



**Intercultural Programs
Switzerland**

Welcome to Switzerland!

A Guide for AFS Participants in Switzerland
NH16 Edition

AFS in Switzerland

AFS Switzerland hosts about 200 participants each year and sends approximately 250 abroad. Many host families have sent their own children abroad, were AFS participants themselves, or have hosted previously. Like all AFS partners, AFS Switzerland is a non-profit intercultural education organization.

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Office closed on Thursday mornings

Did you know that the fee you pay to participate in the AFS program does not cover the entire cost of your participation?

The AFS network of partners conducts fundraising to supplement the amount that participants pay. These funds, combined with your program fee, cover operational costs in your home and host country, among many other things.

Your AFS experience in Switzerland would not be possible without your host family, who does not receive any compensation for hosting you, and the help of over 1'000 volunteers who run the program at the local level in one of the 25 chapters. Please express your appreciation to host families and AFS volunteers regularly for all they do for you and the AFS program!

Table of Contents

Foreword	6
I. About Switzerland	8
Geography	8
Climate	10
Languages	10
National Languages	10
Swiss German vs. High German	11
Transportation in Switzerland	12
Educational System	13
Primary and Lower Secondary Level	13
Upper Secondary Level	14
Tertiary Level	14
Practical Information	15
Mail	15
Telephone	15
Electricity	16
Internet	16
Currency and Exchange Rates	17
Units of Measurement	17
Authorities and Laws	17
Websites about Switzerland	18
II. Your Exchange - Before You Arrive	19
Online Language Course	19
Contact Your Host Family	19
Visa and Travel	19
Insurance	19
Liability Insurance	20
What to Pack	20
Spending Money	22
Expenses Paid by AFS Switzerland	22
Expenses Paid by the Participant	22
Approximate Costs of Consumer Goods	24
How to Receive Money from Home	24
III. Your Exchange - While You Are Here	25
Your Time in Switzerland - For Year Students	25
Your Time in Switzerland - For Semester Students	26
Your Time in Switzerland - For Trimester Students	27
Arrival Day and First Weeks	28
Intensive Language Course for Year Students	28
First School Day in Your Host School	28
Orientation Camp	29
AFS Rules	29

Rules of AFS Switzerland	29
Travel Rules	30
Visits from Home	31
Your Host Family and You	32
Your Host School	32
Making Friends	36
Classmates	36
Leisure Activities	36
Relationships and Sex	36
Religious Practice and Attitudes	37
Good Manners	38
Meeting and Greeting People	38
Table Manners	38
Typically Swiss?	40
Highs and Lows	42
Homesickness	42
Importance of Learning the Language	43
Weight Gain and Weight Loss	43
Share Your Feelings - Contact AFS Support	43
Host Family Changes	45
Contacting Parents and Friends	45
Money Traps	46
Social Media Fair Play Rules	47
Conclusion	49
IV. Appendix	50
Important Numbers and Addresses	50
Safety Handbook	51
Introduction	51
At Home	51
Outside the Home	52
Other Important Issues	55
Conclusion	58

Foreword

Dear exchange student

While you are busy preparing for your exchange experience in your home country, AFS Switzerland is also preparing to have everything ready for your arrival in Switzerland. There are many people eagerly awaiting your arrival. Your host family, host school, AFS volunteers and staff members are here to support you in whatever way possible, so that you can make the most of your exchange experience.

During your exchange, you will go through a learning process. Among other things, you will learn how things work in your new environment. You will find your place in your host family through observation and dialogue. You will connect with new friends and schoolmates. You will also learn and use a new language.



This learning and adjustment process can be exciting, but also sometimes frustrating. Whenever you feel unhappy or have concerns about your experience, please reach out to your host family or to AFS Switzerland. Both volunteers and staff know that it is not always easy to adjust to new surroundings, and we will do our best to help you.

This booklet contains useful information to prepare you for the great and also the more challenging moments of your upcoming adventure.

However, you are not the only one embarking on an adventure. The information in this booklet is also important for your parents, so please give them a copy as well.

We are looking forward to meeting you in person!

Dear parents

Although you want to give your child the opportunity to discover the world, it will probably not be easy for you to let your child go. You have to trust that your child is ready for this experience, and has enough strength and selfconfidence to deal with the challenges of an exchange. Rest assured that your child is not alone during this adventure. The host family, the school, AFS volunteers and staff in Switzerland are here for guidance, advice and support.

Your child will need patience to adjust to the new environment. Building new relationships, both with host family members and schoolmates, takes time. It is likely that your child will sometimes be frustrated or homesick. This is normal when so many things are new and unfamiliar.

If you notice that your child is unwell or unhappy, please encourage him/her to reach out and talk to the host family or a local AFS volunteer. Experience shows that small problems have a tendency to grow bigger if they are not addressed, so please tell your child not to be embarrassed to seek help, even for seemingly insignificant issues.

While AFS Switzerland is there for your child during the exchange, your national AFS office is there for you. If you have any concerns – even if you are not sure that you have reason to be worried – please contact AFS in your country. The colleagues in all AFS offices around the world know about the difficulties that can arise during an exchange, and they will consult with us whenever necessary.

Thank you for the opportunity you are giving to your child and the trust placed in AFS!

Enjoy reading this booklet!
Volunteers and staff of AFS Switzerland

I. About Switzerland

Geography

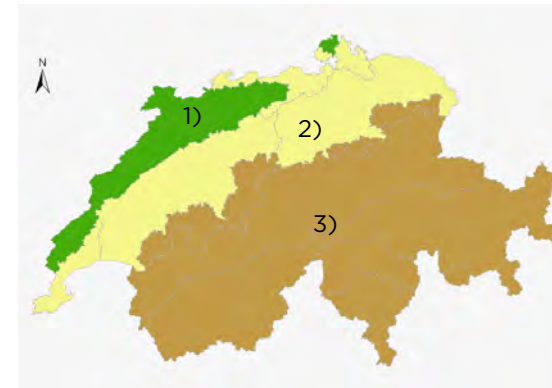
Switzerland is a landlocked country in the heart of Europe. Compared to many other European countries it is rather small, as you can see on the map below.



