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As The Gear Diva, I bring function and style to active women's lives

The Best Active Travel With A Woman's Touch—Micato Safaris

As travel quickly rebounds from the COVID-19 pandemic, one of the strongest sectors has been active and adventure travel. Americans took up new outdoor activities such as cycling and hiking, which saw massive growth during the pandemic, and now they want to take that on the road. At the same time, many realized that life is unpredictable and having great travel experiences now, not "someday," is important. The more "Bucket List" type trips, from safaris to epic hiking routes like the Tour du Mont Blanc, have also seen jumps in bookings.

Many of the leading tour companies specializing in these kinds of trips are reporting record reservations, and travelers are booking big active and travel trips into late 2023, a year and a half out. Active and adventure travel is my favorite kind of travel, but these trips can be expensive and require advance commitment, so it is important to choose wisely. The knowledge and personalities of the individual guides is key to your enjoyment, and with complex logistics, often in far-flung or exotic locales, you need to use an organization with expertise in this kind of planning and execution. Strong networks of local contacts get you the best, most unique or most charming accommodations, the best meals along the way and memorable local, immersive experiences.

Since summer is prime vacation travel time and many Americans are starting to plan their return to travel right now, I'm devoting June to profiling and speaking with the women who run some of the best tour operators in the business. After all, the majority of travel decisions and bookings are made by women, so whether you are traveling solo, with other women, or with your husband, boyfriend or partner, you might appreciate the perspective these women have about what will make your trip the best. Today I'm featuring **Micato Safaris**.

Micato is to safaris what the New York Yankees are to baseball, the best ever and perennial winners. In fact, since the Yankees have won and appeared in more championships than any team in all four big North American sports, not just baseball, the



If you want to get up close and personal with African wildlife, you can't do any better than Micato Safaris.

comparison is especially apt. Micato has won more awards than just about any company in any aspect of travel. **The feat of taking the #1 spot on *Travel + Leisure Magazine's* World's Best Safari Outfitter list 10 times is unprecedented across any "World's Best" category. In addition, Micato has made the list every single year since it launched a quarter century ago, and it is the only tour company in *T+L's* Hall of Fame.** But that's just the tip of the accolade iceberg, and from consumer media to travel industry trades, the awards just keep piling up, including on the charitable and conservation front, where the company has also won five of the prestigious Condé Nast Traveler World Savers Awards. Micato also specializes in and has offices in India, from Bengal tiger safaris to seeing the top sites such as the Taj Mahal and Lake Palaces. Micato offers both scheduled small-group departures, which are more affordable (though still luxurious), and completely custom private trips.

Anastasia "Anna" Pinto serves as executive director of Micato Safaris, a family-owned company founded by her parents in Kenya. She's the second generation of amazing Micato women, as her mother Jane, who represented Kenya in the Olympics in

table tennis, is also still involved as founder, and often welcomes Micato guests for meals in her Nairobi home (and still sits on the board of the International Table Tennis Federation). A Southern Californian, Anna spends her days as the West Coast face of Micato, heading up its worldwide sales efforts and logging countless air hours travelling the globe on the company's behalf. Her background is set firmly in the hospitality business, having been an executive with Hyatt Hotels in both the South Pacific and North America. Anna was born and raised in Kenya, spending her undergraduate years in the U.S. at St. Lawrence University in the beautiful Adirondacks of New York.

"When my parents, Felix and Jane Pinto, founded Micato Safaris more than 55 years ago in Africa, their only business plan was to treat guests like family, an approach *Travel+Leisure* recognized when they wrote 'Micato Safaris' edge is personal warmth. The Pinto family run their show as though they were entertaining well-loved, out-of-town relatives.' To this end, Micato's safaris are fully inclusive: A highly-credentialled Safari Director—in addition to a Driver-Guide—travels with guests throughout their safaris; valet laundry anytime, every last gratuity, a renowned on-site 24/7 Concierge team, all meals, alcoholic beverages at mealtimes, and much more are also included on safari with Micato, even if they are not normally part of the lodge or camp program."

Q: Have you seen an increased interest in active travel among women travelers in the past few years?

A: We have seen sustained interest in active travel among women travelers. Micato has arranged its fair share of girlfriend safaris—groups of women friends or multi-generational mixes of grandmas, daughters, sisters, and granddaughters travelling together, leaving the men behind for whatever reason, turning the journey into a ladies-only bucket list safari.

Q: Have you done anything as a company to encourage or facilitate travel by women?

A: All our guests, men and women, appreciate that just by simply going on safari with Micato, they become part of **The Micato One for One Commitment, through which we send a child to school for every guest on safari.** But I think the women in particular are moved by our philanthropic work because the beneficiaries are often overworked moms, young women, and girls.

Micato Safaris operates its philanthropic works through its nonprofit foundation, AmericaShare, which has helped send thousands of young women to school for decades. Over the years, AmericaShare has also run empowerment programs and workshops for women.

Micato is a major donor and proud supporter of Huru, launched 15 years ago by AmericaShare's co-founder Lorna

Macleod. Huru manufactures reusable sanitary pads—nearly 1,700,000 to date—which have been distributed in free Huru Kits to more than 200,000 girls in Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda. When I meet women at conferences, on planes, wherever, and tell them about Huru's mission, their eyes either light up or well up. Micato's women guests respond the same way. What is more fundamental than giving these vulnerable girls and young women access to safe sanitary pads?

Q: What trends have you been seen recently or expect for the future in terms of types of travel or who is traveling?

