

At the end of their AFS exchange in Paraguay, 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:

It was really hard for me to adjust to their view of time. It's all very laidback, so 10 minutes could really mean 20. It was difficult to worry about being punctual when no one really cares if you're 30 minutes late.

Alexa, Year, 2009

The family lifestyle is completely different; a lot closer in some ways and farther apart than others. The families with more money tend to be less united compared to the families who are relatively poor.

Hannah, Year, 2009

Men tend to dominate in this society, more so in rural areas than in the city. Drinking and smoking are a part of everyday life. There is an overwhelming tendency to gossip - everyone knew who I was after a week even if they had never seen me before. My host sister knew who I danced with at the disco and she hadn't even gone to the disco herself! Be prepared to have people talk about you behind your back, even if they are your friends. And, a lot of times, things will not be said directly to you if someone is not satisfied with what you do/how you do things, but you might hear it from a different person. The men are pushy! Avoid situations where you might put yourself at risk - although it may seem safe, take in mind that you are NOT native and should not walk around alone even if you know the streets well after 8 months of living there. Just be smart about things. Don't have an open bag in a bus filled with people - its contents (or IT itself) might disappear! Most of all... remember that it's not wrong; it's just part of a different way of life. You can and should be yourself and still adjust to their culture. Once you do, it's the most beautiful thing you'll experience!

Genevieve, Year, 2009

Everything in the US is fast paced and I couldn't adjust to the slow, meandering pace of life in Paraguay. I also had difficulty adjusting to people being consistently late to meetings.

Kimberly, Summer, 2009

I found it harder to transition back to the US culture because the quality of my life in Paraguay was way more fun.

Nicholas, Summer, 2009

Don't be afraid to mess up when speaking in Spanish! The people of Paraguay are really amazing, they will laugh and giggle at your mistakes but 9 times out of 10 it's actually really funny! You will get friends that will be there forever. I loved Paraguay, and I am going back. The friends you make are so real and you will notice how accepting they are, and your families as well. I love my family and I can't wait to see them again!

Stephanie, Year, 2009

Just enjoy it all - Paraguayans are some of the nicest people you'll ever meet. They're always willing to open up their doors and let you in, even if there's no room. You'll never be alone.

Hannah, Year, 2009

Family is everything!! And gossip is the country's best sport, you can't hide from it and they will talk about you no matter what, so don't worry about it. Also, the food is really heavy and they will always offer you more food, so be firm but respectful when declining an offered piece of cake or sopa paraguaya.

Petra, Year, 2010

Paraguay is not the best place to be a vegetarian (although I was able to make it work). I did gain a lot of weight as well and people in Paraguay are very honest about weight gain.

Margaret, Semester, 2010

As a gift, I recommend you bring a nice screw top thermos (the type you would put hot cocoa or coffee in) with a nice design pertaining to your region or country. This is because the Paraguayos all drink a certain tea and all have



these great thermoses and would love a present like that. Candy is also a good gift for brothers and sisters. Some candies they probably haven't tried are Skittles, Starburst, Reeses, Sour Patch Kids, marshmallows, etc.... It may sound strange, but there's a reason these things sell so well in the States! Also, t-shirts with sports teams or something funny written in English are really good gifts. You will definitely be in a Spanish speaking area, so don't worry about not getting a chance to practice your Spanish. Also don't worry about bringing heavy winter coats either because the average temperature is around 90 degrees. It does get cold though if your family doesn't have heating. Just leave the ski jacket at home. Bring all your MP3 music and your photos of home on a thumb drive because your family will want to see them but *leave the laptop and iPod at home!!!* Most teenagers in Paraguay do not have PCs and do not have Ipods. DO take your camera, though.

Byron, Year, 2009

The locals are welcoming and loving, don't hold back, let them get to know you and they'll love you for the person you are. It's hot, but don't underestimate the winters. Bring warm clothes. Don't be surprised if your [host] parents want to know where you're going, with whom, at what time, what you'll be doing, and when you're coming back. You'll have a lot less privacy, especially if you share a room with a sibling. Try and spend as much time as you can with your family, because when and if you return, they'll be the ones there for you. Also, your family will probably get offended if you spend too much time by yourself, in your room, or out with friends. It can come off like you don't like them.

Lauren, Semester, 2010

Go into the experience without any expectations and just make the most of what the country has to offer. If you do this, you will not be disappointed and you will be much more able to adapt to the culture quickly and gain lifelong friends.

