

Pod of Wales- Portmeirion to Blaenau Ffestiniog

Cast:

Kiri Pritchard-McClean

Esyllt Sears

Guests:

Meurig Jones

Mark Threadgill

Oliver

Michael Bewick

[Pod of Wales Intro Music]

Kiri: Croeso i, Pod of Wales, welcome to Pod of Wales. I'm Kiri Pritchard-McClean.

Esyllt: And I'm Esyllt Sears.

Kiri: I'm so excited about this episode.

Esyllt: I'm actually going to be ticking two things off my bucket list.

Kiri: Sharing a bed with me? [laughs]

Esyllt: OK three.

Kiri: Go on.

Esyllt: Staying in Portmeirion and eating in Portmeirion.

Kiri: Yes. Well we're starting in Portmeirion and then we're following a trail basically that goes via the Welsh Highland Railways, up to Blaenau Ffestiniog to the amazing Llechwedd slate quarry which has got so much going on. There's Zip World, there's Bounce Below, there's Underground Golf, there's glamping. We're going to be sampling as much as we can.

Esyllt: Yeah.

Kiri: As much as our pelvic floors will allow.

Esyllt: We're going to get spikes of adrenaline along the way.

Pod of Wales- Portmeirion to Blaenau Ffestiniog

Kiri: I know that my adrenaline will spike higher when I'm in Portmeirion and able to parrot facts at you than I would on a zipline.

Esyllt: Oh you're one of these people. Oh [sighs].

Kiri: I cannot tell you how much, the love I feel for Portmeirion is what I imagine other people feel for their children.

Esyllt: Right.

Kiri: I absolutely love the place. I'm buzzing to tell you everything I know about it. To be like 'Oh, oh, oh look at this bit! Look at this bit!' I think it is the most magical place in the world.

Esyllt: Do you know what's a shame for you is, I hate other people's children.

Kiri: [Laughs] I'm really excited because this is somewhere that I feel I have dipped my toe in as a tourist.

Esyllt: And my experience of this area as well is holidaying here with my family back in the '80s and '90s.

Kiri: Like Blaenau especially I don't know very much about and I pass through it and always think, oh this is absolutely beautiful.

Esyllt: Yeah.

Kiri: The train I've always wanted to do and that's going to be really genteel, I'll be living my best Agatha Christie life on that and Portmeirion is really sort of creative and inspiring and then just pure adrenaline junky stuff as I vomit down myself on some kind of attraction and ruin it for the children.

Esyllt: But then if you're vomiting on yourself, you're probably going to vomit on me as well because from my

Pod of Wales- Portmeirion to Blaenau Ffestiniog

understanding with the zipline, we're going down together [laughs].

Kiri: OK yeah well.

Esyllt: So maybe vomit into the wind.

Kiri: Or get a poncho at the gift shop [laughs].

Esyllt: Can I expense that?

Kiri: Yeah [laughs]

[Interim music]

Kiri: Oh my gosh! [laughs]

Meurig: I'm Meurig Jones, I'm the location manager at Portmeirion, this wonderful little Italianate village in North Wales.

Kiri: I absolutely love it here. You've got the only job other than mine that I would want.

Meurig: [Chuckles] I do feel very lucky. The work we do is the same as any other work basically but it's an incredible office to do it in.

Kiri: Yeah.

Meurig: It was one man's vision, the architect Sir Clough Williams-Ellis who had a burning ambition as a 23-year-old to build the village.

Esyllt: 23-year-old?!

Meurig: Yeah.

Esyllt: What?!

Meurig: Yeah he thought about this and he said, yeah I want to build a village. So he waited then 20 years to find the right site and then he came across this site in 1925 and what

Pod of Wales- Portmeirion to Blaenau Ffestiniog

sold it to Clough is all the wonderful cliff edges that we have here, this amphitheatre with a ravine in the middle. The view over the wonderful Dwyryd estuary and eventually the seventy acre headland which has got 90 miles of footpaths here as well. So it was a blank canvas to build on really. So he went to see the Midland Bank and he bought it for £5000.

Kiri: I'll give you 10 for it.

Esyllt: [Laughs]

Meurig: We'll negotiate that later OK. So it took 50 years to build everything that we have here now which is 60 hotel rooms and 13 self-catering cottages.

Esyllt: When I was 23 I think maybe I built maybe like a billy bookcase from IKEA.

Kiri: I built an overdraft I'm yet to pay off.

Esyllt: [Laughs] But it's like I admire that so much though.

Kiri: You know me, I've read the book, literally. And I didn't realise that he had almost searched the world and yet his family home was only up the road.

Meurig: That's right.

Kiri: And I think that's such a beautiful Welsh thing of like what are you looking for? Home.

Esyllt: Did he live on site then?

Meurig: No he lived six miles away, Plas Brondanw his ancestral home. So this was his plaything, his office, his place that he would come. And he had all of these ideas for 20 years in his head you know he wanted to show that you could have fun with architecture but also he knew he could work with nature. So when he found the right site he was let loose then so he built quickly in the first ten years. And he

Pod of Wales- Portmeirion to Blaenau Ffestiniog

wanted the place to look old. He wanted Portmeirion to be his home for fallen buildings, so there are buildings taken down and rebuilt here. But he also called it his architectural mongrel.

