

Micato Brings Its Magic To India

Excerpted from an [article](#) by Jeanne O'Brien Coffey

I am standing barefoot in a Hindu temple in Kerala, having checked my shoes in a pile of hundreds and hundreds of others at the door. Dusk is falling, and music, lights and incense swirl all around me. Dozens of elephants are brushing past, close enough to touch. Walls lined with thousands of small oil lamps flicker on the crowds.

My group of five Americans are the only foreigners in the temple, in a crush of thousands. We're such an unusual sight that kids tugged on their parents' clothing, pointing and staring, and people asked to take pictures with us.

The temple festival wasn't even on our itinerary. Our local guide suggested it that afternoon, and we were in cars moments later for a bumpy two-hour drive from our resort. The whole experience was overwhelming, breathtaking, pure magic. One of my most memorable episodes in a lifetime of travel.



That is the magic of a Micato Safaris tour. The company, well-known as the go-to for African itineraries, has been offering custom add-ons to India for years. Dennis Pinto launched Micato India more than 30 years ago with friend and Indian travel-industry legend Cecil Haider Ali, whose children direct Micato India today. But the company has recently been expanding its formal tours to the country, giving visitors the same off-the-beaten path access it is known for in Africa.

It's a natural expansion for Pinto, managing director of Micato Safaris. "Kenya is my homeland, but India is my *ancestral* homeland... my grandparents are from Goa," he explains. "Visits to India helped shape my childhood. It's when I discovered that the secret to what makes India great are all the unique daily encounters you can have with the Indian people. Having real local experiences is likewise what drives Micato India."

So on a trip to Mumbai, Micato's guests descend *into* Dhobi Ghat, the world's outdoor largest laundry, wandering among the 700 stalls where workers wash nearly a million pieces of clothing a day, so close to the coal-filled irons that you can feel the heat. Tourists generally observe from a platform above the laundry.

What made this experience even more special was that the people working in the stalls knew our guide and welcomed him. So rather than feeling like an interloper gawking, I felt like a welcome guest.

I think that is part of the success of Micato – by partnering with local guides, and building relationships – not to mention giving back to local communities in meaningful ways – a visit feels more like a cultural exchange than a collecting of sites.

"If you want the real Indian experience," Pinto says, "you're going to want to travel with an Indian. All Micato India journeys are led by Indian Travel Directors who not only know the land and its customs but know the locals, too...from India's movers and shakers to the traditional *dhobis* (laundry laborers) and *dabbawallas* (lunch meal deliverers). Our travelers get to meet them all."