

THE LONG ROAD TO CULLAVILLE

Stories from my travels
to every country in the world

BORIS KESTER

Cover photo: Boris Kester
Near the summit of Mount Wilhelm
(4509m), Papua New Guinea

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An té a bhíonn siúlach, bíonn scéalach
He who travels has stories to tell (Irish saying)

In memory of my cousin Sander and my friends Walter, Mark &
Marilyn, who had the misfortune of being in the wrong place,
at the wrong time

Special thanks to Corona. Without you, I would have never found
the peace and time to write this book

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1.

Cupid amidst Kalashnikovs

Yemen – 2004

Adventure begins where the familiar ends. A city you're visiting for the first time, a path you've never followed before, a mountain you've never climbed. Unknown scents, unusual sounds. Meeting people whose language you don't speak and whose traditions you don't know. Together with curiosity comes surprise and wonder about all that is odd. However strange the experience seems, the biggest mistake you can make as a traveller is to forget that *you* are the stranger. It's up to you to try and make sense of it all. It's crucial to leave your prejudices at home, together with stereotypes and clichés. Only then can you really start to appreciate your new environment for what it truly is.

When you arrive in a country you've never been to before, that amazement is all but guaranteed. Everything is new. You're besieged by impressions and you're often short of the senses to absorb it all. Gradually, the unfamiliar surroundings transform from curiosity to the stage of new experiences. You just don't know what meaning they will have in your life and what feeling they will evoke when, later on, you recollect the memories of your journey. The first moments, immediately after arriving in a new country, are often the most dazzling. Everything is pure. You still have the innocent look of the child who is dying to experience something new and is open to anything.

Tonight I have that innocent look. I zealously let my eyes wander over my new surroundings. Mighty tower houses rise all around me. White patterns are plastered above each floor. A red, green, blue and yellow glow emanates from the *qamariah*, the refined stained-glass windows bricked up under the ornaments in the facades. The irregular decorations and windows make each building unique. The soft glow of street lamps makes the high walls glimmer dark yellow against the moonless night. The splendour of a thousand-and-one nights sweeps over me from all sides. It's well past twelve, I've just arrived in Sana'a and in half a day, I've been thrown back several centuries in time.

The advantage of arriving at night is that you prolong the exaltation of the first impressions until the next morning. As soon as the light falls through the dingy curtains a few hours later, I impatiently pull them open for my first glimpse of the city. Below me stretches a sea of beige-and-white tower houses that seem to have been scattered around randomly with between them dozens of stubby minarets pointing towards the sky. Sana'a is crying out to be explored and I rush down the stairs of my tower hotel to go outside. Into that sea.

For a few days, I immerse myself in one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world. I can't get enough of wandering through the narrow streets and alleys and I'm enchanted by the buildings that make the entire inner city a World Heritage site. Not one of them is the same. Each house is painted in swirling lines of white, geometric patterns on the uneven walls. Here and there, men sit on wooden planks dangling from frayed ropes along the walls, touching up the plastered frames of the windows in dazzling white. Between the buildings, I find *miqshamah*. These palm-fringed patches of land where vegetables are grown are usually only visible from the roofs because they are well hidden between blocks of houses. They were once constructed here to keep the city supplied in times of siege. The fresh green contrasts with the terracotta walls that sur-

round them. On the outskirts of the old city, I come to the pompous Bab-al-Yemen, the gateway to the historic centre of Sana'a. Two Yemeni flags are draped over the archway, reaching all the way down to the street.

From the gate, the Souk al-Milh, the Salt Market, begins. There are endless alleys full of market stalls and shops where robes, copperware, spices, traditional daggers, headscarves, mirrors, dates, toothbrushes made from *miswak*, grains, bowls, jars and, well, anything else you can think of is for sale. Here and there, a donkey or camel roams the streets. I wander through the market without anyone trying to sell me anything. At one point, I'm invited in for a glass of tea. The shopkeeper asks curious questions, just as I want to know everything about him. After all, he is the first Yemeni I've had a real conversation with. Just when I think he is going to try and sell me one of his copper coffee pots, he says: 'You probably want to see more of the city and don't have time to stay here any longer. Just know that you are welcome in our country. *Welcome to Yemen.*' With those last words, he puts his right hand on his heart.

