

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

You will love Belgium! After getting past the language barrier, you will make friends so easily. Belgians are such sweet people, trust me, and there is always something to do there! It has lots of culture since it is divided into three regions! visit the Dutch side if you are in the French speaking region. It is a completely different experience!

**Lizbeth, Year, 2010**

I would like to say that you get what you put into it. If you try to learn the language, you will. If you try to stay in touch with family, you will. If you try to pass classes, fail classes, make friends, or just keep the old, you will.

**Mackenzie, Year, 2010**

French Belgians are very polite, always saying "thank you" and "please." You must say this as well. The style of clothing is also very different; cowboy boots were in style when I was there. Just be yourself; there's no point in pretending to be somebody you're not just to fit in with the others at school. You'll make friends regardless.

**Megan, Year, 2010**

School is taken very seriously - no clubs or sports. Also, families are very, very close, which was difficult for me to adjust to.

**Anastasia, Year, 2009**

The fewer expectations you take in with you, the more you will get out of your experience. I know it might sound impossible, but if you expect less, there is less to be disappointed and more to be pleasantly surprised about.

**Leah, Semester, 2007**

If you leave with an open mind, you will have a great experience!

**Jeffrey, Year, 2007**

Don't worry, have fun. Just talk to your family and try to build a strong relationship. Hang out with other exchange students, but make efforts to make friends at school. Visit all of Belgium it really is almost seeing another country when you venture from wallonie to flandres. Take advantage of your year the most possible, because before you know it it will be over.

**Gretchen, Year, 2007**

Belgians can come across as a bit cold before you get to know them but don't let that scare you away. They really are wonderful, fun people, you just need to take the first steps when meeting new people. Don't be afraid to start up conversations with people, even on the simplest topic. Once you get close to them, Belgians are really great and trustworthy friends.

**Judith, Year, 2007**

Carrying a pocket dictionary for the first month or two is really helpful if you end up somewhere you didn't think you were going...Anytime you try something new you have to try it again (this is easy if you like it) but...Some activities took a few tries in order to get used to. You can never give up after one go at it... Try everything: food, meeting people, a new sport, new words; even if you're really bad or say something really wrong, most people will forgive you and you'll at least get a good ab workout from laughing. Bring a raincoat or umbrella. It rains all the time in Belgium...so the dorky rain boots sitting in the back of your closet now, may become your best friends for the year...Everyone laughs in the same language, and if laughing is too embarrassing, try a smile on...You have to be outgoing if you want to make some friends and get invited to do things. So take the initiative and invite them somewhere. Maybe you could have a couple kids from school come over to look at pictures from the US or watch a DVD (but always check with your host



## Country Quotes: Belgium French

family first!) Listen to the radio and watch the TV or read kids books. Any submersion into the language that you have will help...Participate in your family activities. Even it just means going down to gather eggs with your host dad, every little bit counts. You have to make an effort to learn about them and really feel like you're at home in order for it not to feel like you're at a hotel...Ask question....Your family, friends, and teachers will be able to tell you all about history, geographical sites, and stories about your host country. They will probably be happy to learn a couple things about the US too. Overall, just try to adapt the best you can be observing what everyone else does and trying to do everything they tell you to. You're likely to forget how to do something once in a while so just ask....at least be honest about it. Try to also stick to family rules in order to have a pleasant relationship with the entire family. Also keep all communication wires opens....even the littlest concerns should be addressed immediately.

**Lauren, Year, 2007**

Be aware that in the US, people are much more direct in contact with each other. In Belgium, people tend to be more reserved and there is a lot of room for misunderstandings if you are not careful with the way you express yourself.

**Leah, Semester, 2007**

The structured family schedule and Belgian parties among teenagers are some things that take a little getting used to.

**Jeffrey, Year, 2007**

In Belgium family life is taken really seriously. All important decisions are taken as a group and family always comes before friends. It can be hard to get used to at first, especially coming from the USA where individualism is so important. In America, for example, it's rare for my family to eat a meal together, while in Belgium my family always ate at least one meal together a day.

**Judith, Year, 2007**

In Belgium they give kisses on the cheek. In Belgian culture it is usually one kiss on the right cheek and sometimes three (alternating cheeks) if it is someone you know but see very rarely; also older people, such as my host-grandparents used three kisses. This was something I had to get used to and had to remind myself in the morning to greet my family appropriately and remember to give kisses before going to bed. The kisses are actually called "bisous" in French and it is really just touching the side of the cheeks while

making a kissing sound. School was different in many ways. For one, unlike my high school, Belgian students stayed with the same class throughout most of the day and teachers came to the classroom rather than students finding the teachers. This was really helpful in order to make friends. I was able to spend most of the day with the same people and in the beginning this is really awesome because it is kind of hard to learn everyone's name...only focusing on 20 was much easier...The paper is a different size, you have to use fountain-type pens, take notes with a ruler, stay very organized using an obligatory school journal, and other such things that you just get used to...I also had to get used to how to figure out which trains to get on and which way the buses were going.

