

## Leading a New Era Podcast

### Episode 2: Merry Antoja

**David:** Welcome back to Leading a New Era, the Podcast from IHG that opens the doors to the world's most iconic hotels and to the people who lead them. I'm your host, David Littlewood from the Talent Acquisition Team here at IHG.

**Eunice:** And I am your co-host, Eunice Clements-Tweedie, VP of Global Talent Acquisition and Business Partnering—what a mouthful. Hi, David, how are you today?

**David:** That's a very long title. I am very well, how are you?

**Eunice:** Superb, thank you.

**David:** Fantastic. In every episode, we speak to one of IHG's Luxury and Lifestyle General Managers to discuss their stories. From bold career moves to guest experiences that leave a lasting mark, we explore the personal and professional paths that shape hospitality's most inspiring leaders. Today we're heading to the beautiful South Coast of Spain where we're joined by Merry Antoja, General Manager at Kimpton Los Monteros, Marbella. Merry is a dynamic and creative leader with over 20 years of experience across Europe and Asia. She's got a strong foundation in Sales and Marketing and has led several major hotel openings—including luxury resorts in Vietnam and the first Kimpton Hotel in Spain. Known for her positive leadership style, passion for developing teams, Merry brings energy, strategy and a deep commitment to guest experience in everything she does. We're thrilled to have you with us today, Merry. Welcome to Leading a New Era. How are you today?

**Merry:** Thank you, David. Thank you, Eunice. Well, I'm super happy. Thank you for that amazing introduction. You explained very well, so you did everything already.

**David:** I did my best. I did my best.

**Merry:** And I feel fine. A little bit nervous to be honest, but I'm fine. Thank you.

**David:** Oh, nothing to be nervous about at all. How are things in beautiful Marbella?

**Merry:** Marbella is amazing. As always it's sunny and super busy.

**David:** Obviously your hotel is in its early days. What's the energy like with the team and the new hotel right now?

**Merry:** They're excited. Always I think that with the openings, you are really, you feel this excitement and passion, and energy. And still so we are getting the high season with this, the excitement. I think that would be the perfect word. Excitement and passion about what we are doing, and we have an amazing property, so we really feel proud about this project, and you can feel it with the team.

**David:** Amazing. So, Merry, before we get into your career journey, let's break the ice a little bit with a segment that we like to call Early Check-In which is a rapid fire round of this or that question round, it's no overthinking, just go with what your first thought is.

