

Paula Ellis

Paula Ellis, group general manager of the Retreats Group of hotels in Pembrokeshire, tells *Katherine Price* how she's ensuring the survival of hospitality in south-west Wales through Covid-19 and preparing to weather her business through 'three winters'

What is the situation with the Retreats Group now that your three hotels are temporarily closed due to coronavirus?

Everything is mothballed and everybody's on furlough, except for myself and two maintenance and grounds workers, who keep an eye on the properties. Thank goodness the government allowed us to put everyone on furlough, otherwise that would have been really disastrous.

There was only one person out of 65 that we weren't able to furlough because of the deadline of 28 February, but we had great news that it's been extended to 19 March, so that's fantastic.

Are you keeping in touch with your colleagues who have been furloughed?

We have a Facebook page, a WhatsApp group and a weekly newsletter, so we're keeping everybody informed. We're including things they can do to keep themselves fit and active, as well as lots of mental health support ideas, and we've sent out lots of links to training, such as courses with the Wine & Spirit Education Trust and on learning the Welsh language. My colleagues don't have to speak Welsh, but we like to say a few phrases to give people that sense of place. I'm not a fluent speaker, I've just learned through saysomethinginwelsh.com, so they're all having a go at that now.

I have calls with my colleagues just to keep their spirits up, especially those who have vulnerable family members. I call them to see how they're feeling and to reassure them that hopefully this will all be over soon and we'll have a job for them to come back to.

Although it's hard for us to find the money to pay people until we get the money back

from HMRC, with no revenue coming into the three properties, we have to invest in our people. This is not just so that when we open the properties again there will be people who can slot back into the organisation – it's also for the whole UK economy to keep people financially stable during these unprecedented times.

We had two senior colleagues who had resigned; we've brought them back onto the payroll and put them on furlough until hopefully the hotels they were going to can take them. We have to see the bigger picture and do whatever we can.

Are you engaging with the government in your role as chair of the South West Wales Tourism Forum?

I'm having weekly virtual meetings with Welsh government ministers and senior members of VisitWales. I gather all of the issues and concerns of our fellow hoteliers, hospitality companies and tourism businesses and present those in the meeting and follow them up in writing. They are good at listening and actioning wherever possible. They then work with Westminster to try and release more funds.

We're also working with the Welsh Tourism Alliance and UK Hospitality Wales. We're just trying to do the best we can to keep this industry sustainable until we get back on our feet.

What are the issues in the area right now?

It's the gaps. There's still a concern that seasonal workers are not going to have their summer salaries, which is a big aspect of seasonal locations like ours.

There's also the gaps with funding; you have ▶

“We're just trying to do the best we can to keep this industry sustainable until we can get back on our feet again”



PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARCUS OLENIK

to meet so much criteria to be able to attain funding. There's a lack of support from the insurance companies, and there was initially lack of support from the banks, but that's starting to change now.

Has the government done enough to support hospitality businesses in Wales?

They've exceeded our expectations. There's still an awful lot more to do and we have to be realistic, but they have been very sympathetic. The senior management of VisitWales has been working tirelessly to try and support the industry.

What are you focusing on in terms of your own business?

I'm looking at recovery planning now. A notification came out on the Welsh government website that said restrictions are going to be in place until 26 September – that's a big concern for us now.

When we do reopen, I think there will be a positive amount of business on the staycation side of things, especially here in the far west of Wales, with empty beaches and open spaces. It's how to manage that safely and effectively. It's such an intricate planning process that we have to think about now.

It's also cost saving and cost cutting. I'm looking at every avenue: I'm renegotiating with all my suppliers, my facility companies; I'm requesting holidays and postponements from marketing companies and consortia.

This is three winters for us, effectively. We've just come out of the winter; Easter through September, we're not going to get any business now, so that's another winter; and then we've got the following winter.

For places like us that really rely on making enough money in the summer to carry us through the quieter winter periods, we've got three winters on the trot, so we won't start to even regain some level of decent business until May 2021. So it's a long road ahead that we have to traverse. My concern and challenge at the moment is how to keep this business sustainable until then.

Would you reopen straightaway?

We'll open as soon as the restrictions enable us to, but with some safeguarding procedures in place. And all of the housekeeping procedures we had in place before the lockdown.

What sort of procedures?

Every two hours we were cleaning public areas, surfaces, door handles. We removed all of our soft furnishings from the public areas. We had hand sanitiser everywhere, and we were wearing masks for a very long time. All of the books that we had in the public areas were taken away. These are just a few of the little things we were doing to protect ourselves and our guests. We'd been doing those things since the beginning of February.

When I first asked my colleagues to do those things, they looked at me as if I'd come from a different planet. [Now] they're far more



Roch Castle



Penrhiw Priory (and right)



“When you remove the fear of making the mistake, people are happier to try new things, which helps them to grow rapidly”

understanding and appreciative of us protecting them and our guests as early as we did.

We were probably further ahead than the government because my boss, although he was born in Merthyr Tydfil and grew up in St Davids, had lived in Hong Kong for more than 35 years and had seen the country prepare for Sars in 2003.