**Lauren, Year, 2007**

You really need to put yourself out there, speak the language, and be active with your friends. Try to understand where they are coming from because they aren't always the most "out there" easy to understand people.

**Lynsay, Year, 2005**

I found it hard to adjust to school because the students came at 8 o'clock and left at 3 o'clock. Everyone went their separate ways, so I had to find alternate ways to develop close bonds with people.

**Allison, Year, 2004**

Expect rain...but lots of welcoming and interesting people too. Try to always say yes to invitations-exposure to many different people and activities makes for a wonderful experience.

**Allison, Semester, 2003**

Be prepared to sit down with your family for the majority of meals. The social life revolves around the family, although there were no complaints or restrictions for socializing with friends as well.

**Asa, Semester, 2003**

It's not good, it's not bad; it's just different. At least that's what they told me, and I didn't believe them at first, but it's completely true.

**Becklien, Year, 2004**

Make a visible effort...the local Belgians will like you better for it.

**Carrie, Year, 2004**

## Country Quotes: Belgium French

Bring an umbrella and get ready to eat good chocolate.

**Rebeca, Year, 2004**

Once I proved to my family that I was going to be a part of their lives and that I genuinely wanted to be like their daughter, they warmed up to me, slowly but surely, and now they will always consider me their big girl! At school it was the same, a lot of people rejected me too quickly because I was "American." they assumed that I was closed minded and unwilling to learn about them. When I showed them I legitimately was interested in who they were as people, and when they took the time to get to know me, there was nothing blocking our friendship, and my relationships blossomed. Don't assume Belgians are all cold and pompous. Assume that they are just caught up in their everyday lives and may just not realize that you could become a part of it. If you make the effort, they will be your best friends forever. School was hard, especially with the language barrier. But talk to teachers and show them that you are trying and may need their help. Often teachers are not willing to help, which surprised me a lot. The distance between teachers and students is enormous, I missed being able to have discussions with my teachers after a class, really getting to know them as people as I had in the U.S. They are willing to help, but they usually just want to keep the distance. It was a hard adjustment, fortunately I found people who were willing to help me out and go the extra bit to help me understand. If you show that you are serious, they'll be much more willing, and your classmates will take you seriously, too.

**Emily, Year, 2003**

In Belgium many people are very hostile towards the United States. I did not find them ever to be hostile towards me personally, but it meant a lot to them to know an American with whom they felt they shared many views and who could be a friend. It takes patience and a lot of frustration to work through all of these negative views but in the end it is very rewarding...Life is very rhythmic. It takes some getting used to having dinner at the same time each day, having every day mapped out ahead of time.

**Michele, Year, 2003**

Keep an open mind! There are so many amazing new things to learn about other countries and cultures. Even though they may seem different or weird at first, always give new things a try. This sounds like it isn't a very big deal but it caused some problems with my friends! In Belgium, you greet everyone with a kiss in

the morning. Some mornings I would forget to give everyone a kiss or I would just wave. A lot of people thought that I was angry with them! After I explained that people don't greet each other like that in the United States so I didn't know it would offend them if I waved. I gave a more conscience effort to greet everyone with a 'bisou' and things went more smoothly!

**Nicole, Year, 2002**

Keep an open mind and don't be afraid to speak! You have to talk to make friends!

**Renee, Year, 2002**

Buy an umbrella and bring a raincoat! Speak French any chance you get and try to watch movies/read books in French.

**Oliver, Year, 2002**

You need to go towards the Belgians that you meet (especially at school) because after the first few weeks they won't think that you're very interesting. Be prepared for questions like "How many stars do you know?" and people believing that the USA is like the shows you see on the TV. Some people find it hard to believe that the USA isn't really like all the soap operas we see on TV.

**Sara, Year 2002**

The amount of freedom I had and the amount of responsibility that accompanies that [was a challenge]. I came from a small town and in my host country lived in the biggest city and I had to learn about taking care of myself. Don't be afraid to take risks. Not life threatening risks but the everyday kind, like talking to a foreigner in their native language. They will understand it is hard and be patient with you because you are trying to understand them by being there.

**Allison, Semester, 2001**