Switzerland covers about 41'000 square kilometers of land (equals -16'000 sq. miles). All neighboring countries are a lot bigger. Even Austria, also considered a small country, is twice as big. The only smaller neighbor is the Principality of Liechtenstein, the little spot in the map below between Austria and Switzerland.



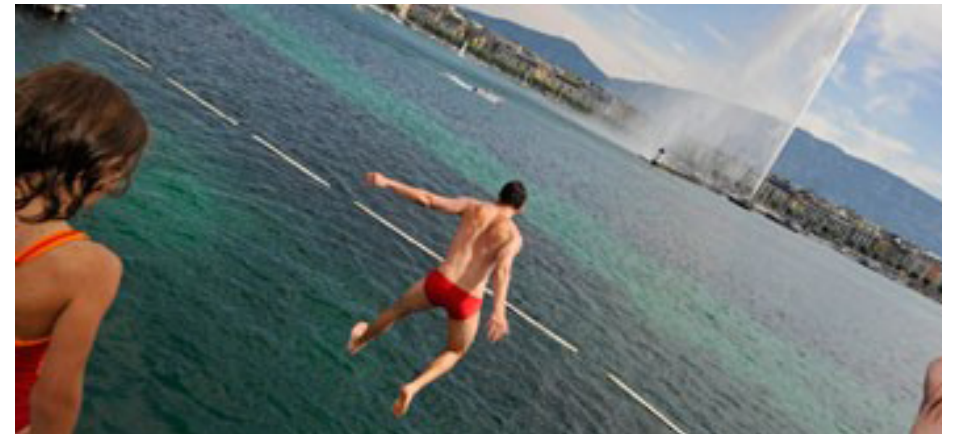
Geographically, Switzerland has three major areas. The Alps, the Swiss Plateau (sometimes called Middle Land), and the Jura. While the Alps occupy the greater part of the territory, the Swiss population of approximately 8 million people is concentrated mostly on the Plateau. The Plateau stretches from Lake Geneva in the south west to Lake Constance in the north east, with an average altitude of 580m (1902 ft). It covers about 30 percent of the country's surface area, but is home to two thirds of the population. Most of Switzerland's industry and farmland is concentrated in the Plateau, and most host families live in this region.



The three main regions:

- 1) Jura
- 2) Plateau
- 3) Alps

Although Switzerland has no access to the ocean, there are plenty of possibilities to go swimming. The country is full of rivers and lakes of all sizes. Swiss people are very proud of the fact that even in big cities, the water in the rivers and lakes is clean enough to go for a swim.



Climate

The Swiss climate is generally temperate, but it can vary from glacial conditions on the mountaintops to the almost Mediterranean climate at the southern tip where palm trees grow.

Switzerland has four clearly distinguishable seasons:

- In spring (March to May), the trees blossom and the meadows become green.
- In summer (June to August), the days get longer and the temperature rises to 25-30 degrees (77-86 degrees Fahrenheit). This is the time to check out the lakes and rivers and go for a swim!
- In autumn (September to November), fruit ripens, and then the leaves turn red, yellow and brown before they fall.
- In winter (December to February), snow changes the landscape in the mountains, but in the Plateau it is usually not cold enough for the snow to cover the landscape for more than a few days. The days get shorter, and especially for exchange students who are not used to the changing of the seasons this can be a depressing time. It is dark when you leave the house in the morning to go to school, and it is dark again when you go home in the afternoon. But don't worry, after the shortest day on 21/22 December, it will get better again!

Languages

National Languages

Switzerland has four national languages: German, French, Italian and Romansh. However, this does not mean that all Swiss people speak all languages. The language you speak depends on where you grow up. While all Swiss students have to learn a second or even third national language at school, they often don't reach a high level and don't feel confident using the other languages. Sometimes, they even prefer to talk English to each other instead of communicating in one of the national languages. You will soon notice that many German-speaking Swiss dislike learning and speaking French and vice versa.

There is even a (humorous) term for the language and cultural differences between the French and the German speaking regions: „Röstigraben“. Rösti is the Swiss German name for hashed potatoes, a dish considered typical for the German speaking region. So literally, „Röstigraben“ means „hashed potatoes ditch“.

German is the most widespread language. It is the native language of 64 percent of the population. French is the native language of about 20 percent of the population. Italian is spoken by 6.5 percent, and Romansh by less than 0.5 percent of the population. The remaining 9 percent are immigrants who speak their native language.



The German region (Deutschschweiz) covers roughly the east, the north and the center; the French part (Romandie) is in the west and the Italian area (Svizzera italiana) in the south. Last, but not least, there is a small Romansh-speaking native population in the canton of Grisons in the east. Three cantons are officially bilingual (Bern, Valais and Fribourg), Grisons is officially trilingual (German, Italian and Romansh).

Swiss German vs. High German

If you are placed in the German-speaking region, you will probably learn two languages at the same time because Swiss German varies widely from High German. High German is the written language and it is also spoken during lessons at school. At the beginning, you will learn High German. Don't be afraid to remind the people around you to speak High German to you. After a while, you will start to understand Swiss German too. The dialects of Swiss German can differ a great deal from region to region. Even for a native speaker, it can be challenging at times to understand someone with a strong dialect.

