

At the end of their AFS exchange in Ecuador, 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:

It was hard to know what people expect from you. People there are much less direct when telling you if they have some problem with your behavior.

**Tisa, Semester, 2008**

First impressions are so important. No matter how home sick you are it is important to be yourself and be cheery with people when you first meet them

**Brecken, Year, 2008**

My family was hard to adjust to just because they assumed I understood the norms when I really didn't. I had to tell them to be very straight with me, that I wouldn't understand them if they "beat around the bush". Ecuador is a beautiful country with beautiful people. You do have to be careful about thieves, however, especially with the economic crises.

**Lia, Year, 2008**

Probably the [indirect] things like if I didn't like something I'd eaten or didn't eat everything, I had to say "I don't feel so well today" or "I'm very full." If there is still some food left on your plate by the end of the meal, a response like this is necessary usually followed by an enthusiastic, "very delicious meal! I loved the chicken you made!"...I found that the majority of the time responses would be not in the answer itself, but rather how the answer was stated. My host mother would never tell me no when I asked if I could go out. One night however, she answered me with a regretful tone and did not seem to happy to be saying "yes" so, I decided to not go out after all. Then she seemed more comfortable, acting normal once again. I realized that that was just her wanting to please me. She knew I wanted to go out and didn't want to disappoint me. She would also expect me to do a few things around the house. Like I wouldn't realize she wanted me to take in the cover that she'd hung to dry because she'd never told me. So it was just a cultural difference which I had to work to get used to.

**Sarah, Year, 2008**

Be open to people; it'll go a long way. be patient, don't be afraid to sit back and listen, but also be ready to jump in. laugh at yourself. Smile A LOT. Don't be afraid to make mistakes, you'll almost always learn from them. Balance your time well, with your friends and family. Ask questions.

**Sarah, Year, 2008**

It was hard for me to adjust to adults being "above" kids. I was located in the mountain region of Ecuador and what an adult says is what is right. At home what my mom said was the rule and I could not argue with her. Sometimes I was not allowed to go see friends and I could not ask her why. At school it is assumed that the teacher is always right and, as students, we could not question the teachers.

**Sabine, Year, 2008**

Ecuador is a very peaceful country. The people are kind and loving and they all want to get to know exchange students. At school the other girls in your class will like you if you are humble and enjoy talking to them. Take dance classes and learn to dance from the beginning because it is very fun and popular in Ecuador. I enjoyed doing volunteer work at an elementary school. You will enjoy trying new things, I am not at all athletic but I decided to join track which was a great way to make friends and have fun. Oh!...also I should tell you that "borrowing" in Ecuador actually means "keeping" so don't lend anything to valuable. You will be surprised at how amazingly warm and generous the Ecuadorians are but don't be shy. Talk even if you think you sound stupid because your friends and/or family will be a big part of your [experience] and can last long afterwards.

**Sabine, Year, 2008**

It's a very reserved country, especially if you're a girl...Men are expected to go win the bacon while the women stay home to cook and clean. Men



are given more trust while it's frowned down upon if the woman goes out at night...they feel as though their culture allows equality for men and women, but they have a ways to go. Ecuador is the most beautiful country you could choose. It's home to the Amazon jungles, the Andes Mountains, the Galapagos, and some of the most beautiful beaches in the world. It's very geography is so intensely varied that when you [travel] an hour one way or the other, you can literally see the green Andes mountains turn into the more colorful Amazon. Take advantage of all opportunities to get to know the landscape, as well as the people. Ecuador is a country home to many different indigenous cultures. It would be a great opportunity to learn about these people who date back to the Incas. Their culture is rich and colorful. Feel happy you chose such a wonderful place!

**Cara, Year, 2008**

My first family was very rigid in proper manner to salute and it took me a while to understand their expectations.

**Victoria, Year, 2008**

One of the biggest things for me was the time issue. Ecuadorians tend to run late or just not have the same idea about time. I found this difficult to adjust to. Also school in Ecuador, at least for me going to a public all-girls' school, was very confined and just set up a lot differently than schools in the US...Study up on your Spanish because learning the language is key to making friends in school and in the community. Don't worry about time, especially if you're from the US, it will only lead to more worries, just go with the flow. Be up for anything, just cruising around town or going out for coffee. Family is very important...so when your family asks if you want to go with them somewhere, be it your aunt's house or your grandmother's, try and be open and willing to go with them. Sometimes they won't ask outright questions, things tend to be more subtle, so you have to pick up on hints...and will be disappointed if you don't.

**Camille, Year, 2008**

The lack of diversity. The people can be offensive by not accepting your culture but remember that it's you that has to adjust.

**Kito-Jacobi, Year, 2008**

The element that was most difficult to adjust to was the status of women, and in my case; young women. In America teenagers are given a lot of independence compared to teenage girls in Ecuador. I was not allowed out very late compared to the American boys in my AFS group, and I was definitely looked after more

carefully, not only because I was a foreign exchange student, but also because I was a girl. I understand that it was because my family loved and cared about me, but it was a factor that I wasn't raised with.

**Rachel, Summer, 2009**

My advice to future AFSers is there are times where you'll get very frustrated and want to go back home, but just remember that you're only there for this short amount of time and to make the best out of every situation. You might feel lonely and left out but you need to open yourself up to them sometimes, and when you do this, you'll gain so much more than you expected. You'll feel more comfortable, like you're right back at home, and in return others will be more open with you!

**Rachel, Summer, 2009**

A wider world perspective and greater capacity for cultural understanding. The Ecuadorian culture was easy to adjust to; the Western culture that now permeates most of the world I had trouble with.

