

At the end of their AFS exchange in Austria, 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:

I met the most amazing people I think I've ever known. My host family became a second family to me and my German is almost fluent (my English, on the other hand has suffered. It turns out that 'reservated' is, in fact, not a word).

**Brianna, Year, 2009**

Try really hard to speak German. It's a really rewarding feeling when you come home and can say that you are multi-lingual!!!

**Mackenzie, Semester, 2009**

In Austria people are generally not as open with their feelings as they are in the United States. It was surprising for me that sometimes people aren't as likely to give you a shoulder to cry on as you would think. During your AFS program you will go through a lot of adjustments at one time, and it can get overwhelming, so it's important to remember that their seeming lack of sympathy is not pointed at you, it's just one of many cultural differences.

**Vanessa, Semester, 2009**

I come from a small town and most of my really good friends live about five minutes away. Since I went to a larger city in Austria where it took almost half an hour to get anywhere, I missed having everything so close. I also missed going to people's houses. In America a lot of social interaction happens in someone's house but in Austria that interaction occurs mostly in a cafe or a club. I missed the casual setting of meeting in someone's house, but after a couple of months I was used to it.

**Belle-Pilar, Year, 2009**

A personal journal is such an incredible tool while abroad. It helps you not only record unforgettable experiences, but for years to come it will be an incredible personal account of everything that was going on around you, and inside of you. Afterward, it is the best souvenir you could have.

**Vanessa, Semester, 2009**

The school in Austria was a lot different from American schools. They didn't have the spirit or social aspects that we as Americans have. The language was definitely new. I took German in high school and did well but when I got to Austria, I couldn't understand a word. I often remarked "No way that's German! I know German and that is definitely not German!" My host family helped me so much with the language.

**Brianna, Year, 2009**

One of the most valuable things I took away from my AFS program was some amazing new friendships. I met so many great people during my year abroad, including both the members of my host family and fellow AFSers, and it's amazing to be able to have contact with people in so many different countries. Additionally, learning another language has definitely been beneficial, and I think I have changed personally in many positive ways as well.

**Belle-Pilar, Year, 2009**

You just have to be open, completely...mind, body and soul...to go on an adventure as great as this one. Austria is a beautiful country. Try as hard as possible to see it all: the mountains, the cities, and the countryside. This is a country like no other!

**Ana, Semester, 2009**

Austria is such a beautiful country. The people are so warm and friendly. The language is fun to speak and don't get me started on the food...it is DELICIOUS! You will LOVE Austria!

**Brianna, Year, 2009**



Have someone show you how to use the public transportation. Talk a lot because they may not start the conversation with you. Remember...It's not right or wrong, it's just different, you will be tired of hearing it, but it really is so true.

**Emily, Year, 2009**

Be prepared to change many things about yourself and the ideas you had before you came to your Austrian host family. In Austria they have a totally different way of doing things from the laundry to eating meals! Be open to everything that presents itself to you and remember...*It's not right or wrong, it's just different!*

**Hanna, Year, 2008**

I read all that AFS said about getting out and thought that it didn't matter too much, but it does! I was so tired on the first day of school; too sleepy to make a strong head start. I later realized that first impressions really count. I might have made my experience more enjoyable if I started everything nicely on the first day. Before I went abroad, I was told that Austrians will tell you everything they find wrong with you. While that may be true, the reason is that they are simply honest. They pride themselves in their honesty and want things properly explained. Once my teacher asked me, in the middle of class, "Rosie, bist du traurig?" – "Are you sad?" Everyone fell silent as I felt her gaze pierce through my brain. I think that it was her way of getting things straight, because she was worried. In the USA, we might call that "tactless," but in Austria, it is just honesty. I comfort myself in knowing that I will never have to worry about whether or not I look strange or act different because I can always count on someone to tell me about it.

**Hannah, Semester, 2008**

Simply be open to everything. Take in all the advice you receive prior to departure but...form your own opinions as you adapt to the new life. When abroad take every opportunity offered to you as it may be the only time you get to experience it...Take in the cultural differences and be accepting of their customs. Share your views and tell your host family and friends about your own values, beliefs, and customs. Approach new people and introduce yourself—make it a "meet in the middle" situation. Austrian people are very friendly and open to those who are interested in them and their lifestyles. Do NOT be afraid to ask for help if needed. Take many photos and try to see as much as possible of the land and surrounding countries. Take advantage of the great public transportation. This is your time to have an amazing life-changing experience—make it what you want it to be from the start! Most importantly,

be yourself but don't be afraid to change, and have the best of times! I only hope that all exchange students may have such a positive and uplifting experience as I did. My AFS experience continues to impact my life daily.

