

An aerial photograph of a vast African savanna. The landscape is a mix of golden-brown and greenish-yellow grasses, dotted with numerous acacia trees. A winding dirt road or path cuts through the terrain. In the lower portion of the image, a herd of giraffes is grazing, and a small white safari vehicle is visible on a path in the bottom left corner.

AFRICAN CONNECTION



**A CLASSIC KENYAN SAFARI PROVES TO BE THE ULTIMATE FAMILY VACATION.
BY ELAINE SRNKA**

DUNCAN WILLETTS

Up, up, and away:
An early-morning game drive
by balloon and (opposite)
giraffes in the Maasai Mara.

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EVEN IN THE WEE HOURS OF the morning, when the African sky is still black, the Maasai Mara is rarely silent. Predators venture out to hunt under cover of darkness, and their prey must stay alert to survive. As I lay in bed in a tent on the bank of Kenya's Mara River, my husband beside me and our two teenagers asleep in a second tent next door, I pulled the covers tighter and listened to the call of the wild – literally. Bush babies (tiny nocturnal primates) rustled in nearby shrubs, and night herons squawked in the distance. I tried to decipher the strange bellows, grunts, and groans coming from the river below, where dozens of hipopotamuses dwelled. A fierce roar, then another, followed by abrupt splashing, confirmed that a tense drama was transpiring. Almost imperceptibly, the sky began to lighten, and I arose from bed to investigate. In the dusky shadows on a rocky landing just below our tents, I could make out a mama hippo – and the newborn calf I'd just heard her birth. The scene called to mind an African proverb: "However long the night, the dawn will break." Indeed, it was a new day – and when you're on safari, anything can happen.

Every day brought a different



adventure on my family's recent East African safari. My husband and I planned this trip of a lifetime to celebrate a year of milestones, including our 30th wedding anniversary, our daughter's 18th birthday and looming high school graduation, and our son's 16th birthday. As all parents wistfully know, the opportunities to gather everyone together dwindle with each passing school year, so the decision to book such a big-ticket, bucket-list trip was both practical and poignant. The prospect that this could be one of our last vacations as a family before the kids venture out on their own imbued it with additional meaning.

We were traveling with two other families, for a total party of 16, and planning began almost a year in advance. With so many moving parts (numerous land and air transfers, and



Fairmont Mara Safari Club's riverfront family tent.

multiple lodges across great distances), a safari isn't a do-it-yourself endeavor, so we tapped our Virtuoso connections to ensure we did it right. All outfitters in the Virtuoso network have been vetted, and we went with Micato Safaris, a family-run company with 50-plus years of experience and plenty of awards to prove it.

"Micato's planning and execution are beyond amazing," says Amanda Klimak, a Virtuoso travel agency executive in Waterbury, Connecticut. "Their tour directors travel with guests from start to finish, and everything – from transfers to tips – is included." She recommends Kenya in particular for both first-time and repeat safari-goers because its abundant wildlife delivers the classic safari experience. "It's the perfect vacation for families with teens because

it's so immersive and makes everyone feel like they're on a real adventure."

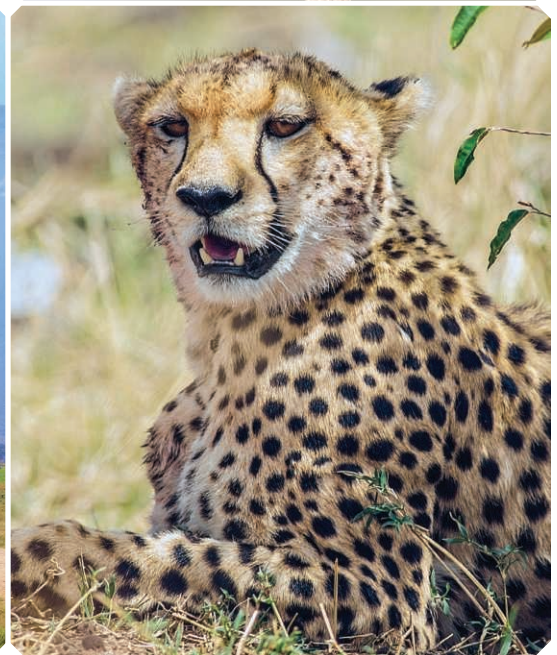
Micato's executive director, Anna Pinto, whose parents founded the company, naturally agrees. "By design, a safari takes you out of your busy day-to-day lives and brings your family closer," she says. "It's a chance to press pause and have new experiences together."