**Merry:** Okay.

**David:** Classic, Elegance or Modern Edge?

**Merry:** Modern. Modern.

**Eunice:** Oh, nice. Tapas Night or Tasting Menu?

**Merry:** Tapas Night.

**Eunice:** Oh.

**David:** Heels or Trainers?

**Merry:** Heels.

**Eunice:** This is a good one for you. Wine Tasting or Street Food.

**Merry:** I would say Wine Tasting. Wine Tasting.

**Eunice:** Oh, Wine Tasting. Lovely, delicious.

**David:** Are you white or red, Merry?

**Merry:** Depends on the occasion, depends on the menu. But maybe I would say red wine.

**David:** Great answer.

**Eunice:** Merry knows her choices.

**David:** I always find this one really interesting, head or heart?

**Merry:** Heart, always.

**Eunice:** Dogs or cats.

**Merry:** Dogs. Well, I love both, but dogs.

**David:** You have a dog, right?

**Merry:** Yes, Jimena, is her name. She's amazing. And sometimes she's in the hotel, so she's our pet in the hotel.

**David:** Oh, incredible, yeah. You're talking to two dog lovers.

**Eunice:** Dog lovers.

**David:** Yeah.

**Eunice:** Chocolate cake or cheeseboard?

**Merry:** Chocolate cake, no doubt.

**Eunice:** Good choice.

**David:** Guest feedback or team feedback?

**Merry:** Oh, here I would say both, but guest feedback. Both are very important for me.

**Eunice:** Important, yeah, I so agree, Merry.

**Merry:** Difficult choice, yeah.

**Eunice:** Difficult choice. Okay. So, this is an interesting one. Barcelona energy or Marbella pace?

**Merry:** I would say Marbella because in Marbella you have pace and energy as well, both. I really love Marbella.

**David:** Nice. Quick decision or deep reflection.

**Merry:** Quick decision.

**Eunice:** Espresso shot or herbal tea.

**Merry:** Espresso shot.

**Eunice:** Gorgeous. I've had about two or three today, being a coffee—

**Merry:** Not me, I was very nervous.

**Eunice:** Oh.

**Merry:** Today, not today.

**David:** Travel to recharge or travel to learn?

**Merry:** Travel to learn.

**David:** Lovely. And that's it, there's some really interesting answers, I feel like we've learned a lot more about you already, Merry. So, always heels over trainers. So, you're similar.

**Eunice:** Yeah.

**David:** You're aligned.

**Eunice:** I'm aligned.

**David:** Yeah. You got a sweet tooth.

**Eunice:** And Merry likes wine, what's not to love?

**David:** So, Merry, you've had an extraordinary journey. Hotel openings, moving continents, and now leading a flagship property in Spain. What inspired you to step into hospitality in the first place?

**Merry:** I think in the first place would be the team. I really love leading the team and I think that is the part that gives me this motivation and this energy to continue in being in this industry. But it's also the combination of a mix of things. Also, I mean, it's in general people, so also a connection with the guest and everything that is around hospitality really makes me feel, you know, with a lot of energy and really connected with that industry.

**David:** Amazing. And your first GM role was in Vietnam, wasn't it, and I think that was quite a big step for your growth, right? Moving into a new country, new position, leadership role, how was it adapting to those environments and did it build resilience?

**Merry:** Well, to be honest, it was not easy. It was a really difficult moment, but then I learned a lot. I came back stronger. And it was my first international experience. Before I was travelling a lot, but not for a long period of time. So, in that moment, it was like the first for many things. So, it was like my first resort, my first opening, and my first international experience, so I did everything at the same time. It was on my bucket list, so I said I have to do it, it's like now or never, I was almost 40 years old, so a lot of resilience. I had to start—I mean, I was there alone, I moved from Madrid, in that time I was in Madrid, having the best moment in my life. But as I like to move from my comfort zone, I decided to go to Vietnam. And I moved on my own into a place that everything was completely different, so I had to learn about this, how to deal with a different culture, a different language, a different way of work and different way of living as well.

**Eunice:** Gosh, you mentioned so many incredible words. Resilience, courage, cultural differences. How do you think all those factors have shaped you as an individual in the role that you play in the current property you manage?

**Merry:** It had a big impact on me and everything professionally and personally. I think I had to really open my mind and see how to work and resist in that environment, take the best of that experience. And I think that the most important

was that I learned to live just with myself, you know. When I was in that time, really me and me. Obviously, I had a lot of people surrounded and my team, but I was quite isolated there. I was quite far from home. And this is, I think, the best learning that I took because in this life you are just with yourself in some moments, so this was the best and it changed me, that point view, in that if you are with yourself and you are okay with yourself, you can do whatever you want in your life. And also realise that managing that team, at the beginning you think, well, they have a different culture, but at the end it's the same. They are people, they just want to have kindness and respect and have fun as well. So, I realised that even if it's a completely different country, at the end, we are human, and human connections are really, really important. It doesn't matter if it's Vietnam, if it's Barcelona or whatever place, so. And then this is I think the best learning that I took. And then coming back to Spain, I felt, well, everything has to be easy, you know, or at least easier than I was living there.

**David:** That's a lovely answer, yeah. It sounds like there's been a few risks taken in terms of growth and trying to build your way up through to the GM role that you're in now. In terms of risk taking, et cetera, is that something you still do on a day-to-day basis as you continue to learn and grow?

**Merry:** Yes. This is always—I don't know why—but when I'm getting more stable in let's say, you know, quiet time, like always I need to move and get out of my comfort zone. It happened when I was in Barcelona, at the Kimpton Vividora, when the hotel was stabilised and the team was working, you know, and everything was more or less moving alone, it is in that moment when I said, okay, now I need to take another risk and get out of my comfort zone and get another challenge, as it is in Marbella.