**Caitlin, Semester, 2008**

Never be afraid to share your opinion. They *expect* you to do that. Be honest. Keep in mind that they *will* tell you if you are doing something odd, but don't let it bother you. Try to get involved in a sport and do as much [in] school as you can. They will respect you for it and you will become closer to them. *Laugh at yourself if you make mistakes.* Be the best that you can be. Don't be afraid to make your own circle of friends beyond your host sibling's, even if they invite you everywhere with them. Strive to make your own place in the family, so that you don't replace someone else, but don't push too hard. Let them know when it is awkward that you do things differently in the USA, so that they understand where you are coming from. Learn the language! Use your own good judgment, and trust yourself that you can do it!

**Hannah, Semester, 2008**

I sometimes found it difficult to see how closed off and private some Austrian people were but in the end I discovered that once they get to know you they are the most open and wonderful people I have ever met.

**Kurt Semester 2008**

Austria is one of the most polite and safe countries in the world. Get ready for a lot of etiquette and be more outgoing than you think is necessary!

**Sydney, Year, 2007**

**Society:** Formality and politeness are very important; always use the formal when addressing adults, teachers and strangers, and always greet people when you enter and leave a store or room. **School:** Introduce yourself to as many people as possible early on and try very hard to remember names! Show active interest in class, and do as much homework as you can, even if it is not assigned. Keeping up academically makes it much easier to get integrated and make friends with classmates. **Host Family:** Be observant! Pay attention to how the household works, and how the family members interact, even on the very first day; noticing small details without having to be told, like where the silverware is kept and when dinner is served, is a big help with getting integrated as a family member. Showing that you are motivated to learn about the family and culture is very important to your adjustment. Taste everything once, even if it

looks intimidating. Practice eating with your fork in your left hand and knife in your right BEFORE you leave, otherwise the first family meal may be awkward. Try to find some commonality with each member of the family, and make time to get to know each one's interests and activities. Smile and be positive! Be sure to remember birthdays and holidays. Don't immediately make judgments; even if something seems totally illogical or silly, most of the time there is a good reason that will eventually become clear. Share your own culture with photos, family recipes, stories, traditions and more. Always ask how you can help, even if you're not sure how.

**Anna, Year, 2007**

In Austria, differences in family are personal and depend on a student's own family as well as their host family. The biggest difference in the school system is that students are separated by skills and abilities, classes are generally smaller (in a Gymnasium), the school hours are different, students interact more with one another and are much more focused on studies, and the punishment system is not quite as severe as in the US. There are also many social differences. Generally, religion is important, politics are very influential, immigrants are not very welcome, education is highly regarded, family and friends are greatly valued and the Austrians take pride in their culture and customs. The teenage social life is also different: weekdays are for studying and the weekends for having fun; the drinking age is lower; what constitutes a "relationship" is different; youth are very direct in speaking; dance courses are a key part of teenage life; and "going out on the town" may be something different than [in the US]. However, these are personal generalizations and should not be taken for what life in Austria is. There is much more to it.

**Caitlin, Semester, 2007**

There was not one big thing that I had trouble adjusting to. There were just a lot of little things but if you keep the communication channels open with your host family you will be fine!

**Julia, Year, 2007**

Tell your family about yourself but always remember to ask about the culture a lot. I found people are so much nicer when they realize you want to learn about their home and culture.

**Helen, Semester, 2005**

In Austria, there is a very old fashioned society living in a very modern lifestyle. Men are served and sit at the table after dinner while the women clean up. Men work

outside, and women clean inside. The Austrians love things to be clean. Their houses are their pride and joy. School is difficult and completely different from the US. Social life is going out on the weekends only. My best advice to dealing with that is just to shut out your thinking and what you know from the U.S. (to an extent of course) and jump right in; do what they do.

**Becky, Year, 2005**

I hope you have all heard this before but I thought I would say it again as it was the most helpful thing I ever heard while my program: "it is not good, it is not bad, it is just different"

**Mallory, Year, 2003**

It would have been 100 times easier if I had known more about my home country's government, history, and politics. I was asked a lot of questions on these subjects in Austria and I could not answer them. Verbal communication is key, and don't assume anything.

**Elizabeth, Year, 2001**