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Once Upon A Time ...


TRAVEL BACK TO THE 19TH CENTURY AND A TIME BEFORE MODERN CONVENIENCES RULED OUR LIVES WITH A VISIT TO SOETMELKSVLEI.

BY MARLI VAN SCHALKWYK

THERE WAS A TIME when the glow of the hearth was the heart of the home and not that of a screen. There's no electricity inside the historical farmhouse. Instead, fire warms my hands and face and we're devouring bread still hot from the wood-fired cast-iron oven chamber. We slather it with butter and wash it down with cups of traditional *moer koffie*, strong enough to give you palpitations. As an extra treat, there are *koesisters*, sweet, dense and wholly unlike the syrup-drenched versions you find in stores today. Outside, a typical Cape winter unleashes rain from clouds almost black with weight. It's as if time stands still – and the clock is paused in 1897.

A short shuttle ride from the Babylonstoren Farm, Soetmelksvlei is the latest project by husband-and-wife duo Koos Bekker and Karen Roos and their teams. Babylonstoren has become a national and international tourism icon, as has The Newt, their reimagined country estate in Somerset in the UK.

Acquired in 2019, the farm Donkerhoek has been transformed into a historical site and renamed, depicting craftsmanship from a time two years before the Anglo-Boer War started. Soetmelksvlei opened its doors to the public earlier this year, offering an experience that transcends a typical museum visit with its immersive interactive historical displays.



Medwin Dombas, assistant activity manager, with the farm's blackhead Persian sheep, a breed chosen for its remarkable local history. The ancestors of this breed were stranded on the shores of the Cape after the ship they arrived on was damaged at sea in – 1869! From a ram and three ewes, the blackhead Persian was established as a prominent breed in South Africa.



BELOW LEFT Soetmelksvlei leather craftsmanship celebrates the lost art of hands-on creation by reviving 19th-century tools and techniques. BELOW RIGHT The ox wagon in the centre nave tells a fascinating tale of travel long before the one-click convenience of exploration today.



served for lunch, showcasing dishes typical of the Boland. Guests can enjoy hearty oxtail, *waterblommetjie* bredie, bobotie and a harvest table filled to the brim with fresh fruit, *roosterkoek*, artisanal cheeses, jams, Chianina biltong and *droëwors*.

Soetmelksvlei is an educational gem for adults and children alike. Little ones can play in the outdoor play area, splash around in the shallow water canals, play in the sand pits or explore the haystack clamber area. They can also try their hand at the wooden 'milking cows' that squirt water or ride the moveable donkeys on the historic threshing floor.

Inside the Jonkershuis Farm Shop, the interior evokes a general store of a bygone era, with collections of domestic antiques alongside traditional bakes, preserves, cordials and handcrafted items by local craftsmen and women. From crocheted blankets to wooden toys and hand-forged iron cookware, the shop offers keepsakes as well as treats and refreshments to take home.

In every corner of Soetmelksvlei, the past is alive, making it not just a visit but a journey back in time. It's more than just a museum; it's a vibrant, functioning reminder of a simpler way of life and a must-visit for anyone interested in the rich layers of South African heritage. It provides a profound appreciation for the resilience and ingenuity of previous generations. ▽ babylonstoren.com



As you enter the farmhouse, it's as if you've stepped into a living scene from that time. The Bosman family, although fictional, are portrayed as the inhabitants of this meticulously restored home. Historical experts went to great lengths to source era-appropriate antiques or recreated items to the style of the period, creating an environment so authentic that it almost feels intrusive to be there. The attention to detail is incredible with the children's rooms particularly striking, reflecting the simple, uncluttered lifestyles of the time, devoid of any unnecessary luxuries.

Life under British rule in the Cape Colony meant isolation and hardship, despite the expansion of a railway network connecting Cape Town with the interior regions. Families relied heavily on horse-drawn carts and ox wagons for transportation. From sunrise to sunset, daily survival hinged on essential tasks, from tending to the watermill and milking cows to sowing crops and fixing farm equipment. Soetmelksvlei is a working testament to the traditional agricultural methods of the era, featuring historic livestock breeds such as Ayrshire cows, giant Percheron horses and blackhead Persian sheep.

Wandering through the farm, the experience is enriched by live demonstrations in the workshop. Here, a blacksmith, carpenters and leather workers demonstrate their trade using 19th-century tools and techniques to make and repair farm implements and utensils for the home. Visitors can witness firsthand the separation of milk using the

centrifugal force of a hand-rotated machine and taste freshly churned cream. The operational watermill, a replica of one from the late 1800s, underscores the authenticity, grinding wheat into flour daily. *Kaalnek hoenders* feast on kernels from an antique dehusker while sharing their living space with other chicken breeds, Pekin ducks and turkeys in the Fowl House.

A highlight is the veritable 'wonder room' inside the old cellar and distillery. Part exhibition space, part playhouse and part reading room, it celebrates the era's fascination with culture and natural history collections. Hundreds of books from the era line the floor-to-ceiling shelves of the library, featuring copies of advertisements, newsletters and other artefacts. A replica of a now-extinct blue buck and other taxidermied specimens, preserved insects, a collection of seeds and various dioramas offer fascinating insights. Library desks with charging stations are perfect for sitting down, relaxing, reading and researching while children play inside the life-size Cape Dutch playhouse.