Swiss French also has its distinct features but there are fewer differences between „Swiss French“ and „Standard French“ than between „Swiss German“ and „High German“.

Most AFS students will be placed in the German speaking region. In the French region, only very few students can be placed. This region is much smaller, and the schools only accept students with good prior knowledge of French. In the Italian region, there are almost no host families and placements there are very rare.

Transportation in Switzerland

School buses do not exist, and it is very unusual to be driven to school by your parents. But do not worry: there is a great variety of transport ranging from the train to your own bike. Most students get to and from school either by public transport or by bike.

It is very common to use public transport in Switzerland which is reliable and safe. In urban areas especially, there are many families who don't even own a car because public transport is more convenient.

You will soon realize that many people in Switzerland are very proud of the public transport system. They have an almost emotional relationship with the Swiss railway company SBB/CFF/FFS. The company has a great website and a smartphone app where you can look up all train, bus and boat connections (in German, French, Italian and English): www.sbb.ch

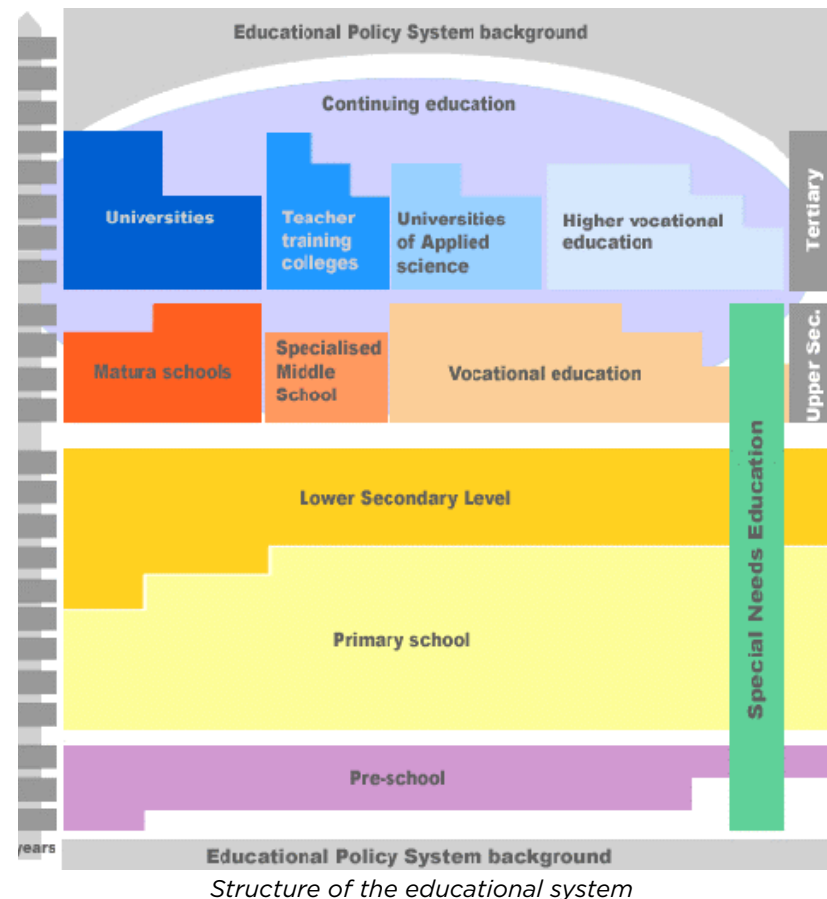
Make sure that you always have a valid ticket. If you don't and get caught, you will get a fine of 100 CHF (approx. 105 USD)! Ticket inspectors are usually pitiless even if you start crying and tell them a moving story of a lost exchange student who does not yet know how the ticket machine works.

In the safety handbook in the appendix you will find useful safety tips regarding the different means of transportation in Switzerland. Read them carefully!



Educational System

The Swiss educational system is a reflection of its federal system. It is difficult to make a general statement about schools in Switzerland, as schools are under cantonal authority and the structures as well as the names may vary considerably from canton to canton. However, the general pattern is described in the following paragraphs.



Primary and Lower Secondary Level

Compulsory education consists of nine years of schooling. Depending on the canton, primary education lasts four to six years; hence lower secondary education varies from five to three years. In Switzerland children start school aged

seven. Pre-school children attend kindergarten for one to two years.

Upper Secondary Level

Matura schools (German: Gymnasium, Kantonsschule; French: Collège, lycée, gymnase) give students a broad general education, comprising the fields of languages, humanities, social sciences and economics, mathematics and natural sciences, visual arts and music as well as sports. Matura schools are academically competitive (only 20 percent of the teenagers graduate from a Matura school) and the usual route taken by those who wish to go to university. **Most exchange students will be placed in Matura schools.**

Vocational education is a dual system, consisting of practical training in a private or public company and of parallel attendance at a vocational school which provides tuition in basic theoretical knowledge. Vocational training usually takes two to four years and successful trainees receive a certificate of proficiency. Either during or after their apprenticeship, students can attend further courses to qualify for a professional baccalaureate. This certificate allows students to be admitted to universities of applied sciences.

Specialized middle schools (German: Fachmittelschule, Wirtschaftsgymnasium, Informatikmittelschule; French: École de culture générale, école de commerce) teach both general and specific subjects such as those required for certain professions in health, social work, education, music and arts. In addition, students can earn a professional graduating certificate after taking additional practical training or courses.

Tertiary Level

At the tertiary level, there are two types of higher education institutes with differing educational thrusts: 1) traditional universities, including the cantonal universities and the federal institutes of technology, where education is focused on basic research and 2) universities of teacher education and universities of applied sciences, whose teaching is based on applied research.