Margaret, Semester, 2010

Always try to speak Spanish! Try to say anything you can, and people will love you for it. Ask for help when you need it - the Paraguayans I met were the warmest, most welcoming people I know. If you go to high school, don't try to find cliques or feel like you need to desperately search for a group to latch onto. From my experience at a Paraguayan high school, the harsh, rigid cliques found in American high schools were virtually non-existent. Hug people back; share everything you have; try to return the joy you receive

from the people around you. If your family has servants, try to talk to them! My most rewarding conversation was during the last week of my trip, when my Spanish was finally good enough to have an hour long conversation with my family's maid. I wish I hadn't waited so long to talk to her - I had assumed that she would be uninterested in me, but after I finally struck up conversation I realized she was more friendly and interested in me than my family was.

Wynn, Summer, 2008

Any potential AFS participant should know that the months or year they spend in their host country will be the best time of their life. It always is. They will be a better person because of their experience, and colleges are interested in your adventure too!

Ryan, Semester, 2007

Be open and think of the Paraguayans as equals. Try to become one of them while you are there the more you understand them the more successful you will be.

Westin, Year, 2007

Be prepared to laugh at yourself you'll make mistakes. Listen to what your siblings tell you and especially your host mom, they'll keep you safe. Spend time with your family, as it really hurts their feelings if you spend all your time with other AFSers or don't eat at home and keep in contact with them when you get home.

Hailey, Summer, 2008

Bring warm clothes for the winter. Don't be surprised with how drawn people will be to you. Keep your wallet and cell close to you. Always be open to new experiences.

Amanda, Year, 2007

Fall in love with Paraguay, with whatever city you are in, with the language, with the people, with the culture, and with the life you will find there! Go out on limbs and stick your neck out, be whoever you want to be and enjoy your experience as much as you can. You will experience tears from being homesick, and tears from knowing how much you will miss it. There were some hardships with adjusting to the lack of personal space and privacy, but those problems disappeared when I changed families. I've found it more difficult to adjust back home, living the American life that I had wanted to avoid. I miss Paraguay every day!

Morgan, Summer, 2008

I found it difficult to adjust to the way women were treated. I couldn't walk down the street without an uproar of "psssttt...whhoot whoott". Once I was made uncomfortable when I was with my host mom at a

bakery and a group of men were taking pictures of me with their cell phones. This was one aspect that was somewhat hard to get used to.

Mackenzie, Summer, 2008

One of the most difficult elements for me was as a woman, you have a lot less freedom than in the USA. It wasn't that the males in my family were really sexist or mean to females, but you could definitely tell who ruled the house and had the final say. The male dominance was actually less than I expected but was still there.

Hailey, Summer, 2008

One of the most difficult things for me to adjust to was "La hora Paraguaya" as they call it. This means that it is very common for someone to show up 30 minutes to an hour later than they say. So when a plan is made for 7pm, it will most likely not begin until about 8pm. The other thing was food. My host mom always tried to serve me, or encourage me to eat more than I wanted to, and it was very difficult to get her to understand that I was full and didn't want to eat any more.

Caitlin, Summer, 2008

Immerse yourself in the culture of Paraguay and avoid ONLY socializing with fellow AFSers, because you will miss out on so much. Probably the lack of privacy was most challenging for me. If I wanted to go off by myself to listen to music or write in my journal, it was seen as anti-social or disrespectful.

Erinn, Semester, 2007

One of the most difficult things to adjust to was the difference in gender roles, especially within the family, where the father is almost always the authority. It also took me quite awhile to adjust to how much my host parents worried about me, as a young female...As for friends, it was just difficult how long the time period was between when I would meet people and know them superficially and when I felt like I had actual friends who genuinely cared about me and for whom I genuinely cared for.

Sierra, Year, 2007

Please just come with an open mind and don't pass up any opportunity, no matter how out-there it sounds, or how completely exhausted you are. Don't be afraid to leave your comfort zone, because the more you put yourself out there, you will gain so much more from your experience. Don't shy away from strong relationships. While they make the goodbyes more painful, they are definitely the most rewarding, and you definitely don't want to end your exchange with regrets. Never stop asking questions! Be confident that most of

the people you meet will have something really neat to share, and more than anything else, it is the people that will make your experience amazing. Do things during your exchange that make you happy. This is likely a once-in-a-lifetime experience, so don't spend it being sad. That's not to say it's not OK to be sad and have difficult times, but remember that you are capable of getting through them, and that there are people who care, who want just as much as you do for you to be happy. If you think that everyone around you is crazy, go a little crazy yourself.

Sierra, Year, 2007

The Paraguayo spirit is calm, open, and can be best friends with about anyone. They share everything. You walk a lot. They don't care about littering, so there is lots of garbage on the streets. Lots of dogs and cats!

Amanda, Year, 2007

Try everything that is offered to you at least once. No one will be offended if you don't like something, but they might be if you don't at least try it. Ask questions all the time! Take advantage of your location and learn as much as you can about the people, culture, and language. Try to find an English to Guarani dictionary!!!

Caitlin, Summer, 2008