A: It's clear to me that many of our travelers are still processing all the opportunities they've missed these past two years. To travel. To actually have their destination weddings, or honeymoons, or big anniversary getaways. Nearly every couple we book these days makes sure we understand how much is riding on their safari being perfect. And trust me, we understand. Every day we get more and more inquiries from couples trying to make up for lost time and lost time away.



Micato is also seeing an uptick in solo women travelers that is now on par with pre-COVID levels. Over the lifetime of our company, Micato has had thousands of solo women safari with us, which speaks to our ability, time and again, to dependably create an environment on safari where women feel comfortable. All Micato safari programs are fully escorted throughout, which adds a layer of comfort for female solo travelers.

We have a three-time repeat guest who took a custom mother-daughter safari on her last trip with us, but on her upcoming safari her daughter couldn't make it. The mom told us she feels perfectly comfortable travelling with Micato on her own with just her Micato Safari Director as her expert companion, saying quite emphatically that we make her feel comfortable and taken care of every step of the way.

Another upcoming guest is not only travelling solo, but will be away by herself in Africa for almost a month! This includes time in Rwanda, where, accompanied by a Micato guide, she

will trek into the forested Virunga mountains to meet up face to face with the majestic Silverback gorillas. If I had to pick one safari experience that no woman, solo or not, should deny herself, this is the one!

It means a lot to me personally, as a frequent solo business traveler, that the woman solo travel trend is ongoing. Women travelling solo should be as commonplace as women running companies.

Q: What destinations are hot right now and going forward?

A: Long-stay visits on private conservancies throughout East Africa continue to be highly valued travel experiences. Being the only guests on a 50,000+ acre wildlife conservancy is a precious type of luxury and allows for very intimate explorations of wildlife—including endangered species—and ecosystems.

So many Micato travelers now are trying to make up for lost time, so among the first things they ask during safari planning is, “Can we visit more than one country without rushing?” And we walk them through how they can easily visit Kenya and Tanzania, or venture to East Africa and Southern Africa, all within the same thoughtfully-structured itinerary, all without sacrificing the quality of the experience.

Luxury mobile tented camps that follow the annual wildebeest migration are popular, especially when booked exclusively for a family or group of friends. In this case the journey truly is the destination!

Cultural visits within cities are regaining popularity. Micato has arranged several journeys recently that incorporate East and Southern Africa’s rich artistic communities, including private visits to the Museum of Contemporary Art Africa (MOCAA), and one-on-one visits with some of East Africa’s most sought-after painters, sculptors, and other artisans.

Q: What does your company do to make travel as great as it can be—what makes your company special?

A: Every last arrangement Micato makes for its guests are overseen by dedicated Micato staff, both stateside and on the ground, including highly-credentialed Micato Safari Directors who lead journeys every step of the way, guaranteeing not just unsurpassed game viewing experiences throughout Africa’s safari lands, but an unsurpassed, seamless safari. Our Safari Directors don’t just look out at the plains for game. They look ahead—at the weather, at what documentation our guests need to have in hand the day after tomorrow—and stop problems before they start. Our guests actually tell us they’re moved by how dedicated our Safari Directors are to their jobs.

Among the things we’ve learned after more than 55 years on safari is that however capable a hotel staff is—and Micato

works with highly capable ones—there is no substitute for a Micato employee being on site. Micato has throughout its history maintained a 24/7 concierge team exclusively for its guests for handling last-minute, unexpected, and unusual requests.

Our many years in business has afforded us the opportunity to build strong, longtime relationships with the top luxury accommodations in every destination we serve. Our relationships also enable Micato to cater to whatever needs our guests may have, whether arranging for doctors or nurses to accompany guests, handling private planes and their flight crews, or working closely with bodyguards and security details. That includes working with the U.S. Secret Service, who set a rather high bar for Micato when we escorted their protectees!

Q: Do you have any advice for planning a trip or picking a trip or destination?

A: Collaborate with an expert. Our most successful safaris are ones where our guests aren’t shy about their particular wants and needs. Micato Safari Specialists, many of whom have been with us for decades, love nothing more than hearing all the improbable, sometimes seemingly impossible requests from potential guests, and then delivering on them. In the end, it comes down to trust. Once a traveler or travel advisor trusts that we know what we’re doing, the sky’s the limit for our guests.

A safari is an adventure like no other, so one only needs a bit of an adventurous spirit. When you are on safari with Micato you will be left wanting for nothing, except perhaps wishing for the trip not to end! Once you have your first taste of safari, you’ll want to come back for more. Each year, 70% of our guests are either past guests or referrals from past guests. I think that says a lot about the quality of the Micato experience.

Q: Any other thoughts that would be of interest to active travelers or women travelers?

A: To all the ladies out there with adventurous spirits, please know that it’s never too late to travel. At 102, Mrs. Carlotta Niles was our oldest guest to date. She was an avid hot-air balloon enthusiast, and she relished her balloon safari over the lush Maasai Mara. We also arranged for her to meet with a local Maasai Elder who himself was 98 years old.

Don’t ever settle for a travel experience, especially now. And I’m happy to say that Micato guests never settle. They don’t want meaningless bragging rights. They want access to the things that personally interest them, which have included private meetings with wildlife conservationists, local artists, and celebrity chefs. Just one meaningful face-to-face meeting can make your whole trip, but just imagine taking a helicopter flight to the Turkana Basin to look at fossils during an exclusive one-on-one meeting with the first family of paleoanthropology, the Leakeys. The women travelers I meet want to channel their inner Indiana Jones just as much as the boys do!