Kiri: [Laughs]

Meurig: Because he borrowed from every range of architecture he could but that wouldn't work unless you could join them together somehow so he joined them together with the Italianate colours of Portofino that he was a big fan of.

Kiri: I love that it's eccentric, his pure vision. That you're like 'Oh this is Wales'.

Meurig: Yeah it is yeah.

Esyllt: Did he spend much time in Italy then?

Meurig: No not really, he travelled the world. But he did go to Portofino and he arrived by boat and he opened the curtains in the morning, saw the coloured terraces and said, yeah if I do my village I want to do it.

Esyllt: Right. Did he ever get married?

Meurig: Oh he did and his wife was very critical of him.

Esyllt: Oh! I would have love to have been his wife. I mean I know nothing about the man but just to lord it around here, I would love it.

Kiri: I bet she hated it.

Esyllt: Do you think?

Kiri: Yeah I bet she was like that thing, do you know how women feel about the shed at the bottom of the garden.

Esyllt: [Laughs] Do you think she would have hated it?

Kiri: I think it would have felt like a mistress yeah absolutely.

Pod of Wales- Portmeirion to Blaenau Ffestiniog

Esyllt: Aww that's a shame.

Kiri: Taking all of his money and time and thoughts up. But what a place to have a party.

Meurig: Absolutely.

Esyllt: You're so negative.

Kiri: [Laughs] About men, yeah!

Meurig: But it's always creative people that get this you know? It's people who think outside the box. It's been an inspiration to so many people and writers and musicians and artists. It is quite special really.

Kiri: This statue that we're next to, if I get this right.

Esyllt: Helo! Ti'n alright? Shwmae! Ti'n iawn? [Conversation in Welsh with somebody in the vicinity]

Kiri: Oh my gosh, ti'n jocio. Of course.

Esyllt: That's my daughter's swimming instructor.

Kiri: [Laughs] That is the Welshest thing you can put in the podcast.

Kiri: And I don't think people realise, you know people see it on Instagram and they don't realise, you can come and stay here, you can stay in the village. Which is magic

Esyllt: To be able to stay here. Because then it stops it from just becoming a museum.

Meurig: Absolutely.

Esyllt: It's wonderful, shall we carry on?

Meurig: Lovely.

Kiri: Let's go.

Pod of Wales- Portmeirion to Blaenau Ffestiniog

[Sound of a car motor]

Meurig: So here we are, as we're going into the village now, Clough felt very strongly whichever way you go in you have to walk under an arch and then you've arrived in the village after you walk under the arch. So the first arch we're going to go underneath is Gatehouse.

Esyllt: OK.

Meurig: Built in 1954 and the tricks on it are the windows are too small to make it look bigger than it actually is. And can you see the 4 tier painting scheme on it, light shade at the top and dark shade at the bottom.

Kiri: Oh yeah.

Meurig: To make it look old and damp. So he was ageing it.

Kiri: So it's not actually damp?

Meurig: No. Do you know what I've heard people stand here and say 'Well I wouldn't stay here it must be horrible in that'. And it's like no it's no, we paint it like every five years so we're still keeping the tricks going you know.

Esyllt: I have two questions. So the first question is, who's the most famous person who has stayed here?

Kiri: [Laughs]

Esyllt: And then the second part is who's the most famous person you have seen here?

Meurig: So many. Portmeirion has always been a creative hub for creative people. So going back to the wartime Noel Coward wrote Blithe Spirit here.

Esyllt: Oh my God.

Kiri: Nodding along, I knew that [laughs]. I could tell you which building he did it in as well.

Pod of Wales- Portmeirion to Blaenau Ffestiniog

Esyllt: My God, when we go to our rooms I'm going to read that book cover to cover before dinner.

Kiri: It's brilliant, it's brilliant.

Esyllt: Wow.

Meurig: So I'm a huge music fan, it's always been fantastic for me personally being a huge Beatles fan, that the Beatles came here.

Esyllt: All four of them at the same time?

Meurig: Yes.

Esyllt: Wow.

Meurig: And of all the Beatles George Harrison came back most often. He was the one who really got Clough's idea of thinking outside the box, I mean he was quite spiritual wasn't he?

Kiri: Yeah.

Esyllt: He's the one I fancy the most.

Kiri: He's the best Beatle, yeah.

Meurig: He even has 50th birthday party with us.

Kiri: Wow.

Meurig: Which is great. I've spoken to staff who were here at the time when the Beatles were here and I said 'What was it like 1964, 1966 when they were at their peak fame?' Well they were just four people wandering through the village. And I thought that must be lovely for them because they couldn't go anywhere without getting mobbed I guess but they were here.

Esyllt: Who else would have come to his birthday party?

Pod of Wales- Portmeirion to Blaenau Ffestiniog

Meurig: Jools Holland was also here. And they had this jamming session where you are tonight in the bar of the hotel there's a piano there. I would have loved to have been there, how good would it have been to be a fly on the wall for that jamming session?

Esyllt: Genuinely I feel breathless just thinking about, wow.

Meurig: [Laughs] But that is so lovely.

Kiri: There would have been somebody who was like 'Play Hey Jude' over and over again.

Meurig: [Laughs]

Esyllt: [Laughs] Wow so who was the most famous person you've seen here?