**David:** Oh, amazing. Did you always see yourself doing what you're doing now if you reflect back? Do you see yourself as a GM?

**Merry:** Indeed, yes. I think it's because I have tourism in my DNA. My father was working in travel agencies, he owned some travel agencies. And I guess that because I was lucky and I was travelling quite a lot when I was a child. I don't know why, I always said that I wanted to become a General Manager one day. I really like hotels. I was even playing, I have a game at home that was like creating, and buying hotels and I projected in that time myself, something like this, or being manager or leading the team. I was kind of wanting that situation. And sometimes, even now, when I'm working, there are some moments, obviously, there are some moments with a lot of stress and difficulties, but in some moments I'm feeling like I'm still playing. And for me, I know that can sound like a cliché, that I love what I do, but this is the reality and I was really enjoying it when I was a child. And I was projecting or playing like I'm acting to be a GM, and sometimes still I can feel this when I'm with a team and in that kind of nice and funny situations and moments.

**Eunice:** I think it's really rare, Merry, that purpose comes to you as a child, but it sounds like your purpose was forming even in your very early years as a youngster, for your love of hospitality, travel, running a hotel. And it's obviously pulled through to now which you don't often hear that purpose being defined so young. Don't you think, David, that's quite unique?

**David:** Yeah, I think that's really unique. There's so many people that you meet and speak to that, yeah, don't know what they want to do when they finish school or they go to college or university, so I always think that people that do, they're so lucky.

**Eunice:** Thinking about the Kimpton that you currently manage, run, curate, and do all those wonderful things, what's the most exciting thing that you are looking forward to in your tenure of the guardian of the property?

**Merry:** So, about the hotel, about the Kimpton Los Monteros, the excitement for me, so one of the most important are the people, are the team, that is really exciting, about our team and our guest. But also because this hotel is a legend hotel, has a lot of history. And I think that is really exciting to take this history, this legacy, and then to bring it into the world. And especially when we are projecting where we want to position the hotel, I think it's a very nice journey, and we are all super excited about what we can create with this hotel and also for the brand—for the Kimpton brand, I think that can be a reference hotel in Europe, and this is our objective, and we are very excited about this.

**Eunice:** Fantastic. I think as humans we all want to leave a legacy that we curate and create, so I love the fact you're taking the history and hopefully leaving a legacy behind after you leave to do other incredible things, so I really, really love that. Thanks, Merry.

**David:** So, let's talk about culture. It sounds like passion is a real driving force at Kimpton. What does passion look and feel like day-to-day with your team, Merry?

**Merry:** We have a lot of—I have to say that we are creating an amazing team. And it's a combination from the previous hotel to the new ones adding to the brand, and also some people already came from the Kimpton brand. And I think that we are creating that kind of culture and really you can feel the Kimpton and it's really at the beginning because it's been just a few months, but I think that we are creating something quite unique. And you can feel like the core values of Kimpton are very present in the hotel, so we feel very proud about the team that we are creating.

**Eunice:** Fantastic. Were you not at the Kimpton in Barcelona before?

**Merry:** Yeah, I was in Kimpton, yes. It was not the opening. I came and I did like the re-opening; it was like almost an opening. And I was there for three years.

**Eunice:** Three years in Barcelona. My, you're so lucky it's such an incredible city. Have you been, David?

**David:** I have, yeah, I've been a couple times. It's one of my favourites actually.

**Eunice:** Is it?

**David:** Yeah, I love it there.

**Eunice:** Gorgeous.

**David:** Yeah, I need to get back out there. And the Kimpton brand, it feels like it's aligned and in parallel with your journey. What is it about the brand that's so special to you?

**Merry:** I really love the brand. I think that I connect very well, I fit very well with the brand because we share the same values. The way that they're connecting with people, the way they're treating people, and the way of living life. For me it's very important when you have fun and it's one of our core values. And be yourself, I think that I feel really comfortable coming to work and I can be myself, and I encourage my team also being themselves, so I think that this is very important, and this is also a kind of inclusion. And I see how we can work in a more relaxed way and then altogether we get better results, so I really love the values of Kimpton.

