

At the end of their AFS exchange in Norway, 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:

Learn the language as fast as possible. Don't speak English. Be outgoing and try to meet new people all of the time. Make the best out of your year and you will have a great experience no matter what. Remember what AFS told you....It's not right or wrong, it's just different.

**Ian, Year, 2009**

Bring a big warm waterproof jacket and enough spending money.

**Jordan, Year, 2008**

Spend your time with the people who are interested in you and want to help you learn or show you around, and don't worry about those who ignore you.

**Elizabeth, Year, 2008**

Be ready for a change. This experience will open your eyes! Not only do you learn a new language, culture, and how to live with a new family, but also who you really are.

**Evan, Year, 2009**

Watch out for the Fish pudding, and make sure you don't go too crazy. Just have a fun time.

**Lucas, Year, 2009**

Begin speaking Norwegian right away and don't hesitate to walk up to people and try speaking with them in Norwegian because many of them won't just wander up to you. Norwegian people are very reserved and you need to be confident and take the first step. You may struggle with the language but don't worry it will come to you! If you ever feel like giving up; don't. You can make it through the difficult times and they will probably teach you something about yourself and the Norwegian culture.

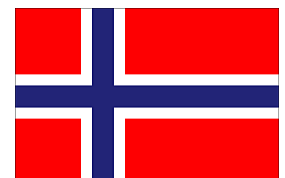
**Nicole, Year, 2009**

Bring long underwear and warm clothes you can wear under your normal clothes as well as over. Even if you're from a cold climate, you'll have to walk so much

in Norway that you'll be colder than you might expect. They don't heat their houses or schools as well as we do, either. Try to only speak in Norwegian, and resist the temptation to speak English. Norwegians are almost all near fluent in English and if you don't tell them from the beginning that you only want to speak Norwegian, you'll never learn it. Making friends does not happen fast, but invite people to do things and start conversations. They like to talk about themselves, so if you just ask about them, you've got a conversation going. Remember, if people don't seem enthusiastic and don't smile to you, do not take it personally; it's just the culture not to show enthusiasm to any large degree. Once you break through the icy exterior, though, Norwegians are some of the warmest people I've ever known. Norwegian teenagers dress nicer at school than they do in the US, but save the shopping until after you get there and have started school, since the styles are very different there. Be prepared that it's very expensive...Help out at home, become a member of your family, start conversations with everyone, and try everything!! Even if you don't think you can do it or say it, try anyway, especially when speaking to people. Do remember that there will be good days and bad days. Being an exchange student is not easy and it's easy to feel isolated in Norway, especially in the beginning, but don't spend too much time communicating with those back home. Remember, it's not good, it's not bad, it's just different!! Learn to "slapp av" (relax) and make the most out of each and every day...Chances are this will be the best experience of your whole life. I still think and dream in Norwegian, and speak it now and then without thinking, and will never forget the incredible friends I have there. Have fun!!

**Acacia, Year, 2007**

Norwegians are very reserved on the outside and can be extremely difficult to get to know, especially in comparison to the US. Gaining true friends takes a



lot of time and effort, but once you've got a friend, they're your friend for life. Also, culture values were very different, especially concerning use of time, transportation, and money. Norwegians walk, bike, or take the bus everywhere, and never drive unless absolutely necessary. [After] having been a teenage driver in a very car-dependent community for 2 years, that was a huge change. Also, they are much more relaxed about time than we are, and set a large amount of time aside for relaxing and doing nothing. With American "time is money" values, this was probably the hardest thing to adjust to. School, also, was a shock to me in terms of how relaxed they were. Deadlines didn't mean much, but the grading system was harsher. People spent a lot more money and shopped a lot more than I thought was normal and teen drinking wasn't a big deal. A lot of American "taboo topics" were openly talked about, and nobody ever gossiped. Four entire months without seeing the sun was hard. They eat mostly bread there, which was hard to adjust to, but all of these challenges became daily life and in the end, adjusting to the US again was harder.

**Acacia Year 2007**

I would say the most important thing to do is to be positive and open minded because if you say to yourself I'm determined to have a good year and not let petty things determine my year then you will have a good experience. Just be open and optimistic about everything and even if you feel uncomfortable chances are you can fix it. Also, learn the language as soon as you can. It's so much easier once you have it down.

