

Forbes REVIEWS MICATO



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I travel to learn, eat, golf, and ski, but mostly for travel's sake

The World's Best Safaris Keep Getting Better: 50 Years Of Excellence

Ten minutes after walking off the plane, I was on my way out of the Nairobi airport. Less than ten minutes later I saw a zebra roadside, my first wildlife of the trip. It was an auspicious beginning to what would be a fantastic trip, especially given that most of my fellow passengers were still back in the airport, waiting in the immigration line. **And it would have simply been impossible had I not been traveling with Micato Safaris.**

Micato was founded in Kenya more than 50 years ago, and is still family owned, run jointly out of headquarters in New York and Nairobi, with substantial satellites in South Africa and India, and smaller offices across Africa. Its founders have brought many millions of dollars in tourism activity to the local economy, provided numerous high quality jobs, and run an impressive non-profit, AmericaShare, that has given free education to thousands of children and sent hundreds more through college. Micato sponsors the education of a Kenyan child for every safari it sells through its One for One program, operates charitable efforts in South Africa, and has won awards for its sustainability and conservation efforts. Jane Pinto, who founded the company in 1966 with her husband Felix, even represented Kenya in the Olympics. The result of all this is that **Micato is locally beloved and impossibly well connected**, and that is how I found myself using the empty diplomatic line at immigration. Then, while other travelers filled out customs forms, we exited with a wave of the hand. Micato's dedicated airport staffer meets arriving guests every day and knows everyone at the airport, and like many of their employees and safari guides, she has been with the company for over twenty years. That's why Micato's guests routinely dive deeper than the normal luxury tourism experience and get to meet scientists, rangers and dignitaries. It's why I had tea in the otherwise off-limits residential area of the Royal Palace in Jaipur on my trip to India, and why the head of the National Park met me for lunch at my hotel to discuss Bengal tigers. It's why Micato customers include many who have their own sea of handlers and are used to incredible access, with clients including supermodels, professional athletes, and lots of Hollywood stars like Will Smith, and Leonardo DiCaprio bought his Micato Safari at a charity auction. Even the President of the United States chose them—George W. Bush and his family traveled with the Pintos. But every Micato customer gets that kind of special treatment.



When you are the top of the food chain, others notice. Maybe that's why so many people in the travel industry keep naming Micato "Best Safari Outfitter."

About 20 years ago a magazine assigned me a feature on African wildlife safaris, and I arranged my first visit to the continent. The consensus among travel industry experts I knew was that Micato was the best, so I picked them. I was blown away by the quality of their services, and I am very, very familiar with the world of luxury travel. That first trip made me want to go back, and in the two decades since, I have traveled with Micato four more times to seven countries in Africa and to India, and have recommended them to countless friends, families and colleagues.

Five years ago here at Forbes I wrote about why Micato runs the World's Best Safaris and I just got back from my most recent trip, to Kenya and Rwanda. This reaffirmed what I have learned repeatedly over the intervening 20 years—if you want the best possible travel experience in Africa or India with expertise you cannot get from any book or website, informed and updated curation of the best hotels, restaurants and game viewing lodges, flawless execution of often convoluted logistics like bush plane flights, gorilla and tiger viewing permits, and most of all, nonstop VIP insider access, just go with Micato. After these experiences and the certainty of an outstanding trip every time, I would not take the risk of going with any other outfitter.

I am hardly alone in this opinion, as the company has won endless awards and accolades, most notably *Travel+Leisure* magazine's World's Best Safari Outfitter—a record nine times. Best Active Tour Operator, Best Outfitters on Earth, Trips of a Lifetime, World's Best Guides, and so on and so on, awards have flowed in like water from the likes of *National Geographic Traveler*, *National Geographic Adventure*, *Virtuoso*, and major travel trade publications. For their extensive non-profit endeavors, they've won *Conde Nast Traveler's* World Savers Award five times and were named to the World Savers Hall of Fame. As contributing travel editor to *Cigar Aficionado* magazine, I oversee the annual travel poll, and Micato has won every category it competes for, with votes cast by the nation's most informed travel agents and journalists. But on this last trip I spoke to a first-time Africa traveler whose choosing Micato had nothing to do with awards. She liked that they were truly local, founded and based in Kenya where Felix and Jane Pinto still live. The Pintos welcome every Nairobi-bound Micato traveler for lunch in their home, along with the guests' "safari directors" (expert head guides), for an elaborate luncheon to get them oriented, and they do this four or five days a week. **Thousands of travelers have passed through the Pintos' home, and for decades this has been emblematic of Micato's personal touch.** And unlike many tour operators, all departures are guaranteed, even if you're the only customer (This is a nice security blanket—a few years back an upscale cycling trip I booked was cancelled for lack of participation, but only after my wife and I had gotten tickets to Sardinia).

