

At the end of their AFS exchange in Egypt, 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:

Girls, dress conservatively even if you can get away with a t-shirt and tight jeans, don't do it. It makes you stand out and a target for sexual harassment on the street. Shorts and tank tops are out of the question. If you do get sexually harassed, ignore it if its just words, scream and yell if it is anything more. I don't mean to scare you, but it does happen. I wish I had known that going in. Otherwise, enjoy Egyptian culture! Enjoy the hospitality, the generosity, the craziness, the funnyness. Go on a felucca boat on the Nile, go to Siwa, the Red Sea if you can, go to the top of the Cairo Tower, ride a microbus to the middle of nowhere and explore, be respectful of your host family's rules its only temporary, try at last a little in school it will help you make friends even though that seems impossible, regress to being immature and crazy if necessary. Have the time of your life!

Katelyn, Semester, 2010

Be ready for anything and open to trying it all! Learn how to use public transportation ASAP and explore your city. Talk to strangers on the metro and little kids to improve your Arabic, they may laugh but remember they are amazed that you are doing as well as you are! Eat the local food and learn to dance to the music. Enjoy the generosity of Egyptian grandmothers! Drink as much juice off the streets as you can and eat lots of besboosa!!!

Gabrielle, Year, 2010

It was really hard to adjust myself to the sleep/wake cycle in Egypt. There is a totally different system, mostly of staying up late, and getting up late. It really threw me for a loop. In the US, everyone is moving by 8. in Egypt, it may be 11...

Dayton, Year, 2010

The work culture, or lack thereof, is remarkably different from the United States. It was incredibly difficult for me to simply relax and realize the value in working and 'accomplishing' less.

Patrick, Year, 2010

The language was pretty difficult to take in at first, which freaked me out a little. I soon realized, though, that my host family understood what I was going through. "Language Shock" they would call it. Speaking the native language isn't critical at first, but it sure does help to know how to ask for the bathroom as soon as you land in Cairo!

Cody, Semester, 2010

Be patient. Also, even if you think you are right, sometimes it is simpler to just swallow your pride and apologize.

Molly, Year, 2010

I researched my host country and culture so much that I had all these expectations that didn't turn out to be accurate for Egypt, especially Cairo. For the first week, therefore, I was in huge "shock" and... let's just say - I'd have probably had a better experience if I had learned not to expect anything... I guarantee you, if you listen to AFS's advice in your guidebooks and handouts and talk to your liaison, you'll learn to handle it and find the tremendous beauty that Cairo and Egypt have to offer. Have an open mind and don't be negative. Do everything you are offered to do (that are obviously safe and within AFS rules) even if you're tired or not in the mood, because you'll be glad you did it - you'll learn so many new things each time you venture out into your host country. Also, make sure you start learning your Arabic weeks, even months, before departure. I thanked myself each and every day while I was in Egypt for starting my language study weeks before departure. Because I did that, I was able to get more vocabulary, and thus, learn more Arabic while I was there. Arabic, by the way, is no easy language. There are two types of Arabic you'll encounter in Egypt and most other Arab countries - a regional dialect, like Egyptian Colloquial Arabic, and Modern Standard Arabic... Research both before you start studying to see where



you'd need each. I think a bare minimum for you should be to learn the Arabic alphabet and numbers, and then learn as many Egyptian Colloquial words and phrases as you can master. There are so many resources you can use to learn both Modern Standard and Egyptian Colloquial Arabic - so research!

Salman, Summer, 2009

Watch, observe, jump in. Things may seem weird, even backwards, but the harder you try the easier it becomes. People may have ideas about you based on the country you come from, but if you act polite, friendly, and do your best to fit in, maybe you can change their minds, or at least be an exception to a stereotype.

Cera, Year, 2009

Be prepared to stay up late and wake up early. Unless the program changes school is early in the morning about 9 am. But in the Egyptian culture (during the summer at least) everybody stays up really late. You don't want to miss out on all the fun, so stay out late, get up early, and take naps in the afternoon.