**Tyler, Year, 2009**

Don't worry about clothes if you're on the coast, they dress just like us. In the mountains it'll be freezing all year long.

**Roxane, Year, 2007**

Blond and blue-eyed girls beware! You will be the hit of every party and the coolest new thing in town because of your "Barbie-like" looks. Set the standard early on if you are a light eater. Ecuadorians eat huge portions and do not understand the concept of being full or not hungry.

**Maya, Semester, 2007**

Even though it's hard not to get discouraged in the first few weeks, try to open yourself up and look at it as a learning experience. It WILL get better. Everything in life takes time. This is no different.

**Caroline, Semester, 2007**

*Family:* It is the single most important thing in your life. That was the bottom-line...about Ecuadorian families. It was hard for me to adjust from a family where I see my cousins once a year max to living down the road from my entire host family and having dinner with them every weekend. Expect to spend much more time with family. There were many more Ecuadorians living in the US than I expected. And everyone who had a relative there assumed I knew them because I was from the US! *School:* The public schools are very disorganized, without academic freedom. I didn't learn

much in my subjects, as what they were teaching I had mostly learned freshman and sophomore year in the US. The teachers frequently didn't show up but no one really seemed to care. *Social Life*: Machismo; the different standards in Ecuador for what girls and guys should and shouldn't do. Dating is viewed very differently (much more seriously).

**Mary, Year, 2007**

For students going to Ecuador I would tell them to keep an open mind! Yes, AFS always says, keep an open mind, don't be expectant, and it's really true! Ecuador is very family oriented, but they're also very honest. My host mom wouldn't hesitate to point out a blemish on my skin or if she thought I was too fat. They think that this kind of openness is great because they're being honest. You have to be very self assured if you want to go to Ecuador. The year I went they offered a trip to the Galapagos; if you have the chance to go, GO! It was an amazing experience...Even [though I had some] bad experiences there, Ecuador is an amazing country and, if you work hard, you can have an amazing year!

**Catheryn, Year, 2007**

Have fun!! Do things you wouldn't normally do and be sure to keep an open mind. When you're offered chicken-foot soup, with the actual chicken feet floating in your bowl, don't throw a fit but politely turn it down or make a point of sipping some of the broth. It'll all make for great stories once you get back home.

**Maya, Semester, 2007**

Have no expectations. Also you have to be very open minded. I'm not sure about other Latin American countries, but in Ecuador the men have a lot more freedom and respect than the women. Women were never treated badly, men were just always put first. Women were always expected to do all the domestic things. Also, the people have views on certain things that may be a lot different than your views, and aren't always too keen on even trying to listen or understand your side of things. So really, you just need to keep a very open mind.

**Brittany, Year, 2007**

I found communication to be very difficult. The language at first of course, but also the subtler sides of communication. The direct/indirect communication thing may seem pointless and unnecessary, but be careful because these differences in communicating can cause uneasiness between you and your family and neither of you may understand why.

**Mia, Semester, 2007**

If you don't understand something, talk about it! People really love to help you, and pretending that you do understand will only catch up with you. Prepare to get embarrassed A LOT. It's ok, just laugh with everyone else. Try everything; you never know what you may actually like, and your host family will appreciate it. Answer questions! People will have lots of them, and it can be fun for both of you, and a great way to practice the language. Relax about things, and don't be uptight about being late; you likely will be quite often. Be aware that people won't say no to your questions. They will joke, avoid it, or guess if they really don't know the answer to it, so beware (they mean well). Be yourself but do your best to blend in. DON'T spend too much time at home, go do things! If you don't you'll regret it later. One piece of information I would have loved to have had before I left for Ecuador is: what do they wear? They wear more or less what we do here: jeans, no matter the weather. Dance! they don't care if you look stupid. Stay in touch with other AFSers. They are wonderful outlets and friends to have, but don't spend too much time with them. Make sure you make Ecuadorian friends!

**Mia, Semester, 2007**

One of the hardest things for me to adjust to was the sexism in Ecuador. I found that, even though I was 18, got good grades, helped cook and clean the house and did all my homework, my 15 year old host brother, who got bad grades, yelled at his mom, complained about the cooking and lay in bed all day watching TV, was allowed to do more than I was.

**Catheryn, Year, 2007**

Family is super important to the Ecuadorians. It's the central of life to them. The family connects people, beliefs, and traditions. Even if you have some faults with your family try and make sure you can talk to a volunteer about it, but try to behave yourself with them. Remember it's not only a change to you, but also to them. There're opening their home and hearts out to you, try and appreciate it. In school you'll have a lot more classes and will more than likely have to wear a uniform. Sometimes the school can be one of the most shocking. I went to school in the US that was new, had everything tiled, sparkly and nice, and there was always toilet paper in the bathroom. I went to a school in Ecuador where the floors were just wood. The classrooms consisted of only desks for the student and teacher, a chalkboard and lights. The bathroom never had soap nor toilet paper. You learn to adapt.

**K.C., Year, 2007**

Spend time with your host family. Maybe you'll miss out a little on the social scene, but it is totally worth it because if you put in the effort, the rewards will be more than you imagined. You will be accepted into their world and truly feel like you have a second family. That is when you know you are truly living as an Ecuadorian, not a foreigner, and that's what this is all about, isn't it? But if something's not right or you feel like you're doing something wrong, but can't figure out what, talk to a volunteer. They know the culture and are on your side. It's better to solve problems with your host family or school quickly than to just "stick it out" acting happy when you're really miserable. Listen to your host family. Cities in Ecuador are much more sketchy after dark and you should never go anywhere alone. Buy a cheap cell phone, and learn the bus system ASAP.

**Mary, Year, 2007**