**Eunice:** I think values really create a sense of belonging, don't you agree?

**David:** I do, yeah, shared purpose, yeah.

**Eunice:** Yeah. I wonder, Merry, what belonging means to you in a luxury hotel environment? Do you have any ideas about that?

**Merry:** Yes. And I think that nowadays it's quite important for the team and also for the guests. For me belonging is when you're really part—you really feel, I mean, respected and listened, and also when you feel part of the project. And this is what we want with the team but also with the guest. So, now, when we have our guest, it's not just the coming and sleeping. And it's not a hotel, we want to go beyond that and we want to offer more than just accommodation and we want to connect with them. And this is when for me it's what belonging means.

**David:** Merry, I wanted to ask you as well just around obviously as a GM we know you're very busy and thank you so much again for taking the time out today. But I just wanted to ask you about work-life balance. How do you manage that and how do you prioritise it for yourself?

**Merry:** What I try to do is like, well, always is my morning, my slow ritual morning. Always I need to calm down in the morning with my coffee and it's like my moment of reflection and a little bit of meditation sometimes. Also, my dog, my Jimena, since I



have her, I think that the walks that I do in the morning or in the afternoon, I'm really fortunate I'm living here next to the hotel, in the mountain, and I saw the sea. So, just, you know, observing the sea, the mountains, and walking Jimena in the morning really gives me that moment of calm that I think that we need. And of course, also trying to keep a balance doing sport, I think it's very, very important to keep for our mind, it's not only for the bodies, just to keep calm in our mind. And always trying to find this moment of reflection, calm and disconnection. Also, I can disconnect, like having a drink, or. I think it's really important.

**Eunice:** So, Merry, being a Spaniard, do you play paddle?

**Merry:** I try, but that's like here having the tennis and the paddle, like we did a tournament last month with the team, and now we want to do every month because they were like very excited and they enjoyed it a lot. So, I want to take some classes again at least. Even if I'm not going to be very good, at least trying to and to play it, so I'll do it, yeah.

**David:** Do you play it?

**Eunice:** I do play it.

**Merry:** Really?

**Eunice:** So, I was thinking when we come and see you, Merry, we can play some paddle together, I love paddle.

**Merry:** Okay, perfect.

**Eunice:** Yeah. Deal, deal, definitely.

**David:** Love a game of paddle. So, now we're going to talk about impact and purpose. And you've described your leadership as joyful, passionate, purpose driven, so we're in great company. Are there any standout guest moments that have really stuck with you?

**Merry:** There are many, so it's really difficult to choose one. But maybe, if I have to explain and to give some examples, maybe I would choose two. One really short. One was in Vietnam, when I was there quite alone, and all of our guests were mainly from Vietnam and/or Asia. And then suddenly I got—it was at the beginning of the opening of the hotel and then I got a Spanish family. And you know, for me, it was incredible. That connection was like if it was like my family. And then really, we created something special. I was taking care of them because for me it was really amazing and important to have that Spanish guest. Also for them, because it was now in Vietnam, in a very touristic place, this was a new area, a new place, so they were not expecting to find a Spanish Hotel Manager. And it's nice because we are still in contact through LinkedIn and all these things and, you know, it's that kind of



guest that really lasts forever. And they are, in my mind, I don't know, it's something—that you create something special and they were just for a few days there. And also another important moment that I remember was when we re-opened Kimpton Vividora after the COVID. I remember the first guests that were at the hotel, and the connection was also really special because it was not only for being the first guests at the hotel, it's also because after that situation with COVID and, you know, they were reconnecting with life and also us. We were like, at the same time, a bit scared, but the excitement of having again some guests, so it was like, you know, a lot of emotions at the same time, that I remember as a very, very special guest and very special moment for both, I think that was for both sides.