MICATO HAS PERFECTED

the art of anticipation, building our excitement for months leading up to the trip. We couldn't wait to open the pre-departure packages mailed to our home, including keepsake-worthy documents, signature Marmot duffels, and a movie-night gift box of microwave popcorn and a DVD of the classic film *Out of Africa*.

When the date finally arrived, our bags were packed and we were off. After landing in Kenya's bustling capital of Nairobi, we were met by our safari director, George, and his team, who whisked us to Fairmont The Norfolk, a legendary hotel that has counted Winston Churchill, Theodore Roosevelt, and Ernest Hemingway among its guests. Its British colonial architecture and lush courtyard made it easy to imagine the aristocratic safari-goers who stayed there a century before us. So much has changed – today we tote cameras, not guns, as Kenya banned big-game hunting in 1977 – but the property's grand history still makes it a glamorous starting point.

At Nairobi National Park, we fed Rothschild's giraffes at the African Fund for Endangered Wildlife's Giraffe Centre and met elephant orphans at the Sheldrick Wildlife Trust. Though we'd soon view them in the wild, the opportunity to see so many young elephant calves was a highlight. Dozens of them frolicked around us to splash in the mud until their handlers lured them back with giant bottles of formula at mealtime. At the trust's nursery, we "adopted"



(GIRAFFES AND ELEPHANTS) TERRIE HANSEN, (CHEETAH) BOBBY NEPTUNE, (BIRD) DUNCAN WILLETTS



Mukkoka, a shy male who had just been rescued. We fell in love after he tentatively approached us and sniffed my daughter's hand with his trunk, and we learned of his attachment to one of his keepers, who slept in his stable to comfort him.

THE NEXT DAY, WE BOARDED A BUSH PLANE BOUND FOR AMBOSELI

National Park, home to more than 1,000 elephants. Elewana Tortilis Camp, our base for the next few nights, sits on a private conservancy in the shadows of Kilimanjaro, Africa's highest mountain. This dormant volcano looms in the distance (it's actually in neighboring Tanzania), its snowcapped peaks providing a majestic backdrop on clear days.

From our thatched-roof tent's veranda overlooking the plains, we could spy zebras just yards away, but the eco-lodge's open-air main lounge was our favorite gathering spot. Before game drives, we'd start the mornings there with cups of Kenyan coffee, perhaps with a splash of Amarula cream liqueur, and then regroup for cocktails before and after meals. The lounge offered unfettered views of Kilimanjaro, and the nearby wildlife watering hole provided endless entertainment, attracting elephants, giraffes, zebras, baboons, and other creatures day and night in search of refreshment.

Even though it was the wet season, Amboseli lived up to its name, which means "place of dust" in Maa, the Maasai language. Vehicles are required to stay on the park's designated roads, and on game drives we'd stir up clouds of dust as we passed warthogs and wildebeests rolling in the dirt, scratching their backs like dogs. In the vast stretches of swampland, though, elephants grazed chest-deep in murky water, zebras crossed the shallows in a seemingly endless single-file line, and thousands of flamingos took wing, their pink reflections shimmering in the sunlight.

We quickly bonded with the knowledgeable driver-guides, who wowed us with their expertise as they adroitly dispensed factual tidbits that we'd repeat to each other later

TIP

"Don't rush the trip, and try not to bounce around too much. Three days at each lodge is ideal – if you stay much longer, you'll start to repeat your game drives."

