

Experiencing Artful Luxury In Kenya, From Urban Nairobi To The Bush Beyond

BY PAUL JEBARA

While the raw, untamed splendor of Kenya's wilderness often eclipses Nairobi, this metropolitan maze proffers an intriguing tale of defiance. It stands where the wild savannah seamlessly meshes with the urban landscape, as the echoing roars of lions harmonize with the city's rhythmic hum. Yet, Nairobi's true evolution unveils itself not through this unique cohabitation, but in its burgeoning role as a vivacious hub of contemporary art.

Over recent decades, Nairobi has evolved from an overlooked dot on the global cultural map to a radiant beacon of artistic expression and design ingenuity.



A wild ride of design innovation unfolds at Angama Mara, where architects and designers push boundaries, creating a safari lodge that breaks the mold. Photo: Paul Jebara

The city's pulse aligns with the spirited tempo of its blossoming art scene, facilitated by **Micato Safaris**. This luxury travel outfit, deeply rooted in African heritage, remains at the vanguard of this transformation. **Masterminded by third-generation Kenyans, Felix and Jane Pinto, Micato Safaris capitalizes on their extensive understanding of Africa's eclectic landscapes and wildlife, weaving unique safari narratives that transcend the ordinary.** Their intricate, art-infused Kenyan adventures are particularly captivating.



Blending 1920s romance and modern amenities, Cottar's cream-canvas-tented camp offers an unparalleled experience guided by some of Africa's top safari professionals. Photo: Paul Jebara

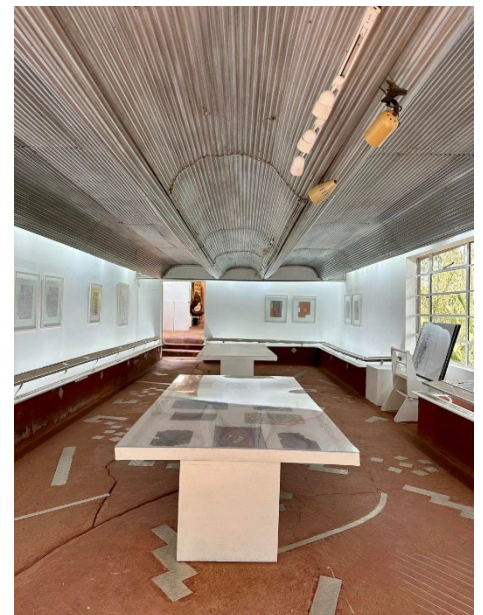
Dennis Pinto, Managing Director of Micato Safaris, reflects on this evolution: “Over the last three decades, Nairobi has undergone a cultural renaissance — superb restaurants, glamorous nightlife, multitudes of shops, and, certainly, local artists, galleries, and art-infused hotels that give an ever-growing gravitas to the city and its arts scene.” This cultural metamorphosis doesn't overshadow the thrilling allure of Kenya's safaris but instead illuminates them anew, paving the way for a bespoke safari concept: a journey harmonizing the artistic energy permeating the capital with the expansive wilderness beyond.

Dive into Nairobi's Pulsating Artistic Tempo

Nairobi, frequently underestimated as a mere layover destination, warrants a discerning gaze. Its burgeoning art scene is a testament to an artistic renaissance as local talent, galleries, and art-centric hotels add depth to the city's robust cultural landscape.

The city's artistic constellation glows with bright luminaries. Consider Nairobi-born contemporary artist Wangechi Mutu, whose dynamic array of collages, sculptures, and installations provides a prism for examining the complexities of contemporary existence (a recent solo exhibition at New York City's New Museum is proof of her growing fanbase). Elsewhere, visual maverick Thandiwe Muriu confronts beauty norms with her vibrant, pattern-rich photography, crafting a celebratory ode to

One Off Contemporary Gallery showcases the exceptional talent of East Africa's esteemed contemporary artists, offering a curated selection of sophisticated artwork for discerning art enthusiasts and collectors. Photo: Paul Jebara



black femininity. Artists like Ian Banja, with his poignant paintings encapsulating the Kenyan ethos, and Kawira Mwirichia, advocating for queer rights through her diverse artistic oeuvre have carved their own niches.