**Eunice:** And that's what you and the team curate all the time, Merry, those special guest moments that give people the memories, and that's part of those amazing luxury hotel experiences. I was at the Vividora which is Kimpton Barcelona a few months ago, celebrating my son's 18th birthday, and we had an incredible weekend. So many special memories, moments, and it was pretty much curated by the team there, just the very small touches in the room, the balloons, the birthday wishes, the bottle of beer at lunch time. It was absolutely fantastic. And that's what you and the team are creating every single day. Do you not think, David?

**David:** Yeah, I always think with luxury, it's really, it's about those details that make such a huge difference.

**Eunice:** Yeah, the moments that matter. We talk about that a lot, don't we, in our team?

**David:** Yeah. And similar to your example at the beginning, Merry, just talking about how that experience with that guest really stayed with you, and those memories do live with you forever which is what makes the hotel experience so special.

**Eunice:** Yeah.

**David:** I wanted to ask you, Merry, from your team's perspective, what sort of impact do you hope to have on them?

**Merry:** What I want to—I mean, for me, it's really important how I make them feel and it's really important to support them, and to help them to grow. And this is the impact that I want to lead, my legacy. My oldest sister always told me, live the life as you want to be remembered. So, I want to be remembered a little bit like this, like approachable and human, not only getting the good results also, but I think that the impact that I can do on my team is this and supporting them, and I really like when I saw that they are also growing and they feel happy and belonging, and all these aspects that we were talking and all these values of Kimpton that really are there, and I need to be present to support them.

**Eunice:** I think like most people, you try and leave behind something better than when you started. And I think you know when legacy is working because it endures, you build something that's future proof, and you also build something that is guardianship of the future for someone else to put their stamp on and to keep evolving and growing it, so I think it comes—I think leadership comes with quite a big responsibility. I mean, that's how I feel anyway.

**Merry:** It's not only professional, sometimes even you have to listen and help them in personal problems or issues. So, for me, I feel a little bit like they are my family. And I guess that, well, I guess it's when you have your family, I don't have my own children, but when you have children, you take this responsibility from the first day. So, I cannot compare, but it's something similar because they depend on you a lot, they look at you a lot, so. And it's a big responsibility for both professionally but also sometimes it's also personal.

**Eunice:** Yeah. I think leadership with care builds teams that want to stay with you. I mean, you're in my team, right, David? We work together.

**David:** Yeah, Eunice is my boss. And also, around caring, that question earlier around head and heart and thinking, and you instantly answered heart. I just wondered if you could expand on that and where that's come from, and that philosophy of yours?

**Merry:** I'm more emotional. I mean, I try to be logical in some moments but my nature is to be really emotional. And that's not always but also it was like a piece of advice from my oldest sister that I think when there's important things in life, it's better if you follow your gut and your heart, instead of the logical things, but I think it's part of my nature. And when I work like this and I really—obviously, difficult situations, obviously I need to be super strategic and focus the goal, so I'm very competitive on that way, but also at the same time combining with these emotional connections and I feel much better. This is what I really like. And this is how I want to be remembered as well.

**Eunice:** Yeah. And we can sense that through our conversation today, Merry. Merry, I'm looking towards the future. And I was wondering what do you think about the future of luxury hospitality? How do you think it will evolve, change, be different than it is today? What's your thoughts?

**Merry:** Well, it's really difficult to predict the future, especially nowadays that it's changing a lot. But I think it will move in the same direction, the direction that it's moving now, looking for something more real and something more authentic. And obviously local experiences, sustainability, also I think it's going to be important. And I guess it will move also into technology because maybe we are not so there and keeping humans because we need to. Luxury cannot be without humans, in

hospitality, keeping humans for the important things. So, I think that in the future we need to see a shape on this, getting more things in terms of digital, but keeping the humans for the important things and continue with this genuine and authenticity, that now maybe we are moving slightly.

**David:** We're going to move on to our final segment which is called Hotel Spotlight. This is where we want to learn a little bit about Kimpton Los Monteros, Marbella, and the things that you love about it. So, first things first, what do you love most about your hotel?

