

Back To Africa? What To Expect On A Luxury Safari

BY IRENE S. LEVINE



For the tenth time, Micato Safaris has been ranked #1 on *Travel + Leisure*'s list of the [World's Best African Safari Tour Companies](#).

“An African safari is an adventure like no other,” says Dennis Pinto, Micato’s Managing Director. Safaris offer game drives, hot-air balloon rides over the savanna, meals in the bush, and other countless bespoke experiences, ones that are now more appealing than ever before as travelers are seeking out small group, socially-distanced adventures in wide-open spaces.



DENNIS PINTO AND HIS SON, TRISTAN

Dennis Pinto represents the second generation of Pintos at the helm of the family-owned business founded by his parents, Felix and Jane, more than 55 years ago. He expanded the geographic reach of the business from Kenya to India and Southern Africa and co-founded AmericaShare, Micato's non-profit philanthropic arm.

Forbes.com caught up with Dennis Pinto to find out how the luxury safari operator has been faring after the travel industry hiatus:

Dennis Pinto: We have weathered many other crises, including SARS, Ebola, election disruptions, financial meltdowns—even Somali pirates on the high seas! The downcycles in Africa come more frequently than those in the US so our business model calls for healthy financial reserves for the inevitable downturn.

I'd like to think that each crisis has made us more adept at handling the next one. Shortly before the pandemic was officially declared we had our first virtual company meeting. I reinforced the Micato mindset from previous incidents—that every crisis has a beginning, middle, and end—and that our focus had to be on ensuring we were well prepared for the inevitable pent-up demand at the end of the pandemic. Because of our sometimes hard-earned knowledge and experience, we have fared very well and are positioned to have our best year ever in 2022.

Are travelers coming back?

DP: Not only do we see travelers coming back, but they are coming back with a vengeance: longer, more expensive trips with friends and family members.

Is it a good time for travelers to book a safari?

DP: Absolutely! I was on safari in June with my wife, Joy, and our two children, Tristan and Sasha, and we had incredible wildlife encounters—some of our best ever—and truly felt like we had the bush to ourselves.

All of the destinations in Africa where we operate (Kenya, Tanzania, Rwanda, *South Africa, Botswana, Namibia, and Zimbabwe) are open and welcoming visitors, so choosing a destination just comes down to considering the time of year and the prior safari experience a traveler has had.

What is the ideal length of a safari? How large are your tour groups?

DP: Ideally, I would say about two weeks, but in 2022 the average length of our safaris is 17 days. We do, of course, customize shorter or longer ones to best meet the needs of our travelers.

Pre-COVID, the average size of our Classic Safaris (scheduled small-group departures) was around 12 people. These days, the size varies, and since we never cancel a departure, some guests have had completely private safaris all to themselves even though they did not pay for a private trip.

What characterizes a “luxury safari” and differentiates it from the pack?

DP: In a word, I would say *stressless*. Once there, a traveler should be left wanting for nothing; except perhaps wishing for the trip not to end.



Every step of a Micato luxury safari is meticulously thought out in advance by our destination offices so guests have seamless 24/7 access to the best in-country resources. From the moment a guest lands and we meet them at the aircraft door to the time they ride back to the airport for their flight home, they can be assured that they will be taken care of by our team. They needn't worry if they've forgotten to bring a certain medication or if they need a camera battery in the middle of the bush.

Micato safaris are truly all-inclusive, too, from our no-tipping policy to complimentary daily valet laundry service, Wi-Fi, and alcoholic beverages. Heck, you could even take one of our trips and leave your wallet at home! It is a wonderful freedom to not be constantly digging into your pocket for change – especially in this era of COVID.

What destinations do you recommend for a first safari?

DP: I tend to recommend East Africa (Kenya and Tanzania) for first-time travelers since East Africa provides the experience of your imagination. When you think of the large herds of animals on the vast African plains—that is East Africa. Southern Africa is also quite spectacular, so we evaluate the needs of the traveler before determining which area is better for the guest.

Can someone be too young or too old for a safari?

DP: I can say, without any exaggeration, that we have hosted travelers aged 2 to 102. It entirely depends on the health and fitness level of the individual. At 102, Mrs. Carlotta Niles was our oldest guest to date, and we arranged a special meeting for her with a local Maasai Elder who himself was 98 years old.

One of our safari specialists just brought her 8-month-old baby with her on safari. The African cultures are very respectful of the elderly, so older travelers or those with mobility challenges are warmly welcomed and graciously accommodated.



What changes has the pandemic brought to the ways in which Micato operates?

DP: Micato is connected with top-flight security and advisory networks in the U.S. and Africa and has a dedicated full-time ground team, which allows us to make the health and safety of our guests our number one priority.

Once the pandemic was declared and air flight resumed in late summer 2020, we already had a “go-plan” in place. We were able to quickly, but safely, transition our teams and methodically began developing [extensive COVID safety protocols](#). By the summer of 2020, we were able to resume operating safaris with the highest safety standards in place, without missing a beat.

Our goal was to ensure that our guests could both book—and ultimately travel—without worry.

Consequently, we quickly adapted our cancellation policies to make them more flexible.

How do you account for Micato’s longevity and the numerous accolades it has received over the years?

DP: From the beginning, my parents came from a farming background and while they took us on many safaris, they certainly didn’t have any experience running them for visitors. But their modus operandi was always to treat their guests the same way they would like to be treated when traveling overseas



It was a simple concept which meant they personally met all guests at the aircraft gate upon arrival; they invited every traveler to our home for cocktails and dinner; they only employed highly skilled African guides instead of ex-pat former “white hunters,” as was the norm at the time; and they were very focused on details. In short, they wanted to offer more than just a safari, rather a rich cultural and wildlife experience.

We are exceptionally proud that Micato has been committed to education and hands-on involvement in local communities for over three decades. Our non-profit arm, [Micato-AmericaShare](#) has been a passionate advocate for East African children and their families through our educational programs, which include.

- [The Micato One for One Commitment](#) has enabled thousands upon thousands of Kenyan children to attend school, one child for every guest on safari. Every child deserves an education, and we’re overjoyed to be contributing to this unalienable right.
- Our [School Sponsorship Programme](#) matches orphaned and impoverished children with generous Micato travelers and travel advisors who sponsor the children to attend a carefully-vetted boarding school. These former students are now doctors, lawyers, pilots, bakers, hair stylists, entrepreneurs, accountants and all manner of productive citizens helping their extended families and communities.
- Impoverished girls in Africa often have to miss school during their periods because they have no access to menstrual products. As a result, they fall behind in their studies and eventually drop out of school, perpetuating the cycle of poverty for women. Micato is a founding partner of [Huru International](#), which manufactures reusable sanitary pads that have been distributed to more than 200,000 girls in Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda. Early in the pandemic, Huru redirected some of its production lines to manufacture and distribute reusable face masks, another unaffordable luxury in the slum.

One other measure of our success: We are proud that each year, over 30% of our guests have traveled with us before; another 35% are referrals from past guests, with the remaining 35% new to Micato. I think that says a lot about the quality of the Micato experience.