

## Safaris Adapt to Covid-19 As Kenya and Tanzania Open to Americans

By Ramsey Qubein



Safari travel in the age of Covid-19

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With Kenya and Tanzania reopening to tourists, including Americans that [present a negative Covid-19 test](#) from the past 96 hours, safari travel is back on the table for many who are looking for adventure without the crowds. Like other segments of the travel industry, safari companies paused operations due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

To restart safely, they have made several changes to [meet new health protocols](#) and assure travelers that the experience will be safe. Naturally, safaris provide ample opportunity for social distancing with guests often [sleeping in luxury camps](#) away from crowds. Dennis Pinto, managing director for Kenya-based [Micato Safaris](#), shares the steps and protocols his company is implementing to navigate this strange time.



Dennis Pinto and Joy Phelan-Pinto of Micato Safaris

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### **What did it take to restart safari operations after the pause?**

We began a ramp-up of our East African operations last month in preparation for the fall season. In May and June, our ground teams implemented sanitation and health protocols to ensure the safest possible experience for our guests. That included sending teams on safari to “test drive” the procedures. In the coming weeks, we will be doing the final reconnaissance trips to be ready to welcome travelers to East Africa starting in mid-September.





Safari game drive

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## **Are Americans traveling right now on safari?**

Kenya and Tanzania are both open to Americans. Kyle McCarter, the U.S. Ambassador to Kenya, recently said that “the greatest opportunity the United States has right now to travel internationally is to Kenya,” which has been awarded the “Safe Travel Stamp” by the World Travel and Tourism Council for adopting global health and hygiene protocols successfully.

We are also hearing from our local offices that many Kenyans and Tanzanians are enjoying going on safari right now, too. This is our normal high season, and we have had reports of amazing animal sightings and an unprecedented migration. The animals seemed to have enjoyed their “time off” and are moving in great numbers now. Visitors can experience this if they travel now; they’ll have the Masai Mara seemingly to themselves.



The Micato Safari staff is cleaning commonly touched surfaces regularly.

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**Many hotels are implementing safety protocols including the [addition of onsite hygiene managers](#). Have you made changes at any of the camps or lodges you visit?**

Safaris are ideally suited for social distancing since there is nowhere more private and isolated than the African bush. Since every safari we operate is escorted by one of our "Safari Directors," they will ensure that the camps and lodges are providing the safest possible experience for our guests. Since we have full-time staff on the ground, we'll ensure Micato's safety and sanitation protocols, as well as those of the camps and lodges, are enforced as strictly as possible.





Guests will have their temperatures taken regularly.

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Typically, we always have a large supply of complimentary amenities for our guests (over-the-counter medications, power strips, candy, books, bug repellent, hats, and pre-stamped postcards to mail home). We're adding face masks and hand sanitizer to the lineup now, too. Guests will have their temperatures taken regularly, including upon arrival at all properties and before boarding any flight (including in the bush).



When social distancing is not feasible, guests and staff must wear masks.

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### **Are there changes to housekeeping and staff interactions?**

Our staff wear masks at all times and will limit their interactions with hotel and camp staff. The “Safari Director” will gauge guests’ comfort level and adjust accordingly. For example, in terms of housekeeping, guests may opt to forego daily service if they wish.





Guests dine at private tables.

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### **Will travelers intermingle with many other guests?**

No. Once you have started the safari, there are no crowds (except for the animals, of course). Staff can also assist to keep travelers as isolated as possible should they wish at the camps. Many of our safaris are custom trips, which include private vehicles, but even if someone books one of our Classic (regularly scheduled) safaris, guests can book a private vehicle for themselves.

### **Are guests required to wear masks?**

Yes, guests will need to wear masks if they are somewhere where social distancing is not possible. But while in the bush, this is infrequent.



Travelers see a variety of animal life on twice-daily game drives.

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## **Do travelers need any form of health insurance?**

It is not required, but we strongly encourage our guests to purchase trip insurance prior to traveling with us. This covers guests for pre-existing health conditions as well as medical evacuations.





A safari is, naturally, designed around social distancing.

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## **What would you say to someone nervous about travel, but considering a safari?**

Keep updated on any changing travel restrictions. The U.S. Embassy still requires Americans from [California, Florida, and Texas](#) to quarantine for 14 days upon their arrival into Kenya. For everyone else, temperature checks and a health surveillance form are part of the arrival process.

Based on web traffic and trip request information, we are seeing significant interest in safaris, but it has not yet converted into actual bookings at comparable levels to years past. This leads us to believe that travelers fall into three categories. Some are waiting until a vaccine is available while others are interested now, but have some questions. The third group is ready to go soon and doesn't want to wait. For those with questions, our safari specialists are available before and during any trip. Once people arrive in East Africa, a Micato "Safari Director" is there to take care of them and anticipate their wants and needs every step of the way.





A typical game drive on safari.

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### **If someone books a 2021 safari, are there any restrictions if they change their mind?**

Most of our customers for earlier this year postponed their trips to later this year and next year; those that canceled were given full refunds even though we had already paid non-refundable deposits to camps, airlines, and other suppliers. We will continue to adapt our cancellation policies to be flexible given the current situation so that people can make the travel decisions that are right for them.

### **Like other international airlines restarting U.S. service, Kenya Airways will resume its nonstop flight from New York in late October. Is this the easiest option for safari travel going forward?**

It is certainly a good option – and one that our U.S. team uses frequently. We have also seen an uptick in guests opting to fly via private aircraft. Other airlines have restarted flights to Nairobi via their European hubs including [KLM](#) and [Lufthansa](#).





Guests enjoy sundowner cocktails after a private game drive. Staff wear masks, and sanitizer is readily available.

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## Will the popular safari tradition of “sundowners” continue?

Yes, absolutely. One of the great experiences of safari life is enjoying your drink of choice while watching the sun set over the savanna. Snacks are now individually wrapped and presented (rather than buffet-style), and there will be plenty of hand sanitizer. As they say, the show must go on.