The centrepiece of the library is a meticulously detailed ox wagon, ready for a seaside vacation and complete with period-specific items like wooden containers, clay vases, blankets, clothes and sewing kits strapped on with ropes – even the father's springbok *velletjie* lies ready where he would sit to steer the oxen and the wagon on a trip to the coast that could easily have taken a few days.

In the Old Stables Restaurant, delicious seasonal farm-to-fork food is

PHOTOGRAPHS: COURTESY OF BABYLONSTOREN



TOP Jonkershuis Farm Shop at Soetmelksvlei is a trove of artisanal treasures. ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT Visitors can take a break in the Old Stables Restaurant; Tjokkie, the farm's beloved miniature donkey; Jany Sampson, poultry handler, in the Fowl House – home to funny-looking feathered friends belonging to the Naked Neck breed of chickens.

Earthly Delights

WHY RUSH YOUR VISIT? AT BABYLONSTOREN, THE CONNECTION BETWEEN LAND AND LIFE IS PALPABLE, INVITING YOU TO STAY LONGER, EXPLORE DEEPER AND LEARN THE LANGUAGE OF NATURE. **BY MARLI VAN SCHALKWYK**



stay for a while



IT'S EARLY on a crisp winter morning that masquerades as summer and I find myself alone in the expansive gardens of Babylonstoren. The five-hectare farm is quiet, the silence punctuated only by birdsong and the satisfying crunch of peach pits beneath my boots. These early mornings are a gift to those who choose to stay over at the Babylonstoren Hotel.

While an extended farm stay, say four to five nights, might initially sound too extensive for a single visit, boredom is an impossibility here. Guests can stroll through acres of orchards, take a guided hike up Babylonstoren koppie, fish, canoe, cycle or drive up the slopes of Simonsberg to picturesque picnic spot 'In die Wolke' where an unforgettable sunset, enjoyed with a glass of wine, awaits.

Ideal for families, Babylonstoren Hotel is the perfect home base to explore not only the farm but also the surrounding valley. However, you may find the many activities the farm offers more than enough to fill your days.

Central to everything that takes place at Babylonstoren is the garden, a living mosaic of abundant fruit orchards, vegetable patches, farm animals and a macrocosm of pollinators. The garden's Puff Adder walkway plays host to unique seasonal exhibitions and collections, telling stories through fascinating botanical and archaeological treasures.

Dining here means eating fresh every day. Menus are dictated by the daily harvest, ranging from breakfast in a converted cowshed Babel (included for hotel guests) to lunches under ancient oaks at the

PHOTOGRAPHS: BABYLONSTOREN

OPPOSITE Hotel guests are free to explore the farm on complimentary mountain bikes. CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT The Greenhouse Restaurant is the perfect refreshment station after a garden walk; Hotel guests can enjoy bass fishing, guided fly fishing or canoeing on the dam; Orchard and vineyard views from the Fynbos Family House; The meandering 70-metre Puff Adder walkway.



TOP Besides being a beautiful spot to enjoy tea or lunch, the domed ceiling and tall glass panels of the Greenhouse Restaurant are characteristic of an actual greenhouse. True to its name, plants are also nurtured here. RIGHT Treatments in the Garden Spa's Turkish hammam include traditional Turkish cleansing rituals.

Greenhouse. The garden's yield shapes what you eat, sprinkled with delightful seasonal surprises and marrying nostalgia with innovation. In the evenings, the Old Bakery Restaurant serves communal dining with Italian nights and meat feasts featuring the prestigious Chianina beef. Accordion music, fine wines and a stroll back to your room through the evening air cap off perfect days.

For those in search of a bite between meals, dedicated rooms offer gelato, coffee, speciality sweets, treats, fresh juices and home-baked goods.

Babylonstoren also engages guests not just as visitors but as learners. Participate in daily farm tours and workshops led by master gardeners, chefs and experts. Trace the origins of winemaking, learn to make your own soap, find out how using meat can change the way you cook, bake biscuits, construct garden features or become skilled at distilling natural oils.

Babylonstoren is more than a destination, it's an experience that reconnects you with the earth while imparting a timeless language. ▽

Rejuvenate!

The ritual begins almost unexpectedly. Clothed in little more than dense steam and lying on a slab of cool, white marble, a sudden cascade of warm water catches your senses off guard. The shock is startling and soothing in equal measure and is followed by skilled hands in traditional *kese* starting their choreography of exfoliation, aromatic soaping and more generous outpourings of warm water.

In this misty cocoon, you're not just cleansing your body, you're plugging into a centuries-old tradition, the hammam. It's a cultural relic that has weathered the test of time, inviting you to shed more than just surface impurities and to rejuvenate both mind and body.

The Babylonstoren Garden Spa offers a variety of treatments in a setting of bamboo, tranquil greenery and anchored by a hot vitality tub, all-weather pools, a sauna and a salt room – a holistic retreat designed to harmonise and heal.

