

Hello new ETAs! Congratulations on getting a Fulbright grant to Taiwan - you're going to love it! Below you will find some introductory information about the place you're going to call home for the next year: the beautiful **Yilan County**.

Note: If you want more info, you can read through the "Living in Yilan," "Locations," and "Places to Eat" pages, though some of that will not be applicable until after you've arrived here. Don't forget to *carefully read through the packing list*, too!

Location and Background:

Yilan County is located in the northeast part of Taiwan in a triangle-shaped plain surrounded by mountains. Most of Taiwan's population lives on the western coast spanning from Taipei in the north to Kaohsiung in the south. Taiwan's eastern coast, which includes Yilan, Hualien, and Taitung, is separated from the rest of the country by a large mountain range. In the east, you'll find the population to be rural

and agriculture-based, with more aboriginal and native-Taiwan influence than you would find in the big cities.



Yilan County is absolutely beautiful, framed by mountains on one side and beaches on the other. With the highest rainfall in Taiwan, Yilan also supports lush forests, vegetation, and rice paddies all year round.

If you look at the map, you'll notice that Yilan is quite close to Taipei. What you don't see is the series of mountains that separates the two areas. Traveling between Taipei and Yilan used to mean

hours of driving along a dangerous mountain road, therefore limiting the amount of trade and development that Yilan received. That all changed with the completion of the Snow Mountain Tunnel (雪山隧道) in 2006 (it was the 5th largest tunnel in the world when it opened!), which cut travel time to about an hour. Over the last decade, business, tourism, and investment has flooded into Yilan because of the tunnel. When you arrive, you'll see a region that is in the midst of a major change, with Taipei millionaires building weekend mansions in the middle of rice paddies and amidst modest farmers' homes. This change has meant more job opportunities

and tourism in the local economy, but it also means that many locals have found it impossible to adjust to rising real estate and other living costs.

Evidence of this change can be seen in interesting ways. One moment you'll be driving through rice paddies, and the next you'll pass a new Korean restaurant that would fit in a trendy NYC neighborhood. You'll meet kids that commute to Taipei every day for school, and adults who can only speak Taiwanese. Interestingly enough, some of the older generation will speak fluent Taiwanese and Japanese, but very little Mandarin! This all combines to make Yilan a unique and fascinating place to live.

Weather and Climate:

It rains a lot in Yilan. Below is the weather forecast right now (early May), and pretty much what a typical weather forecast looks like for Yilan. It usually only rains for a few hours instead of all day, but you'll get used to bringing a raincoat and an umbrella whenever you leave the house.



When you arrive in August, you'll be hot and sweaty *all. the. time.* The mid/high-90s temperatures and crazy humidity mean that you'll be sweating as soon as you get out of your (voluntarily) cold shower. You'll spend your first month in a nice air-conditioned classroom for orientation, so you'll have a little time to adjust, but you should definitely come prepared with light, breathable clothing.

The summer months are also peak typhoon season. With climate change, typhoons are becoming more common and more severe. Chances are that you'll encounter one (or more) over the course of your year here. Usually, this means buying a bunch of food/water and holing up in your apartment for a day or two until it passes. You can find some heatable sandwiches and other snacks at 7-11 to stock up on while you weather out the storm. Schools should cancel classes when the typhoon hits, but you might find yourself having to scoot to school in some crazy pre- or post-typhoon storms. The amount of damage will vary based on the strength of the typhoon, but if you're smart and don't leave the safety of your apartment until it's passed, then you shouldn't worry too much about getting hurt.

Yilan doesn't really start getting cold until late-November or December. And after a few months of hot sweatiness, you might welcome the change. But then you realize that indoor heating doesn't exist, you didn't pack enough warm clothes, and you're shivering in 60 degree weather, and nothing will make sense. On the other hand, some ETA's find the colder weather extremely refreshing compared to the humidity and heat of the summer. No matter what: **don't underestimate the cold**. Yes, it doesn't really get below the mid-50s, which right now might sound like a light fall breeze. But here's why you'll feel colder than you think:

1. Your body will eventually adjust to the summer heat, meaning that after a few months 95 degrees will feel pleasant (or at least bearable) and 60 degrees will feel like 40.
2. Heating doesn't exist. Not in your apartment, not at your school, not anywhere. If you get cold or wet for any reason, it's really hard to regain that body heat until you get under some blankets or take a hot shower.
3. You will scooter to work (in the rain). 60 degrees might still feel fine when you walk out the door, but once you're wet and driving at 60km/hr, the wind will make you feel downright frozen.
4. The general humidity and wetness of Yilan really makes the cold feel **much colder**. The coldness gets trapped indoors. Many of us wore waterproof, thermal ski jackets from the U.S. for the majority of winter.