Do you think the UK government has been decisive and prepared enough?

It's too little, too late. We should have been listening to the World Health Organization and countries like Hong Kong, rather than sticking our heads in the sand and thinking it's just going to be like Sars – something that just happened in Asia and didn't come this way. I just hope that we learn from

this situation and then we will be in a much better situation when the next pandemic comes our way.

Tell me about the Retreats Group

Our owner, Keith Griffiths, identified that there wasn't a luxury hotel [in St Davids]. Rather than build a new hotel, being a lover of historical buildings, he decided to rescue these three special places. He really wanted to boost more than just the economy of Pembrokeshire – the last five years for me, and the future for as long as I'm here, have been about really helping raise the profile of Wales as a luxury destination on an international platform.

How did you feel when you won Independent Hotelier of the Year at the Independent Hotel Show Awards last year?

I was so surprised to be shortlisted, but to actually win, I was in shock. As far as I'm aware, and nobody's told me otherwise, I'm the first female general manager to win. There just aren't enough of us.

Why do you think that is?

When I first got into hotels I was very shocked about how brow-beating the culture was and it was very male-dominated. The issue is that



Twr y Felin's Windmill Tower suite



Blas at Twr y Felin

The Retreats Group

In 2009, Keith Griffiths, the Wales-born and Hong Kong-based founder of architecture company Aedas, established the Griffiths-Roch Foundation, and spent £25m acquiring and restoring three historic buildings in St Davids, Pembrokeshire, to create the Retreats Group of luxury hotels.

Penrhiw Priory, built as a vicarage in the 1880s, was relaunched in 2010 as an eight-bedroom hotel. The 12th-century Roch Castle was turned into a six-bedroom hotel one year later. The group's third property, the 19th-century, Grade II-listed windmill and former temperance hotel Twr y Felin, reopened as a 21-bedroom contemporary art hotel in 2015. It won AA Hotel of the Year Wales 2017-18, has four silver AA stars and a two-AA-rosette restaurant, Blas (meaning taste in Welsh).

Paula Ellis joined the company as group general manager in 2014 and has overseen the restructure of the group, which included further renovation and extension works to Twr y Felin. A £3.5m extension housing 20 further bedrooms is due to open at Twr y Felin in October.

you either fight or flight; when you come across these horrible cultures, it's easy to just go and find another career. It's really sad because hospitality is an amazing occupation.

Thankfully, I carried on, and I vowed to myself that when I became a manager, I would be the antithesis of them and I would take that as my textbook of how not to be a boss.

I do think things are changing, but when I first came to the Retreats Group, I had male contemporaries say to my face, 'women can't be proper GMs, you only play at it'. One of those people was in the audience when I picked up the Independent Hotelier of the Year award.

However, it wasn't me that picked up that award – I'm just the conductor of the orchestra. It's my amazing team that pick up the instruments and pay the beautiful music.

Has team development been a priority for you?

We never have people queuing up because we are in the most challenging of locations geographically and we don't have staff accommodation. When we find people with the right attitude but with zero experience, we polish them up into very shiny diamonds. We just invested, invested, invested, took them under our wing, said 'we believe in you', and sent

Paula Ellis

Paula Ellis worked at hotels including St David's hotel and spa and the Vale Resort, both in Cardiff, and St Brides spa hotel in Saundersfoot, Pembrokeshire, before joining the Retreats Group as group general manager in 2014.

She is also chair of the South West Wales Tourism Forum and a governor at Pembrokeshire College. In 2019 she became the first female general manager to win Independent Hotelier of the Year at the Independent Hotel Show awards.

“I'm just the conductor of the orchestra, it's my amazing team that pick up the instruments and pay the beautiful music”

them on training courses if they needed to develop certain skills.

We had to promote a lot of young, talented people into senior positions because we didn't have a choice. Although it was treading deep water for a very long time, we were there to guide and support them, and they have grown into amazing people.

What kind of culture have you tried to create across the group?

One of my sayings is, 'the answer's yes, just ask the question', which is very empowering for our colleagues. A guest will ask my colleagues a question and they can say, 'yes certainly, of course,' instead of, 'I'll just go and check with my manager'.

And, 'we have no mistakes, only well-earned lessons'. When you remove the fear of making the mistake, people are happier to try new things, which helps them to grow rapidly.

I have a very basic business equation: happy colleagues equals happy guests equals successful business. My main focus is looking after my colleagues and ensuring they are being looked after every time I see them. Like with every guest, we simply ask, 'how can we improve?' or 'how can I help you?'

The average turnover of colleagues in the UK is 35%. Here, the most challenging of locations, it is 6% turnover. It can work and it does work.

What is your outlook post-coronavirus?

I'm a consummate optimist and I think at the end of it we'll all be more caring to the environment and each other and I don't think people will take things quite so much for granted.

I always say to my young colleagues when they have a bad day, 'we have to feel the rain to see the rainbow' – from everything bad comes something good. I'm just trying to keep their spirits up as much as I can, but it's devastating to the industry, it really is.