

At the end of their AFS exchange in Italy, 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:

I would advise the person to go in prepared to learn and to not expect to be the way you are in America. Everything will be different and you get out as much as you put into your exchange experience. Don't be afraid to fail because everyone will respect you for your courage and spontaneity. The people you will meet are going to shape so much of your experience, so don't be afraid to go for it and be yourself. Also, be prepared to be lonely and to be sad and to be homesick. Eventually it will all pass or you will learn to grow around it. The further you open yourself to your host country, the wider your love for it will become!

Myriam, Semester, 2009

Italy is one of the greatest places to go on an exchange program. The Italian culture is so open and so friendly that you will feel right at home within weeks. There are many small things that don't exist in other countries but it's not hard to get used to it. Everyone is so interested in other cultures...Italy is definitely "exchange student friendly" and is now my second home. Ti Voglio Bene Italia!

Tanya, Semester, 2009

It was difficult to live in an apartment and be with family all of the time and also trying to make new friends because I did not speak the language, but you adjust to all of that quickly.

Grace, Semester, 2009

Where I was in northern Italy, physical contact isn't as common and I am from a very touchy-feely family so at first I felt like my host family didn't care about me because we didn't hug, but later on I realized that they really did care, and showed their affection in other ways.

Michelle, Semester, 2009

Families always eat meals together and it is very rude if you do not participate so you need to ask for permission or warn your family early on if you plan on missing a meal to be somewhere else. Friends gather

in the piazza and walk around together and talk, occasionally stopping for pizza, gelato, a granita, or something similar. They do not go to malls or movies as frequently as we do. Talking is the main point. It can seem very, very dull and repetitive but you will soon learn to enjoy it.

Katherine, Semester, 2009

Try to make close friends. Talking and socializing is very important. Keep your room clean and help clean up any messes you make in common areas because cleanliness is extremely important there. Wear slippers inside of the house always and dry your hair if you've taken a shower and are planning on going out. Greet everyone cheerfully, even if you don't really know them - Italians are very friendly people. Don't be afraid to kiss someone on the cheek. Try not to be offended or frightened when they get close because their ideas about personal space are very different than ours.

Katherine, Semester, 2009

Italians are very big on family, so make sure to make yourself a part of the family. Even if you don't understand something, show that you're interested.

Chevelle, Semester, 2009

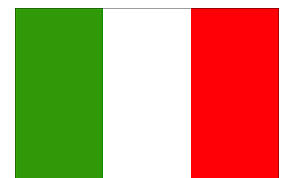
I found it difficult to adjust to walking everywhere strangely enough. I also found it difficult how open everyone was with each other.

Olivia, Summer, 2009

It was incredibly hard to adjust to the heavy smoking. If you have problems with that, don't be afraid to let people know. They will be more cautious around you.

Theobekile, Summer, 2009

It wasn't really difficult to adjust; rather, there were certain quirks about the country/area I was in. For example, I have never blow-dried my hair in the U.S. but in Italy, you never go out in public



with wet hair. You take a shower, dry your hair, and then get dressed.

Emilie, Summer, 2009

Immediately jump into the culture. Try absolutely everything! The food is delicious, but don't stop trying new things once you've found something you like... Also, even if you don't speak the language, try using a mixture of languages you do know, along with various and exaggerated hand motions; everyone will be hugely entertained and will love that you're trying to communicate.

Emilie, Summer, 2009

Italians are always joking! I don't think I heard anyone my age (especially among males) be 100% serious. The school is also completely different and built on relying on the student to do all of the work and learn the materials. But what help the most was *always* smiling. Even if you are tired and sad, make yourself smile because it pays off and don't be afraid to sound stupid...because you *will*. Italians are forgiving and happier to see that you tried.

Brianna, Year, 2009

Italians are very loud and passionate people. The best way to fit in is to smile a lot and be friendly. You can understand conversations by their hands. Family is number one to them; staying out late is very normal... school is wicked hard; the country is the most beautiful country I have ever been to.