Meurig: Well I guess, with the idea that Clough didn't want it to become a museum, should be a creative influence. I had a meeting with Robin, Clough's grandson and he said 'What can we do?' and I said 'I think musicians would know the place because they'll definitely know The Prisoner' because of course Patrick McGoohan was such a superstar. And then we did our first festival, Festival No 6 here. And then New Order asked to headline the first and it was just lovely. And on the Monday morning they asked for the tour so I took them around on tour and Bernard Sumner I gave him my card and he said 'Oh I sent you a letter about four years ago' a complaint or something you know. And he said 'No, no, no we've been here as a day visitor, I loved that blue that you painted in the bell tower, and I asked can you send me that as a fob?' And I did and I painted my kitchen that colour, he said.

Esyllt: No! Wow.

Meurig: So it was just how prominent can...

Esyllt: It is a great blue colour.

Pod of Wales- Portmeirion to Blaenau Ffestiniog

Meurig: Oh it is.

Kiri: It's nice to know the colour of Peter Hook's kitchen as well isn't it?

Meurig: [Laughs]

Esyllt: You mentioned Clough's grandson. So the family are still very much involved?

Meurig: Absolutely hands on everything yeah.

Esyllt: Is he available?

Kiri: [Laughs]

Esyllt: What to have an interview?

Kiri: No she doesn't want that.

Meurig: No, no, alas no.

Esyllt: Oh damn it!

Kiri: Stop treating this like Tinder. Can I ask, he had a very specific vision and he lived to a brilliant age, but will it ever develop? Will anything ever change?

Meurig: Well there was one building that he designed and it wasn't built and the Lion Cottage wasn't built and it was designed by Clough and we have an interview with him saying if anything else should be built it should only be the Lion Cottage. I would love for us to be able to do that for our centenary in 2026, to build the last cottage that Clough designed here. So you'll have to put your names down to be the first people to stay in Lion Cottage hopefully if we can do it.

Esyllt: [Draws breath] That would be fab.

Meurig: In 2026.

Pod of Wales- Portmeirion to Blaenau Ffestiniog

Esyllt: We'll top and tail

Kiri: I'll fight off the remaining Beatles to stay there. I reckon I could take Ringo.

[Interim Music]

Esyllt: So we're here at the restaurant at the Hotel Portmeirion. We have just had an incredible taster menu.

Kiri: I had full vegan tasting menu which is so rare. Sometimes they'll just sort of be like 'Here's a bean, enjoy it'.

Esyllt: [Laughs]

Kiri: And then you had full meat and my partner has joined us to eat vegan gluten free and we've all had an incredible. And Jo our producer is eating vegetarian. So we've brought the most difficult dietary requirements along with us. The most antisocial.

Esyllt: I bet you were cursing this table when we came in.

Kiri: It sounds like a table of mystery shoppers that we're really trying to stretch but it has been absolutely amazing and we are sat here now with the chef.

Mark: So my name's Mark Threadgill, I'm the head chef at Hotel Portmeirion.

Esyllt: Actually you look very clean for a chef who has just done a full shift.

Mark: Yeah I am, I changed my apron.

Kiri: Oh have you?

Mark: Yeah.

Kiri: Put on your Sunday best for us.

Mark: I always keep one for back up.

Pod of Wales- Portmeirion to Blaenau Ffestiniog

Kiri: For press engagements like this.

Mark: Yeah.

Kiri: So how long have you worked here then?

Mark: As head chef, 12 years.

Kiri: Wow.

Mark: But I worked here previously as an apprentice.

Esyllt: Genuinely I want to know what your skin care regime is. You look like a baby.

Kiri: Did you start working here at quite a young age then?

Mark: Yeah I started here at 15 years old, so straight from school. So it was the day after basically so I already had a job before I started my exams, so I couldn't wait to start really.

Kiri: I'm so glad that people as talented and absolutely smashing it in the field are staying in Wales. Because otherwise people like us who grew up in Wales, like if you don't see people doing it, how do you know that that's a job that you can do?

Mark: Yeah.

Kiri: And is it important to you, because I could taste some Welsh, like there was definitely Halen Mon in there so I can taste local stuff, is that important to you.

Mark: Yeah it is important. Anything we can get locally we'll get it. But if we can get something better we'll take it further afield. But we just wait for seasons. When I went to France to work, because I worked there in the south, you would pick your own produce. So in the morning you'd go, pick the fish, pick the vegetables, so I was learning, I'd see the different produce.

Pod of Wales- Portmeirion to Blaenau Ffestiniog

Kiri: Well it's so good to find out that it's seasonal which means I can justify coming back here at least four times a year.

Esyllt: [Laughs]

Mark: Yeah.

Esyllt: So on the taster menu that we just had, what is your favourite?

Mark: Well the taster at the moment, you had the meat one didn't you?

Esyllt: Yeah.

Mark: That's The Great British Menu.

Esyllt: So it's got Super Ted and Sam Tân

Mark: Yeah so Robin said it would be nice to have it on for now, OK that's a good idea.

Esyllt: I really liked the Caesar salad.

Mark: Aye the crab yeah.

Esyllt: It's just a mouthful.

Mark: Yeah.

Esyllt: How you got all the textures in one mouthful, it was incredible.

