

At the end of their AFS exchange in Iceland, 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:

The most difficult things to adjust to were their family life and social life. In the typical family, both parents work, at least one usually comes from a previous marriage, and the kids are free to do as they please, even at a really young age. They don't ask for you to help but expect you to help around the house anyway, so take part in chores without being told. The social life is also strange; kids become very social when they drink but the next day they will not even say hi to you. It takes a lot of patience and endurance to become friends with Icelanders, but once you are friends, you are really close. Make a serious effort to learn the language because people will appreciate that and it will help you integrate so much. Enjoy the days with good weather and spend time outside then because the weather is so often bad.

Amy, Year, 2009

Talk to people and try to be outgoing because Icelanders won't take the initiative to break the ice but if you do, they can be cool people

Ernest, Year, 2009

I think that you have a lot more independence in everything that you do.

Amy, Year, 2004

Things were different, but with an open mind and a lot of watching, nothing was hard to adjust to. Try things. Even if they're horrible, you'll have stories to tell for later. I did things I'd never done before, and they ended up being my favorite parts of the year.

Jean, Year, 2003

Enjoy it and learn the language quicker than I did. It opens up a whole new set of doors. Everything was a lot more laid back than it was in the U.S.

Elizabeth, Year, 2002

I had to get used to food, family structure, taking your shoes off all the time, never getting any sleep, school being so free.

Michael, Year, 2002

Learn the language. It's easy not to, as English is so widely known and used, but it makes such a difference. Learn Icelandic, but don't be embarrassed if you're not good at it (it's hard). Just talk! People are very understanding. Many of them don't really believe it's possible for a foreigner to learn Icelandic anyway, and they love it when you try. Other than that, just have fun. Don't worry about whether you're a good exchange student; don't panic if you if you don't feel like you have enough friends. If you're unhappy, don't worry about whether or not your experience is different from the perfect exchange student. There's no such thing, and every single person has a completely different experience - different achievements, different priorities, different lives. There are so few exchange students who go to Iceland that you'll probably get to know them all pretty well. You'll see as many different experiences as there are students. The most difficult thing (apart from the language) was making friends. As AFS will probably tell you, Icelanders in school will very rarely approach you first, but you have to take initiative.

Bronwyn, Year, 2002

If you really want to learn Icelandic, make that your goal to begin with. If you don't, everyone will talk to you in English, so don't be shy to ask him or her to speak Icelandic with you. Just know that things are going to be different, the whole county isn't going to change just for you, and you're the one that must make the adjustments!

Sally, Year, 2002

