



**Larry Olmsted, Contributor**

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

## The World's Best Safaris

When a travel magazine recently assigned me a feature on luxury South African safaris and the best safari lodges, I didn't buy a guidebook—I called Micato.

Even though *Travel+Leisure* magazine named one of Micato's many itineraries, a 13-day South Africa trip, "The *Travel+Leisure* World's Best Safari," there is quite a bit of debate among safari-goers as to destinations. The classic is East Africa, namely Kenya and Tanzania. South Africa wins for opulence and ancillary non-safari activities, with many of the world's top private luxury safari lodges, charming cities, wine country and more. Botswana is currently hip, with a less visited natural experience. But the reality is you can have a truly great, world-class safari experience in any of these places—in many ways who you go with is more important than where you go, especially when it comes to guides and choosing the actual places to stay and see wildlife. For me, whether it's Kenya, Tanzania, South Africa, Botswana, side trips to Zanzibar or Victoria Falls, or gorilla tracking excursions to Rwanda, the "best" is always the same—Micato.

When you are excellent at something for a long time, people tend to notice, and that is the case with Micato Safaris—and why I wouldn't think of having anyone else help arrange my trip. It doesn't surprise me that *Travel+Leisure* Magazine just named Micato the "2012 World's Best Tour Operator and Safari Outfitter"—again. It was no fluke, since they won the same award last year—and the year before. In fact, it's the ninth time in the past decade the magazine has given Micato that distinction, which is pretty impressive considering how many tour operators and safari specialists there are.

T+L is not alone. They've won three different best categories from *National Geographic Traveler*: Best Outfitters on Earth, 50 Tours of A Lifetime, and 10 Guides Who Make the Trip. Safaris are a hugely popular land add-on to cruise vacations, and *Port-hole Cruise Magazine* has named them Best African Safari Tour Operator for five straight years. The popular book *1,000 Places to See Before You Die* just picked them as Preferred East Africa Tour Operator 2011. I have written here before about the exclusive Virtuoso consortium of the nation's best travel agents, an elite and very respected group of true travel experts, and in competition with the best tour operators in the world in many fields, Micato once again took home Virtuoso's Best Active and Specialty Provider 2011—and the year before Best Escorted Tour Operator. And that's all just the tip of their award iceberg.



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."

But while these accolades reflect well on the amazing job Micato does, these awards are not why I just called them for my trip. I called them because I have traveled with Micato before, and I know firsthand how great a job they do. My first trip with them was to Kenya, more than 10 years ago, a safari feature assignment for *Cigar Aficionado* magazine. I have traveled with a lot of high-end tour operators in various areas of specialty, and I was blown away by the job Micato did. I've written before in these pages about how enamored I am about Butterfield & Robinson, the world-class bicycle tour operator. Well, Micato is the equivalent for safaris, and both companies succeed over and over again by emphasizing the same things: excellence of guides, local employees, offices and equipment, utilizing the very best accommodations and cuisine, with decades of first-hand knowledge and insider clout to make things happen that other simply can't.

Many tour operators, especially safari companies, are essentially booking agents, turning over actual operations to local companies who handle the ground transportation and guiding. Not Micato, which is dually based in New York and Nairobi, Kenya with satellite offices, staffed 24/7, in Cape Town, Arusha and Johannesburg. Micato has its own fleet of first-rate safari vehicles—window seat-only minivans with pop up roofs in East Africa, and open Land Rovers in South Africa. Its biggest



When your group of four are the only guests in an entire deluxe Tanzanian safari lodge, it is easy to get close up private time with the wildlife.

asset is a cadre of highly trained, multi-lingual, expert safari guides, drivers, tour leaders, and trackers. Micato serves 5–7,000 customers a year, an average of about 500 monthly, and has 300 employees, a staggering ratio. Even when visiting parks that require use of their own guides or rangers, Micato guides ride shotgun, and from the moment you get off the plane until the moment you leave, your trip is personally supervised. When I last used Micato three years ago to climb Mt. Kilimanjaro, our departing flight changed while we were in Tanzania, and our guide not only rearranged transfers for the later departure but got us all day rooms at a swank hotel so we could change, shower and rest until it was time to go.

Micato is a family business started by Felix and Jane Pinto in 1966, just three years after Kenya got its independence from Britain. They are both Kenyans with long personal connections to their homeland. Every Micato trip includes a lunch or dinner at the private home of one of your hosts, and on my first visit to Kenya I was lucky enough to meet both of them at their house, something that is still typical. The company is run on a day to day basis by their son Dennis, a Stanford grad and former VP with American Express, along with his wife and sister. I've had the pleasure of meeting Dennis several times and his passion for the safari business, for Africa, and for philanthropy is limitless.