Mark: Yeah it's a good one, that's been on before as well.

Kiri: What cartoon was that? Sali Mali I've never seen it.

Mark: So at the moment until I think it's May that menu is on.

Kiri: Amazing.

Mark: Just the Great British Menu event.

Esyllt: How was that taking part in something like that?

Pod of Wales- Portmeirion to Blaenau Ffestiniog

Mark: It was good. I just gave my all, and I went through to the final so.

Kiri: Amazing.

Esyllt: You seem so chilled though.

Kiri: Like really chilled. That's chefs though.

Esyllt: Yeah.

Mark: I think I'm quite a chilled person anyway.

Esyllt: Have you ever introduced a dish that really hasn't worked?

Mark: Yeah New Year's Eve.

Kiri: [Laughs] Instantly. Go big or go home. Really?

Mark: Yeah there was 130 all at once and we did after the mains like a palette cleanser so I did a Bloody Mary, we did the sorbet, celery, puree celery cress. It was so strong and so spicy and so powerful. I did an excuse saying it was meant to be powerful, it's one mouthful. It was too strong.

Kiri: [Laughs]

Esyllt: Do you have sleepless nights about stuff like that?

Mark: Yeah my wife says sometimes I get up saying 'Someone put the chicken in the oven' and stuff like that.

Kiri: Unbelievable.

Mark: Nice, it don't stop.

Esyllt: The dedication.

Kiri: And a chef, you've got a whole restaurant in your head, your whole team in your head and it's physically hard work. Like you know you're sweating, temperature's mad, you're working incredibly quickly, I've got so much respect for what you do. And to like, love it and not phone it in.

Pod of Wales- Portmeirion to Blaenau Ffestiniog

Mark: Yeah.

Kiri: Because it's a bit like what we do performance wise, every night it's you starting again, all those people it's the first time

Mark: Yeah it's live innit?

Kiri: It's live yeah.

Esyllt: It doesn't matter if they enjoyed it last night. You're having to perform to this night.

Mark: Again yeah [laughs].

Kiri: And they want to only talk about the one they didn't enjoy.

Mark: Yeah.

Kiri: You've got to smash it.

Mark: Oh every time yeah.

Kiri: You've got to smash it every time.

Mark: No it's true.

Esyllt: The Bloody Mary sorbet yeah.

Mark: Every service is different and the team changes. So you've got, this guy here he's with me today so you have to change slightly.

Kiri: Name names.

[Laughter]

Mark: So yeah I have to be careful sometimes.

Kiri: Yeah I bet. I'm obsessed with Portmeirion and I read the book that he wrote about making this place. And when it started the restaurant, the chef was central to it. It was like

Pod of Wales- Portmeirion to Blaenau Ffestiniog

he was the main person who was drawing people in as well.

Mark: Yeah.

Kiri: And it was the restaurant that helped this place push forward.

Esyllt: Wow.

Kiri: And now with what you're doing being on Great British Menu and things like that, it's back on you again.

Mark: Yeah, yeah it is.

Kiri: No pressure.

Esyllt: [Laughs]

Kiri: Enjoy another sleepless night calling out covers

Mark: Yeah.

Kiri: Thank you so much it's been so nice. It was amazing tonight, thank you so much it was lovely.

Mark: Oh nice...

Esyllt: I can't believe how chill you are.

Kiri: You're so chilled, yeah.

Esyllt: Oh my God. When I make Sunday lunch for my parents, like I'm more stressed than this

[Interim music]

Kiri: Well Bora da.

Esyllt: Bora da!

Kiri: Good morning.

Pod of Wales- Portmeirion to Blaenau Ffestiniog

- Esyllt: I said that way too cheery. Like I aimed too high then with bora da because now my voice has gone all the way down.
- Kiri: [Laughs] We're reaching new octaves here at breakfast at Portmeirion. Which was so nice, delicious. And one of those ones where there's like multiple courses for breakfast.
- Esyllt: Yeah.
- Kiri: So like yeah oh God I've had a delicious vegan breakfast muffin. I feel ready for the day.
- Esyllt: Not muffin, croissant.
- Kiri: No I had that as well.
- Esyllt: Did you have a muffin as well? [Laughs]
- Kiri: Alright thanks for shopping me on that, on the old carb intake.
- Esyllt: [Laughs]
- Kiri: We were saying here one of the amazing things is the staff in the restaurant are incredible.
- Esyllt: Yeah.
- Kiri: They're all bilingual, they're all really friendly in a way that this could be a really posh off putting restaurant but it's not because they're so warm.
- Esyllt: Yeah.
- Kiri: And funny and pretty sound.
- Esyllt: Yeah [laughs] yeah.
- Kiri: It's nice. So we're having breakfast and then we're heading off to Porthmadog and we're going get on, and I think this is the perfect way to start the day, on a lovely train ride.

