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I travel luxe but smart: I know what's worth shelling out for.

Being The Best While Doing Serious Good: Micato Safaris

Kenya's super-high-end tour operator **Micato Safaris** has been racking up the accolades since it launched in 1966. Founded by third-generation Kenyans Felix and Jane Pinto, it was the first outfitter to employ all local guides and to emphasize genuine connections with local communities, and it still stands out in the increasingly competitive field of East African safaris.

My fellow Forbes.com contributor Larry Olmsted has [written at length](#) about how Micato deserves all its world's-best awards, and a recent trip to Kenya and Tanzania (sponsored by Micato) gave me reason to agree. The camps and guides were top-notch, the knowledge was palpable, and the passion was infectious. Like nearly all the outfitter's clients, my group began our safari with lunch at the Pintos' gracious Nairobi home (sometimes it's drinks or dinner instead, but the Pintos make a point of personally hosting their guests). Our safari director had been a guide for 23 years and had the highest certification a Kenyan guide could achieve. We had a separate concierge on call to handle the banalities (embarrassingly, I sent her on errands to procure toothpaste and dental floss, which she completed with lightning speed). When one flight was delayed, Micato worked its airline connections well enough that the connecting flight was also held back—long enough for us to stop for lunch.

And also like nearly all clients, we concluded our trip with an eye-opening look at the flip side of safari decadence. The morning before we flew back to the U.S., Micato took us on a tour of Mukuru, Nairobi's second largest slum, with a population of more than 600,000. This is a place of extreme poverty, where the government's "free" education is out of reach to some 62,000 children whose families can't afford school uniforms and fees. Guests take a lengthy tour of the library and community center that Micato built, and have candid conversations with a graduate of the safari company's ambitious community-support program who now works in the office of its 27-year-old nonprofit foundation, AmericaShare.



Micato Safaris founders Felix and Jane Pinto with children who have benefited from Micato's AmericaShare programs

These days every outfitter worth its salt has a philanthropic arm, and everyone is talking about “doing well by doing good,” but Micato was committed to social responsibility long before it became a marketing gambit. In early days, the company sent clients an extra duffel to fill with items for Kenyan children. After working with a religious organization, Micato honed a formula that lets it do maximum good with minimal overhead—all the administrative costs are covered by safari fees, so 100 percent of donations goes directly to programs. “There was a lot of trial and error,” says the company’s communications director, pointing out an advantage to contributing via Micato rather than an idealistic startup that may still be figuring out how to do effective work in a challenging environment.

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In 2009 the Pintos’ son and daughter-in-law, who now run the company, heard a talk by TOMS Shoes founder Blake Mycoskie and decided to enact its own One for One program: For every safari the company sells (from \$7,500 per person for a ten-day trip), it pays the school fees for one child in Mukuru. It makes a point of showing guests the realities of slum life in Nairobi, and makes it easy for them to make a bigger commitment—as much as paying a child’s private school tuition until they graduate, exchanging letters every few months along the way and playing a meaningful role in each others’ lives.

The One for One Commitment has sent thousands of children to school, and the library and community center have served more than 65,000. Micato is also a founding sponsor of Huru International, which provides teenage girls with free sanitary pad kits—the absence of which used to force them to drop out of school—and has helped more than 80,000 girls and created dozens of jobs. A borehole provides more than 2 million gallons of water a year to schools and community centers. And that’s just what Micato guests inadvertently fund by booking a trip—after seeing the projects, many decide to make a more overt (tax-deductible) contribution.

As Micato notes in its AmericaShare brochure, “Our shameless (and not so secret) objective, of course, is that travellers will fall in love with these children and choose to sponsor the education of a child.”

How could there be any shame in that?