Rhonda, Summer, 2009

I really had a hard time adjusting to the social rules and customs of Egypt. I wore mismatched socks, put my feet up to relax, and went barefoot in the house. All mistakes. Culture and customs are such fundamental parts of our society, that sometimes we don't actively acknowledge them, so the people at school just thought that I was insane that I mismatched my socks. My host family thought I was just insulting when I put my feet up. It took a long time to figure out what was right and what was wrong.

Cera, Year, 2009

The one thing that I know is very concerning is indirect communication. One thing to remember is that Egyptians will always appear to let you do whatever you want to do, when in reality, they want you to do something else. Instead of asking them bluntly, like in America, instead phrase your question as: "Would it be BETTER if I...". Also, when offering an Egyptian something, they will automatically say no the first time, assuming that you will offer it again, when they can say yes. They consider it a sign of politeness.

Nicholas, Year, 2009

Be open to everything. Enjoy the food, speak to the people, and release your inhibitions. Wallahy, enjoy Egypt and Egypt will welcome you.

Taylor, Summer, 2008

Do everything with everyone, no matter what time it is! Some of my best memories are from one or two in the morning, because I took the energy to do that something with my host family when they wanted to do it. And even if you feel completely exhausted (and you will), remember that this really is a once in a lifetime experience and go out and have some fun!

Jessica, Summer, 2008

Do not drink the tap water. They say that for a reason. I didn't and I didn't get sick, everybody else did, and they got sick. I was fortunate.

Caitlin, Summer, 2008

Don't hold yourself back, I made the mistake of being what I thought was "polite" by talking quietly and too respectfully to people I met. Unfortunately, people thought I was weird. Be friendly and you'll make lots of friends. Go to cafes whenever you can because Egyptian cafes are amazing (and they're everywhere). Enjoy the juice, especially mango juice... If you don't like the food, say it's good but you don't like it. Don't make a mess (or if you do, clean it up without bringing attention to yourself).

Isaac, Summer, 2008

Egyptians, especially the girls, like to dress cute... you have to be modest but you will feel more comfortable if you dress like they do. This means covering as much as possible but you can still wear stylish clothes... Also its best if you just go with the flow in terms of "Egyptian time." You will be late but it's not the end of the world!

Vanessa, Summer, 2008

Everyone in Egypt is incredibly sweet and nice... do not be afraid of people on the streets; if you ask anyone anything, they will go out of their way to help you and make sure that you are okay. People genuinely care for you when you are there, even if they view you as a tourist. Just relax while in the country, and go with the flow. As they say in Egypt, "malesh" and "mafish mish keda", basically, roll with it and do not worry.

Aseem, Summer, 2008

I found it hard to convince my host family that I was full. They were always wanting me to eat more. I loved the food, but I could never eat enough.

Adelaide, Summer, 2008

The language barrier between myself and all the people around me [was challenging].

Spencer, Summer, 2008

I found it most difficult to judge if everything I was doing, saying, wearing etc. was appropriate. I think for the most part everything was fine but it was constantly on my mind, it felt like I was monitoring everything I was saying. I think I may have been overly culturally sensitive.

Vanessa, Summer, 2008

In terms of Egypt, I found the sexism and classism that I perceived in Cairo extremely difficult to reconcile with my ideals about the world, and the way that I had become used to being treated in American society.

Julia, Summer, 2008

Indirect communication was hard to pick up; I never knew if my host mother was serious or just biting her lip to keep quiet. Teachers in Egypt expect much more on the students' part; they wanted much more respect than American high school students are used to giving. Staying up until 3 am every night was hard at first, but I loved it within the 2nd week. Egyptians are very social and love going to cafes, cinemas, restaurants, etc.

Isaac, Summer, 2008

Just jump right in to your host family's way of life. My host family ate some meals on the ground and at first they wanted to move to the table for me, but I said no. The more you try to be a part of their lives, the more you will get out, and you will fall in love with the people and the culture.

Adelaide, Summer, 2008

Just stay open-minded.

Carrie, Summer, 2008

Never say no; when an experience arises itself, no matter how absurd it may seem, seize the opportunity.

