

HOUSE

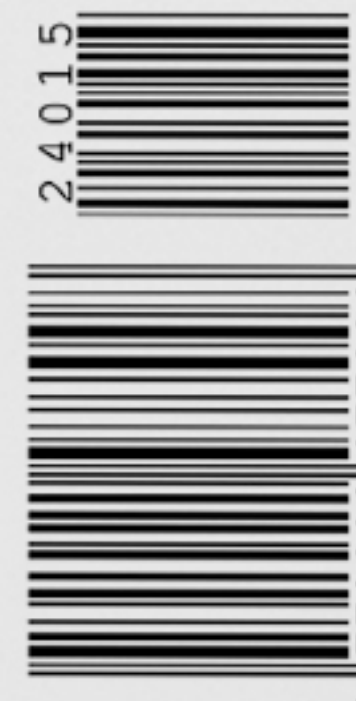
AND LEISURE

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discover

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time

Soetmelksvlei, Babylonstoren's latest offering, gives visitors a glimpse into



travel

the way of life on an authentic 19th-century working farm in the Boland

Words by El mari Rautenbach



Deep in the Groot Drakenstein Valley, at the end of a winding lane of eucalyptus trees, lies Soetmelksvlei, the latest farm experience from neighbouring Babylonstoren. But something is different. Enter the historic U-shaped *werf* (farmyard), and you step through a looking glass into a world that offers a glimpse of life on a Boland farm in 1897.

‘Soetmelksvlei is a multi-sensory immersive journey back in time where you completely lose track of the outside world,’ says Adele Johnson, head of the farm. Visitors are invited to explore life on a farm in the 19th century. Babylonstoren museologist Elsa Vogts, who oversaw the curation of the experience, says, ‘It was an era when everything was handmade and repaired on-site with a surprising level of sophistication. We wanted to celebrate that art and beauty.’

She describes the incredible team of consultants – ‘heritage, cultural history, millwork, rough forging, dairy cows; the list goes on!’ – as the project’s greatest asset. Keeping the restoration and decor of the Farmhouse authentic and historically correct without losing sight of the human angle proved a real challenge. It led to creative intervention, including imagining a family with a teenage son and young daughter living in the house and creating spaces around them. Interior decorator Sylvia van Heerden and her textile team were particularly valuable in

Previous spread At Soetmelksvlei, life is dictated by the passage of time. Visitors can experience what it was like to live in a time when things were made by hand and mended rather than discarded. **This page** In the Old Stables, tools are produced using the techniques of the era.

sourcing and sometimes re-creating time-specific items.

The Farmhouse, whitewashed and majestic, lies at the top of the yard. The air inside hints at furniture oil and wood smoke. The light is soft – filtering through lace curtains framing tall sash windows, or pooling around a brass lamp where a woman’s knitting basket stands next to a dainty writing desk.

Embroidered and brocade cushions adorn yellowwood and stinkwood furniture; worn animal skins cover the wooden floors. A piece of lace drapes across the mantelpiece. In the corner of the dining room, an heirloom print, *De Breede and De Enge Weg* (‘The Broad and the Narrow Way’), references a family Bible.

Trail your fingers over the cobbler’s set the 17-year-old son of the house would have used to repair his *vellies*. Sniff the air in the kitchen when cook Louise Johannes pushes open the iron door of the oven to remove steaming loaves of bread using a wooden peel. Marvel at the meticulous rows of ‘Reserve Aandeelent’ numbers in the farmer’s accounting books, or his set of Lee-Enfield rifles and mounted gemsbok (oryx) horns on the wall. Then set off to see how blacksmith Dan Devonshire forges a cast-iron pan, making it non-stick using beeswax and fat. Or watch as he creates his hammers, drifts and clamps in the Old Stables.

Step onto the *stoep* to taste the cream produced by turning the handle of a centrifugal milk-and-cream separator at speed, or



Clockwise from top left In addition to reading nooks and books, the Old Cellar library features an ox wagon stocked with the provisions a family would take on a seaside holiday, including two 19th-century fishing rods. A miniature Farmhouse is an enchanting indoor playhouse for children.



spend time in the Old Cellar, admiring the aspects of rural life exhibited here, including a fully stocked *kakebeenwa* (ox wagon with canvas cover) the family would have used as transport.

End the experience with a buffet from yesteryear, sitting on straw bales covered with sheepskin in the Old Stables restaurant, or visit the Jonkershuis farm shop, where gems such as Martie's Karoo wool, Doortjie's crocheted blankets and Tyron's miniature ox wagons are stocked.

This personalised experience aligns with a growing trend in educational institutions and museums worldwide, where experiential, participatory and image-driven engagement redefines the connection with visitors. In the Singapore Science Centre, for example, you can explore the effects of growing older as you see and feel yourself age. In the Deutschlandmuseum in Berlin, visitors hear, smell and walk through 12 epochs of German history, going from a medieval forest to crouching in a trench in the First World War, and zipping down the S-Bahn. At The Newt in England, the Story of Gardening takes you on a journey through nine gardens – from Versailles to those of Persian kings – by stepping into hidden 'rooms' in an enormous green hedge. You can also visit the Villa Ventorum and explore Roman Britannia.

History is no longer packaged and forgotten on a dusty shelf. Experiences such as Soetmelksvlei breathe life into it. After all, as author Pearl S. Buck wrote, 'If you want to understand today, you have to search yesterday.' ● @babylonstoren



This page Old meets new in typical Babylonstoren fashion. At the Old Stables restaurant, straw bales covered with sheepskins and copper and iron implements contrast with modern elements such as a life-size horse lamp by Dutch brand Moooi, while resident farm animals will delight younger visitors.