

TRAVEL

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INTO YILAN

Taipei's often-overlooked neighbor offers diverse, one-stop recreation

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Turtle Island, left, and hot springs, right, are two of Yilan's main attractions.



PHOTOS: TAIPEI TIMES

Feeling bored after hitting all the hiking trails on Yangmingshan (陽明山) and the hot springs in the Taipei area? Eager to venture further for the weekend, but don't want to spend too much money or stay overnight? Try one destination that's often overlooked even though it's just a stone's throw away — Yilan.

Yilan offers great hiking, beautiful scenery, hot springs and delicious food. The drive there used to take two hours, but with the opening of the Hsuehshan Tunnel (雪山隧道) in 2007, you can now get to Yilan in less than one hour from central Taipei. Upon arriving in Yilan, it's easy

to wonder how such a relatively undeveloped, scenic coastal area could be so close to urban Taipei. The first sights visitors notice after exiting the tunnel are the verdant Yilan Plain and, just off the coast, Turtle Island (龜山島).

Local specialty products include duck, vegetables cooked in the area's spring water, jujubes and candied fruit. Yilan County accounts for 90 percent of Taiwan's kumquat production, and Jiaosi is famous for its century eggs, which are also prepared using spring water.

The number of visitors to Yilan County, though, dropped from 2007 to 2008. Last year 2.26 million people visited, compared to 3.01 million visitors in 2007.

However, the area has become more well known, as the number of visitors was only 1.4 million in 2002. Most tourists are Taiwanese, but an increasing number are from overseas.

Because of the convenience offered by the Hsuehshan Tunnel, holiday spending patterns are expected to change, with more people predicted to travel to Yilan in the future, according to the county's tourism promotion officials. In an indication of this optimism, the number of five-star accommodations in Yilan County is expected to rise from the current two to at least five in the next two years, according to officials at the Jiaosi Visitor Center (礁溪遊客中心).

IF YOU GO

Getting there

► **By car:** From the north, take the Suao-Hualien Freeway and exit at Jiaosi (礁溪), or take Provincial Highway No. 2 to Jiaosi. From the south, take Provincial Highway No. 9 or Provincial Highway No. 2 to Jiaosi.

► **By train:** Taiwan Railway Administration (TRA) trains stop at Jiaosi and Yilan (宜蘭) stations.

► **By bus:** From the Taipei Station Passenger Bus Main Station (台北車站客運總站, (02) 2550-4668), take Kamalan Bus Company's (葛瑪蘭汽車客運) bus to Jiaosi. A one-way ticket costs NT\$104. It's best to buy a return ticket, especially on weekends, as it may be hard to get a seat on a bus back to Taipei in the evening.

Where to stay

One of the most upscale hotels in Jiaosi is the **Hotel Royal Chiao Hsi Spa** (礁溪老爺大酒店). Designed based on a Japanese-style hot spring hotel, it has around 200 guest rooms, and venues for large meetings, a gym, massage lounge, and KTV and offers both open-air hot spring pools as well as private indoor soaking facilities. Types of soaking include a water therapy pool, a massage pool, a swimming pool and private soaking in "aromatic spring houses." Also available are indoor and open-air hot spring houses made of Edo stone aimed at offering authentic Japanese-style bathing.

Telephone: (03) 988-6288

On the Net: www.hrjhotel.com.tw

The **Silks Place Yilan** (晶英酒店) was the first five-star hotel to open in Yilan City. It has 193 guest rooms, a "Southeast Asia Hanging Garden" and nearly 6,020m² of space, as well as indoor and outdoor pools, gyms and saunas.

Telephone: (03) 935-1000

On the Net: www.silksplace-yilan.com.tw

Sun Spring Resort (山泉大飯店) is an eight-minute walk from the train station in Jiaosi. It offers a rooftop aviary, free Nintendo Wii games in its coffee shop and a "fish kissing" Doctor Fish Foot Spa.

Telephone: (03) 988-7979

The mid-price **San Guang Hotel** (三光溫泉旅館) is located near the train station in Yilan City, with double rooms starting at NT\$1,600 (there is a 40 percent discount on weekdays). This hotel also has an open-air hot spring pool.

Telephone: (03) 988-2128

Di Wang Spa Hotel (帝王大飯店) is centrally located in downtown Yilan City.

Telephone: (03) 988-3769

Kelly Hot-Spring Hotel (凱麗溫泉飯店) is also in downtown Yilan City.

Telephone: (03) 988-1516

What to do

► **Wufongchi Scenic Area** (五峰旗風景區) in Jiaosi, located around 7km north of Yilan City, offers great hikes that are suitable for families, with views of the coast and Turtle Island. You can reach the scenic area by walking or hailing a taxi on Wuncyun Road (溫泉路) in Jiaosi. A view of the 60m Wufongchi Falls (五峰旗瀑布) is the highlight of the hike.

► The main tourist attraction in Yilan County is Jiaosi's hot springs. A red light district during the Japanese colonial period, the area has cleaned up its reputation and is now one of the best places to enjoy hot springs in Taiwan. A wide variety of hotels offer refreshing soaks, with a range in prices. The Jiaosi springs are fed by rainwater that seeps into underground fissures and is heated by the subterranean magma of this volcanic area, which results in colorless, odorless sodium-bicarbonate spring water.

► For more information, check out the Yilan County Government's Web site at www.e-land.gov.tw, contact the Jiaosi Visitor Center (礁溪遊客中心) at (03) 987-2403 or call the Yilan County Department of Business and Tourism's tourism promotion department (宜蘭縣府工商旅遊處觀光行銷科) at (03) 925-1592.

Turtle Island

Also known as Guishan Island, Turtle Island (龜山島) is one of the least-visited destinations in Taiwan. Every winter, the island is closed to tourists to allow its ecosystem to reinvigorate itself. It is only opened from March to November.

Even then, the number of visitors is limited by a strict quota system to protect the island's flora and fauna. Would-be visitors must register and wait for a spot to become available. The quota is 400 visitors per day on weekdays (except Wednesdays, when the island is closed to tourists) and 500 per day on weekends.

A former military base, Turtle Island was off-limits to civilians until 2001, when the government designated it as a tourist spot. The island itself is home to plants and animals that don't exist elsewhere in Taiwan, while the surrounding ocean has to one of the country's richest populations of cetaceans — 17 species appear regularly, including whales and bottlenose dolphins, which can be seen from April to September or October. Most visitors join guided tours. Those who strike out on their own are asked to stick to established trails to avoid damaging the fauna. It takes 90 minutes to finish a tour.

Be sure to bring snacks and beverages because Turtle Island is one of the few places in Taiwan that limits development — only water is sold here. Visitors are required to leave with their own trash, including empty beverage bottles.

IF YOU GO

Registering to visit

► It is recommended that visitors register to visit Turtle Island at least 20 days in advance, although spaces sometimes open up much sooner. To register, contact the Northeast and Yilan Coast National Scenic Area Administration of Taiwan's Tourism Bureau (交通部觀光局東北角暨宜蘭海岸國家風景區管理處) online at www.necoast-nsa.gov.tw or by calling at (02) 2499-1115 X181.

Dolphin watching

► The best time to see dolphins and the occasional whale near Turtle Island is between April and August. For more information, go to tourism.e-land.gov.tw.

Getting there

► Drive or take the Kamalan Bus to Toucheng (頭城), Yilan County. It's a five-minute taxi ride from there to Wushih Harbor (烏石港), where ferries depart to Turtle Island.