

As this wasn't my first time in Taiwan, I was generally well prepared and didn't come across any surprising cultural differences whatsoever. While I will focus on Kaohsiung and NSYSU more in this summary, I will also share some general information about life in Taiwan at the end.

Part I.: Life in Kaohsiung & studying at NSYSU

1. Language

You might've heard or seen online that language is not an issue in Taiwan, as most people speak English well. Most of these articles talk about Taipei only – in Kaohsiung, English proficiency is not as high. While the office staff and professors at NSYSU all speak excellent English, your classmates or workers at local stores and restaurants might not be so fluent. Taiwanese people are super nice, and they'll try their best to accommodate you, but you should not demand people speak English everywhere :)

1.2 Learning Mandarin

University offers free language classes (4h/week, worth 6 ECTS) at its Chinese Language Centre. If you studied Mandarin before, you'll be asked to take an exam prior to your arrival (reading, writing & listening). You can change groups within the first week if you feel your level is too low/too high for the one you were assigned to. The books used are a bit outdated and might use some offensive language (i.e. calling native Americans "Indi*ns"). The teachers, regardless of level, will use Mandarin only in class!

1.3 Other accommodations

NSYSU has something called a "buddy programme", which pairs you with local student. They'll reach out to you prior to your arrival and offer some help and guidance, as well as organise different events allowing you to experience Taiwanese culture. Buddies speak English well, but some might be a bit shy at first. Still, feel free to ask them for help whenever you need - they'll surely try their best. Other than that, street signs and public buses/MRT usually also have street/stop names transliterated or translated. Uber & Uber Eats work with no issues and often you won't have to say anything to your driver/delivery guy – just show them your order on the phone. Moreover, many restaurants near the campus offer English menus, making it easier for non-Mandarin speakers to order food.

2. Campus

NSYSU's campus is located on the mountain side, right by the sea. It offers beautiful views, but also daily hikes with a lot of stairs, so it is not very suitable for people with mobility issues. Campus might be a bit confusing to navigate at first, especially inside the buildings as some parts of the same building do not connect, have separate staircases etc. It is also placed on the outskirts of the city and getting to the centre takes anywhere between 30 minutes to an hour, depending on how lucky you are with the buses and traffic. You'll mostly

have to walk or bike (there are U-bikes on campus – a bit more about that later) to the Hamasen station to get pretty much anywhere in Kaohsiung.

2.1 On-campus facilities

Luckily, most everyday services can be all found on campus grounds. There are some restaurants/cafes (including a vegetarian/vegan one), food court, convenience stores, post office, ATMs, stationery store, bookstore, hairdresser, library, gyms... You can also find quite a few restaurants, cafes and convenience stores right outside the campus. I would recommend making some trips further into the city though, as it offers many great spots for eating & shopping.

2.2 Transportation

To the campus when arriving for the first time: you'll probably fly into Taiwan through Taoyuan International Airport. From there, you need to take a train to Taipei Main Station and then switch to HSR (High Speed Rail) to Zuoying Station in Kaohsiung. Another option is flying directly into Kaohsiung, but it will probably require an extra connection. Both the Kaohsiung Airport and Zuoying station are not exactly in the city centre, so it's best to just call an Uber from there to the campus. It's best to set your destination as Wuling Dormitory Centre, otherwise you might be in for a looong walk up the mountain with your luggage.

Everyday transportation: There are some buses going all the way up to the College of Liberal Arts on the top of the mountain, including free campus buses, but these are scarce and far in-between. Most buses stop at the tunnel entrance (a shortcut between the campus and Sizihwan area) or the Administration Building of NSYSU. To check the times, you can download Kaohsiung iBus and NSYSU apps. Around the library and Administration Building you can find U-bike stations - a bike-sharing system. To rent a bike you need to purchase EasyCard or iPass (also used for paying for other transportation, at the convenience stores etc.), link it to your free U-bike account, where you also sign up for the free insurance. Without insurance, you won't be able to rent a bike! Also, the first 30 minutes are completely free :)

Travelling around Taiwan: For travelling alongside Taiwan's west coast, HSR is the fastest, but also the most expensive option. Moreover, HSR stations are often outside of city centers, as opposed to TRA stations. TRA train tickets are cheaper – roughly 2/3 of the HSR ticket prices for the long rides i.e. from Kaohsiung to Taipei and 1/2 of the HSR ticket price for shorter rides such as Kaohsiung-Tainan. Thus, TRA is a better option for trips around the South. There are also buses - the cheapest but also the slowest option. They're quite comfortable though, so if you don't mind taking overnight buses you can get to the North of the island for as little as ~600 NTD (~18 €). TRA and buses are also the only option for travelling around the beautiful east coast as well as islands' southernmost point in Kenting.