Another form of tertiary level education is the higher professional education and training. This Swiss speciality provides programmes for demanding occupational fields and leadership positions. It serves the purposes of staff training and helps professionals to specialise. In many countries, equivalent programs are realized at university institutions.

For further information in English visit: <http://swisseducation.educa.ch/en>

Practical Information

Mail

To write to a Swiss address, you first write the name of the recipient. On the next line you write the street name and the house number. This is followed by the postal code which is frequently preceded by CH but also can be written without, particularly if sending from within Switzerland.

If your parents want to send something to you, they can just put your name first and then use the c/o address. Here is an example:

Marco Meier (your first and last name)
c/o Fam. Müller (c/o your host family's last name)
Centralplatz 2 (street name and house number)
CH-4051 Basel (CH- followed by postal code and town)

Swiss Post is very reliable. Sending and receiving letters or packages of all sizes is no problem in Switzerland. For customs regulations and further information check out the website in English: <https://www.post.ch/en/>

Telephone

Most host families have a landline and the family members (except for small children) usually have a mobile phone too. It is very common for Swiss teenagers to have a mobile phone and it might be very helpful for your integration into the life of your host family and your host community to get a Swiss mobile phone number.

If you already have a phone, you can just buy a prepaid Swiss SIM card. Most phones are now globally compatible, however, some countries (e.g. USA and Canada) may use a different mobile phone standard so your phone might not work in Switzerland. If your phone does not work in Switzerland, ask around if someone can lend you a phone before purchasing an expensive new one.

If you are thinking about buying a new mobile phone while in Switzerland, read this **warning**: Many companies offer discounts on new phones, but only if you sign a plan with them. **To protect you and your host family, signing mobile phone plans is forbidden for AFS students in Switzerland.** Firstly, most students are not yet 18 and are therefore not allowed to sign a contract. Secondly, the contracts contain complicated small print. Many students only realize what kind of contract they have signed when they receive the first monthly bill. Once signed, there is no way to get out of such a plan for at least 12 months.

There is a variety of **good prepaid offers** on the market. Compare the prices

before you decide what is best for you. Some prepaid offers also contain a data package.

The rates for mobile phone calls in Switzerland are much higher than in many other countries. This is why Whatsapp and other communication tools that don't use the telephone network but connect to the Internet have become very popular. In many places, you can use Wi-Fi Internet connections for free.

Here is a good piece of advice from former exchange students: Do not use your mobile phone to call your parents back home unless it is an emergency. International calls are very expensive. There are many options to save money on international calls, e.g. by using Internet services (Skype etc.), using a cheap access number from the landline, or international calling cards. Talk to your host family and AFS volunteers to find out the best options.

Internet

Most host families will have an Internet access that you can use. Fast Wi-Fi connections with unlimited data uploads and downloads are widespread. Ask your family if there are any restrictions regarding computer and Internet use in their home. Many families have such rules, mainly for social reasons. Computer and Internet time are limited in order to have more family time together.

Most schools have computers with Internet connection that you will be allowed to use. You will also find Wi-Fi in many cafés, museums, libraries etc. They are often password protected so ask the staff if you want to use it. Internet cafés are not so widespread anymore because mobile devices have become so popular.

Electricity

The electric current used throughout Switzerland is 230 Volts AC, 50 cycles (continental European standard). Wall outlets are unique to Switzerland, however. They are compatible with the three-pole Type J plug and with the Euro-plug (CEE 7/16). For all other plugs, you need an adapter. If you come from a country with „exotic“ plugs, it might be a good idea to get an adapter already in your home country.

Be careful with equipment designed for 100/110/120 Volts AC (as used in the USA and some parts of Asia). While some notebooks and mobile phones are explicitly designed for automatic adaptation to a wide range of input voltages (100 to 240 Volts), most electronic devices are completely incompatible and might be damaged if used with doubled voltage! So never try to connect a device designed for 110 Volts to a 230 Volts outlet unless you have a voltage transformer.



Currency and Exchange Rates

The currency in Switzerland is the Swiss franc, usually indicated as CHF or Fr. Switzerland is not part of the European Union and thus is not obliged to convert to the Euro, but many merchants accept Euro (although at an exchange rate that is favorable for the merchant and not the client). Change given back to the client will most likely be in Swiss francs.

The Swiss franc comes in the following denominations:

Coins: 5, 10, 20, 50 Cents and 1, 2, 5 Francs

Bank notes: 10, 20, 50, 100, 200, 1000 Francs

Here is a good site to look up the exchange rate between the Swiss franc and the currency used in your country: <http://www.oanda.com>

Units of Measurement

The metric system is used to measure length, weight and volume. Temperatures are measured in Celsius. If you are not used to the metric system or the Celsius scale, here is a good website for you: <http://www.metric-conversions.org/>

Authorities and Laws

AFS students are subject to the law of their host country. We recommend reading the foreign travel advice about Switzerland published by your foreign ministry to find out if there are important differences between the laws in your country and those in Switzerland.

In Switzerland it is expected that citizens and visitors carry I.D. and/or a passport. Should the police stop you, and you are without I.D, you may be

taken in for questioning.

For more information, read the chapter *Authorities and Emergencies* in the Safety Handbook (Appendix).

Websites about Switzerland

www.swissworld.org

Official information portal from the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs and Presence Switzerland. Information on the population, languages, geography, politics etc. In English, German, French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Chinese, Russian and Japanese.

www.myswitzerland.com

Official website of Switzerland Tourism in even more languages.

www.swissinfo.org

International Service of the Swiss Broadcasting Corporation. News and Information in 9 languages.



II. Your Exchange - Before You Arrive

Online Language Course

All participants of the year and the semester programs receive access to an online language course approximately 2 months before the program starts. It is important that you start working with the online language course as soon as you receive your access information. At the same time, we will inform you how many levels you are expected to complete before arrival.