Which brings me to another appeal of Micato—in an age where hotels and other travel entities are suddenly trying to cast

a socially responsible image, Micato has long been a leader—before it became a fashionable marketing tool. For every single safari they sell, Micato pays the expenses and fees to send an African child to school—for 12 years. Their other programs donate school and health supplies to children in Nairobi slums, have staff volunteering and the company even donates a gallon of clean drinking water to locals for every gallon its customers consume on safari. Micato has been doing these programs for 25 years, and created AmericaShare, its charity arm, with seven full time employees. The company's monetary donations are substantial and ongoing, as are its charitable efforts, and for this reason the awards that the Pintos value the most are those reflecting their philanthropy, such as Conde Nast Traveler's World Savers Award, which Micato just won (yet again) for 2012, in two different categories: Education and "Doing It All."

As for the safaris themselves, the quality of both the itineraries and guides are simply awesome. In many ways, no one has more effect on your actual wildlife viewing experience than the guides and game drivers, and Micato has excellent staff. When it comes to lodging, they have longstanding relationships with the top luxury lodges, but also a unique product called the "Bespoke Collection," accommodations consisting of private ranches, family homesteads, and country estates throughout Kenya and Tanzania, many within private game reserves, to which Micato guests have exclusive access. Like many special touches Micato offers, this is only possible because of the Pinto's deep roots and friendships in the African





There's lots of reasons why safaris are such fantasy trips, and you see why every day.

community. And from a strictly business perspective, ultra-luxe safari lodges like Singita, Royal Malewane, Londolozi, Ulusaba and Xaranna are far more likely to offer flexibility and upgrades to a company that does a large volume of business with them year in and year out. On my first safari there was a honeymoon couple on our trip, and when the Micato guide found out he told the Mt. Kenya Safari Club, one place we were staying, and they immediately upgraded them to the luxurious Presidential Suite—at no charge. These properties value Micato's business and it is the customer who benefits. Likewise, they are on first name basis with the best bush pilots, hot air balloon owners, naturalists, scientists and so on. Itineraries almost all include special Micato-only touches, from lunch or dinner at the Pinto's home to bringing in guest expert naturalists to lead bush walks. Micato guests routinely meet Masai elders and enjoy other "by invitation only" experiences such as meeting with paleontologists Philip and Louise Leakey, grandchildren of the world's most famous paleontologists, Louis and Mary Leakey.

Micato offers both scheduled small group trips and completely bespoke custom itineraries, including anniversary, wedding, celebratory, honeymoon and graduating themed trips, itineraries using private planes or jets, and unique safaris by horseback, camel or on foot. For its scheduled group trips, the company has an unusual guaranteed departure rule—sign up for a published trip and you are going, even if no one else does. You might be surprised how many people find their vacation plans ruined because of such trip cancellations. Last year I tried to go on a specialized European trip with a different high-end tour operator only to have it cancelled because they said not enough people signed up to make it worthwhile—well after I made my plans. That won't happen with Micato, and in terms of

similar policies, the company adds no surcharges or supplemental fees to their published or quoted prices, something many other tour companies do, and includes many things in the rates others add on, especially all airport transfers, park entrance fees, and all bottled water and soft drinks—on drives and at lodges. All gratuities are included, from porters to waiters, and Micato has a "no tipping necessary—ever" policy. That being said, they are a luxury company heavy on hands-on service and the best accommodations, and these trips are not for the budget minded.

There are a lot of different reasons to love Micato Safaris, but for me at the end of the day it comes down to confidence. Just as you might seek out the best possible surgeon for an operation or the best architect to design your home or let a star chef like Joel Robuchon or Thomas Keller use their

judgment in cooking you dinner, there is a piece of mind that comes from knowing you are in the best hands and have a true expert in your corner. If you are planning an African safari, Micato's half century of expertise and success provides that total confidence. I have now traveled with Micato to Kenya, to Tanzania, to the "Roof of Africa" atop 19,000+ foot Kilimanjaro, and in every case, I had the same great experience: the best guides, best vehicles, best time.

I look forward to seeing what they recommend for South Africa and cannot wait to travel with them again.



It's Micato's expert guides and drivers, shown here sharing sunset cocktails (they actually drank soda) with guests, who make the trip.