

What It's Like to Go on Safari Right Now

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Dec 21, 2020



During pandemic-era safaris, Micato Safaris conducts twice-daily temperature checks. *Credit: 2020 Ramsey Qubein*

Cautious travel is the norm these days. My October Micato Safaris trip to see the Great Migration wildlife spectacle, while also social distancing in nature, proved that it can be done safely — and to the benefit of local communities and animal preservation.

Micato restarted operations when Kenya and Tanzania opened their borders to Americans showing a negative PCR test for COVID-19 from the past 96 hours. To prepare for a safe restart of operations, Micato conducted in-person reviews of its accommodation partners. I was pleasantly surprised at the new safety protocols, which did not hamper the overall experience.

Expect Minor Changes

As a tour operator, Micato traditionally sends a safari director with guests who now does double duty as a guide and a liaison with lodging staff to handle any concerns.

Twice-daily temperature checks and electrostatic luggage spraying are the norm. Masks are required when social distancing is not possible, and safari directors and hotel staff always don masks. For added safety, all Micato employees isolate for two weeks and get tested before coming to work.



Safari directors and hotel staff always wear masks. *Credit: 2020 Ramsey Qubein*

Small plane flights between air strips adhere to similar standards. Pre-flight temperature checks and masks are required, and aircraft is sprayed with pre-flight disinfectant. Micato also gives passengers hand sanitizer, cleansing wipes, extra masks and even lotion to combat dry skin from using so much hand sanitizer. The safari director stocks game-drive vehicles with similar amenities.

Travel advisor Hope Smith of Born to Travel experienced similar reassurance during her pandemic-era visit to Tanzania. She agreed that travelers will never see the landscape with so few safari vehicles again and often had a lodge or camp to herself.

These efforts were integral in convincing the growing number of American safari-goers that the journey is safe. According to Dennis Pinto, managing director of Micato, another surprise has been the number of Kenyans getting out to explore their own country.

One thing is for sure, the animals are not quarantining.

Properties Take Precautions, Ensuring Luxury Experience

In the Masai Mara, Ol Donyo Lodge (one of two Kenyan Relais & Chateaux properties and a National Geographic Unique Lodges of the World member) and the new luxury tented camp Mara Nyika, both part of Great Plains Conservation, installed handwashing stations for people to use when entering the property. One thing that hasn't changed is the attention to detail; following a temperature check, a refreshing towel and welcome drink always follow.

Masks are required in public areas, and guests can stay within their travel bubble should they wish. Travelers can choose what housekeeping frequency they want from multiple times per day to no service. Micato, as well as hotel staff, gauge comfort levels at the start of the trip. At times, it's easy to entirely forget the pandemic while enjoying the natural beauty.

At uber-luxe Arijiju, a fully staffed private residence with contemporary design within the Borana Conservancy in central Kenya's Laikipia region, guests can dial up or down the level of service based on their comfort levels. The staff live on property and undergo regular testing, which seals Arijiju into a bubble of giant proportions (just you, the animals and 32,000 acres of nature). Masks and all-natural hand sanitizer are plentiful.



At Arijiju, staff undergo COVID-19 testing and live on property.
Credit: 2020 Crookes & Jackson

It's hard not to be wowed by the wellness-themed menu of fresh flavors here (the variety of fruit and vegetables grown in Kenya is astonishing). At a time when maintaining a healthy lifestyle is paramount, the customizable culinary program will inspire you to eat better once back home. Despite the pandemic, there have been no cutbacks on the offerings here

Also in Laikipia is the eclectic Ol Jogi Estate, with jaw-dropping views of a watering hole where animals graze a few hundred feet from guests. The residence is booked in its entirety, so guests never interact with people outside their group; like Arijiju, these types of properties are ideal for pandemic times.

Guests complete a thorough checklist to customize their travel bubble experience. Questions include: Do you prefer family-style dining or a la carte service by staff? Daily housekeeping and turndown service? Do you want help unpacking bags? Waiter service or self-serve drinks? Individually plated canapes or shared bowls of sundowner snacks? Should game drives be limited to 50% capacity? Should staff wear face shields in addition to masks?

It's this attention to detail that will be the catalyst to safely move travel forward.

Should Travelers Go on Safari Now?

These days, Kenya's Masai Mara (often swarming with safari vehicles) is quiet. Few vehicles are driving around, creating the unique experience of having the entire savannah to yourself.

The Great Migration was especially notable with plenty of up-close animal sightings. Once you're out in the bush, not much seems to have changed.

While traveling during the pandemic is a personal and not uncontroversial topic, there is a vital reason to travel on safari: The economic downturn has had an unprecedented impact on local jobs in rural communities. Economic resources for many of the visitor-supported charities and nonprofits have also dried up.

For example, Micato Safaris sends one local child to school for each safari sold and Arijiju uses its profits to support conservation and rhino anti-poaching efforts. At Ol Jogi, visitors can meet the wildlife and conservation manager to learn about its anti-poaching program, rhino breeding efforts and veterinary clinic for injured animals. Without tourism revenue, its wildlife protection programs will suffer.

A socially distanced safari can be good for your soul. It supports local communities, animal protection efforts and the important conservation work that makes our planet a better place. On safari, it's just you and the animals.