Your access to the online language course remains active for 6 months. This way, you can continue to use it during the first few months of your exchange. We encourage you to use it on a regular basis. The language will be a major factor in your integration. Experience shows that students who learn the language quickly have fewer difficulties during the exchange.

Contact Your Host Family

You will receive the information about your host family from AFS in your country. As soon as you have it, you should contact the host family. They are just as excited to get to know you as you are to get to know them. This first contact is very important because it is the first link to your Swiss family. It has a very practical side to it, too: Ask your host family what you really need to bring along and what you might borrow from them.

Visa and Travel

The AFS office in your home country organizes the travel arrangements and sends you instructions for the visa application. If any questions arise, please do not hesitate to contact the office in your home country.

Insurance

During your stay in Switzerland, you will benefit from a medical insurance which covers medical costs for accidents and illnesses. Your national AFS organization can provide more information about this insurance.

All other types of insurance – such as liability or theft insurance – are your own responsibility. It is important that you and your parents discuss what you need and take out the necessary insurance policies before your program starts.

Liability Insurance

AFS Switzerland strongly recommends taking out a liability insurance which covers damages and injuries caused to third parties. If you break something or cause an injury to someone, the costs can be enormous. It is very important that you have insurance for such cases as these costs are not covered by AFS Switzerland.

If you do not yet have a liability insurance, look for options in your home country before the program starts. One option available to students from all countries is the travel benefits package offered by: <http://www.esecutive.com/afs>

What to Pack

Many students have difficulty in deciding what to pack. Furthermore, they have a tendency to pack many things they don't need. To avoid this, take enough time, make a list and discuss it with your parents and with your host parents.

One suitcase and one piece of hand luggage are enough. You have to be able to carry your luggage yourself. If you find it difficult to imagine that all you need should fit in one suitcase, **imagine that you are only packing for two weeks.** Here is a list of things you might want to bring. This is only a guideline and not conclusive:

- ✓ Teenagers in Switzerland usually wear **casual and informal clothes**. It is ok in Switzerland to wear the same trousers or sweaters for more than one day, as long as they are not dirty and do not smell.
- ✓ You should bring **clothes and shoes for both hot and cold weather**. A pair of **warm shoes/boots** and a **warm coat/jacket** are an absolute must! If you do not own such items and cannot buy them in your country, make sure, you have enough money to buy them in Switzerland.
- ✓ Do not forget to pack a **rain jacket** and your **swimsuit**. (In summer, the Swiss love to go swimming in one of the many lakes or rivers.)
- ✓ **Underwear:** Pack enough underwear to last at least a week, as most Swiss families do the laundry only once a week. (Unlike trousers or sweaters, you are expected to change your underpants and socks every day).
- ✓ **Slippers:** In most Swiss homes, you are expected to take off your shoes. Ask your host family if you can borrow slippers from them or if you should bring them with you.

- ✓ **Special Gear:** Before you pack things that you need only on very few occasions such as hiking boots or a ski outfit, talk to your host family to find out if they can lend you these items.
- ✓ **Computer:** It is not necessary and not recommended to bring a computer. All schools and most families have a computer you can use.
- ✓ **Mobile phone:** If you don't have a mobile phone or if you have one that is not compatible with the Swiss mobile phone network, don't worry. Once you are in Switzerland, you can certainly borrow a phone from someone and just buy a Swiss prepaid SIM card.
- ✓ **Musical instruments** can often be rented or borrowed. Talk to your host family about this as well.
- ✓ **Gifts:** A small gift for your host family is a very nice gesture. Most Swiss families appreciate little things with symbolic value rather than expensive gifts. They especially like things that tell them something about you and where you are from (e.g. pictures of your home and your family, a thank-you-note from your parents, typical recipes, a traditional product of your country etc.)
- ✓ **ID Photos:** You have to bring 4 photos for student and travel card and other bureaucratic procedures. Write your first and last name (in Latin letters) and your date of birth on the back.
Make sure the photos fulfil the following criteria:
 - front shot
 - face width on the photo min. 20 mm (max. 35 mm)
 - eyes open
 - spectacles not hiding the eyes
 - single colour background and even lighting (no shadows)
 - photo should be clear and high-contrast

You will need one of the photos as soon as you arrive. So please have them ready in your hand luggage.

- ✓ **Information about you and your home country:** Many Swiss people will be interested to know more about you and your country. You may even be asked to give presentations about your country at school. We suggest you bring information about your home country and items to represent your family and school to help with these presentations, such as photographs, books with pictures, music, recipes or traditional clothing.

Spending Money

It is very important that you talk with your parents about money before the exchange. You will need pocket money. The following paragraphs will give you a realistic range as a basis for a discussion with your parents.

Expenses Paid by AFS Switzerland

To make a budget, it is not only important that you know what you will have to pay, but also what you won't have to pay during your exchange. AFS Switzerland covers the costs of the following:

- ✓ Expenses in connection with your residence permit.
- ✓ Online language course (starts approx. 2 months before your departure and is valid for 6 months)
- ✓ Half-Fare Travel card that allows you to use public transportation at half-price rates.
- ✓ Costs for public transportation to school and to AFS camps.
- ✓ School books can either be borrowed from the school or the library of the local AFS chapter. If you need to buy additional books, these will be reimbursed at the end of the exchange as long as they are in a good condition and can be used again (excluding dictionaries, reading and exercise books).

In many cases, your host family will advance the money and then ask AFS for a refund. **It is very important that you keep all receipts.** AFS Switzerland can only reimburse amounts for which you present a receipt.