– Jay Johnson,
Virtuoso agency executive,
Garden Grove, California

Above: Friends and family that safari together, stay together. Opposite page, clockwise from top left: A tower of giraffes, a dazzle of zebras, a bee eater, a cheetah in repose, and Mount Kilimanjaro makes a picture-perfect backdrop for a parade of elephants.

over meals: “Can you believe that elephants eat 18 to 20 hours a day?” or “Did you know giraffes can sleep standing up?” or “George told me zebras have better eyesight than wildebeests, who have a better sense of hearing than zebras, and that’s why they travel together!” Listening to my teenagers excitedly recount what they saw or learned was a heart-warming departure from the usual one-word answers they offer at home (“How was school?” “Fine.”). As one guide pointed out, “There is no Wi-Fi in the bush, but you will find a better kind of connection.”

Though our safari director was in hot demand – everyone wanted to be in his vehicle because he told the best stories – we rotated who rode with whom on each drive. One time,

it might be individual families together; another time, we’d divide up by males and females or by age group (teens in one vehicle, adult kids in the second, and parents in the third). Everyone had a window seat in the three-row vehicles, which were stocked with drinks, snacks, binoculars, blankets, and long-range radios for communicating with other drivers. There’s nothing like the thrill of hearing the radio crackle to life with the chatter of a sighting and your driver hitting the gas to speed to the scene in hopes of spotting elephants mating, a lion teaching her cubs to hunt, or even a kill.

On our last afternoon, the drivers surprised us with a different sighting, taking us to a high plain just in time for sunset. The staff had arranged a sundowner, an African happy-hour tradition at the end of a drive. As they greeted us with cocktails, we took in the savanna that stretched around us as far as the eye could see, the clear sky ablaze in pink and orange. We settled into the camp chairs they’d set up for us and raised our glasses to the sun as it slipped below the horizon.

WE FLEW FROM AMBOSELI TO THE MAASAI MARA, WHERE DOZENS

of Maasai villagers welcomed us at the airstrip. Wearing distinctive, colorful dress and ornate beaded jewelry, they performed their culture’s syncopated, rhythmic chants and *adumu*, their famed jumping dance – which a few in our group attempted to imitate, with unimpressive results.



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BUT YOU WILL FIND A BETTER KIND OF CONNECTION.”



Scenes from a safari:
Lions on the prowl and
(right) a sundowner setup
in Amboseli. Opposite:
Maasai warriors demonstrate
the *adumu*, their renowned
jumping dance.

(MAASAI WARRIORS AND LIONS) DUNCAN WILLETTS, (SUNDOWNER) TERRIE HANSEN

At Fairmont Mara Safari Club, a resortlike tented camp set along the Mara River, our stately tents were furnished with four-poster beds swathed in mosquito netting, leather-wrapped trunks, and en suite baths with marble sinks. Friendly dik-diks (small antelopes) scurried off our deck, hippos bathed on the riverbanks below, and we had to zip the tents to prevent curious monkeys from breaking in. In the evenings, attendants tucked a hot-water bottle beneath the comforter to keep us warm, and we delighted in the pillow gifts and trinkets Micato left for us.

We rose early, with pots of steaming hot chocolate, coffee, or tea delivered to our tents before dawn. We'd pile into safari vehicles, wrapped in blankets that we shed as soon as the sun warmed us. Unlike in Amboseli, Mara vehicles can venture off-road, which meant we could go deeper into the bush in pursuit of sightings, adding an exhilarating element of suspense.

After a couple of hours, we'd return to the lodge for breakfast, relaxing by the pool or hanging out in the main lounge, admittedly not only for its gorgeous African art collection, but for its Wi-Fi – while it was nice to unplug, we welcomed our digital connection to the rest of the world.

Following a late lunch, most of us would opt to join the afternoon game drive. One day, we came upon a pride of lions we'd seen that morning. On the first drive, we'd witnessed a



Above: Flamingos take flight in Amboseli.

roaring territorial scuffle between lions from two different prides that sent a tiny cub scampering into a ravine as one lion chased off two others. Distressed, we worried about the cub's fate. Though we never saw the cub that afternoon, we watched the older lions of one pride reunite, clearly happy to see each other as they rubbed their faces together and intertwined their bodies and tails the way housecats would. That feel-good moment was interrupted, however, when they became aware of our presence and stalked toward our open-air vehicle to investigate. Five interested lions suddenly surrounded us, so close they could jump into our car. None of us moved. After a tense minute or so they retreated, and we let out a collective (and silent) sigh of relief.