Spencer, Summer, 2008

Please...be sure to tell anyone going to Egypt that Egyptians, especially the "upper class", are extremely well-dressed, and take a lot of pride in their appearance and definitely expect you to as well. I packed much too casually not knowing this, and I wish I had known ahead of time the particular cultural differences in that area.

Julia, Summer, 2008

The face-saving aspect of Egyptian culture was quite daunting. Word travels very quickly in Egyptian circles and everyone is only two degrees of separation away, instead of 6. (No surprise in stopping in the middle of a highway to say hello to friends in this city of 18 million). It was hard to get used to being consistently aware of

the image you portrayed to everyone. There is no word in Arabic for "privacy" after all. The way you dressed, talked, or spoke was remarked upon by someone. When everyone goes out really dressed up every day, matching down to the seams in their jeans, you know that those safari clothes you took just won't cut it anymore.

Danielle, Summer, 2008

The food [was a challenge]; I lost a lot of weight (I'm a really picky eater though). You just have to get used to eating different kinds of food, and at different times. My family would eat "dinner" at 11 or 12! And dessert (fruit) was at 1.

Caitlin, Summer, 2008

The loudness of my family and the lack of privacy (sharing one room with four girls) took a lot of getting-used-to. Also the teaching style in school: I'm definitely not used to having the teacher announce who did best on the test.

Olivia, Summer, 2008

The most challenging thing was to be able to decipher the unspoken, seemingly untouchable rules in a society. Being Americans, we typically are open to a lot of things and forget to censor ourselves. I found that as long as you asked before you acted you would save yourself a lot of strife.

Taylor, Summer, 2008

I was used to not having to tell everyone everything, but in Egypt I had to get used to just being open with everyone. I remember having a serious conversation with my host sister about how she waxes her mustache, and I had to burst out laughing when she asked, "wait, you never told me what parts you wax!"

Jessica, Summer, 2008

The presence of a primary religion, Islam, was both fascinating and confusing. Because of its omnipresent existence as the root of the culture, I had to learn to accept everything as a stem from it. The male-female roles were incredibly difficult to adjust to and I experienced a lot of disrespect and hassling, but you get used to it. Most of all, the sleep schedule was challenging--- be prepared not to get more than five hours a night (if that)!

Anna, Summer, 2007

Egyptian culture and customs are extremely varied in terms of what's appropriate for attire and behavior. I had two families, and they were completely different; one was conservative and lived in Helwan (a suburb of

Cairo), which meant no short sleeves except in the house and don't even consider shorts, and the other was liberal and lived in Zamalek (the island in the middle of the Nile were all the embassies are) and I could wear tank tops and basketball shorts.

Kelly, Summer, 2007

It was extremely difficult for me to adjust to the differences in gender relationships. There were always subtle things to be aware of- like how close you were walking to a boy in public. Also, Egyptians rarely communicate directly, so it was hard to gauge whether my behavior was appropriate.

Micaela, Summer, 2007

As an American time is a very important factor in my life. In Egypt time is stressed much less. An appropriate phrase used to describe Egyptian life is "malish", meaning "no worries." It was very hard for me to arrive everywhere late; however, it gradually became less and less of an issue. Now, whenever I feel stressed about time, I just say "malish" and move on.

Hannah, Summer, 2007

In Egypt, indirect communication was a big cultural challenge that I faced early on. Being a very direct person myself, it was difficult to decipher exactly what my host mother was saying; I was never sure if she said something because she meant it or just said it to hint to me that she didn't like the idea of something. Also, the eating schedule is very odd; they ate dinner around 11 PM or 12 AM. Regarding social life, teenage girls and boys don't interact as much as we do in the U.S. Dating is very common, but not as open as in the U.S., either.

Elahe, Summer, 2007

The hardest thing to get used to was the indirect communication. It could be extremely frustrating at times since it's difficult to figure out what someone wants, let alone what their motivation is, particularly if you don't speak the language.

Kelly, Summer, 2007

It is very hot in Egypt! Be prepared for days of sweating, but still dress conservatively, or you will attract a lot of attention.

Allison, Summer, 2007