

At the end of their AFS exchange in Japan, we asked some recent AFSers from the USA to answer two questions:

- ❑ What elements of your host culture, compared to US culture, did you find most difficult to adjust to in the areas of family, school and/or social life?
- ❑ Please note any advice you would like to share with AFSers destined for your host country.

Here are some of their responses:

Learn as much of the language as you can before you go, you will eliminate a lot of trouble and have a lot more fun. The Japanese language also entails many cultural aspects of Japanese life, so it will also help you understand the Japanese mindset, which may puzzle you if you have no knowledge of the language.

**Nigel, Year, 2010**

The hardest thing I had to deal with was keeping my voice down. America is very outspoken and loud but Japan is very quiet and respectful so talking loudly can be seen as a bad thing.

**Olasunkamni, Summer, 2009**

Know your basic Japanese so you could get around easier when lost. Learn how to use chopsticks!

**Christian, Summer, 2009**

Relax. If you make a cultural mistake (manners, clothing, anything) the Japanese people will not be rude or criticize. They understand you are foreign, and you are learning.

**Lucy, Summer, 2009**

I found that the level of separation from foreigners the Japanese have was rather hard to adjust to. I have been evaded by people at a train stop because I merely sat next to them on a bench. My school teachers have even given a sense of separation, me and some other exchange students accidentally walked in on a PTA meeting, and a mother seemed rather shocked to see us. A teacher calmed her down by stating, "Oh, don't worry, it's just the exchange students."

**Jon, Year, 2009**

Japan is still moderately segregated by gender; boys and girls do not often eat lunch together or hang out together even in high school.

**Nigel, Semester, 2009**

The difference in the meaning of little suggestions or

tips was the most difficult thing to adjust to. In my culture, you don't have to take the suggestion or tip, but over in Japan, usually if something is a suggestion or tip, it's more like they are telling you/asking you to do that instead.

**Julia, Semester, 2009**

Be really ready to try and talk to people, the Japanese are very quiet. You should also make sure that you join a club at school, since a majority of high school students spend time at club.

**Jon, Year, 2009**

Try ALL the food when you can. Go to the convenient stores and BUY bread and candy. It's just so good. Especially the rice balls. You'll miss it when you get back because I sure do!

**Angie, Year, 2009**

Although I loved some aspects of the differences of Japan from America, others made me miss home. For example, the subways were deathly quiet compared to New York. No one made eye contact or any noise at all, and it instilled a sense of loneliness for me.

**Aia, Summer, 2008**

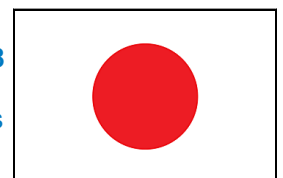
It was very different in the way that people wanted to blend in, get along rather than stick out and be their own person.

**Ariel, Year, 2008**

There is more of an emphasis on politeness in Japanese culture, which is very difficult language-wise and also socially; that is, knowing how to act in what situations. However, Japanese people are usually very forgiving to foreigners and seem impressed by even the most basic knowledge of the language.

**John, Year, 2008**

I think the most difficult thing was the concept that asking



questions was not ok; they got angry when I questioned anything they told me, even when I was just trying to get a better understanding of the culture and mannerisms. I don't want to say that are mean, because that is wrong; they were very nice. They just seem very set in their ways. In America, I feel it is necessary to explain my actions if I do something wrong, at least to a slight degree. However, in Japan, they do not like you to try to explain yourself, they simply expect an apology. At first I found this a difficult concept to stomach but eventually I realized it was really good, it is easier to just say sorry than it is to explain yourself.

**Nicholas, Semester, 2008**

Try speaking to people in Japanese because they really are nice people, but they are really shy and they get frustrated if they aren't able to understand you. Give everything a try.

**Bergen, Year, 2008**

Let everyone know how happy you are to be there. Say thank you for EVERYTHING, no matter how ridiculous you think you may sound repeating the word.

**Aryaled, Year, 2008**

Don't try to explain your actions if they say you have done something wrong; simply apologize and move on, and obviously don't do it again. Spend as much time as you can talking to your host family and your classmates. If you don't know the language, study hard at the beginning, then you can slack off towards the end and have fun with all your new friends.

**Nicholas, Semester, 2008**

The hardest thing to adjust to while in Japan was the fact that they considered me a child; though my host family meant well, their constant concern and rule-enforcing was almost overbearing compared to what I'm used to as a 17-year old American. Just be prepared that while high school students in the US are nearly adults, when you go to Japan you will be considered a child and will be much more limited in what you can do/what's considered okay.

**Alyssa, Semester, 2008**

Be nice and cordial, and do not hug people on first sight. Also, bring tissue/toilet paper with you wherever you go and beware the hole-in-the-ground toilets!