Pod of Wales- Portmeirion to Blaenau Ffestiniog

- Esyllt: Yeah I love a steam railway.
- Kiri: Yeah.
- Esyllt: I like to imagine that I'm fleeing from my husband.
- Kiri: That's what you like to imagine?
- Esyllt: In the 19th century with like a carpetbag and I'm going to go off to Belgium or something, I don't know.
- Kiri: I like to pretend that I'm dressed as a man and I'm sort of faking my way into medical school. And I'm going to be a pioneer.
- Esyllt: [Laughs]
- Kiri: Everyone else does that right? That's why my moustache is so prominent this morning.
- Esyllt: [Laughs]
- Kiri: Shall we go and have a sordid affair on the train.
- Esyllt: Absolutely yeah.
- Kiri: Alright let's do it.
- Esyllt: See you there.
- Oliver: Good morning ladies and gentlemen, can I see your tickets please? Thank you very much.
- Kiri: It was a popular school trip like to go to Llanberis slate museum. We're in a tunnel, woo hoo hoo. Oh and all the steam around you.
- Esyllt: Wow.
- Kiri: It's like an M.R. James.
- Esyllt: [Draws breath]
- Kiri: Quite eerie isn't it? Look at this. It is magic.

Pod of Wales- Portmeirion to Blaenau Ffestiniog

- Esyllt: It's just the way the light touches everything differently. Like no mountain is lit up the same way or in the same shade, everything is completely different.
- Kiri: No and they found a lovely light as Suzi Ruffell will say, I found a lovely light.
- Esyllt: [Laughs]
- Kiri: So we are on the Mountain Spirit. You might be able to hear it.
- Esyllt: Is that the name of the train?
- Kiri: No the feeling I have today. Oh yeah because it's on the door Yspryd y Mynnyddoedd.
- Esyllt: Yeah.
- Kiri: Yeah and it starts, well we certainly got on at Porthmadog and it stops all the way along these beautiful old sort of Victorian stations, it's a gorgeous shiny steam train.
- Esyllt: Yeah.
- Kiri: Like a murder would have been done on. And it goes all the way to Blaenau Ffestiniog. It's winding its way through, it's really relaxing.
- Esyllt: Yeah.
- Kiri: It's like you're being rocked like a baby. And it's really historic, there's this great brochure that tells you the history of the areas you're passing through, of the railway itself and there's a conductor who comes around and stamps your tickets as well.
- Esyllt: Yeah old school.
- Oliver: I'm Oliver Bennett I've been working on the railway for around about 24 years this August. I started when I was 11.

Pod of Wales- Portmeirion to Blaenau Ffestiniog

- Kiri: Wow!
- Esyllt: Oh my gosh.
- Kiri: How is that allowed? [laughs]
- Oliver: [Laughs] It's not allowed anymore of course.
- Esyllt: So you obviously love trains then.
- Oliver: Yeah I was brought up down here when I was little, about six months old. My grandparents had a holiday cottage in Nefyn.
- Kiri: Ah.
- Esyllt: Oh, Nefyn another great part of the area really good.
- Oliver: Yeah on the other side of the coastline.
- Kiri: So what is it you love so much about this railway then?
- Oliver: Just chatting to the people. Giving them stories and information. We're at Tan-y-Bwlch at the moment. There used to be a lady here but she used to bring the engine drivers tea and coffees.
- Kiri: Is she the lady who dressed up in traditional Welsh costume to do it?
- Oliver: Yeah she dressed in Welsh costume yeah.
- Kiri: Yeah she knew how to get money out of people.
- Oliver: Yeah [laugh].
- Kiri: That's how you do it, put on one of those little hats.
- Oliver: Yeah of course yeah.
- Esyllt: When we were passing through towards the beginning I think we were at Penrhyn or Minffordd it was. And I was

Pod of Wales- Portmeirion to Blaenau Ffestiniog

like oh my gosh it's beautiful. There's bedding plants there, it's been repainted. Is that volunteers doing that?

Oliver: Most of it is volunteers yeah.

Esyllt: Wow.

Oliver: The reason why we tried to make that one so nice and beautiful is because just up the road is Portmeirion.

Kiri: Yes of course.

Oliver: Portmeirion of course is where The Prisoner was filmed.

Kiri: Yeah so you Botox that one so it's as good looking at the village.

Esyllt: [Laughs]

Oliver: Yeah but we try to make all of our stations look good as well.

Kiri: That's so lovely. Because I've seen a big spread of age of people who are with their dogs as well. It feels like there's something for everyone.

Oliver: Oh yeah. I mean we don't just do this journey. We do little journeys so this station here Tan-y-Bwlch, we do little journeys over towards Beddgelert and on our other railway towards Caernarfon and we like to let people just enjoy the ride and not do too much if they have little children or dogs. You know keep them entertained.

Esyllt: Have you ever pulled the horn?

Oliver: Well yes.

Kiri: [Laughs]

Oliver: I had a foot plate ride a few years ago so...

Esyllt: [Draws breath]

Pod of Wales- Portmeirion to Blaenau Ffestiniog

Oliver: ...it was a completely different experience to be on the foot plate.

Esyllt: Oh yeah I can imagine.

Kiri: And you seem like you love your job as well.

Oliver: Oh yes, yeah. I wouldn't do anything else for the world.

Esyllt: Aww.

Kiri: Do you know what I spend a lot of time on trains that aren't steam powered and I've never met anyone who works for the railway who likes their job [laughs]. You're a breath of fresh air.

Oliver: Thank you very much.

Kiri: Someone who isn't just selling stale sandwiches.

Esyllt: And actually this is one train that was on time.

Kiri: [Laughs] Yeah that's true as well, it's true.