While the Yemenis greet and warmly welcome me, I soon realise that there are hardly any women walking around on the streets. When I do see one, she is completely wrapped up in a dark *niqab* or *barlos*. In these wide, face-covering robes, only their eyes are visible through a narrow slit. I have to control my natural inclination to look into people's eyes and dare only cast furtive glances at the strips of facial skin between the dark fabric. Age-old traditions still have a firm grip on life in Yemen. Mecca lies a few hundred kilometres to the northwest. Yemen was one of the first areas where Islam gained a foothold and that influence is still tangible and visible. Legend says that Mohammed himself supervised the construction of the Great Mosque of Sana'a, a mere stone's throw from my hotel.

Here we come across the paradox of the traveller. On the one hand, I feel like I've won the lottery because everything indicates the

country has stayed true to itself. It lives by traditions that go back many lifetimes. The whole inner city of Sana'a looks just like it must have done for centuries. People wear clothes that Yemenis have been wearing for a long time. Most of the items for sale in the market stalls were sold there hundreds of years ago. A foreigner here is a curiosity and a welcome visitor who is received with open arms, not a rich tourist on which locals jump from all sides to exploit. This is what I look for when I travel. This is exactly why I can fall in love with a country. Call it authenticity. A different world, almost without any similarities to my own, that I can marvel at and where I nevertheless feel at home.

At the same time, this uniqueness means that development in this country is stalled. The division of roles between men and women is persistent: Yemen continues to be a patriarchal society, just like others in the world. It will probably still look the way it does now for years to come, and women will play a secondary role for many more years. However, I do wish women a more equal role in society. When I told friends I was going to Yemen, their response was: 'Yemen? Are you out of your mind?' This is a country known for reports of calamities on the news, terrorism and kidnappings, not tourism and recreation. The isolation and absence of foreign influences allows the country to continue living on the same old footing. Which is precisely what I like so much about it.

Sana'a has made me hungry for more: I want to see the rest of the country. I need permits to travel to the different regions. Once I arrive at the relevant office, this turns out to be a formality. With the necessary documents in my pocket, I take a *bijou* the next day, the jumbled Yemeni version of Peugeot, the French car manufacturer. As soon as all the seats of this shared taxi are filled with passengers, it takes me west through a rough mountainous landscape. We're headed to the Red Sea, to Al Hudaydah, and then to Bait al Faqih. It's much warmer and more humid here than in high-altitude Sana'a. I go to the Friday

Market, a sandy place on the outskirts of the city where you can buy everything and anything. Old TVs, electronics, plastic *Made-in-China* junk, but also gourds, spices and beans, fruit and vegetables, goats and cows. Here too, there are almost exclusively men around, dressed entirely in white and crowned with a red-and-white chequered headscarf or a white *taqiyah*, the Muslim headgear.

Then I continue to Zabid. Once the capital of the country, it has turned into a dusty village with dilapidated houses which were once white, most of which appear to have been abandoned. When I look closer, I see old, blue-painted and richly decorated wooden doors with heavy, handmade locks, framed by carved white walls. Ceilings with blue-yellow-red-grey motifs of flowers, leaves, stars, coffee pots and geometric patterns on beams in which you can still clearly recognise the original shapes of the tree from which they were cut. Small, white minarets with stubby tips lean against even smaller mosques.

Italian Director Pasolini lived here in the early 1970s and filmed his *Il Fiore Delle Mille e Una Notte*. The Flower of a Thousand and One Nights, also known simply as Arabian Nights: an erotic film about love and travel, and the essential role of fate, which so often links the two. In the strict Islamic society of Yemen, where sensuality remains hidden far behind those beautiful doors, it's hard to imagine that this film could have been made here. It's equally unlikely that the same fate would catch up with me a few weeks later in this same country.

From Zabid, I travel further south. The legendary hospitality of the Yemenis touches me more and more. As I get off the bus in Ibb, I want to pay, but the driver says that's not necessary. Someone else paid for me and he won't tell me who, so I can't even thank the donor. A little further on I ask for directions from a man who doesn't speak English, but who understands where I want to go because I say the name in Arabic. He hails a taxi, shouts my destination to the driver through the open window and pays him in advance, even

though he doesn't come with me. When I arrive in Jibla, a bit further south, a passenger pulls aside my hand full of change just before I want to give it to the driver. He insists on paying for my ride, grabs my other hand and takes me to his home. We chat and drink tea, seated on cushions on the floor of the *mafrāj*, the guest room. Friends join us, and then two women fill the entire carpet with bowls full of spicy chicken, meat, rice, vegetables, various sauces, several salads, and bread freshly baked in a clay oven. This would be the best meal of my entire trip.