2.3 Monkeys

The campus is a home to Taiwanese macaques, who might jump on you and steal your food. Avoid walking around with food out, including any drinks, and plastic bags as the monkeys connect the sound plastic bags make with food. In case monkeys get interested in whatever you're holding, it's better to just throw it away – they might bite too! Generally speaking, it's best to avoid them as much as possible and pay no attention to them when passing by; some monkeys might react aggressively to loud sounds, sudden moves or pointing to them.

2.4 Smoking and drinking on campus

This is a bit of unethical advice, but very much human. So technically, smoking and drinking on campus are prohibited. There are cameras, but some spots, such as the sitting area near the Wuling Convenience Store or rooftop are out of sight. This is where most students go to smoke. And while officially you cannot drink on campus, as long as you are not too loud or destroy something, nobody will actually care. You can even buy alcohol on campus grounds.

3. Dormitory

If you decide to stay in the dormitory (the cheapest option, costing only ~530 €/semester for a two-person room), you need to prepare to coexist with monkeys, geckos and some pretty big bugs and spiders. Bugs and spiders are not a super common occurrence, but it might happen. The dorms are also quite old and rooms vary drastically in standard, with some having issues with mold, ants or leaking windows. You'll be also sharing a room with at least one person (there are also 4-people rooms for only ~260 €/semester). Usually, they'll be from the same country, allowing for better communication. Moreover, in a two-person room dorm, each corridor is separated into two parts, with 6 rooms in each. These 6 rooms share a kitchen (equipped with fridge, microwave and mini-oven) and bathroom (providing 2 shower cubicles, 1 sitting toilet and 1 squat toilet). Inside the bathroom you can find a washing machine and dryer, each costing 20 NTD per use (paid in cash with two 10 NTD coins).

3.1 Washing machine

Taiwanese washing machines have a tendency to quickly wear-out your clothes, leading to holes and pilling. I recommend bringing clothes you don't mind getting destroyed + hand-washing more delicate pieces. Also, local washing detergents don't have a strong smell, so if you'd like for your clothes to smell nice, you'd have to purchase a separate product called clothing/laundry fragrance.

3.2 Power outlets

There are only 2 power outlets per person in the room, so I highly recommend bringing with you extension cord. Taiwan also uses different sockets (type A & B compared to EU's type C & F), so an adapter is a must.

3.3 Kitchen/Eating outside

As most Taiwanese eat out, dorm kitchen is not really suitable for cooking, but rather keeping/warming up your food. There's a slightly bigger kitchen in the common room, but again, it is not suitable for preparing any elaborate meals. Luckily, food there is cheap and you can easily get full with just around ~200 NTD (~6 €). Western food is naturally more expensive (aside from Asian style Western food), but luckily for some, typical Taiwanese food is not super spicy, but can be quite oily.

4. Courses

NSYSU offers a selection of courses in English, with humanistics/sociology sadly having a way smaller selection than STEM. If you're a Sinology (or similar programme) student, you can also take courses in Mandarin. Personally, I'd recommend asking the lecturer to join these as an auditor, as even with a good command of the language, Taiwanese Mandarin uses a lot of unique vocabulary coming from Taiwanese Hokkien, Minnan, Japanese & some other aboriginal languages. Moreover, Taiwanese tend to speak really fast (i.e. you'll often hear something like "bao yis" instead of "bu hao yisi"), not too loud and not super clear, making it harder to understand them. Also, traditional characters are used, so if you've never studied them before you might find it a bit overwhelming/hard at first.