Expenses Paid by the Participant

In order to immerse yourself into your host culture, it is important that you have enough pocket money to participate in activities either organized by your host school, by your host family or by your Swiss friends.

If you come from a wealthy family, you should know that the Swiss tend to be modest in their appearance rather than flaunting their wealth. If you have more money than your host siblings or your classmates, this may cause tension. Find out what your siblings and classmates can afford and be considerate of how you spend your money. Your Swiss family will have great respect for you if you prove that you spend your money wisely, but they will find it most despicable if you spend it on things they perceive as useless or unnecessary.

How much pocket money you will need depends on several factors: people have different needs and standards and it also depends on where you live (cities tend to be more expensive than little villages) and on your host school. It is thus impossible to state an exact amount for all exchange students. We can generalize a bit and provide a realistic range:

Pocket money - CHF 200-250 per month

For expenses such as leisure activities, short trips, clothes, hygiene, mobile phone bills etc. Once you arrive, try to find out how much teenagers your age spend and on what. You might already know that Switzerland is a rather expensive country. But you can save a lot of money if you talk to the people around you and learn about „money traps“. (See also chapter *Money Traps*.)

Items for school - CHF 100-250 for the whole exchange

Although you don't have to pay for school and there's no need to buy a school uniform in Switzerland, there are still some things for which you will need to pay. AFS Switzerland refunds only schoolbooks that can be used again. Depending on your school, you will need between 100 and 250 CHF for copies, notepads, pens, dictionaries, reading and exercise books.

Excursions and school camps - CHF 250-800 for the whole exchange

This depends very much on the school you will attend. Many schools organize excursions, sometimes even outside Switzerland. Some of them are optional, some compulsory. The costs have to be covered by the students themselves. Exchange students are generally expected to participate. We highly recommend you seize this opportunity if given the chance. It is not only a fantastic chance to travel or to participate in interesting activities, but also to get to know your classmates outside the classroom.

Optional courses - CHF 100-1000 for the whole exchange

Many schools offer optional courses in music, language, art etc. Outside school, you will soon realize that there are hundreds of associations and clubs in Switzerland for all kinds of activities (e.g. singing in a choir, playing soccer, scouts groups and many more). Almost everybody in Switzerland is a member of one or several clubs. So if you want to become a true Swiss, you should check out the possibilities in your host community and join one of the clubs. This is a chance to meet people with similar interests and learn a lot about typical Swiss traditions. The fees for optional courses at school and membership fees for clubs are usually very moderate.

Approximate Costs of Consumer Goods

As mentioned before, Switzerland is an expensive country. To get a first impression, use the website <http://www.oanda.com> to compare the prices of the following list with the prices you would pay in your home country:

Cup of coffee:	CHF 4
Coke:	CHF 2.50 - 4
Sandwich:	CHF 5 - 10
Restaurant:	CHF 20 - 50
Cinema:	CHF 12 - 20
Bread:	CHF 1 - 5
Hamburger:	CHF 3.50 - 20
Concert	CHF 20 - 150
Ski pass (1 day)	CHF 45 - 80

As you can see, for some items there is a wide range of prices, depending a lot on where you buy them. There can be significant differences between individual shops and restaurants, but also between urban and rural areas. Talk with your host family and your friends about the spots with the best value for money.