“Micato’s East Africa CEO, an avid African art collector, leverages his insider access to premier galleries and artists, enabling us to orchestrate exclusive art experiences and private curator meetings,” adds Pinto. “Our Safari Directors, well-versed in the East African art scene, further enrich these experiences for our art-loving guests.” The One Off Contemporary Art Gallery perfectly showcases the city’s artistic vitality by heavily featuring local talent (“Even a quick stroll in the sculpture garden feels good for the soul,” adds Pinto). Then there’s the Circle Art Gallery, which also spotlights contemporary East African art (for both established and emerging artists), and the Nairobi Gallery, home to the vast Murumbi Collection that bridges the gap between the city’s glorious past and its current artistic wavelength.



The Nairobi Gallery, with its stone-embellished Victorian exterior and stunning octagonal dome hall, stands as the city’s architectural gem. Photo: Desmond Gatimu

Nairobi’s artistic vigor extends beyond its galleries and into the hearts of its inhabitants. Take Bernard, a student from the Mukuru Slum who according to Pinto, sees art as a lifeline, a skill nurtured by his artist father that doubles as a means to finance his education. Pinto elaborates, "To truly showcase the transformative power of art, we at Micato take our guests to the AmericaShare Harambee Center, Micato’s philanthropic arm. Here, we recently held a community art contest, which Bernard won. Despite the lack of formal art education in his school, Bernard’s father inspired him to express himself through drawing. He recently sold one of his drawings to fund his high school education and plans to continue selling his art to finance his college degree in art."

Feast on Nairobi's Diverse Restaurant Scene

Nairobi is a melting pot of cultures, and this diversity is most evident in its culinary scene. From Westland's effervescent nightlife to Kilimani's modish food joints, Nairobi serves a banquet that titillates every sense.

Take, for instance, Talisman. This restaurant isn't merely a place to dine; it's a temporal portal, marrying the city's colonial past with its pulsating present. Here, amid oriental rugs and warming fireplaces, one can relish a globally influenced fusion menu teeming with South Asian nuances. The fusion of feta and coriander in their samosas proves to be a revelation, while the slow-cooked braised pork belly, accompanied by house-made mustard, elevates the culinary craft to art. And for a denouement? A lavender ice cream that echoes the freshness of a summer day.



The Alchemist is a creative hub where fashion shows, open mic nights, and an impressive selection of cocktails come together for an unforgettable experience. Photo: Pete Maina

Then there's the Pepper Tree, a rooftop haven ensconced in the city's heart. Enclosed by floor-to-ceiling windows and enwrapped in verdant foliage, it emulates a sophisticated greenhouse dining experience. Its international menu reflects Nairobi's diversity, while the expansive cocktail selection takes you on a liquid world tour. Whether savoring the tang of their margaritas or relishing their Spanish-style gin and tonics, each sip embarks on a new expedition.

Cultiva's innovative farm-to-table delights by culinary pioneers Ariel Moscardi and Peter Silvester makes for an exhilarating journey for food enthusiasts. Photo: Paul Jebara

For gastronomes who crave their meals served with a dose of thrill, The Alchemist merits a visit. This dynamic venue, a nucleus of creativity, hosts an array of social events, from fashion showcases to open-mic evenings. Lastly, there's Cultiva, a culinary diamond in the rough that redefines the farm-to-table dining concept. The brainchild of co-founders Ariel Moscardi and Peter Silvester, Cultiva delivers an unparalleled dining experience tethered to its agricultural roots.



Artful Sustainability: A Shopping Journey in Nairobi

Shopping in Nairobi transcends being a mere hobby; it's an exploration of the city's ingenious blend of creativity and sustainability. Tucked away from the hectic Dagoretti Road, the House of Treasures Emporium sits, a serene complex featuring shops, a spa, and an alfresco café. Here, patrons can peruse an array of home goods and fashion items from international designers—and local ones, too, like Hamaji Studio, a Kenyan label that ethically crafts garments made from natural fibers.