**Merry:** Well, what I love the most about the hotel, well, obviously the people, but I'm not going to repeat it again. But I think that really makes it unique and the energy, the vibe that the hotel has is thanks to people, to our team and to the guests. But also, the design. I think that the design that we have makes it quite unique and is different, really has a very special design with the colors. You can feel Marbella, you can feel Los Monteros, so it's like a perfect combination from the '60s to the modern. And I really love when you get into the hotel, it's like, wow, it's amazing, the design and colours. Plenty of life.

**Eunice:** I love the candy stripe umbrellas, the parasols that you have surrounding the pool, it looks absolutely exquisite, it really does, set against the blue sky.

**Merry:** Yeah. It kind of reminds of Marbella in the '70s, yeah. Every Kimpton has to be unique and every Kimpton needs to reflect where it's located. And in our case, it has to be Marbella, it has to be in Andalusia, Costa del Sol, but also has to be the essence of Los Monteros, and Los Monteros in that time in the '60s, in the '70s, was the hotel, the legend—the iconic hotel in Marbella with all the stars, international stars who were coming in, were staying here. So, it's trying to get that moment by bringing into today's world.

**Eunice:** Wow.

**David:** If a guest only had one night at the hotel, where would you recommend they spend it, Merry?

**Merry:** I would recommend to do like a full experience. But for me, well, obviously, the rooms, we have very nice rooms. But the most special place in the hotel I think is our rooftop, Escondido. It's a new part of the hotel that we have built now during the renovation with like an extension of rooms. And the rooftop is amazing. Because you don't think that it's there, so it's quite hidden, this is because of the name. Escondido means hidden. It's a complete gem. When you are there, it's like a combination of calm, especially in the morning, but a nice vibe in the evening. And it's like, wow, having the Mediterranean Sea just in front of you, super blue, you can see all the coast from Marbella. And all the neighborhood which is really, really amazing, Los Monteros with amazing houses. It used to be the richest square meter

in Spain, so we're in a super nice area. It looks like Los Angeles, you know, these big houses, plenty of reign, and the combination of the mountain that we have on the back and the sea makes that a perfect spot and amazing, amazing.

**David:** It sounds amazing. I think you've answered my next question about your favourite thing about the hotel, I think. But I also wanted to ask actually, when it is at its busiest, if you wanted to take in the ambience of the hotel, where do you kind of go to get, you know, a vibe and a feel for the hotel at its most bustling?

**Merry:** Well, you can feel the vibe in the hotel in everywhere, also our pool area—it's amazing.

**Eunice:** Now you're talking.

**Merry:** What we tried to create is having the vibe and the energy in the entire hotel and I think that this is Kimpton, that every spot, every area has that unique sense, real mind music, and every place has to be unique.

**David:** Thank you, Merry. Thank you so much for joining us today. Your journey has been a powerful reminder to us, what it means to lead with purpose, empathy and joy. We have one final question that comes from Younes Atallah who was our previous guest.

**Merry:** Okay.

**David:** From Episode 1. And he wants to know, what passions or pursuits outside of hospitality energise you and in turn influence how you show up as a leader?

**Merry:** I would say maybe I love—as I was in Sales and Marketing before, really I'm very creative, I really love all this part of Marketing and Sales, and really in Social Media. And I think it's getting an impact into my leadership, into my hotels, because this is the way that I live with a lot of creativity and with this marketing because at the end it's also related to this as well. So, creativity I think is part of my passion because I like—when I go out and I do things in my career, doing different things, and thinking about, you know, out of the box, and this is something that I bring in also into my leadership. Sometimes I'm too much creative it seems. My team is telling me that like stop thinking.

**David:** I'm sure that's not true.

**Eunice:** No, I'm sure that's not true.

**David:** Thanks for tuning in to Leading a New Era where we go behind the scenes with the GMs shaping the future of Luxury and Lifestyle at IHG. If you've enjoyed hearing about hearing Merry's journey and you're interested in more episodes like this, be sure to subscribe, share, and check out our next episode, where we'll be heading to Dubai to chat to Mohamed Mahmoud, Cluster General Manager at



InterContinental Residences, Dubai Business Bay and Kimpton Dubai. It's bound to be another great conversation. See you then.