Oliver: Well we try our best.

Kiri: You've been fantastic Oliver thank you so much for chatting.

Esyllt: Yeah thank you so much diolch.

Michael: See you again soon.

Kiri: See you.

Esyllt: I feel like I'm being lulled into a false sense of security here because I am so relaxed because of the rocking of the train. And in about half an hour I'm going to be thrown down a mountain.

Kiri: Before trying to squeeze into a harness to be hoisted into the air and thrown through an old slate quarry.

Pod of Wales- Portmeirion to Blaenau Ffestiniog

Esyllt: Yeah. For anyone who hasn't guessed yet and think we're going to do something really sadistic, we're going to go on a zipline.

Kiri: We're going to go on a zipline.

Esyllt: Have you been on a zipline?

Kiri: No I haven't.

Esyllt: No I've never.

Kiri: I've been to the amazing, the Bounce Below there.

Esyllt: Ah OK.

Kiri: Which is phenomenal because it's in the old quarry so it's these hollowed out caves and it's really fun but now I'm going to be hanging from a very small bit of wire.

Esyllt: Yeah because I was thinking, would I prefer Bounce Down Below? But then I've had two kids and I think maybe the zipline is the best option for me [laughs].

Kiri: [Laughs] I'm one of these people who wasn't scared of heights as a child but as I've got older, you know I don't like scary rides now.

Esyllt: No you're more aware of your mortality.

Kiri: Yeah I'm more aware of my mortality if I like put a jumper on going down the stairs, let alone if I get on a zipline.

Esyllt: So let's enjoy the last bit of calm.

Kiri: Yeah this serene lovely blast from the past before we get hurled across the countryside on the harness.

Esyllt: [Laughs]

[Interim Music]

Pod of Wales- Portmeirion to Blaenau Ffestiniog

Kiri: Well you join us at quite a monumental bleak phase in our lives I would say. So we're at the Llechwedd slate quarry, the home of Zip World and we're about to do an absolutely massive zipline and there's sort of a little bird hide shed that we're now in where you can watch.

Esyllt: The person I'm watching now, they look so calm.

Kiri: Yeah they've probably passed out.

Esyllt: [Laughs]

Kiri: Yeah or on betablockers. And we forgot to get the wristband where you get betablockers with it. Oh gosh someone is going to go down now.

Esyllt: Ugh, right.

Kiri: [Groans]

Esyllt: Dim diolch.

Kiri: Ugh.

Esyllt: See you at the bottom. It will be great, you'll be buzzing at the bottom.

[Sounds of the staff counting down the moment of launch]

[Screams]

Kiri: We're post zipline.

Esyllt: Feet on the ground.

Kiri: Adrenaline gland completely burned out.

Esyllt: [Laughs]

Kiri: I had a big moment at the top.

Esyllt: When we were sat down in the harness ready to go and I looked over at you and the look you gave me.

Pod of Wales- Portmeirion to Blaenau Ffestiniog

Kiri: I think the last thing I said to you was 'I don't want to do this'.

Esyllt: Yeah [laughs]

Kiri: And they were like Tri, Dau, Un, and they gave this [noise] and I was like well I'm here, I'm here doing it.

Esyllt: [Laughs]

Kiri: Also I was profoundly worried about losing my wellies.

Esyllt: Yeah but you kept them.

Kiri: I kept my wellies so.

Esyllt: Yay [laughs].

Kiri: One of the amazing things I wasn't expecting was that you would see so much from the ziplines because it's the best view you're going to get going over these huge amazing manmade sort of caverns and valleys.

Esyllt: Well there's some speed to it but not too much that you're not able to take stuff in you know.

Kiri: Yeah. Genuinely the hardest part for me was getting on scales in front of people. I will say to anyone else who's fat listening, the number is away from you but they still write it on your wrist. And if you're lucky like me they put on a special parachute to slow you down because you have too much velocity inherently.

Esyllt: The parachute was cute though.

Kiri: Was it? I couldn't see it...

Esyllt: You looked adorable.

Kiri: ...because it was buffeting behind me, like a huge red billowing stigma. It's the colour of my blood pressure chart and my risk of diabetes.

Pod of Wales- Portmeirion to Blaenau Ffestiniog

Esyllt: [Laughs]

Kiri: I actually was weirdly calm and it's beautiful. I mean this is quite a Blaenau day I think you get this in summer but it's got these gorgeous sort of mists rolling across the hills and it is stunning. It's almost like the best way to see it.

Esyllt: Yeah it really is. And it's busy today and it's off-peak in terms of the season.

Kiri: Yeah.

Esyllt: You can imagine the summer, it's absolutely heaving.

Kiri: Yes I imagine so. And it's really family-orientated in a really great way. Where we're sat right now there's like a little cake shop behind us. There's a little playground here. Picnic tables, there's loads to do. And even just sitting here I feel like the air is so clean here.

Esyllt: Yeah I know.

Kiri: The minutes I shaved off my life from doing the ziplines, it's adding back on again with all the fresh air.

Esyllt: [Laughs]

Kiri: We're going to be staying here. Which I didn't realise because I don't read the itinerary.

Esyllt: No [laughs].

Kiri: But we are staying here.

