

Vacations Of A Lifetime

The Africa I Never Expected: On Safari With Micato

by Natalie DiScala

(NAPSA)—I went to Africa for the animals, and for good reason—you won't find wildlife more magnificent anywhere else in the world. And I relished every moment of my bush adventures, expertly orchestrated by Micato Safaris. But by the time I left Africa, it was the people who had captured my heart.

Off to a Good Start...

My journey began on British Airways' oh-so-comfortable Premium Economy class from Toronto to London, then on to Nairobi. I was concerned about how "full service" our reception would be, as we landed in Nairobi near midnight, but a member of Micato's concierge team (on call 24/7!) was there to greet me and my husband as soon as we stepped off the plane. She whisked us through customs without our having to wait in any lines, stayed with us until our luggage arrived, then led us outside.

It was here that we met Philip, our Micato safari director, who accompanied us every step of the way. When I think back on the amazing people we met with Micato, Philip springs to mind the most. His knowledge of the reserves and animals was nothing short of astonishing, but it was his disposition and infectious laughter that almost single-handedly made the trip.

Luxe Lodges at a Glance...

Hemingways Nairobi was the perfect first stop for a real rest. Our room had a blissfully comfy king-size bed and an enormous deep soaking tub. Nearby, the Giraffe Centre, where you can feed the endangered Rothschild giraffes, is a must-see experience. But an only-with-Micato experience in Nairobi is lunch with Micato Africa founders Felix and Jane Pinto, who truly treated us and our companions like "well loved, out of town relatives," which is how Travel+Leisure characterized the indefatigable hospitality of the Pinto family.



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The internal flights that Micato builds into its safaris make getting around a time-saving pleasure, which we came to appreciate as soon as we touched down in the Maasai Mara. The time we would have spent being endlessly shuttled between regions was better spent on the ride to Olare Mara Kempinski, a 45-minute drive that serendipitously turned into a two-hour game drive. Olare conveniently borders the banks of the Ntiakiak River, so it was the perfect spot for sipping cocktails and watching elephants and hippos leisurely going about their business, literally in our backyard.

From Olare we made our way to Sir Richard Branson's uberluxurious Mahali Mzuri, in the northern part of the Mara. From the outside, the tents call to mind spacecraft, their gray-steeped rooftops pointing high into the sky. Sir Richard seems to share Micato's keen awareness that location and timing matter a great deal in Africa; conveniently, camp here was off the "main drag" of one of the Mara's most fertile viewing areas, and we were not disappointed.

Upon arriving at the decadent Four Seasons Safari Lodge Serengeti in Tanzania, Philip

shepherded us to one of the watering holes to witness a thirsty herd of elephants—a spectacular greeting! We rose the next morning for a 4:30 a.m. departure on a hot-air balloon safari, followed by a champagne bush breakfast. Soaring above the savanna, we witnessed a lion with a fresh kill, a galloping dazzle of zebras, a bloat of hippos and countless other creatures.

The Micato Difference

While every place we stayed at was entrancing in its own way, they all had one thing in common: each and every place obviously held the utmost respect for Micato and for all its staff. We were literally treated like royalty upon each arrival—and I soon realized why Travel+Leisure has named it the #1 World's Best Safari Outfitter a record nine times. Micato just seems to excel in the art of safari—and was continually surprising us not just with awe-inspiring animal encounters, but also with all sorts of other "Ah-ha's" along the way.

Another benefit of traveling with the "World's Best"? Micato covers all gratuities from beginning to end—at your lodges and at every other point along the way. It was so nice not to have to worry about whom needed tipping at any given time—I could just relax and enjoy!

A Company that Cares

As my two weeks on safari went on, I came to realize something else about Micato. The company certainly has a firm foothold in the safari business—but the company is every bit as passionate about being in the education business. Through its One for One Commitment, Micato sends a child to school for every safari it sells.

Micato also got into the philanthropy business before it was trendy. For more than 25 years, its nonprofit arm, AmericaShare, has changed the lives of African children, and I saw firsthand how Micato-AmericaShare and its travelers are making a difference in the lives of Africa's neediest families. So by the end of my trip I had seen the Africa of my dreams, but I also saw an Africa I never expected.

An Amazing Finish...

Our journey ended with a visit to the Harambee Community Centre, an oasis of hope within one of the largest slums in Africa. It's from the Harambee Centre that Micato-AmericaShare operates a lending library, recreational facilities, a meal program for a nursery school, and perhaps most remarkable, hosts a small manufacturing operation where they make reusable sanitary pads.

The pads, made and distributed by Huru International as part of "Huru Kits" (which contain other sanitary supplies as well as a life-skills booklet), have thus far been distributed to 84,000 young women, enabling them to stay in school during their period.

With all these resources, Micato-AmericaShare and Huru International are enabling sustainable changes for the communities where they do business, and by association, they're giving travelers something very special: the satisfaction of knowing that their safari is really making a difference.

To find out how to book your own incredible safari, visit www.micato.com or call 1-800-MICATO-1.