4.1 Course selection system

The process of course selection has multiple phases and lasts for over a month. This allows you to adjust your schedule and add/drop courses. Local credit system is easy to understand - min. amount of credits for everyone is 5, max. for undergrads is 25 & 15 for masters. Each credit equals 2 ECTS. As an exchange student, you'll join the selection system starting from the second phase during which you can only choose courses of the same study level as your current degree (undergrad/masters). Still, attend all the classes you are interested in from the beginning and inform a teacher you are not yet enrolled in it. In third phase you can add classes from other levels (masters for undergrads, undergrad & doctorate for masters). In case you still fail to secure the classes you are interested in, you can add them during the special circumstances phase after getting approval from the class' instructor (which they usually agree to, so don't worry!).

4.2 Sport

NSYSU also offers a few sport courses in English, but these are really popular and it's hard to get a spot. You can join non-English courses, but these might be challenging for non-Mandarin speakers and sometimes you might be asked by an instructor to drop the course. There's also a sports card, which you can get for the entire semester allowing you to use the gym, swimming pool etc. for 480-1200 NTD (14-35 €) per semester. There were also some hiking trips offered throughout the semester by university, usually free of charge.

4.2 Clubs

NSYSU has many clubs, most of which are sport clubs. You might need to pay a fee to join some of them, but it's super low (i.e. yoga club membership for a whole semester costs only 300 NTD/9 €). The clubs, however, are mostly aimed at local students, so the language of instruction is Mandarin. In some clubs there will be people who speak English well enough to translate for you, but in others you might be indirectly asked to leave, similarly to the sports courses with Mandarin as a language of instruction.

5. Student ID

Your Student ID card is also a key to the dorm, a library card and an iPass, meaning you can use it to pay for the transportation & more around the city. You will be asked to show it when entering campus after midnight (main gate) or after 10PM (side gates). Keep it safe, but also make sure it's easily accessible at all times. For discounts on HSR etc., head to the administration office – your ID will get scanned and stamped there, proving you are currently enrolled as ID on its own might not be enough.

6. What to do in Kaohsiung/the South?

While many prefer Taipei, Kaohsiung also has a lot to offer, especially for those interested in arts and local culture. Taipei can be compared to Berlin – while cool and lively, it has a completely different culture and vibe from the rest of the country. The south of the island is home to many of its aboriginal groups and an actual cultural center of Taiwan, so do not waste this opportunity! Do not skip on many festivals and other events happening in the area – you can find all the information on Kaohsiung City's official Instagram.

Recommended places to visit in Kaohsiung:

- Kaohsiung Museum of Fine Arts
- Cijin Island
- Pier-2 area
- Shoushan lookout
- Kaohsiung Museum of History
- Neiwei Arts Centre
- Lotus Pond area
- Shoyoen
- Chengcing Lake
- Ciaotou Sugar Refinery station/Taiwan Sugar Museum & surrounding areas
- ALIEN Art Centre
- Kaohsiung Hakka Cultural Museum
- Jade Market

Recommended places to visit in the South:

- Tainan (~30 min to 1h by train from Kaohsiung; Taiwan's cultural capital & foodie heaven)
- Fo Guang Shan
- Meinong Folk Village & Hakka Cultural Museum
- Waterfalls (Meiyagu, Dajin, Haishen, Liangshan... there's a lot to choose from!)

- Majia/Sandimen + Indigenous Cultural Park
- Donggang area
- Kenting (oldest national park on the island!)
- Taimali Railroad Crossing
- Jinlun Hot Springs
- Duoliang Railway Station
- Taitung
- Alishan (Forest Railway finally reopened after 15 years!)

7. Travelling outside of Taiwan

Kaohsiung has its own airport, offering direct flights to Japan, South Korea, Hong Kong, Macau, China, Vietnam, Philippines and Malaysia as well as domestic flights to the surrounding small islands such as Kinmen and Penghu (also worth visiting!). The flights vary in price, but some of the local low-cost airlines include TigerAir, HK Express, AirAsia and Peach; you can catch flights to different places starting at as low as 2000 NTD (~60 €) for a round-trip ticket. Taipei airport of course offers more flights and locations, but you also need to take into consideration extra costs of getting to Taipei. Due to Taiwan's central position and relatively cheap prices, I'd recommend getting a multi entry visa so you could freely exit and enter Taiwan without having to worry about counting your Visa-free days.

