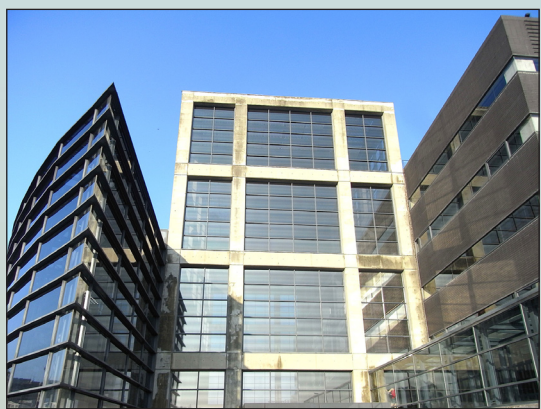


TRAVEL

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Pottering about in Yingge



The heart of the ceramics industry in Taiwan still produces toilet bowls, but Yingge also offers plenty for day-trippers and art lovers to see

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For the past two centuries, Yingge has been known as the ceramics center of Taiwan.

The town's cobblestone-lined Yingge Old Street (鶯歌陶窯老街), Japanese colonial-era architecture and world-class ceramics museum are all especially picturesque in the autumn sunshine.

According to local tradition, the seeds of Yingge's flagship industry were planted when a potter from Guangzhou Province, Wu An (吳安), settled in the area 200 years ago. The abundant forests and ample coal deposits around Yingge provided plenty of fuel for kilns and the city is still known for the manufacture of plumbing fixtures and cable insulators, as well as the abundance of ceramic dishware, fine-art pieces and kitsch available for tourists to purchase.

It takes about 30 minutes to arrive by train from Taipei Main Station, and most attractions are located within a 10-minute walk of Yingge's train station on Wunhua Road (文化路), including Yingge Old Street, the heart of the town's tourist district. As you walk westwards down Wunhua Road (sidewalks are in distressingly short supply, even among the busiest of Yingge's streets, so stay alert, especially at corners), look to your left for the elaborate facades of several brick buildings constructed during Japanese colonial rule. The slightly derelict condition of the old Wang Yang (汪洋居) and Cheng Fa (成發居) residences only add to their ghostly charm.

To get to Yingge Old Street, continue



down Wunhua Road until it splits off into Guocing Street (國慶街). Keeping an eye out for vehicles, cross the street and make a right on the footpath under the railway overpass. Hang a left on Jianshanbu Road (尖山埔路, Yingge Old Street's official name), and follow the cluster of tourists up the hill.

Yingge Old Street is lined with more than 80 shops selling ceramic objects at a wide variety of price points. Teacups can be had for as little as NT\$20, but Peter Wang (王淳興), an art supply store and studio owner who has worked in Yingge's ceramic industry for 30 years, cautions that many of the goods are cheap imports from China.

"Tourists come to Yingge and sometimes they don't have a positive impression about the quality of the items here. They come just expecting to find cheap bargains," says Wang. He advises quality-minded shoppers to bypass stores stuffed with a mishmash of knickknacks and dishware and instead look for places that specialize in a particular type or style of ceramics. One such store that we saw as we strolled under the palms shading Yingge Old Street is Tai-Hwa Pottery (臺華窯) at 27 Jianshanbu Rd (尖山埔路27號), tel: (02) 8678-1600. The elegant, modern gallery exclusively carries ceramic pieces by Taiwanese artists.

No trip to Yingge is complete without a visit to the exceedingly photogenic Yingge Ceramics Museum (臺北縣立鶯歌陶瓷博物館) at 200 Wunhua Rd (文化路200號), tel: (02) 8677-2727, a marvel of modern architecture that has done the city proud since it opened in 2000. Admission is NT\$100 for adults or NT\$70 for students. Start with an informative and surprisingly entertaining exhibit on the history of ceramics in Yingge, and then head upstairs to see the four galleries of the Taiwan Ceramics Biennale, which runs through Dec. 7 and features 114 pieces from artists around the world. The artistic and technical mastery in the sculpture, which range from literal interpretations of the

human form to abstract installations, will please ceramic connoisseurs and serves as an eye-opening introduction to the versatility of pottery as a fine art medium for neophytes.

The expansive park behind Yingge Ceramics Museum is also home to one of the most impressive (and effective) plays to get children into a fine arts museum that I have ever seen: a giant, multi-level wading pool complete with gumball-like spherical sculptures and sprinklers, through which several very giddy kids were running during our recent visit.