This might seem a little dramatic, but I just don't want you to repeat the packing mistakes that I (and I'm sure many ETAs before me) made. Bring warm clothes (thick rainproof jacket - think ski coat, thick socks, gloves, base layer clothing, etc.), you won't regret it.

Though it can rain a lot in Yilan and be surprisingly cold in the winter, the rain doesn't mean you can't enjoy the natural beauty of Yilan. Sometimes it's fun to take a walk in the rain and go to a local cafe, or visit places that are otherwise extremely crowded.

Local Sights and Activities:

I believe Yilan is one of the most beautiful places in the world to live. The cities in Yilan County aren't particularly bustling, and many of the buildings look old and rundown, but those are only minor blemishes when you consider the beautiful scenery surrounding you.

Though Yilan does not have as many well-known tourist attractions compared to Taipei, there are so many fascinating local historical sites, temples, and other scenic

places to explore. Just within Yilan County, there are many interesting places to explore on the weekend. Especially for those who really enjoy nature, Yilan provides a myriad of fun things to see and enjoy. To the north, Wai'ao has a beautiful black sand beach that is rarely crowded (and there's a woman who sells vodka fruit smoothies!). Fulong has the breathtaking Caoling Bike Trail and a gorgeous white sand beach of its own. Hiking trails can be found all along the mountains surrounding the county, though you might have to ask the locals to find them. Botanical gardens and huge public parks provide great places to walk, bike, or play sports. Well-paved bike trails follow the rivers, coastline, and parks. Bottom line: if there's nice weather on a weekend, you should be out enjoying some part of Yilan's natural beauty.

Unfortunately, many times rainy weather will mean that you'll have to find indoor activities for a weekend. While there aren't quite as many options, you should definitely be able to find something enjoyable to do. For starters, there are a bunch of cool museums, including the Lanyang Museum (google it if you like architecture!), Democracy Museum, and Traditional Arts Center. When the weather gets colder, there is nothing better than soaking in the famous Jiaoxi hot springs. Yilan has a few movie theaters that get almost all the big releases from the US (and some even come out earlier here!). Board game cafes are a fun and cheap way to spend a rainy afternoon with friends. Overall, the indoor activity options aren't quite as exciting, but that's small city life for ya!

If you have an entire weekend free (or an upcoming holiday weekend), it's really easy to get around to other cities and regions within Taiwan! There's way too many options for me to list here, but make sure to talk to friends and locals to get new ideas of places to go. Taiwan might be small, but it is packed with cool and diverse places to visit (don't just go to Taipei!).

For a more comprehensive list of things to do around Yilan and beyond, look at the "Living in Yilan" page.

Getting Around:

For most of your time in Taiwan, you'll be getting around using one of the most fun (and sometimes most annoying) modes of transportation: the scooter! In the mornings during August, you'll start practicing using a scooter in preparation for the scooter license test. Scooting can be scary when you first start, but it definitely gets easier with practice. Once you get the hang of it, scoot scooting is a really

convenient and enjoyable way to get around Yilan (especially on nice days), and it gives you the freedom to easily travel around your city and county. Additionally, renting scooters in other cities is cheap and a great way to get around when you're traveling. On the other hand, scooting is much less fun in the rain, when you have to put on a full body rain coat that works alright at best. However, those of us who have scooters are already lamenting not having the convenience of a scooter when we return to America!

(Note: Some ETAs choose not to buy a scooter for various reasons. It's totally doable to do this by biking, riding local trains between towns, and catching rides with friends - but you do lose a certain amount of freedom and flexibility).

For travel to further locations, Taiwan's public transportation system is fantastic! Since most of us do not have a car, we rely on buses and trains to travel to further parts of the country. Trains run throughout the cities in Yilan County, and can also take you to Taipei, Hualien, and Taitung easily. To get to Taipei, there are super convenient coach buses that will drop you off at different locations within the city (these cost around \$5 one way, leave every 10-15 minutes, and take about 1-1.5 hours). Once in Taipei, the subway (called MRT) is a crazy nice and efficient way to get around the city.