We also visited a nearby Maasai community, home to 150 people from ten families. The village elder explained that, in this seminomadic tribe, women, not men, build the houses, and men are permitted multiple wives (although he himself had only one – too many headaches otherwise, he said). While I shopped for beaded jewelry and carved woodwork, I spoke with a 16-year-old boy who'd just returned home from boarding school. He told me that although the Maasai tribe is known for its fierce warrior culture, his generation must balance traditional ways with modern civilization.

One morning, we boarded hot-air balloons for an entirely different perspective of the Mara's vastness, skimming above the tree line as herds of wildebeests, zebras, and elephants raced below us and then scattered as if part of a choreographed ballet. We touched down on the plain for a Champagne brunch, although we were already giddy enough from the experience.

The staff treated us to a candlelit dinner in the bush one night, which was Thanksgiving back home. Tables set with white tablecloths, crystal, china, and silver; a full bar and a firepit; lanterns twinkling all around; plus a menu that included roast turkey and sweet potatoes made for an unforgettable festive dinner.

By our final day in the Mara, we'd checked off all the "big five" (Cape buffalo, elephant, leopard, lion, rhinoceros), countless birds ("Birds are not for nerds," insisted one of our guides), and most of the cats – except for the cheetah. We decided to go on one last drive, dubbed a booze cruise by the adults since we'd brought along wine and beer. We had low expectations that we'd actually see the elusive cat – but as soon as we left the lodge's gates, we came upon a cheetah lounging on the side of the road. Amazed, we laughingly accused our guides of orchestrating it – " Cue the cheetah, stage left!" We toasted our good fortune and headed back to camp.

CLEVER COLLECTIVES

Don't just follow the herd: What to call these groups of animals.

- ◆ Troop of baboons
- ◆ Gang of buffalo
- ◆ Coalition of cheetahs
- ◆ Bask of crocodiles
- ◆ Parade of elephants
- ◆ Stand of flamingos
- ◆ Tower of giraffes (when they're standing still), a journey of giraffes (when they're moving)
- ◆ Bloat of hippopotamuses
- ◆ Cackle (or clan) of hyenas
- ◆ Leap of leopards
- ◆ Pride of lions
- ◆ Crash of rhinoceroses
- ◆ Dazzle (or zeal) of zebras

THE NEXT MORNING, WE

returned to Nairobi. We chose Micato partly because of its One for One Commitment: For every safari it sells, the company sends a child to school. “Safari is our business, but education is our passion,” Anna Pinto says. That’s why we spent our last day touring Nairobi’s Mukuru slum, home to 500,000 people – and the company’s nonprofit community center, an optimistic contrast to the bleak conditions surrounding it.

There, we got to meet Peter, whose education our family sponsors through Micato-AmericaShare, which helps orphaned and vulnerable children. Peter and our kids have been pen pals for years, and even though their circumstances differ immensely, they’ve connected through their shared interests and dreams. Now a high schooler, Peter told us he wants to be a travel journalist – like me. After a long visit, we all hugged tearful goodbyes.

It’s said that you come to Africa for the wildlife, but it’s the people you remember most. On our last night in the Mara, a farewell note from Micato left on my pillow offered another African proverb: “Return to old watering holes – friends and dreams are there to meet you.” My family will never forget our experience and everyone we met on our dream trip – and we look forward to many returns.



Spotting safari royalty and (below) the Srnka family with Peter, the student they sponsor through Micato-AmericaShare.

We customized our nine-day safari to coincide with our children’s school holiday break. **Micato Safaris** offers both scheduled small-group safaris with multiple departure dates and bespoke private itineraries; all include lodging, meals, guided game drives, transfers, and gratuities. *Nine-night safaris from \$11,405 per person, including internal air.*