After we've finished eating and my new friends have asked me all the questions you can ask a stranger with a limited knowledge of English, they take me outside. They tell me as best they can about the rich history of this town. Pride seeps into their words. When the local ruler Ali as-Sulayhi came to power towards the end of the eleventh century, he soon surrendered power to his young wife because he was paralysed. She made Jibla the capital of Yemen and would rule the country for another seventy years as Queen Arwa. She also introduced a variety of ideas that are practised to this day, such as terracing, a technique for growing crops on the country's steep, rocky mountain slopes. Arwa is one of the few women to have held power in Yemen. Moreover, she was supposedly both intelligent and very beautiful.

The question arises: what would she say about the position of women in modern-day Yemen? My friends sheepishly laugh at me when I ask. A woman in power is unthinkable in today's Yemen. They take me to the mosque dedicated to the good-looking queen. One of the men has the key to the minaret, but it turns out to be blocked off due to renovation work. It's time for their afternoon prayers, so I have the opportunity to look around the historic building myself.

Then, it's time for the gentlemen to go in search of *qat*. For Yemenis, this is the highlight of the day. They chew on the leaves for most of the afternoon, constantly putting new ones in their mouths. After a while, their cheeks start to bulge, green slime comes out of their mouths and they talk more and more unintelligibly. Their

mouths get fuller until they spit out the mucous liquid a few hours later. The green stains you see all over the streets are evidence of these daily rituals. My friends give me a few branches, but even after chewing on them for a while, they just taste like green leaves to me and I spit them out. It's unlikely I'll become a qat addict. While the gentlemen chew their first qat of the day, I wander through the narrow streets, past the stone houses and mosques of Jibla.

With my hand on my heart, I say goodbye to my friends and travel on to Aden, a port city on the south coast. A city with a completely different face and atmosphere. Much more modern, breathtakingly hot and humid. After the traditional Yemeni towns and villages, this is the first place in the country that looks vaguely familiar. It reminds me of modern cities on the Persian Gulf, but without the dazzling new glass towers. One day in this oven is enough. I move on quickly because there is much more to experience in this forgotten country.

First, a long bus ride to Mukallah, a long way east. Yemen has gained a reputation as a country where foreigners are often abducted. Since the government wants to promote tourism, it has recently decided to provide a soldier to foreigners on long rides. I'm assigned a youngster whose new uniform seems to have been tailor-made just a week before and with whom I can only communicate in sign language. The poor boy constantly follows me, sitting behind me in the bus with his gun on his lap. After a few hours, he is substituted at a military post. Another young man. I have to abandon my attempts to talk to him because we don't speak a common language. At lunchtime, we stop and everyone gets out, my guard timidly following me with the Kalashnikov around his shoulder.

As in so many places in Yemen outside Sana'a, I'm soon surrounded by hundreds of men. From behind their backs, I can see the barrels of Kalashnikovs sticking into the air, while they carry a richly decorated *jambiya* on a belt around their belly. Without these tradi-

tional, curved daggers, a Yemeni man can hardly show himself on the street. While at first, I had to get used to this display of weapons, it soon became normal for me. I'm guessing that's because of the shy kindness of the Yemenis, which contrasts so strangely with the awe-inspiring weapons they carry. I increasingly get the feeling that the soldier is obediently following me around just for show. It seems to be a breeze to take him out and kidnap me.

Although I'm not scared of that. It seems that they treat you extremely well. Hostages are usually held in a village for weeks at a time, they get given food in abundance, they get riding and shooting lessons, they are pampered in every way and they aren't hurt at all. The goal is to extract ransom money from the government that will help the community to finance a village school, a hospital or anything else of general use. You'd almost want to cooperate. The story goes that there are Europeans who come to Yemen specifically in the *hope* of being kidnapped. That is the extent of the legendary Yemeni hospitality.

It turns out that villages along the way are not in need of a new school building as I reach Mukallah at the end of the day. I thank my last guard for his good care by placing my right hand on my heart, which makes his eyes shine. I have to cancel my scuba diving plans for the simple reason that the only diving school in town has been closed for years. I do manage to arrange a car, with driver Mohammed and soldier-guide Ahmed.

The next day, we leave the Arabian Sea behind us and drive into the mainland. First, we ride through the canyon of Wadi Dawan with its pastel houses, crammed against the flanks of the rocky canyon. The lowest floors have no windows, making the houses more defensible against attack. Yemen was once prosperous: the Romans called it Arabia Felix, Happy Arabia. But the country has subsequently been the scene of tribal wars and invasions for centuries, while its strategic location prompted foreign powers to gain a foothold. It wasn't until 1990 that North and South Yemen were united as one country, but