**Jennifer, Year, 2005**

You will have to take the initiative to make friends. They may (or may not) say hi to you once because you're new, but after that you will usually have to take it into your own hands to start conversations and start friendships. Spend the first few months being as outgoing as possible, introducing yourself to whomever you can.

**Micah, Year, 2005**

In Norway, people are very shy and reserved. Never expect them to take a chance and come to you. You have to be the outgoing one and come to them first. Keep talking to them, striking up conversations whenever you can. They may not say much at first because they're not sure what language they should speak with you, or they're afraid of making you uncomfortable. It might take awhile before they're comfortable with you, but after that, Norwegians are awesome, fun people, and great friends for life. #1 rule – get involved in school, community, etc. It's the best

way to meet people and experience so much. I just joined a junior marching band in my town, and I ended up getting to go to Oslo with them, play in parades, etc.

**Erica, Year, 2005**

I had originally had trouble adjusting to the food. Norway uses a lot less sugar, and I found myself buying chocolate at the market to make up for that difference. After roughly a month I stopped that habit. It also took a little time to get used to the different rules and customs of my family. But after a little while, it came naturally to me.

**Christopher, Year, 2005**

Always remember that it is not good, it is not bad; it is just different. In the beginning of the year it is so simple to enthusiastically label things good and bad. Further down the line that all comes back to slap you in the face. Another thing, always try to speak the language of your host country. Don't speak English. It will take some of the fun out of the overall experience. I found that it wasn't necessarily the country, but my family that was hard to adjust to. We are all very different and living with a different family takes some getting used to.

**Sverre, Year, 2004**

Norwegians won't try and get to know you; you need to make an effort to try to make friends, especially at the beginning of the year. Norwegians are much more willing to get to know you if you speak Norwegian to them. They may seem cold at first, but are very friendly once you get to know them.

**Isla, Year, 2005**

Learn Norwegian as quickly and as well as you can! Even though many Norwegians speak English well; the only way to really get to know them is to talk to them in their native language. If you only speak English people will always think of you as a foreigner, whereas if you speak Norwegian they will begin to think of you as one of them, and you can experience what it's like to be...part of another culture. Norwegian families in general give more freedom to their children than American families...Students in Norway are also given more freedom, less homework and more big tests in school than American students. As far as social life goes, Norwegians are fairly introverted and can be hard to get to know well. On the other hand, once you get to know people they are very friendly and welcoming, and always enjoy sitting in the living room, drinking coffee and talking.

**Graham, Year, 2004**

Find people to do things with you right away. Ask to go out with them. Ask them to help you.

**Ashley, Year, 2003**

Norwegians can be very cold, but that doesn't mean they're not nice people. I won't forget when I bought my host mother a gift and her response was 'you shouldn't have spent so much money on this' and she shook her head. I was at first worried she didn't like it, but then I realized it's just her way of thanking me. The food is also a bit hard to get used to. Bread, meat and potatoes for dinner are most common. Try to eat everything on your plate. I didn't like fish before I left, but I sure got used to it. Even 'lutefisk'.

**Catherine, Year, 2003**

Bring nice pants and clothes. They dress nicely at school. Adjusting to the family's expectations was difficult. They have new rules; they think other things are important. No matter what, you need to talk about them. You have to talk to Norwegians first if you want to be friends. You will be very active and go out skiing and hiking a lot.

**Caroline, Year, 2003**

When I left, I prepared myself to dive into a culture that appeared much different from ours, but Norway turned out to be a lot like us. I wish I had been prepared for how long independent teens are there. I wish I was prepared to deal with how they are more up to date with the major issues the U.S. is dealing with... Norwegians tend to be pretty nice. They will respect you... Try as hard as you can to jump into lives of teens around you.

**Katelyn, Year Program 01-02**

Tell people that you want to speak Norwegian; otherwise you will never learn it. School was the main difference. Nothing was connected to school. There were no sports, school was school. And family values were different; they spent much more family time there than I was used to.

**Michael, Year, 2002**

Going to a school in Norway doesn't automatically mean you will gain friends. You have to work hard to make friends during your stay. After that, you will have a friend for life.

**Kirby, Year, 01-02**