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WHETHER YOU DAY TRIP
OR STAY, SOETMELKSVLEI
AT BABYLONSTOREN IS A
HIVE OF ARTISANAL ACTIVITY
WHERE GUESTS CAN
IMMERSE THEMSELVES IN
19TH-CENTURY FARM LIFE

WORDS & IMAGES JARED RUTTENBERG



THE SWEET life

It's a bracing winter's morning at Babylonstoren in the Cape Winelands, and while the vines are still waiting for their spring foliage, there's plenty of life on the farm. Hens are clucking in the distance, the day's first guests are eagerly arriving, and of course, a hive of staff are busy preparing for the activities, each taking time to smile and offer a hello.

I've driven through the farm gates at Babylonstoren many times, every visit heralding something new. Creativity and innovation are at the core of the farm's DNA. On this visit, I was off to visit the farm's newest development – the no-longer-so-secret Soetmelksvlei.

From the reception, an open vehicle meanders through the farm while fascinating commentary is given en route with GPS-triggered headsets. After a scenic drive where you feel like you're given an exclusive peek behind the curtains of Babylonstoren, Soekmelksvlei comes into view. This interactive farmyard has a late 19th-century setting, paying homage to the traditions and artistry of the period.

Construction of this living history experience began in 2020 and opened in May this year. The 142-hectare farm was originally granted to two Huguenots in 1694, and the modern-day experience carries more weight while knowing that many of the activities experienced today would have been part and parcel of life a century ago – and on the very spot.

Meticulous consideration and research have ensured that Soekmelksvlei accurately depicts activities on a 19th-century farm. The result is a multi-sensory experience – more than the usual museum concept of 'come and see', there's an invitation to come and see and get involved.





“Simply put, there’s no experience like it in the country”

One of the creative minds at the centre of the project is museologist Elsa Vogts. After completing her museum studies in Amsterdam, she consulted at KWV and then Ellerman House in Cape Town. Her passion and interest for this impressive project is utterly contagious. “I’m fascinated by the culture of self-reliance that farm life in 1897 required. It was a self-contained eco-system where everything was handmade and repaired on-site,” she says.

With the privilege of Elsa as a guide who happily faced my barrage of questions, we explored the collection of buildings scattered across the sprawling farmyard. All activities are centred on handcraft and traditional methods, and you can visit them all or craft your itinerary based on your interests.

The central Farmhouse has been meticulously refurbished and gives insight into the home life of a 19th-century farm, which includes tasty treats from the Cape kitchen (the freshly buttered bread is unmissable). The Workshop then offers visitors the chance to watch traditional woodworking and ironmongery being done by actual carpenters and blacksmiths. In the Old Cellar, a treasure trove of curiosities awaits, from an extensive taxidermy collection to a life-sized wagon, and much more.



Exploring further, we were able to witness and participate in the milking of cows, cream separation, butter churning, and wheat milling. The watermill is fully functional and in addition to the milling of flour for guest experiences, the flour is used daily by Soetmelkvei’s bakers.

Since this is an authentic working farmyard, Soetmelkvei is home to a host of friendly creatures, including cows, oxen, Blackhead Persian sheep, miniature donkeys, horses, dogs (the farmyard’s adorable Collie duo), chickens, ducks, turkeys, and bees. These animals, together with a variety of child-friendly activities such as ox-wagon rides, create an exciting day out for the whole family.

On the culinary side, fresh food is served in the Old Stables Restaurant– a natural continuation of the farm-to-fork philosophy that those who’ve visited Babel will be familiar with. And yes, there’s a chance to take home something from one of the farm’s artisans. The Jonkershuis Farm Shop has hand-crafted goods from the master crafters on the farm and local communities. From the shop you can buy a bag of freshly milled flour to take home – a fitting and unique souvenir.

Simply put, there’s no other experience like it in the country. If after visiting the “sweet milk meadow” (the direct translation of Soetmelkvei) you want to indulge a little more in Babylonstoren’s land of milk and honey, the farm has several accommodation options.

My favourites are the newer Cape Dutch-style Fynbos Cottages, tucked away from the main gardens and adjoining vineyards and orchards. Each cottage comes with a golf cart, which you can use to drive around and explore the farm. There’s also a separate heated pool and a bar where you can sip on the estate’s wine and marvel at the endless creative energy and natural beauty that is Babylonstoren. ■

babylonstoren.com/soetmelkvei

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