 countries when, due to a major earthquake in my personal life in 2008, I decided to travel differently. Instead of visiting one or two new countries every year, I decided to travel to all the countries in the world. I gave myself ten years to complete the remainder. The idea seemed absurd, but once it settled in my head, I realized that I had always had that goal – I just hadn’t been aware of it. Hadn’t I already started keeping

track of how many countries I'd been to as a nine-year-old? It had just taken me more than thirty years to find out that it would be my quest to visit them all.

The half-century between my first and my last country was packed with travel, full to the brim with adventures, and chock full of encounters with a diverse range of people. In Mogadishu I ate gingerbread cookies with Somalis while my four bodyguards kept a close eye on the area, their right hand on the trigger of their machine guns. Muslims got me drunk a stone's throw from the dizzying buildings of Samarkand, from where Timur Lenk once ruled an empire and where he is now buried. I sailed with betel nut traders on a boat down the pitch-black Sepik River in Papua New Guinea, under an infinite sky with so many shooting stars that my wishes were exhausted faster than I could think of new ones. On my way to the Central African Republic, I narrowly sped past a group of gorillas on the back of a motorbike. I came face to face with a brown bear in the wild Tian Shan mountains of Kyrgyzstan, got malaria three times, was trapped in a military base in Iran and crawled out of a car wreck with only minor injuries after a serious accident in South Africa.

June 2017. The world now comprises 193 countries. Just under Cullaville, I cross the last border of a country I have never been to before. I have visited all the countries in the world.

Soon thereafter, I realize that I have done something special. Even though I have many photos and stories of my travels published on my website [traveladventures.org](http://traveladventures.org), I decide to do more justice to some of those adventures by writing a book. Once more, my restlessness plays tricks on me because I

inevitably also continue to travel. After all, I know more than ever before that there are still so many places left to explore. It's thanks to the pandemic of 2020 and the associated lockdowns and travel restrictions that I'm finally forced to stay put and find the peace of mind and time to write this book.

For those who want to see images with the stories: go to [BorisKester.com](http://BorisKester.com), or scan the QR code on the back of this book.

My gratitude I offer, first and foremost, to the tens, hundreds, thousands of people I met along the way. To them, I was a stranger, a curiosity, perhaps an intruder. Yet, they almost always lent a helping hand. Told me about their country. Showed me around. Protected me. Advised me. Offered me shelter, food and drinks. Even though they were often poor, they shared what little they had and allowed me, if only for a short while, into their lives.

Fortunately, I found many people willing to help me with the editing. Everyone who read along thus had a contribution to make to the realization of this book. I would especially like to mention the following friends. Marieke, who gave me precise feedback and made me realize the importance of formulating accurately. Sasha, who convinced me that long sentences do not make for great readability and who made me hunt for sentences of over 28 words. Gonneke, who was able to pinpoint sections which needed improvement and who gave me confidence in this book as a literary expert. Renata, who read along into the wee hours and proposed improvements at various stages of the manuscript. Maya, who posed questions regarding the content, which enabled me to improve the preface and introduction. Margreet, René, Francine, Steven and Suzan who all read one or more chapters and who pointed out potential

problems and improvements. Several travelers whom I interviewed about the risks of traveling.

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My sister Leila, brother-in-law Matthieu and niece Maite gave honest advice that made me look at the manuscript with different eyes. Finally, this book would by definition not have been written without my parents Caroline and Gerard, who passed on their travel gene, who taught me to look at the world with an open mind, never to give up, to throw myself into adventures and to trust in a happy ending. And that deserves my greatest gratitude.

Leiden, September 2021