Ocean Sole, an organization dedicated to ocean conservation, transforms discarded flip flops found in waterways into one-of-a-kind hand-carved artwork, shedding light on the dire state of our polluted oceans. Photo: Ocean Sole

Rummage Studio infuses sustainability with a unique flair. Ever pondered the fate of discarded denim? Gikomba, Kenya's largest flea market, serves as a purgatory for Europe's denim castoffs. But, unfortunately, unsold pieces meet their end in landfills. To combat this wastage, Rummage, ingeniously repurposes these unwanted jeans into sought-after bags.

In a similar vein, Ocean Sole, a socially conscious enterprise, tackles the issue of discarded flip-flops, a ubiquitous pollutant on the world's coastlines. The firm

crafts these rejected flip-flops into whimsical animal sculptures, with profits bolstering salaries for a hundred Kenyan workers employed at Ocean Sole's Marula Studios workshop and store.

Experience Artful Opulence at Nairobi's Safari Camps

In Kenya's capital city and beyond abounds dozens of boutique hotels, safari camps, and characterful hideaways where every corner whispers a tale of art, history, and African charm. One of Nairobi's most extraordinary spaces is Hemingways Eden, a treasured sanctuary offering an immersive cultural experience. Once the family home of artists Anna and Tonio Trzebinski, this estate has been transformed into a living museum and private gallery. Guests have the rare opportunity to engage in intimate tea sessions with Anna, allowing her captivating artist's life to unfold before their eyes.



Embrace the harmonious blend of nature, art, and luxury at Hemingways Eden, a captivating boutique hotel and private gallery nestled in Nairobi's leafy suburbs, where the enchanting sounds of wildlife fill the nights. Photo: Paul Jebara

The journey continues with art as the centerpiece in Micato's handpicked camps. For design and art aficionados, Segera, cradled in the grasslands of the Laikipia Plateau, mirrors the Zeitz MOCAA (Museum of Contemporary Art Africa). African art takes the limelight here, beautifully blending with nature to create a mesmerizing experience. Other camps, like Finch Hattons in Tsavo West National Park, guarantee a sybaritic dive into nature with art and design features seamlessly woven in.

For travelers seeking splendor and luxury combined with art, Ol Jogi stands out. Set within a vast 58,000-acre private conservancy in Laikipia, this lavish lodge is a feast for the eyes. Its decor displays an exquisite amalgamation of African elements, adorned with Daum and Baccarat crystals, Dior porcelain, and Cartier glasses. The billiards room, embellished with priceless hunting memorabilia, enhances the charm of this stunning property. For a more subdued luxury experience, Cottar's 1920s Safari Camp in the Maasai Mara provides a serene blend of history and modern comfort. This camp allows design and art enthusiasts to soak in the nostalgia of the golden age of safaris amid serene surroundings.

Stepping into Angama Mara, also located within the heart of Maasai Mara, you are immediately ensnared by an overwhelming aura of African artistry and skilled craftsmanship. The Beading Studio stands as a shining testament to this, where Maasai women, skilled in the art of beadwork, create masterpieces of intricate design.

Angama's Photography Studio, a treasure trove for the visually inclined, encourages guests to delve into the photographic arts. Here, they lend cameras to guests, mentoring them on capturing wildlife on film—and the spirit of a photographic safari—with precision and flair. Beyond the allure of its studios, Angama Mara offers a canvas of curated furniture and striking art pieces. Stylist par excellence, Annemarie Meintjes, weaves her magic through the property, shaping the distinctive aesthetic. Notable among her picks are classic Fermob French metal armchairs, gracing the outdoors and mirroring the sweeping grandeur of the landscape in their design.

Undeniably, Nairobi, and perhaps Kenya as a whole, is teetering on the brink of achieving extraordinary artistic and cultural feats. It has become a place where these elements not only enhance the landscape but define it. As Pinto aptly puts it, "We introduce our guests to local artisans not just to support the community, but because these artists spin the most compelling tales." Across Kenya, these narratives are just starting to unfold for those eager to embark on a life-enriching artistic journey.



At Ol Jogi, a lavish private retreat in Kenya's Laikipia region, 1970s glamour meets the spirit of an African safari—a nexus of chic and timeless elegance for design enthusiasts. Photo: Paul Jebara



At Angama Mara, stylist Annemarie Meintjes' blueprint for its unique aesthetic included commissioning master furniture maker John Vogel for its collection of colorful custom furnishings. Photo: Paul Jebara