

African Roots

A luxury safari operator digs deep into the local community

By **Sandra Ramani**

In 1966, Felix Pinto, a former member of the British Kenyan government and prominent farmer and agriculture expert, and his wife Jane, a former Kenyan national table tennis champion, decided to start a tour company they called Mini Cab Tours, or Micato.

Nearly 50 years later, the family-owned and run Micato Safaris has grown to become one of the most respected (and award-winning) luxury safari operators around—and not just for its impeccable service. Still based in Nairobi, Micato understands the importance of supporting local communities and connecting visitors to the indigenous cultures, leading to rich experiences that go well beyond nature and wildlife.

One way Micato brings its destinations alive is by supporting Kenyan and Tanzanian artisans. Every night of their trip, Micato guests receive a locally sourced gift on their beds, ranging from Masai wool blankets and beaded wedding necklaces to plaid *shuka* scarves and bronze animal figures. On the last day, before flying home from Nairobi, guests also enjoy lunch at the Pinto's family home, where they'll listen to local musicians and receive a gift of a multicolored, bucket-shaped kiondo bag, made from recycled plastic by a group of Nairobi women. When Micato executives came upon these women in 2010, they only had about five bags to sell, as they could not afford to make more. Inspired by the women's stories, and the fact that they were reusing dis-

carded plastic, Micato gave them a large order and 50 percent deposit—and has been working with them ever since.

Also, on that last Nairobi day, Micato guests have the opportunity to take an unforgettable visit to the Mukuru slums, the second largest in the city and home to the Micato-AmericaShare Harambee Community Centre. Offering life-altering school sponsorships, including tuition, room and board, books and more as needed—one child's entire schooling for every safari sold—AmericaShare (Micato's charitable offshoot) has built a facility for Mukuru

residents that includes a well-stocked library, basketball court, nursery school and girls' health education center. At the latter, young women are taught, among other things, how to use the ingenious recyclable, all-cotton sanitary pads created by Huru International, a company founded by AmericaShare exec Lorna Macleod.

Designed to empower girls as they go through puberty and to keep them in school, Huru has been so successful that it may expand to other countries—taking Micato's positive impact beyond Africa. micato.com and americashare.org