While ceramic dinnerware is obviously in no short supply at Yingge, the city's food scene is somewhat less bountiful. For lunch, we headed to the jam-packed Grandma's Sushi (阿婆壽司) at 63 Jhongheng 1st Rd (中正一路63號), tel: (02) 2670-9345. The upstairs dining room was crowded with about 60 diners on a Sunday afternoon, while families posed for photos underneath the restaurant's sign outside.

We picked up a mixed sushi plate (綜合壽司, NT\$50) and a large serving of garlic-flavored cold noodles (蒜味涼麵, NT\$35 or NT\$50 depending on size). Despite the evident popularity of Grandma's Sushi, we were underwhelmed by the sushi. Seafood is relatively sparse and ingredients consisted mostly of items like *rou song* (肉鬆, dried shredded pork), pickled vegetables and egg, which would have tasted fine had the rolls been made to order. Instead, all sushi is pre-made and packed into plastic containers. The cold noodles, which come with half of a preserved salty duck egg, were better.

If you get peckish on the way to the Ceramics Museum, stop by Yilanshi Bao Cun (宜蘭土包子) at 128 Wunhua Rd (文化路128號), tel: (02) 8677-6498. A long line of people snaked out the front of the modest storefront, waiting patiently for fragrant buns and *mantou* stuffed with meat, veggies, red beans or sweet sesame paste. For dinner, we had beef noodles and three-cup chicken (三杯雞)

at Taozhiliu (陶之綠), which sits on the end of Yingge Old Street at 125 Jianshanbu Rd (尖山埔路125號), tel: (02) 8677-6498. Prices were a tad high — we paid a total of NT\$200 for two meals with small cups of iced tea and a bowl of broth with a single, lonely meatball — but portions were hearty and palatable.

If a day spent looking at the work of master ceramic artisans leaves you feeling inspired, consider making a trip to Wang's store, EZ Paint (輕彩畫), at 207 Wunhua Rd (文化路207號), tel: (02) 2679-0486, near the train station. Wang originally ran a ceramics factory, but turned his business into a do-it-yourself studio and ceramics supply shop eight years ago. You can pick from a selection of 400 blank, unglazed ceramic pieces and paint them at home or at the

studio. When your masterpiece is done, EZ

Paint will coat your artwork in a chip-proof, non-toxic glaze and fire the piece for you, a process that takes about a week (the finished ceramic can be delivered to you).

Blank ceramics range in price from NT\$35 for a simple teacup to NT\$10,000 for a large, heavy vase attached to a rotating base. An additional, reasonable fee is charged for finishing. If you want to work on your piece at EZ Paint, NT\$100 will buy you a full day at the shop's comfortable cafe, with paints and brushes supplied.

The peaceful ambiance of the store is what attracted regular Stephanie Lai (賴秋吟) to it, and perhaps points to why Yingge continues to attract serious artists even as certain parts of it turn into tourist traps. Lai, who lives in nearby Sanxia and has been patronizing EZ Paint for two years, says that painting ceramics is a stress relief from her busy job as a corporate headhunter. On the day we visited, she was working on several pieces, including two mugs in a beautiful ombre rainbow pattern.

"Working on ceramics is very soothing and relaxing. I come away with a feeling of accomplishment," says Lai.

Top left: The exterior of the Yingge Ceramic Museum.

PHOTO: RON BROWNLOW, TAIPEI TIMES

Top right and left: Ceramics painted by professional artists at EZ Paint. Beginners are also welcome to try their hand at creating a masterpiece in the Yingge DIY studio.

PHOTOS: RON BROWNLOW, TAIPEI TIMES

Left: The streets between Yingge's train station and its famous Old Street are dangerously devoid of sidewalks but full of colorful characters.

PHOTO: RON BROWNLOW, TAIPEI TIMES

Below: The water park behind Yingge Ceramic Museum is an ingenious play to get children into a fine arts museum.

PHOTO: CATHERINE SHU, TAIPEI TIMES

Left: Nearly a century old, the Wang Yang residence on Wunhua Road was built during the Japanese occupation of Taiwan.

Below left: Lined with cobblestones, Yingge Old Street is Yingge's main tourist thoroughfare.

PHOTOS: RON BROWNLOW, TAIPEI TIMES