Esyllt: Yeah on some pods on the side of the mountain which we saw on the way down that last zipline and they look so cute.

Kiri: Really cute glamping pods.

Esyllt: Yeah and they have chimneys so I'm hoping that means a fire.

Pod of Wales- Portmeirion to Blaenau Ffestiniog

Kiri: Yes.

Esyllt: Oh well I'm glad that I got to experience this with you and that we survived it together.

Kiri: I like being with you but...

Esyllt: [Laughs]

[Interim Music]

Esyllt: We're sat in a nice warm room.

Kiri: Oh it's such a nice room.

Esyllt: And you have a gin and tonic.

Kiri: Mm-hmm.

Esyllt: And I have a rum and coke.

Kiri: And our civilised guest has a cup of tea.

Michael: Absolutely.

Esyllt: So we're in Plas Weunydd, which is the hotel on site at Llechwedd.

Kiri: And we have got a wonderful guest. Would you like to introduce yourself?

Michael: Hello yes, my name is Michael Bewick and I'm the managing director here at JW Greaves.

Kiri: How long have you been involved with this incredible site?

Michael: I've been here about ten years now in total.

Kiri: You're part of the UNESCO World Heritage Site here which is a huge thing.

Michael: Yes.

Pod of Wales- Portmeirion to Blaenau Ffestiniog

Kiri: But I wonder how that feels as a business. Because it means you can't just endlessly put this here, put that there. Or are you seeing it as a badge of honour to work with? Or is it actually quite inconvenient?

Michael: We worked really closely with the World Heritage team to talk about what we might be able to do in the future or what we might not be able to do in the future. And they really understood this was always a working quarry and has been since 1840. So there's always been jobs. It's always been about building things. So thinking about the ziplines that you've just been on, historically the quarries would have been crisscrossed with metal cables that were used to carry the slate waste from one place to another.

Esyllt: Oh wow.

Michael: So you think about that and then you think about this landscape and it sort of all makes sense.

Esyllt: I mean we did look like bags of slate waste going down there [laughs].

Kiri: [Laughs] And that's from the best angle. Slate waste is about the closest to a compliment that I'm going to get today.

Esyllt: [Laughs]

Michael: I don't believe it. There's probably about 25 miles of tunnels down there. And one of the big things that happened ten years ago was when we first met Zip World and they came here and first of all built Bounce Below. Then the ziplines. Then Zip World caverns which is an amazing underground climbing experience. And now they've just built the underground crazy golf course, the world's only underground crazy golf course.

Esyllt: Is it?

Pod of Wales- Portmeirion to Blaenau Ffestiniog

Michael: I think.

Kiri: Clang. There he goes.

Michael: Right, right exactly, gotta say it.

Esyllt: [Laughs]

Kiri: So with all these miles and miles of underground stuff, is it as much as your imagination can do really? Because you've got this almost endless expanse.

Esyllt: Oh completely. For example now, we work with the Snowdonia cheese people who store cheese underground to mature the cheese. So there are currently not far from where you were today, 20 tons of cheddar.

Kiri: Don't say that. Because at about one o'clock in the morning.

Esyllt: I'm going to be sniffing about.

Kiri: Like a pig with truffles.

Esyllt: Yeah [laughs].

Michael: Small snack anybody? Absolutely right.

Esyllt: [Draws breath] wow.

Michael: So you're right, whatever the imagination can do.

Kiri: Being fairly local from north Wales, I'm very aware of meaningful employment.

Michael: Yes.

Kiri: And actually you know we're seeing so many local people employed here and there's a million different things you can do here.

Michael: Yeah.

Pod of Wales- Portmeirion to Blaenau Ffestiniog

Kiri: Also they're not just sort of clipping you into the thing. They give you a history tour, they do a brief, there's a bit of public speaking. And that compared to what their ancestors might have been doing which was just working here until their bodies gave out in their 40s is a such a positive sign of how we can use what we have in Wales.

Michael: Yes.

Kiri: But evolve it into something that brings people over here and still be world leaders in that, it's really exciting.

Esyllt: Well yeah because one of the guys who's doing the tour for us, so I asked him if any of his ancestors used to work here and they did.

Michael: Yeah.

Esyllt: So it's really interesting then to hear from him someone who has descended from people who would have pulled stone out of the mountainside and he's working here now.

Michael: And one of the things I'm proudest of, is that now here there are more people employed than at any time since the late '70s when the quarries were still operating. But actually what's really important is to try and develop jobs that have a high enough value that people can have a mortgage, raise their kids, and stay here.

Esyllt: Yeah.

Michael: That's the big aim isn't it really, is to make that happen in this bit of North Wales.

Esyllt: It's really good to hear that you're mindful of that as well because it is one of the big issues in Welsh communities at the moment. That you know people want to stay where they grew up.

Michael: And one of the things about the World Heritage Site which is really encouraging is that of course world heritage brings

Pod of Wales- Portmeirion to Blaenau Ffestiniog

people who are interested. They don't just want to come and have a great time, they want to do that but they also want to learn about the culture and the history. And so if we can have tourism that brings people who want to sort of have fun but also learn and discover what Wales is about that's the golden shot really.

Esyllt: It is important that people get a sense of where they are and how this has become what it is now.

