

At the end of their AFS exchange in Panama, 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:

Relationships with the opposite sex are somewhat different than in my country. In the United States it is entirely acceptable to have many male friends. It is also acceptable to visit them. In Panama, this is not so. Male friends should visit your home, and only if it has been previously discussed with your host family. You visiting them at their home would have been entirely inappropriate. Having close relationships with males, even if only friendly, can cause problems for your host family, as Panamanians are very big on gossip and the stories were often twisted. Talk to your host family! Have a very open relationship with them. Seek their advice before going certain places, and making friends. If your host family asks you not to be with certain people, listen. They only have your best interest in mind, and you don't want to cause any problems for them.

Destiny, Semester, 2009

It was strange to wear a uniform and it would have been very helpful to have had guidance in class selection because there were classes the students had taken for years that I was thrown into. [Panama has] a very social culture and you need to be prepared to be in a full time mix of food, conversation and friends.

Van, Year, 2009

Panama is definitely a poorer country, and I lived in a house that was the complete opposite of the one I live in in the U.S. It was hard to adjust to having limited luxuries, but it was not extremely difficult. Entering with an open mind made everything so much easier. And the Spanish was not much of a problem either. It was hard to communicate at first but it got easier within a week.

Sabiha, Summer, 2009

The people are very friendly. They say "Hi" to you everywhere and people are happy that you're there.

Yongyu, Summer, 2009

Panama is a busy country filled with people who like to take it slow, which gets confusing and sometimes frustrating. On the other hand, it's a beautiful country and the people are, too.

Anastasia, Semester, 2009

Don't expect anything! Make a good bond with your family, make yourself work on the Spanish, and have a great time.

Zachary, Semester, 2010

Be ready to dance and eat a lot...Bring lots of pairs of jeans. Enjoy every second of the experience because it's going to go by way too fast.

Kendra, Semester, 2010

I wish someone had told me these things before I went, because having to be scolded by my host sister for doing something wrong wasn't always fun. But I did learn to fit in fairly well by the end of my month. Dress up! People in Panama wear American clothes, but are always more dressed up than Americans. They prefer pants and sometimes require that people wear pants to places like churches and museums. Shorts are not allowed ever outside of the house, and skirts are not as formal as pants in most places...Families in Panama are very close and expect the students to be open and outgoing and talkative with them. It can be hard, but the best way to get along is to just put yourself out there and talk, talk, talk. That's the best way to communicate with them. Be ready for NO personal space. The people in Panama like to touch you, all the time. When someone comes into a room, they will likely kiss you on the cheek or hug you, and then while talking, have a hand on your leg or arm. Don't be stand-offish or cold about the physical contact. It's nice once you get used to it. Enjoy the closeness of family and friends, because once you return to the US or your home country, you will miss all that physical love...Rice is



served with almost every meal in Panama, along with a source of protein such as eggs, chicken, sardines, other fish, or beans. Maize and plantains are also staples...Dinner is usually the main meal in urban areas; the entire family gathers in the early evening to share the meal. In rural areas, people often have a big breakfast early, a main meal at midday, and a smaller meal at around 5 pm. Urban families try to eat together, but families in the campo (country) are often prevented from doing so by their work schedules. Women will cook the food, and girls can learn from their families how to cook the native food, it's a great experience. But boys will simply be served and never have to move a finger in the kitchen. It is good manners to keep hands above the table during a meal. In the rural interior, the spoon is the utensil used most often...Relatives and friends visit one another often. In urban areas, Sunday is a popular day for visiting. In the rural interior, relatives may see each other every day. A visit is considered a compliment, and even unexpected visitors are made welcome. I always stopped by my extended family's homes, such as my aunt and uncles, just to say hi and sit on the porch and talk for a while. But, watch out, because they WILL feed you. Panamanians are informal hosts who make a point of taking special care of their guests. They may offer them the best seats and the choicest cuts of meat, and send them home with a small gift. It is not usual for guests invited for a meal to bring a gift, but they are expected to return the hospitality at a later date. Baseball is the most popular sport; other favorites include soccer, boxing, and basketball...You need to know where your house is, how to get to it, and how to give directions to it. Also learn where things like town square, the church, the stores and other's houses are located as soon as you can!

Brooke, Summer, 2008

All of the Panamanians are so effusive. They love to be social and have fun. It's great to feel that they all love you so much and really want you to be there. I found family life somewhat difficult to adjust to, because in Panama, families truly sit and spend every waking moment together, where American like their alone time. I felt I never had moment to myself and that I was being rude if I didn't sit with the family all the time.

Tessa, Summer, 2008

Ask the host family where at some fun places to go or even fun things to do.

Rayshana, Summer, 2008

Be prepared for a lot of family time, and do not be embarrassed if you need a moment to go lie down and be by yourself for a moment. They spend so much time together, from working and doing chores to just sitting in the living room watching movies, that you will feel overwhelm with a need to be by yourself. Take a moment and tell them you need to write a letter or lie down to take a nap. You'll feel better and not so stressed. I found family life somewhat difficult to adjust to, because in Panama, families truly sit and spend every waking moment together, where American like their alone time. I felt I never had moment to myself and that I was being rude if I didn't sit with the family all the time.

Sally, Summer, 2008

Don't JUST befriend your fellow AFS students, it's the easy route and you'll be missing out on so many amazing people in your host community. Communicate with people as home as often as YOU feel comfortable with. Dance as often as possible, because even if you can't dance when you get there...you'll know by the time you leave. Get as involved in your community as possible, look for any opportunity you can to connect with people (participate in groups at school, go to events with family members, etc.)

Caitland, Year, 2007

Don't sit around in your room. This makes you prone to homesickness. You're in a new country! Immerse yourself, try new things, and spend as much time with your family as you can. Remember, it's not every day that you can experience a new culture first hand!

Angelica, Summer, 2008

I found getting to know my family the most difficult. My host mother was a professor so I wasn't exposed to her often. My father was rather quiet so I didn't talk to him much. My brother, however, was my link to my understanding of my host country. Overall, as long as I made an effort to communicate with my family, I was embraced. Panama is a truly amazing place that will challenge you to learn about yourself and those around you. By getting to know your family and experiencing all that there is (and isn't) to do, you will discover what you really care about and more about yourself than you can imagine.

Derrick, Summer, 2008

I would advise AFS participants to travel to their host countries open minded and willing to experience something different.

Shadira, Semester, 2007

Language was definitely the hardest part in the beginning. Fortunately, my family understood the barrier, and took their time to explain things to me. It was frustrating when people outside of my family would talk to me really fast and ignored the fact that my Spanish wasn't perfect. After two weeks though, I caught on. The strangest aspect of Panamanian culture was the whistling and hissing. Guys would often whistle at the girls in the group and call out "Gringa!" (their word for North American female). Even to get someone's attention, Panamanians would hiss at each other.

Angelica, Summer, 2008

Panama is beautiful and very diverse. It has American elements to it, like shopping and eating and movie theaters, but there is a lot that doesn't resemble America at all, and you will have to be ready to adjust. Talk to your host family as much as you can and learn as much as you can. Ask questions, look interested and stay involved. It's easy when you don't speak Spanish to lock yourself up alone and not venture out, but that is some of the best times you will have. When you leave your comfort zone to do something new, and come back a changed person.

Brooke, Summer, 2008

Try all the food and don't get sick of it because you'll miss it when you get home. It's best to at least try something, even if it looks gross or scary, because those are the memories that will stay with you longest.

Jared, Summer, 2008