

At the end of their AFS exchange in Spain, 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 learned to look at something new and accept it with an open heart, instead of comparing it incessantly with my old ways. I gained an entire new family, which I hold in my heart just as dear as my American family. I made new friends and learned a new language. More than anything, I learned to be proud of myself for assimilating into the culture and learning two new languages (I was in Catalunya).

Claire, Year, 2010

Each day, I learned something new about the language, culture, and my own ability to adapt, persevere, and operate independently. I not only gained fluency in Spanish, but understood, and contributed in, each of my nine classes. More importantly, I developed deep friendships with several peers and their families.

Molly, Year, 2010

It was very loud and assertive, and I was afraid to put out my opinion. The Spanish argue quite a bit (or at least the people I knew) which I found hard to adapt to.

Claire, Year, 2010

Some of my best friends were other AFSers, but don't make them your only friends. It really helps to have friends outside of AFS. Don't delay getting to know your host family, because your placement can make or break your experience. If home life is miserable you, will be too. Spain: Don't be taken aback when your family seems to make you eat more and more food, you can say no! The kids in school are shy. They will be interested in you, but are too nervous to initiate anything. So make the first move! If your new friends ask you to go somewhere, GO!! Make good friends with your school principal and head of studies, it will greatly help to have a good relationship with them when you need papers to take to your home school. If they don't know you, it could take a long time before you get those papers. Things close in the middle of the day, and around 8 every night, plus nothing is open on Sunday. Make sure that if you need to go out and get

something you plan ahead. Take advantage of public transportation in major cities especially since it is pretty much non-existent in America! It is a lifesaver, and a great way to get to places. Avoid speaking English, people will love to talk to you in English to practice theirs, but limit your English at all costs!

Patrick, Year, 2010

Family time is important. Long lunches are hard to sit through at first, but a great way to get to know your family. Life is slower than life in the United States - expect things to take time and deadlines to never be met and plan for that.

Bria, Year, 2010

Be prepared to have an accent and people will notice you are foreign, just keep trying and be able to laugh at yourself, not get frustrated. Nobody will have a perfect accent immediately, as long as you can be understood, it's all that matters. Practice makes perfect.

Emma, Year, 2010

Always make sure to eat all of the food on your plate!

Emily, Year, 2010

In Spain, the home and family life was very important, much more so than my family in the US. The schedule threw me off, with everything much later, sometimes siestas mid-day. The nature of people is much more open and they seem to enjoy life more.

Megan, Year, 2009

School in Spain is very, very different. Extracurricular activities are generally not a part of the normal school day (neither during school hours nor afterward), so getting involved in activities is more difficult (and more expensive!). Every family is different, but it can be very hard to adjust to a lifestyle that might be totally different from



everything you have ever known. These differences may be obvious ones, but often they are subtle, and it'll take you a while to realize that the difference is even there. These are the hardest to get used to, and it takes a lot of patience on every side. Try to prepare yourself for this beforehand, and keep an open mind.

Molly, Year, 2009

One of the most difficult areas for me as an exchange student was getting used to the indirect manner of speaking that my host family had. Many times, I think they were offended by my bluntness. Also, the large amount of seafood and olive oil threw my taste palate for a spin but after two or three months, I grew accustomed to the variety of fish, mussels and other seafood. Now that I am back, I definitely miss the Spanish cuisine.

Lauren, Year, 2009

In Spain they are much more open and whenever you greet someone it's by kisses on the cheeks or hugs instead of just a simple "hey" or a wave like here in the US. I liked the openness a lot though; it makes you feel less uncomfortable and closer to others.

Liza, Year, 2009

In Spain, cleanliness and participating in family chores two to three times a day was very important. I was doing dishes three times a day and sweeping and cooking after the first weeks when I didn't realize that was expected of me and offended my host mother. Try to be as helpful as humanly possible, especially in the beginning. You will be overwhelmed and going through a lot, so it will be easy to center on yourself, but honestly, the best thing you can do is think about others and take care of them. This will help you forget about your worries and your homesickness and will really help your relationship with your host family. Invest emotionally in your host family because that relationship will make or break your experience. Socially, be open and friendly from the start. It won't be easy to socialize/connect with people in a language that is foreign to you, so lots of effort is required to get someone to understand you!

Caitlin, Year, 2009

Keep an open mind. Stick up for yourself. Do your homework, put effort into your classes. Never refuse social invitations, however small they may seem. ENJOY and realize that it is an experience of a lifetime. Take advantage of every day you spend here. The year will go by so fast.

Megan, Year, 2009

The Spanish are a very talkative people, get ready.

Kelsey Irene, Year, 2009

Take advantage of the public transportation! The Spanish train system is AMAZING...Pay attention to your teachers. If you do, you will find they will be more open to helping you in the future. If you have questions, ask your teachers after class if you can meet later in the day or during your break.

Lauren, Year, 2009

Let yourself be lazy, take three hours to eat lunch after school, spend lots of time with your host family. It's fun to go out and...party since it's easy to do as a young person in Spain, but keep it varied because that you will end up with a much richer experience. The kids who stayed out late every weekend and blew off school completely stayed the same over the year and never seemed to mature or progress or learn from the experience...Accept struggle; accept sad nights when you will be depressed and miss your family and friends. Share how you feel with people in Spain and move on and enjoy the simple joys of life in Spain. Avoid the internet if at all possible. I had no internet in my house in Spain and it was probably the best blessing in disguise from my experience.

Caitlin, Year, 2009

Be prepared to take short showers. Try to conserve as much water as you can. Be nice when you feel offended because Spaniards do not consider some things, that we think are offensive [to be] offensive.

Julie, Summer, 2008

Don't be afraid to speak the language. It's the effort that counts. And even though you might not get it right the first few times, they understand that you're making the effort to try and will eventually help you by correcting you, so you become better at the language. Also, be yourself. Yet, be able to adjust well.

Chloe, Summer, 2008

It was a bit hard to adjust to the "relaxed-ness" of Spain. I was used to keeping a detailed schedule and getting things done quickly but that isn't really how things go in Spain.

Kristin, Summer, 2008

Make the most of your experience. Do everything you have the opportunity to do, because you may never get the chance to do it again.

Gemma, Summer, 2008

Spain was very relaxed. I spent a lot of time waiting just to start an activity. Conserving water was very big,

whereas in the United States you are only worried of the cost of how much water you were using.

Julie, Summer, 2007

The schools are quite different, more based on rules and memorization. It was also interesting how Spaniards don't have that "American dream" aspect that most of us do. They don't believe one person can change the world or really, really succeed. Perhaps they're right, perhaps they're wrong, but it is different.

Hillary, Year, 2007