

A Day in the Life of a Fulbright English Teaching Assistant (ETA) in Malaysia

By Ethan J. Goldbach



I wake up every day before dawn to the sounds of the morning call to prayer from the palm tree-laden mosque beyond my window. I lead a similar life to the one I would lead anywhere else: I boil some water for my morning brew of coffee, shower, and brush my teeth, being careful to use sanitary pre-boiled water. I eat a small breakfast of buttered toast and hard-boiled eggs before making my way to school. As the sun finally rises, I drive across the bridge and see the boats of my students' families in the distance, hauling in their catches of the day.

I arrive at school and I'm greeted by smiles and shouts from teenage students at every turn: "Good morning sir! Assalamualaikum!" I shake the hands of the other male teachers at school; since touching the opposite sex is forbidden, and make my way into classes.. Some are successes; I've had classes literally screaming with excitement over games as simple as hangman. Some are lessons are failures; I can bring songs or games into the class, and an idea or grammar point may still be left ungrasped by the time I leave class, with students falling asleep at their

desks.. I go to the kanteen, or cafeteria, at my school in the afternoon while my students and fellow teachers go to pray and I gorge on rice with whole curried fish, stewed vegetables, and teh tarik or pulled tea. I eat carefully with my right hand, separating the fish meat from the bone and creating a mounded mixture with the rice and vegetables, which I scoop with my fingers and push gingerly into my mouth with my thumb.

I stay late after school and lead Choral Sketch, a competitive choral speaking team of selected students who are eager to use English with me and share their ideas, favorite songs, and laughter. I eat a quick late dinner of a spicy lemongrass noodle soup with fried banana fritters at a local food stand and finally make my way home, flopping, exhausted, on my bed as soon as I return. I loose the necktie from my collar and let out a relaxed sigh as I feel the air conditioning cool my sweat.

On the weekends, I travel for hours to meet up with other ETAs and assist them with English Camps. These multi-day extravaganzas are filled with high-energy games, songs, activities, and English initiatives which

leave students begging for us to stay and work at their schools. When we explain that we have to return to our students, they insist that we take copious selfies and exchange social media contact information so we can keep in touch. These kids make us feel like we can do anything and that we are really making a difference in their lives.

Some days are easier than others. The life I lead in Malaysia isn't glamorous. (What I couldn't give for some bagels, guacamole, or bacon!) But my life is fulfilling. I wake up every morning tired but ready to see my students again and feel good about being able to help inspire them to think about life outside of their small kampung or village. I go to bed each night with my mind swimming with ideas of lessons that could have gone better, games I can play at future English camps, or ways I can connect their curricula with a pop song which I hear the students singing in the hallways.

I both struggle and thrive. I am both uncomfortable and at ease in a new culture totally different from home. I'm grateful for the education I've received and the paths that have led me, and the many people who have helped me, to be able to come here. If you are considering applying to Fulbright or similar programs, I highly encourage you to go for it. After all, who knows what adventures you'll have and where it could lead you next?



Ethan Goldbach graduated in 2014 from Shippensburg University with BA degrees in International Studies and History, with minors in Anthropology and Music, in the SU Honors Program. He was involved in SU Concert Choir and Madrigals Choirs, Act V Productions, Reach Out!, and Student Senate, serving as Student Association Vice President in 2011-2012 and SA President in 2012-2013. He studied abroad in Oxford with the PASSHE Summer Honors Program in 2011, to the Dominican Republic with Reach Out! In 2013 as a part of his Honors Capstone project, to South Korea as a participant in the Critical Language Scholarship (CLS) in 2013, and to South Korea again from 2013-2014 in SU's exchange program with Soonchunhyang University. He now works as a Fulbright English Teaching Assistant (ETA) in Kuala Besut, Terengganu in Malaysia. In this program, he is one of 100 ETAs in the country, working at a secondary school of 1500 students from ages 13-17. At the end of the grant period, he is considering reapplying for a second year or moving on to teaching English abroad elsewhere. You can contact Ethan about any of the aforementioned programs or about adjusting to life in a foreign country (particularly Malaysia and South Korea!) by contacting him at ethan.goldbach@gmail.com.