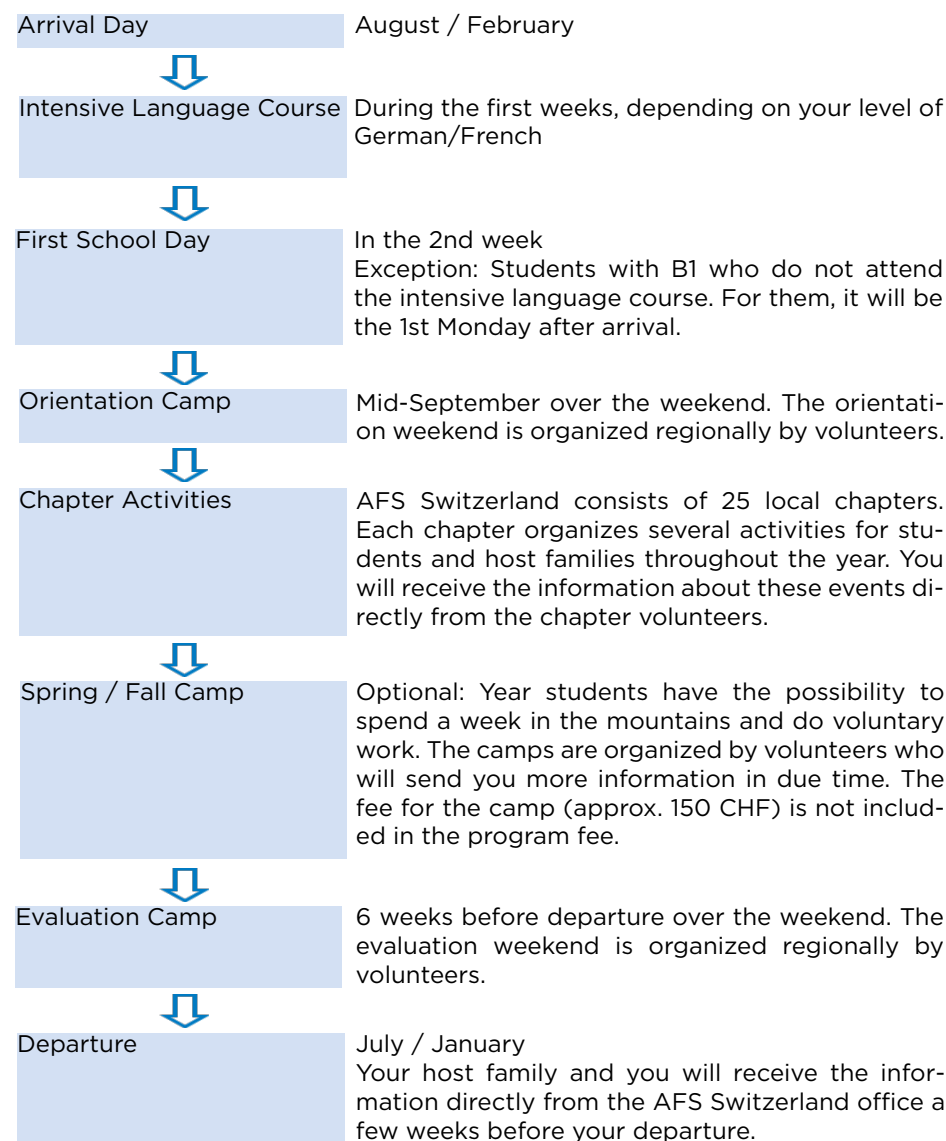
How to Receive Money from Home

For safety reasons, you should not carry too much cash on you. There are different possibilities for your parents to send you money during your exchange (credit or debit cards, money transfers etc.). It is also possible to open a bank account in Switzerland, but only after you have received the residence permit (1-2 months after your arrival).

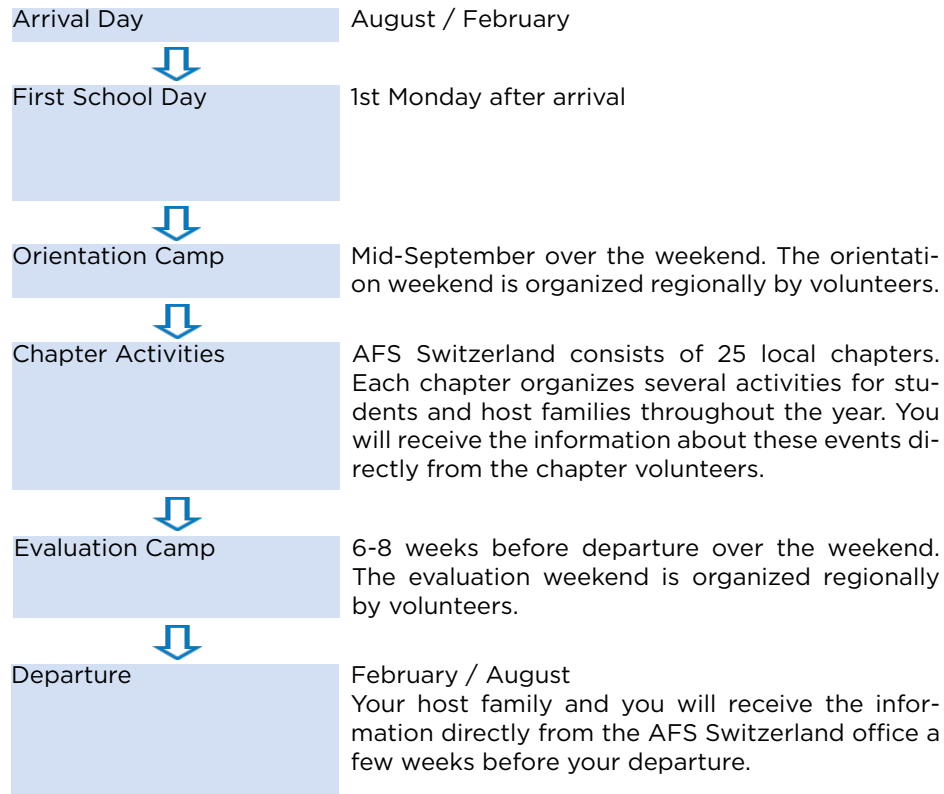
Which solution is best depends on the country you are coming from. Ask a financial institution or AFS in your country what they recommend for Switzerland.

III. Your Exchange - While You Are Here.

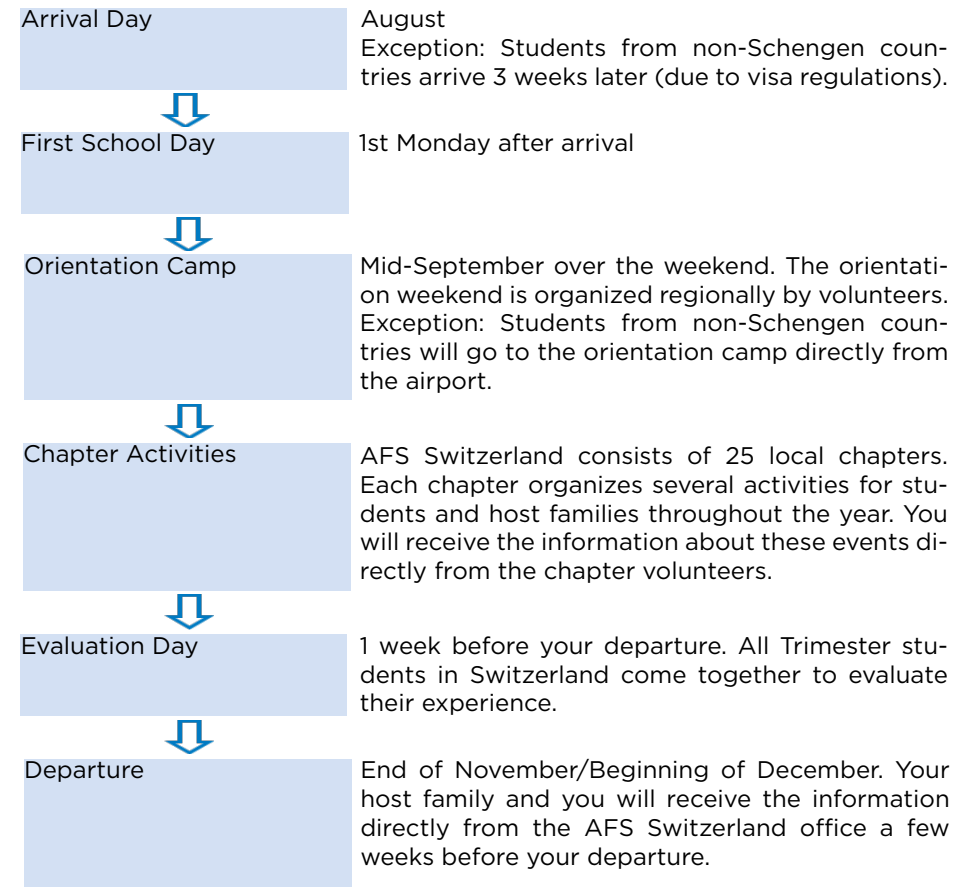
Your Time in Switzerland - For Year Students