**Chi, Summer, 2008**

Be open to everything! If you have are close-minded, you could miss an amazing experience. There are so many opportunities just waiting for you, and so many

people who are willing to teach you! Taiko, omatsuri, o-bon dancing, etc.

**Andrew, Summer, 2008**

Despite all of the activities that are scheduled, your host family may not be very active and do many things with you, so bring a book or something to entertain yourself.

**Sam, Summer, 2008**

Don't be hasty to move unless you are truly running late. Always take your time, look around, and enjoy the people; maybe ask them questions. They are extremely kind people, it doesn't matter who you are. You might be stared at but don't be intimidated; it's normal for Japanese people to stare. Everything they do is a part of culture, not something to offend you.

**Jessica, Summer, 2008**

Even though everything may seem strange to you don't think "I don't like this, it's not how I do it in the US..." you should think about the host family and think about why they do a certain custom for a reason.

**Ashley, Summer, 2008**

I tried every type of food at least once, and I kept trying to communicate even when I felt silly waving my hands to try to get a message across.

**Andrea, Summer, 2008**

I would not recommend taking shoes that take an extremely long time to take on and off because you will be doing just that a lot.

**Ohannah, Summer, 2008**

If you go to Japan, go with an open mind and be sure about why you are going. Learn Japanese because the people you really would want to talk to only speak Japanese...plus when you get back home you can amaze all of your friends with the cool Japanese you've learned.

**Karl, Summer, 2008**

If you want to go to Japan, please learn as much of the language as possible before coming. I studied the language for about half a year, learning many of the basics of the language (Katakana, Hiragana, phrases used in daily life, adjectives/adverbs/nouns/verbs and conjugations, etc.). It helped a lot; but it would have helped even more if I had studied for a year or two. Also, learn the manners. You don't want to look rude or ignorant in front of anyone, especially in another country when you're representing your own.

**Aia, Summer, 2008**

In Japan, everyone moves very leisurely. Not like in America, here everyone is moving around so fast you hardly see someone pass by. It was a little frustrating at first missing my trains to get home to my host mother, but I enjoyed absorbing everything going on around me, so after while, it didn't matter.

**Jessica, Summer, 2008**

In Japan, people tend to be really shy. It's not a bad thing, but it's just how their culture is. But once you get over the language barrier, all the fun starts there because in Japan, the language is where you can learn most about the culture.

**Karl, Summer, 2008**

It was hard to adjust to life with my host family. It was awkward at times and their schedule was hard to adjust to, which made relationships with them delicate at times. I believe that this is one of the most important aspects leading to a memorable experience.

**Zoe, Summer, 2008**

Take the chance and speak to the native people of the culture; it may be intimidating because language is such a tall barrier, but one can slowly overcome it if one believes it.

**Zoe, Summer, 2008**

The distance between boys and girls is very different. Also the lack of trash cans in public places.

**Ohannah, Summer, 2008**

If you learn the language fast, you will enjoy your time so much more. Stay active in club activities, you meet a lot more people and have lots of fun. And stay active with your host family; they really do want to teach you their culture.

**Annin, Year, 2007**

I was very surprised that I had absolutely no difficulty adjusting to anything. My host family was wonderful and my host school was wonderful too. I had formed a brotherly relationship with my host brother during my first week, and I found a group of friends during my first day at school. I was very lucky! I am glad AFS placed me with such a great host family and school!

**Jonathan, Semester, 2007**

Even if you are offered snacks and permitted to eat them before dinner, don't. Wait at least until after dinner before eating anything extra.

**Donovan, Year, 2007**

Don't be afraid to ask for help; if there is anything you are concerned about, whether it is school, your host families, or even dating, don't hesitate to ask AFS. If there is a problem that you are just set to live with, ask to see if it can be resolved. Don't accept less than is possible.

**Paige, Year, 2007**

Japan is the word "homogenous" manifest. Coming from a diverse Western nation will show you the world of difference between us and them. But if you endure it, learn from it, and live it you'll come back a better person.

**Patrick, Semester, 2007**

Mostly it was school. The schools there are very strict, and if you aren't careful, then you can do something wrong and offend someone. I tried to step very cautiously my first few weeks in school and simply followed along with what everyone else was doing. It was a difficult thing to adjust to, but when I finally got it, I got it good and it became one of my best experiences.

**Abigail, Year, 2007**

Probably, one of the hardest things to adjust to was the dinner time. You couldn't just eat whenever you wanted you usually have to wait a while for everyone to come home.

**Donovan, Year, 2007**

Be sure that you're willing to ask questions. The Japanese aren't very confrontational, so if you think you're doing something wrong, ask your host family. Make sure you keep communication open and let them know that you need to continue talking!

**Abigail, Year, 2007**