Elizabeth, Year, 2009

It is guaranteed that a plate of some weird food will be put down in front of you, but always, always try at least a bite. Don't be afraid to change families. Sometimes people just aren't a good match and it's hard for some Italians to understand that. [However] do not use every discrepancy or little quirk that you don't like as an excuse to change families. There will always be minor problems, like in any family, but you have to be willing to work them out. If, after you've tried talking to them and followed the advice of your volunteer, the family still is not right for you, change. Always strive for happiness, and know that even though you feel like your whole world is a million miles away, and all you want to do is get online and talk to them, don't do that. Take the initiative, make friends, and discover the world outside of your hometown. Have fun.

Saige, Year, 2009

Embarrassingly enough, sometimes [Italians] would know more about my country than I did. So, I would suggest getting a firm grip on our culture (and current

events) before leaving. With my host family, I had to learn to be much more patient and realize that they're just people. People that have done such a generous thing by letting me into their lives, but that they can also make mistakes. School was typically more advanced than what I had done here; more homework, higher expectations, and stricter rules. But I sure did learn a lot! You can't be afraid to make the first move towards making friends.

Keyne, Year, 2008

This is going to be one of the most important years of your life. Live like the Italians do. Eat pasta and don't worry about gaining weight; it'll happen anyway. Do your best in school...[and] let your peers and teacher know you're trying your best. Do not speak English—in the long run it is not the easy way out. Enjoy every moment and embrace every opportunity because before you know it, you'll be home. And have fun! Don't take anything too seriously, try things you normally wouldn't and reach outside your boundaries.

Emilie, Year, 2008

Make an effort to learn the language first; it will really make the difference in your first few months, and will boost your rate of learning immensely upon arrival in the country. Keep a journal; it will become absolutely priceless. When you are scared, write. When you are angry, write. When you are alone, thankful, nostalgic, frustrated, hopeful, joyous, or miserable, write. The best advice I was ever given was "Laugh, cry, experience it all, and don't forget to write."

Danielle, Year, 2008

They only shower maybe every other day, but I knew several people for whom it was every third or fourth day. Showering every day was definitely not the norm. Make sure that it is okay with your host family to shower every day if that is what you would like to do, because sometimes it is expensive and they don't understand why you need to shower so often.

Eleanor, Year, 2008

I can't stress enough the importance of learning at least a little bit of the language before going to Italy. This in, my eyes, will make or break your year. I saw kids with AFS have very disappointing years just due to the fact that they didn't learn the language. I was very determined the first few months and picked up on it quickly. I actually think some of my best memories had to deal with my learning process with friends...just enjoy every second you have there because it does just fly right by. Never get caught up inside just watching TV or on the internet. Go outside and enjoy

the sheer beauty of Italy because it's incredible. Make the best of every moment!

Andrew, Year, 2008

Absolutely try everything and keep an open mind. Jump at every opportunity you have to meet new people and experience new things. I promise you won't regret it.

Marianna, Year, 2005

Not just to Italy-bound students, but also to all exchange students, I cannot stress enough the importance of keeping an open mind.

Greyson, Year, 2005

Don't be shy! You will make friends much more quickly if you are outgoing and aren't afraid to make mistakes when speaking the language. And with your host family try to understand how they feel, but if something's bothering you don't let it build up, try telling someone, if not your family then someone from AFS.

Natalie, Year, 2005

The key to having a great experience is communication! You will need to communicate in several ways. If you don't know the language you will come to rely on gestures, voice intonation, and just understanding the things you see. As you learn the language it is your duty to answer questions about your life, your country, and your opinions. But it is also very important to ask questions about where you are, their lives, and what they think. My host family was more than happy to explain to me about their town, how their food was special (my host father was a butcher), about their history as a family. It's not always easy, though. Sometimes you feel rundown and don't feel like starting a conversation, but even being with them is helpful. I ate lunch and dinner with my host family every day. Even if I didn't have anything to say, we were together and there was a sense of family. Italy is a country rich with art and architecture, history, land, food, language, and culture. Every single town is unique. They all have their own histories and dialects and most people live in the same town their whole lives. I lived in Southern Italy and the people were very warm and welcoming.

Wendy, Year, 2005

Be as open and communicative as possible. If you feel there is something wrong, be as proactive as you can be to find out what the problem is, and what you can do to fix it. Many times they will not ask you to do what they want you to do, so you have to do your best to figure it out and be generous and help out.

