

At the end of their AFS exchange in Belgium Flanders, 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:

There are special schools for sports, art, fashion, and cooking. Yawning with your mouth open is considered rude. Flemish people won't hold back their opinions and can be very blunt. Women are generally clean like crazy. Dirty windows are considered a disgrace. Drinking, cycling, and soccer are the national pastimes.

**Aric, Year, 2008**

Everyone in Belgium likes to speak English. You have to insist from the very first week or month that you want to speak Dutch and not English. It will be very hard, but it is incredibly important to do this. Otherwise you will have a much, much more difficult time learning the language. And learning the language is integral to becoming immersed in the culture and enjoying your year despite the fact that most people can speak English. Get a GoPass train ticket. It is a cheap way to ride the excellent rail network everywhere in Belgium.

**Bryan, Year, 2008**

The Flemish tend to be very closed when first met. They are very good in languages. High school students tend to know how to speak English and French almost perfectly and will have extensive knowledge of other languages as well. Every area in Flanders has a different dialect and there's a standard form of Dutch called, "Pretty Dutch". Most Flemish people think of Pretty Dutch as another language and would much rather speak English. This makes it difficult if you want to learn their language. I had to force most people to speak Dutch to me. If a Flemish person learns that your natural language is English, the conversation will most likely switch to English so they can practice it. Flemish people are also into to foreign affairs and will have preconceived notions and are quick to judge a nation

**Aric, Year, 2008**

Bring a rain jacket! It's wet!

**Samantha, Year, 2007**

I had a bit of a difficult time adjusting to the family culture. The family seemed to always be together.

Everyone, all the time. In my family in the US, we like to be together, but we also like to do things with just two people to get to spend more one on one time. It was a little difficult at first to adjust to being with 5 other people all the time when we did family activities, but eventually I came to really enjoy it. As far as social life goes, I found it difficult to go out because I could never stay awake. Everything started late and everyone stayed out late.

**Ashley, Year, 2007**

Never get discouraged and always accept help. Do everything you can to learn the language and always let your friends and classmates know that you are interested in their lives. Always be willing to try everything once!

**Ashley, Year, 2007**

Drop everything you have become accustomed to in the past; everything you think you know about yourself as a person, because it will hinder you when adapting. Accept changes in yourself willingly; don't think of yourself as an outsider looking in.

**Alexander, Year, 2007**

I had a very easy time adapting. I think I found so much American culture in Belgium that I could very easily fit in.

**Alexander, Year Program, 2007**

Go with an open heart, go with an open mind, by all means GO! One of the things I did when I was down was I stopped and looked around at everything and said "Wow! I can't believe I live in this beautiful town in Belgium!" Try to appreciate every part of your experience because you will look back on everything with a different perspective. Oh yeah, and don't forget your camera and a journal.

**Sophia, Year, 2005**



## Country Quotes: Belgium Flanders

Socially, the Flemish people are much less superficial; they're more upfront with how they feel about you, so if they don't like you or are bored with a conversation you are having with them, they don't humor you by pretending to be interested. In a way it was hard to adjust to, but their sincerity became something I valued most during my AFS year.

**Colby, Year, 2005**

Be very open with your family. Find someone you can really communicate with and that can help you communicate with others.

**Ashley, Year, 2004**

Eat all your favorite Belgian food while you can. It takes time to make friends. Most Belgians are a little on the cold side at first, but once you become friends they are much friendlier.

**Krisni W. Year, 2002**

Dealing with accepting personal responsibilities at home with my host family was hard. Besides being an exchange student and staying in their home, things like mealtime, curfews and honesty with your host family were essential. That was difficult to realize and accept, coming from a more liberal family in the U.S. School was also hard, Belgian standards are higher; people seem to take it a lot more seriously than we do in the states. School and your social life didn't really co-exist. Friends met and hung out directly after school (before dinner) or on the weekends.

**Johanna, Year, 2002**

I found it difficult to adjust to using public transportation all the time. School was also harder and not as sporty and full of activities as my high school in America. My Flemish family also got together more often too at their meals.

**Elizabeth, Year, 2002**