Kiri: And how life is really tough around here and then it's nice to see that nice contrast of the local people working here, having loads of fun in their job which is wonderful.

Esyllt: Definitely.

Kiri: Any job you get to have a carabiner and a fleece I always think is fun isn't it?

Esyllt: [Laughs]

Michael: Absolutely.

Kiri: I mean off record both of my nightmares but. Lovely to see as somebody who grew up not far away. Blaenau had a bit of a reputation for being quite bleak, sort of nothing place. But now I think you could absolutely find your groove and find your thing here, it's wonderful.

Michael: Yeah.

Esyllt: So have you tested everything that's on offer here? Have you bounced? [laughs]

Michael: Bounce Below is fabulous.

Esyllt: Why?

Michael: I think it's fun because anybody could go on it and I am like the most scared of heights and the general manager who is such a nice man went 'You've got to'.

Pod of Wales- Portmeirion to Blaenau Ffestiniog

Kiri: [Laughs]

Michael: So I did and I was so scared but do you know what? I had a great time.

Esyllt: Oh brilliant.

Michael: And it was really good fun.

Kiri: It's fantastic.

Esyllt: I really need to try it.

Kiri: It's really fun.

Esyllt: Although I have had two kids and bouncing about, like my pelvic floor.

Michael: [Laughs]

Kiri: Everything is bouncing below if you go on it.

Esyllt: [Laughs]

Michael: Everybody knows they need to be slightly careful on that one, yeah for sure. For sure.

Esyllt: Have some towels on standby.

Michael: Yeah.

Kiri: Thank you so much for your time.

Michael: Oh a real pleasure.

Kiri: And thanks for doing this as well. I just love it when I see people investing in north Wales and the people in north Wales, it's really important. It's really important so thank you.

Michael: It's a unique and special place isn't it? It really is.

Esyllt: Yeah, diolch

Pod of Wales- Portmeirion to Blaenau Ffestiniog

Michael: Cool, diolch yn fawr

[Interim Music]

Esyllt: Bora da.

Kiri: Bora da! What a view to wake up to.

Esyllt: Incredible. It's got rockface, it's got a bit of mist. Because you can see so far down the valley and you can see so many mountain ranges on the way down, I don't even know the names of all of them. And every single one of them has different shadowing and a different type of light hitting it.

Kiri: Yeah.

Esyllt: Yeah it's stunning.

Kiri: It looks pure Tolkien.

Esyllt: Yes!

Kiri: The glamping tent, I mean these things are called tents but they don't feel like a tent at all.

Esyllt: No.

Kiri: Until you're in the bathroom and you look up and you're like, oh yeah that sort of reinforced PVC buffering above my head.

Esyllt: Yeah you could put a knife through it.

Kiri: Yeah. But they are so cosy. Oh gosh it was so lovely. And being in that lovely big warm bed last night.

Esyllt: Alright.

Kiri: All cwtshed up. Enjoy your single mate?

Esyllt: I did thank you. It's all I need [laughs].

Pod of Wales- Portmeirion to Blaenau Ffestiniog

Kiri: You're more petite than I.

Esyllt: Oh shut up.

Kiri: You didn't have to have a red parachute on the zipline so you have to go in the smaller bed.

Esyllt: I feel like I missed out, I want a parachute [laughs].

Kiri: Honestly, the sound of it, flicking open is like oh God.

Esyllt: Like your waters breaking.

Kiri: [Laughs] But it's my self esteem instead. It was really cwtshy in there and it was gorgeous. Going there as the sun was going down.

Esyllt: Yeah put the fire on straightaway, first thing we did.

Kiri: On a clear night the stars would be absolutely spectacular.

Esyllt: Yeah.

Kiri: And then waking up and it was just beautiful. And so quiet here.

Esyllt: Yeah.

Kiri: Also I love that they sort of send a hardcore 4x4 type machine up just to take our sort of pathetic suitcases down to the carpark.

Esyllt: [Laughs]

Kiri: Which is absolutely a walk, but also, thank you.

Esyllt: Yeah. I think one thing we haven't really mentioned about this part of the world is how many Welsh speakers work in tourism and hospitality. So if you were to holiday in this area and you wanted to practise your Welsh as a learner, it's a great place to do it. Because most people, you know if you start with Welsh they will talk back to you in Welsh.

Pod of Wales- Portmeirion to Blaenau Ffestiniog

Kiri: Dwi'n cytuno I agree yeah.

Esyllt: Alright don't show off.

Kiri: Well because as a Welsh learner I actually find it really hard to practise because where I live everyone knows me as an English speaker. Whereas here if you go in with a bit of confidence in Welsh they'll always reply to you in Welsh which is great.

Esyllt: Yeah.

Kiri: It just shows how naturally the languages now coexist in places in North Wales in particular I think.

Esyllt: Great. I'm going to go and look for a Zip World snood now.

Kiri: Genuinely, I went for a natural Welsh made deodorant and you went for a... shows where we are in our lives.

Esyllt: [Laughs]

Kiri: So this has been a lovely episode on Portmeirion and Blaenau Ffestiniog.

[Outro Music]

Esyllt: I've been Esyllt Sears.

Kiri: I've been Kiri Pritchard-McLean.

Esyllt: This has been Pod of Wales produced by Little Wander in association with Visit Wales.

[End of Podcast]