To get to cities on the east/south coasts of Taiwan, the high speed rail (HSR) system provides a really quick and easy way to travel long distances (though at a higher cost than riding regular trains). Renting scooters in other cities is cheap and a great way to get around when you're traveling. There will be scooter rental shops near all major train stations. Overall, Taiwan's public transportation system is far superior to America's, and probably one of the best in the world - once you start to figure things out, you can travel to pretty much anywhere in the country over a long weekend!

Food:

If you like eating, Yilan is going to be your paradise. Yilan is full of small mom and pop stores selling delicious Taiwanese food, as well as larger restaurants and international food joints. Taiwanese food is just fantastic, and you'll soon forget about American food once you start munching on beef noodle soup, scallion pancakes, dumplings, and fried rice. Taiwanese breakfast has some of the best grab-and-go options in the world, and will give you something to look forward to on your early morning commutes. The other Asian cuisines (esp. Japanese and Korean)

are also well represented and much better/less Americanized than back home. You can also get a decent burger or fried chicken sandwich at an American restaurant if you're missing home.

The best part of Yilan's food is that it's outrageously cheap. Taiwanese food is overall cheaper than American food, but Yilan is usually about half the price of Taipei! A good Taiwanese meal in Yilan usually costs about \$2-5USD, while the international places are a little more pricey (\$4-10). A delicious hot breakfast will cost \$1-2.

Living:

The eight Yilan ETAs are split into three apartments: two in Yilan City and one in Luodong City (which is a 10 min. train ride or 20 min. scooter ride away from Yilan City). When you first get there, you will be randomly assigned to an apartment for orientation/training. After you receive your school placement at the end of training, you'll rearrange yourselves so that everyone is living in the apartment closest to their schools. Each apartment has some slight pros and cons (i.e. some have better location, while others are a little more modern), but all the apartments should be more than comfortable for your life here, so there's really no bad option. Each ETA gets their own room with a bed (twin or queen size), desk, and some kind of wardrobe. Since we pass these apartments on from year to year, you'll find that your apartments already have a fair amount of stuff in them (a lot of it is useful! ...but a lot of it is junk). Although you'll only be living here for a year, I really recommend making it your home: put decorations on the walls, buy things that you think are missing, etc. You'll be spending a lot of time in this apartment hanging out with your roommates or lesson planning, so make sure it's a place you enjoy!

Bars:

Yilan's nightlife of course is not quite as buzzing as Taipei, but there are still some funs pubs to check out that are really cozy and relaxed. In Luna Plaza, there is Shasha Bar which is very fancy although rather expensive. Next to the Yilan train station, there is a row of shops and restaurants which includes a bar. In Luodong, the recently opened Dream On bar is a great place to listen to Rock and Roll music. The laoban there is good at making unique mixed drinks. In Luodong, there is also the Blue House which has live music every Saturday at 10.

Random pre-trip reminders:

Here are a couple random notes that many of us wish that we would've thought of before leaving:

- International driver's license: If you already have an American driver's license, go to your DMV and apply for an international one. Otherwise, you'll have to take the written and road tests to get a Taiwanese license, which is a headache. While you'll probably be using scooters as your primary form of transportation, there might be some instances where being able to borrow a friend's car will come in handy!
- Banks/credit cards: Make sure that you give your bank a travel notice so that your cards don't get cancelled the first time you use them abroad.
- Cellphone: Try to unlock your phone (or an old phone lying around your house) before you come so you don't have to buy one here! Also, try to put your number on hold so that you can keep your number, but don't pay the full price while you're abroad.
- Visas: In addition to your Taiwanese visa, think about any other places you might want to travel during your time here. It's much easier to apply for a visa when you're in America, because the embassies here are geared towards Taiwanese citizens. For instance, if you want to travel to China at all, you have to apply for a Chinese visa *before you leave America* (also look up the 10-year China visa!).
- Regarding health/dental insurance: Taiwan's healthcare is one of the best in the world. It costs very little money to make a hospital or health clinic visit, the service is fast, and quality of care is excellent. Because of this, some of us actually choose to have certain things taken care of here, like getting wisdom teeth removed, because it is a tiny fraction of the cost in America. Don't worry about your health care needs, or getting travel insurance for your time in Taiwan.