Part II.: Life in Taiwan in general

1. Vegetarianism/Veganism

While traditional Taiwanese cuisine is mostly meat based, there are also many vegetarian/vegan friendly spots. However, there's a bit of a difference between vegetarianism/veganism in Europe vs. in Taiwan. First, there's a special type of vegetarianism, known as "Buddhist vegetarianism" so sometimes you might see things labelled as [五辛素] or might be asked if your meal has to be Buddhist-friendly. This subtype of vegetarianism is closer to what we would consider as veganism in the West, as it excludes meat, dairy products and eggs, but also "five pungent spices" i.e. onion & garlic. The "pure vegetarianism" aka. Western veganism is known as 全素. Then we have three subtypes of vegetarianism: lacto-ovo vegetarianism (蛋奶素), lacto-ovoism (奶素) and ovo-vegetarianism (蛋素). For my fellow vegetarians/vegans, here's a short list of recommended restaurants in Kaohsiung (green for vegan spots, blue for vegetarian spots & yellow for spots with vegetarian options):

- 玖所 jiU SUO
- PokePoke
- 萩豆乳拉麵
- Mumu Kitchen
- 73 Steps

- Mottainai
- Plant-Based Oasis
- 小孩吃素
- Rododo Hot Pot

2. Weather

The weather in Taiwan varies between subtropical climate in the north and tropical climate in the south. Meaning it's extremely hot and humid in the south from late spring all the way to late autumn, so prepare for daily showers. The "winter" is still humid, but temperature drops to around 20-25 degrees. It might still seem quite high for us Europeans, but you'll feel this drop, so do pack a few hoodies/sweaters. They're also useful to bring around in the summer months, as the AC in many places is set to the max; it's actually easy to catch a cold without having something warmer to put on. In the north temperatures usually stay at around 15 degrees in winter, but due to rain it might feel even colder. Summers, similarly to the south, are hot & humid, although not as much as in the south. Moreover, due to the position of the sun, wearing SPF is truly crucial. It is also a good idea to buy a UV umbrella and carry it around everyday, as a protection from both rain and sun.

3. Politics

Taiwan is a democratic country, so regardless of your political stances you can freely express your opinions. Some Taiwanese folks might feel offended by saying things like "Taiwan is China", but you won't get into any troubles for saying so. It is worth noting, however, that communist symbols are banned there. It is also a generally LGBTQ+ friendly place, so you also do not need to worry about that, although PDA is kept at the minimum by everyone. Some things that might be considered racist or simply rude in the West are not really seen in the same light here. People might want to take photos with you, try to touch your hair or skin – this usually stems from curiosity and does not mean locals are racist. Similarly with things like skin tone or weight – people might give you what we would consider a backhanded compliment, but be 100% genuine about that as the beauty standards there are simply different. Do keep that in mind, but also don't be afraid to express discomfort or directly tell people to stop doing something, if that makes you uncomfortable.

4. Visa

As I got my Visa back in my home country, I am sadly not sure if the process looks the same in Germany. Nonetheless, I will share my experience. There are two main steps in applying for a Taiwanese visa – first, you fill in an online form, which will be sent directly to the representative office of your choice. After that, you will be required to visit the office personally and deliver the documents needed for application:

- health form C or B depending on the length of your stay; this can be done at your GP's office. As for NSYSU, you can also provide them with proofs of vaccination and x-rays, preferably translated into English or Mandarin; however, Ms. Ting who's responsible for

managing the exchange students said she can also just use Google Lens to scan and translate them;

- printed and signed application form
- passport photo taken in the last 6 months
- your passport valid for at least 6 months after the end of your stay
- admission letter from the university; for NSYSU, you will receive that in an online form through the application portal
- proof of financing; this could be a tuition waiver from the university you'll be attending (must ask them to issue one for you), proof of receiving scholarship or a bank statement with at least 10,000\$ in your bank account.

The standard waiting time is about a week, the office staff will inform you about the expected processing time. If you want someone else to pick up your passport with a visa, you will also have to provide a signed form for that. Otherwise, you will have to visit the office again to pick it up. You can also skip getting a visa altogether, as with most EU passports, you can enter Taiwan visa-free for 90 days. However, as mentioned before, I would recommend getting a visa and paying extra for a multi-entry one to save yourself from having to count days and worry about possibly missing the date you have to leave Taiwan if you decide to travel around.