

Fairy Dust

AN AFRICAN ADVENTURE WITH MICATO SAFARIS
TAKES US HIGH AND LOW IN SEARCH OF WONDER.

Tsavo Conservation Area, Kenya



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TWILIGHT ZONE: (From top) Tented accommodations at Finch Hattons in early-morning light in Kenya's Tsavo West National Park. Nyethiel wears a **Sevaria** weaved okafi dress at the Mess Tent bar at Cottar's 1920s Safari Camp. (Opposite) On a drive with a Maasai guide from Cottar's 1920s, Nyethiel wears a **Sevaria** tiered okafi dress.



Nairobi shrinks behind me as our tiny plane roars through the air. Just a few minutes after takeoff, the landscape below turns wild and desolate, devoid of civilization. I spy Mount Kilimanjaro in the distance, a perfect black triangle against the sky. Below us is dusty, scrubby earth dotted with charred-looking volcanic rocks, a far more barren landscape than what I'd imagined for a safari — and this is my fourth in Africa, my second in Kenya. I wasn't expecting to see so much desert. It's a different kind of beauty.

I'm traveling with Micato Safaris, a high-end operator that works with travel advisors to plan trips that go deeper and explore more than just the Big Five. We'll swap stories with the Maasai at Cottar's 1920s Camp, take an aerial tour of Mount Kenya from the Mount Kenya Safari Club, and tag along with rhino trackers at Ol Jogi Conservancy.

It's all spectacular, but the most memorable stopover is the camp called Finch Hattons. I'm met at the airstrip with sparkling wine and a four-wheel-drive vehicle to transfer me to the property — a collection of 17 tents scattered throughout an unexpected oasis in Tsavo West National Park. On the drive to the lodge, I spot more dead trees than animals, but the lushly planted camp itself is a resort-like setting, with a palm-encircled infinity pool and an open-air spa. A short walk from the main lodge, my tent has a bohemian feel, with an antique rug, a hide-covered minibar and a king-size bed under a crystal chandelier. My favorite feature is the deep copper soaking tub, filled up for me each night with bubble bath and flower petals.



CREATURE COMFORTS: (This page) Nyethiel browses through the displays at The Explorer's Tent at Cottar's 1920s; zebras at Tsavo West National Park. (Opposite) At a Cottar's honeymoon tent, wearing a **Sevaria** Omo shirtdress.



They say it's about the journey, not the destination, but after 30 hours of travel that included two consecutive red-eye flights, I've never been happier to be shown to my room. My first night's sleep is interrupted by a 3 a.m. wake-up call; minutes later, I'm crawling into the back of an open-air vehicle for our first scheduled night drive. The vehicle weaves and bumps along dusty roads toward a nearby mountain. It's still pitch-black outside when I feel an imperceptible shift in the air. We begin to gain elevation, and the predawn breeze grows denser and cooler, the chill mocking my thin fleece jacket. Vegetation grows thickly along the road, and branches whip the sides of our vehicle as we careen along the trail, leaving in our path an intoxicating wake of the wild mint, or chyulu, for which this forest is named.

As soon as our eyes have adjusted enough to see our feet — or maybe it's actually gotten lighter — we set off on a hike along the ridge. Thick curtains of fog make it hard to see beyond the hiking path, but what we discover right in front of us fascinates. First, a spider's web covered in mist, dew drops sparkling like diamonds. Then, intriguing plants, the medicinal properties of which our guide explains to us. We move onward, upward. It's eerily quiet until we get close to a tree, where the condensation dripping through the leaves sounds like rain.

When we crest the summit, we glimpse the sunrise beneath layers of fog, a beacon of light shining briefly before we're back inside a cloud. Halfway through the trek, we happen upon a tea-party picnic that Finch Hattons has set for us, complete with floral china cups.

Insider Insight:

"If you can, invest in a high-quality camera, and make sure to have backup batteries. And, most importantly, learn how to use it before you travel."

—Linda Seygeant, travel advisor





SUNSET STRIP: (From top) Relaxing inside a honeymoon tent at Cottar's 1920s Safari Camp, and a view from the deck of Finch Hattons, overlooking the springs.

Pampered with tea, we climb into the cloud forest, a thick canopy of green that shoots hundreds of feet into the air on either side of us. It feels like standing in a grand cathedral, leaves and vines filtering the light like stained glass.

We watch the ground for any dangers, scurrying over slippery logs and twisting vines, coming across an army of swarming safari ants. Our guide, Isaac, leads us to one of the oldest trees in the forest. Using a vine to hoist himself into the tree, he gleefully poses for a photo.

When we emerge, the mist has burned off, and it's already hot as we walk back to our vehicle. And by the time we reach camp, I've dried out like a raisin. It's impossible to reconcile the desperate conditions here with that lush forest atop the nearby mountain. Even the animals seem to be hiding from the sun. The resident hippos stay submerged in water up to their eyeballs.

That evening, after a multicourse gourmet feast under the stars, we set out for another drive. The darkness feels thick and oppressive, like you can almost taste it. Our headlights zoom along dusty road as we sip highballs from crystal glasses, trying not to spill. It's shaping up to be an uneventful evening — that is, until I grab the spotlight and shine it into the trees as we drive. Everywhere, eyes of all shapes and sizes glare back at us. We're surrounded by beasts large and small, striving and surviving in this harsh landscape. Improbably, a lone crocodile marches unhurriedly across our path, in search of a midnight snack. It seems farcical that he's survived here, but it's another reminder that the world is full of life in unexpected places — and that not every safari needs a leopard sighting in order to be spectacular. ■

SAFARI BASICS

Rhinos, leopards, giraffes, gorillas or the great migration?

Africa offers so much diversity in terrain and wildlife, and different times of the year bring completely opposite experiences. Your advisor can help you find a safari to suit your desires. But no matter the agenda, some universal advice:

Bring a duffel, not a spinner. Spinners won't roll through most camps. Consider wrapping the duffel at the airport prior to checking it in.

Pack light. Small planes have lower weight limits, and most lodges offer daily laundry. But don't forget a swimsuit. Also: Some countries in Africa have banned single-use plastics, so pack mindfully.

See a travel doctor. Malaria pills are often recommended, and some countries require vaccines, such as for yellow fever, for entry. A good travel doctor can make sure you are up-to-date with all requirements.

Be ready for anything. Pack a kit that includes first-aid basics, including a good bug repellent and something for upset stomachs.

Buy good insurance. Consider a travel policy that includes emergency medical transportation.

—*Elaina Graham, Linda Sergeant and Stephanie Serino, travel advisors*

