

At the end of their AFS exchange in Switzerland, 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:

My family gave me more freedom, my school was very different and teenagers were a lot more mature.

Kelley, Year, 2008

The most difficult for me was school since my school in the US is much bigger and the classes are a lot less demanding for students. Having school in a different language makes it even harder.

Valerie, Year, 2008

Be open with everyone and be adventurous when it comes to trying new things! An example would be the many outdoor activities that the Swiss particularly enjoy doing.

Kristina, Year, 2008

Some say the Swiss are cold and at first this may seem true, but be warm to them and you'll find them welcoming, friendly and curious about your culture.

Ruth, Year, 2008

Be open to change. Don't think that just because you are not from there that their rules don't always apply to you. You have to adapt to their lifestyle, not have them adapt to yours.

Amanda, Year, 2008

Just be open-minded, stick it out, keep trying and don't be afraid to confide in your host family! They can and will probably help you!

Hannah, Year, 2008

Swiss people are more reserved than Americans. You will have to work to get through their shells but it's worth it. They are just as spontaneous and funny as anyone else but they meet new people with distance. It doesn't mean they are unfriendly. They really just want to help you out but aren't sure how. So don't wait for them to start conversations because you may be left waiting... School gives back what you put in. Teachers won't expect more from you than you're able to do, but a good way to get close to your classmates is to do the

same work as they are doing. You may not be able to do it but you will get brownie points for trying. Extracurricular activities aren't often through schools, but getting involved in something is a good idea and help you can make friends outside of just your class. Don't say no to anything offered! Classes typically do a lot of things together so when your classmates ask you to do something, say yes. If you say no they may think you don't want to be with them at all and they will just leave you alone.

Because public transportation is so well-developed in Switzerland, you will be expected to take it and not call to get rides. Cars aren't as widely used as in the United States. My host family didn't even own one. So always know when your last train or bus is because otherwise you may be sleeping overnight in the train station. The legal age for alcohol is sixteen and having some beers at a party is really normal. That doesn't mean you should feel pressured to drink. However, drinking is a large part of the Swiss culture and you will be faced with it at one time or another. So, before you get put into a situation that might make you uncomfortable, you should think about drinking responsibly or not at all.

Families are a great source of support and interesting things to do but they are also the biggest source of stress. You have to put effort in to make it work between yourself and your family. Watch your siblings to see what the norm is but follow the rules set down by your host parents even if your siblings don't. Your house isn't a hotel. If there is a family activity planned, attend it. Stay in contact with your fellow exchange students. Your AFS contact person can help you as will friends and your host family, but no one knows quite what you're going through like the other exchange students. Whether you need to let out some steam or want to celebrate a national holiday, no one can help you quite like another exchange student.

Gabrielle, Year, 2007



Country Quotes: Switzerland

Family life is similar or different depending on the family, but one thing that is difficult is that Swiss teenagers don't invite their friends over to their houses very often, they go out instead. At school, classes and students are much more serious. There is no getting up to go to the bathroom or to throw something away, no gum chewing and no talking. On the other hand, there is a really long lunch break and students living close by can go home for lunch. Socially, it's hard to make friends at the beginning especially with the language barrier. With a little effort you can find a group of friends to go out with, but having a close friendship with someone takes a lot of time and effort. The Swiss are always polite and friendly, but for many of them, it takes a while to open up.

Haley, Year, 2007

Go into it with no expectations, you'll never be disappointed. Be willing to challenge your ideas/beliefs/opinions, because a lot of those will change while you're there. Realize that humans are very adaptable, and something that surprises you, or something that you dislike at the beginning, will definitely grow on you. ALWAYS SMILE you want to be as approachable as possible, and if you don't speak the language, the only way you can communicate with people is by your face and actions. They're interested in you and want to communicate with you, even though there's the language barrier. Also give them some time, they're shy too. Oh, something my friends always forgot to do, or were shy to do, ASK FOR HELP when you need it... no matter what. Don't be shy. People are surprisingly nice and helpful once you just ask them.

Linda, Year, 2007

How the Swiss make friends [was challenging] -- they are very slow to make friends, but once you do they are friends for life, unlike in the US where we make friends very easily, but not always for a long time.

Lilly, Year, 2007

I found the stereotypical beginning "coldness" and directness of the Swiss to be a cultural element of Switzerland that took a little bit of time to get used to. Be honest with what you say and mean and don't be put off by the coldness, because it is just the first quality you may be confronted with when you meet many Swiss people, but underneath that, they have very warm personalities and are also the most genuine people you will ever meet.

Kathryn, Year, 2007

It is of utmost importance that you participate. Decline no invitation from a classmate. Those you live with

want you to bring yourself into their lives, so actively show them who you are. Laugh when you make a mistake! Let them correct you! Try again, and again, and again.

Timothy, Year, 2007

Learn as much of the language of your placement area as possible before you go, especially if you are in the German-speaking part and have had no prior German. And when you get to Switzerland, dive right into speaking the language. Don't spend all your time on the computer, and avoid spending all your time with exchangers. Also, show that you are a real part of your class by at least participating.

Kathryn, Year, 2007

One of the hardest things to do was to get over the fear of sounding like a toddler...only the toddler would at least have the accent down! My recommendation would be to speak the language as much as possible, even if you don't know much of it - people understand that you are learning, and they are excited that you WANT to.

Grace, Year, 2007

They speak Swiss German, so even if you do learn high German quickly, you still have another one to learn before you can participate in dinner table conversation. Also, if you're used to existing outside the mainstream, be prepared to have to give that up for a year, there doesn't seem to be any counter-culture at all, especially in the schools.

Annalise, Year, 2007