Kate, Year, 2005

Be prepared to eat a lot of good food, watch lots of soccer, and have a life-changing experience.

Mark, Summer, 2005

I highly recommend that you study the language of your country. It will make your experience so much better. I wish I had learned more Italian before I went to Italy so I could have conversations with people!

Veronica, Summer, 2005

Just go with the flow. Be open to all new experiences and try not to compare the Italians to the Americans. Try not to think about going home because before you know it you will be!

Allison, Summer, 2005

Italians are much more open than Americans are. It was mostly the little things that lead to awkward situations, especially with the host family. As long as you try to mimic the people around you and try not to get frustrated, the awkwardness will fade with time. You will remember them and laugh.

Jordan, Year, 2005

It was hard to get used to the fact that everybody studied so much. I would want to go out with my friends and they would always be studying. Another difficult thing for me was that my host mom had to do everything, and my host brother and my host dad didn't seem to appreciate that she cooked every meal and did all the laundry in the house. One thing that I loved is that everybody in my host country would get together outside so you never had to worry about finding a house to be at or a place to go.

Emily, Year, 2005

I found it hard to adjust to how very open the Italians are. They always want to know everything about you. Also the way the Italians speak. They have a way of screaming when they talk! It seemed like they were always angry.

Allison, Summer, 2005

Where most American families would have a quiet "discussion," Italians break out the big guns. The simplest point of contention becomes cause for hours of raucous argument. There is no such thing as "back-talk" in Italy; kids are, it seems, encouraged to argue with their parents. Bring light slippers or comfortable sandals to wear around the house. The temperature usually hovers around the nineties, but your host mother will be convinced that the "cold" stone floors will give you pneumonia. Since housing is so expensive and jobs are so scarce, it is common for

Italians to live at home until well into their thirties. Some of them see American kids as delinquents, since most of us stop living at home when we go to college. Don't be surprised if your 25-year-old host sister can't tell you how to do laundry or use the oven. It's usually the mother who takes care of the cooking and cleaning.

Kristen, Summer, 2005

As odd as it sounds, in the beginning the food was a little hard to adapt to. The diet in Italy is much different than the U.S. The milk especially was a lot different. And they don't eat all different kinds of food there, like Chinese and Mexican. It's basically all pasta, bread, and meat.

Lucia, Summer, 2004

I had initially expected that the kids in my host country would be just as excited to learn about my culture as I was about theirs, but that didn't really prove to be true. I was a bit surprised in this respect, and I think it just goes to show that you have to be pretty outgoing at times. Which can be more work than one might expect. It's good to talk to people since part of the experience is learning, and by asking questions you'll end up knowing a lot more than if you don't. It's good to be involved; you'll have such a better time if you are.

Jessica, Summer, 2004

Italian friends are more 'touchy' and are likely to link arms, hug, and kiss upon meeting and walking with arms around each other. Dining is very much a relaxed activity and Italians take their time in savoring the food and wine. Italians are pretty open and curious about foreigners and often come up to strangers to strike up a conversation about where he or she is from and what he or she is doing in Italy. Italian teens do not seem to have the same insecurities as American teenagers concerning body image. It is very easy to make friends.

Claire, Summer, 2003

Don't be hesitant to try anything, you aren't at home anymore and this is a learning experience. Try to sample all the foods and customs, even if you don't end up liking them. The worst thing you can do is to assume that you won't like it and not even try it. It will offend your host family and you will lose such a big part of your experience.

Hailey, Semester, 2003

When the Italians communicate with each other, it sounds like they are yelling, when in fact they are just asking each other how they are doing that day.

Andrew, Summer, 2002

The families are a lot closer and more involved in one another's lives. You have very little personal space or time. There are also certain cultural aspects that you just have to get used to, like always blow-drying your hair and wearing slippers around the house at all times. School, at least for me, was a lot more than in the U.S. There they learned everything orally and had oral tests every week, and rarely did book work. Social life is similar; friends just hang out together and go dancing on Saturday nights (not Friday night's because there's always school on Saturdays!)

Joanie, Semester, 2002