

Forbes



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

The World's Best Safaris

When a travel magazine 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* has named Micato the #1 World's Best Tour Operator and Safari Outfitter ten times in the past decade. **That the magazine has given Micato that distinction is pretty impressive, considering how many tour operators and safari specialists there are.**

T+L is not alone. Micato has 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 *Porthole Cruise*



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."

Magazine named them Best African Safari Tour Operator for five straight years. The popular book *1,000 Places to See Before You Die* picked them as Preferred East Africa Tour Operator. I have written here before about the exclusive Virtuoso consortium, an elite and respected group of true travel experts, and in competition with the best tour operators in the world, Micato has taken home Virtuoso's Best Active and Specialty Provider as well as Best Escorted Tour Operator. And that's all just the tip of their award iceberg.

While these accolades reflect well on the amazing job Micato does, these awards are not why I 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 Micato was to Kenya, a feature for *Cigar Aficionado*. I was blown away by the

job they did. I've written before about how enamored I am of Butterfield & Robinson, the world-class bicycle tour operator. Well, Micato is the equivalent for safaris. Both companies succeed 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 others 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, 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 asset is a cadre of highly trained, multi-lingual, expert safari guides, drivers, tour leaders, and trackers. Micato serves 5,000-7,000 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 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: on my first visit to Kenya I was lucky enough to meet both of them at their house. The company is run 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 trying to cast a socially responsible image, Micato has long been a leader. 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 and have staff volunteering. Micato has been doing these programs for more than 35 years through AmericaShare, its charity arm, which it began with seven full-time employees. The company's monetary donations are substantial and ongoing, as are its charitable efforts, which is why the awards the Pintos value most are those for their philanthropy, such as *Conde Nast Traveler's* World Savers Award, which Micato won, in two categories: Education and "Doing It All." As for the safaris themselves, the quality of both the itineraries and guides are simply awesome, 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 "Custom Collection," accommodations consisting of private ranches, family homesteads, and country estates, many within private game reserves. Like many special touches Micato offers, this is only possible because of the Pintos' deep roots and friendships in the African community. And ultra-luxe safari lodges 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. **There was a honeymoon couple on our first safari and when the Micato guide found out, he told the Mt. Kenya Safari Club, one place we were staying, and they upgraded them to the luxurious Presidential Suite—at no charge. These properties value Micato's business and it is the customer who benefits.** Itineraries include special Micato-only touches: Micato guests routinely meet Maasai elders and enjoy other "by invitation only" experiences such as meeting with the world's most famous paleontologists, the Leakey family.

Micato offers both scheduled small group trips and bespoke custom itineraries using private planes, including anniversary, wedding, celebratory, honeymoon, and graduation trips. **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.** I once 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. The company adds no surcharges or supplemental fees to their published or quoted prices, something many other tour companies do, and includes many things others add on, like airport transfers, park entrance fees, and all bottled water and soft drinks. **Micato has a "no tipping necessary — ever" policy: All gratuities are included, from porters to waiters.** That 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 Thomas Keller use his judgment in cooking you dinner, there is a peace 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.