Having done assignments on safaris, wildlife, climbing Mt. Kilimanjaro and even African golf for a variety of outlets, I have chosen Micato again and again. I've traveled with a group of strangers on a scheduled trip, with a group of friends, with just my wife, and with a photographer, and every time it has been an unqualified success. **Success breeds more success, and because it has so many safari directors and family owners in the field, each year Micato gets better and better, enriching its personal connections while staying on top of the latest and greatest new lodges and hotels, and dropping those with declining standards.**

Some large high-end safari outfitters are actually adventure travel companies doing all kinds of trips in all kinds of places. Micato does only Africa and India, where the Pinto family is originally from, and where they still have a home. Many luxury safari outfitters use subcontractors, especially for vehicles and drivers in various regions. I saw this first hand last week at the airports with third party shuttle drivers holding signs for guests of some very pricey competitors. Not Micato, which maintains an elaborate fleet of top quality vehicles and an extensive network of full time local guides and drivers. So when I flew to Rwanda to trek with gorillas, my safari director traveled with me, but the in-country driver, a Micato employee in a Micato owned vehicle, was a well-connected local, as is always the case. He introduced us to the head ranger at the national park, just as had been my experience in India, and time and again over the years, I've seen any challenges along the way disappear with a few well-chosen words in languages I don't speak.

Micato's access goes beyond the diplomatic line and royal palaces, and adds many little things. Before you even leave

home you will receive checklists and tips on what to bring and expect, even sent pieces of high quality luggage perfectly sized for the domestic cargo limitations of bush planes. You will be asked for dietary preferences which will be passed on to each lodge and offered assistance with visas. Safari directors carry high-quality binoculars for guests and secure their own supply of bottled water. They know and request the best rooms and best rangers and trackers at every lodge and hotel, and they get them, because they have massive clout within the hospitality industry locally. Africa's best luxury safari lodges are very small, often just 4-12 rooms, tents or villas, and the GM at one of the most famous luxury lodges told me straight out that if they have just one room left at a peak time, Micato will get it for one of their guests over the competition because they need to keep the company happy. On my group trip I traveled with a honeymoon couple, and Micato got them upgraded to the Presidential suite at a grand hotel as a surprise. Every stay booked through Micato includes extras like a special celebratory dinner, under the stars or in a private wine cellar, and at hotels that do not include free laundry service (a common extra in Africa), they do anyway for Micato guests. **These small touches are often unannounced and may even go unnoticed, but at the end of the day, there are so many of them that they add to up to a much better trip.**

I spoke to a couple of travelers on my flight from the Maasai Mara back to Nairobi who had booked their trip through another US-based safari operator and were staying at top lodges, doing the pricey gorilla trekking, and spending thousands of dollars on their trip, but had only a thin printed itinerary for guidance, and had no idea that the airport we were flying into on the propeller plane was not the same one where their onward connection on a commercial flight to Rwanda was. One day while gorilla trekking we hiked with another group who were on a pricey trip through the alumni travel arm of an Ivy League university. They complained that their handlers had vanished after the Tanzanian portion of their trip, leaving them to try to navigate the rather complex Rwandan gorilla permits, park process, and ground transportation logistics on their own, and they were not happy about it. Over my various trips I've spoken to many travelers who planned their own vacations online by choosing lodges and cities and attractions they wanted to see, then combined them in amazingly inefficient ways, crisscrossing from southern to eastern Africa and back, wasting whole days during their trip with ill-fated and ill-informed itineraries that never made sense. On what should be a trip of a lifetime, that kind of wasted time is even worse than wasted money, but many travelers to Africa manage to waste both.

While I'm a fan of using a good travel agent, there are plenty of trips you can plan well on your own, like a weekend in Paris. But with tons of moving parts and requiring deep layers of local knowledge, African safaris are not one of those. Neither are trips to India combining insider access to sites like the Taj Mahal with tiger viewing. **While Micato Safaris is a luxury company, one of the more notable of the many awards it has won was "World's Best Value" from *Travel+Leisure* Magazine. Value does not mean cheap, it means delivering the most bang for the buck, and as I have seen over many years and many trips, that is exactly what they do, and it is worth every penny.**