

Alexandria: another small town in need of radical assistance



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It is almost as though time has stood still in Alexandria, the small Eastern Cape town 100km from Port Elizabeth, which is known for producing chicory and pineapples.

The one set of traffic lights in the centre of town does not work. The main road looks like it has seen better days.

The one-time 7-Eleven is now a Savemore outlet. Alexandria High School seems to have lost its sparkle, its once-manicured lawns and hedges are looking a little rough.

One bank has stuck it out in the town over the years.

Teachers are the most common professionals, with the town being home to two main high schools and several primary schools.

Career options for the next generation are limited and not many youth are interested in joining the police force, which is the next best thing to becoming a teacher.

Seasonal work on the chicory, pineapple or dairy farms is the order of the day for those lucky enough to get it. There is also the occasional piece work, provided through the Expanded Public Works Programme, to clear alien vegetation.

Then there is the money-lending business, which is quite lucrative. It is mostly run by women, who are considered ruthless in the community because they take possession of customers' IDs, South African Social Security Agency cards and such like in exchange for money lent at high interest.

It is a high-risk, high-reward business.

Most lenders also sell chickens and, often, booze on the books to clients, which often results in lenders and customers being joined at the hip.

In most cases, money runs out mid-month, which tends to lead to dependency on these loans and taking out the odd chicken on the books — people have to eat.

Life in Alexandria is full of contradictions, as with elsewhere in the

country. There are untold riches and unspeakable levels of poverty.

In the absence of any major club or decent hangout, the youth have few options where they can go to let loose on weekends. There are two shebeens, where both the young and old let off some steam over drinks and music.

The one shebeen's main advantage over its competitor is a jukebox, whose distinctive sound reverberates through Alex from Friday afternoon to Sunday evening. The music stops at midnight, signalling the official close of the weekend.

A night out at one of these hangouts is something akin to a rite of passage — you have not quite had the full, growing-up-in-Alexandria experience unless you have been on an evening out at one of these two shebeens.

The daily grind entails walking everywhere — there is no taxi industry to speak of. That is how small a town Alexandria is.

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If you want to travel out of town and do not own a car or want to pay the standard fare, you hitchhike. The R75 route, on which the town is situated, is a popular thoroughway to Port Elizabeth for both trucks and motorists.

About 50km from Alexandria is Port Alfred and, just before it, Kenton-on-Sea. Port Alfred, by all accounts, is a vibrant small, seaside town, whose economy is anchored by the hospitality sector.

The town is home to a popular air school, where pilots from across the continent are trained. It also plays host to Stenden University's local arm.

Kenton-on-Sea's property market comprises mostly luxury holiday homes, overlooking its breathtaking coastline.

In contrast, land-locked little Alexandria is stuck in a time warp. It could do with a dose of real, radical economic transformation.

● Phillip is news editor.