Your Time in Switzerland - For Semester Students



Your Time in Switzerland - For Trimester Students



Arrival Day and First Weeks

Most students arrive on a Friday. AFS volunteers and staff will meet you at the airport in Zurich. Many host families will come to the airport to meet their new family member. If your host family cannot be there, AFS volunteers will accompany you from the airport to your host family's home.

When you get to your host family's home, there will be some important AFS documents waiting for you. Take your time to read through everything carefully and to discuss it with your host family. Take the card in the appendix of this booklet and fill in the important numbers and addresses together.

Do not forget to give your welcome gift(s)! Your gifts are the perfect icebreaker and will allow you to have a great start with your host family.

If you come from a different time zone, use the first weekend at your host family's home to get rid of the jet lag. Eat and sleep when Swiss people do in order to get into the Swiss rhythm as soon as possible. You will need your energy for all the new things that await you in the first few weeks!

Intensive Language Course for Year Students

Many year students will attend an intensive language course in the first few weeks. These are organized regionally.

First School Day in Your Host School

If your classmates seem a little indifferent at first, please don't take this personally! Swiss teenagers are often quite reserved at the beginning. But once they get to know you, they will open up.

Orientation Camp

After the first three weeks, you will attend the AFS orientation camp over the weekend. You will get together with around 20 other AFS students who are placed in the same region. The camps are organized by AFS volunteers. Most of them are former exchange students who know exactly how it feels to be new in a foreign country. During the camp, you will have the opportunity to share your first impressions of Swiss life, ask all the questions on your mind, and find out what other host students have experienced so far.

AFS Rules

Rules are important to ensure that the exchange students in Switzerland have a safe stay and to help them adjust to their Swiss family and school life.

You are expected to follow the rules of your host family and of your host school. To them, their rules might seem natural and self-evident, but not to you. It is therefore important that you get to know the rules through questions and dialogue with host family members, teachers, classmates and AFS volunteers. Such discussions are not only important to avoid trouble; they are also a very good opportunity to learn a lot about the values and the beliefs in your host culture.

Furthermore, you have to respect the rules of AFS Switzerland. Students who violate any of these rules can be excluded from the program and sent home. It is therefore very important that you understand the rules and know what is expected from you.

Rules of AFS Switzerland

The rules will be discussed during the orientation camp in Switzerland, so you should seize the opportunity to ask questions if something is unclear. After the discussion, you will be asked to sign the rules to confirm that you have understood and will respect them.

- Respect the laws in Switzerland.
- Driving motor vehicles, hitchhiking and the consumption of drugs are strictly prohibited.
- Don't get drunk. Hard liquor is not allowed while on the program. Never drink more than 2 glasses of beer or wine. Read the information on alcohol in the Safety Handbook carefully.
- It is forbidden to organize parties for other exchange students in rented places (e.g. scout's homes).
- Do not sign contracts during your stay in Switzerland (such as work contracts, mobile phone plans, rental agreements etc.). There is one exception to this rule: You are allowed to sign a contract in order to open a bank account.
- Follow the travel rules and the rules for visits from your home country as explained in the next paragraphs. Independent trips and visits from home must not interfere with your adjustment process, your obligations at school and the plans of your host family.

Travel Rules

School always comes first. You are not allowed to miss school in order to travel.

Switzerland is small, relatively safe, and public transport is very reliable. Therefore, you will certainly have the opportunity to see many places in the country. It is very common for Swiss teenagers to move independently, to visit friends in other parts of the country etc. You are also allowed to do this if your host family gives you their approval. Discuss your plans with your host parents and make sure that they do not interfere with the family plans.

As soon as you have your residence permit, you are allowed to cross the border to the neighboring countries for day trips. In fact, it is very common in Switzerland to cross the border to go shopping. There is usually no border control. Nevertheless, make sure that you always carry your residence permit and your passport with you.

For independent overnight trips outside Switzerland, you need permission from AFS Switzerland. This permission will be granted under the following conditions:

- You have been on the program for at least 4 months.
- You don't miss any school days.
- Your host family agrees.
- Your natural parents agree.
- You either stay with relatives or friends, or you are accompanied by an adult resident of Switzerland.
- You are not allowed to travel independently for more than 21 days during your exchange program.
- You have handed in your request for permission at least three weeks in advance. (How this is done will be explained to you during the orientation camp.)

If you travel with your host family or your host school, you need to inform AFS Switzerland where you are and how you can be reached in case of an emergency. If you plan to leave the Schengen area with your host family or host school, please inform AFS Switzerland 2 weeks in advance so that we can obtain a written permission from your natural parents.

Visits from Home

Visits from relatives and friends often have a disruptive effect. For this reason, AFS advises against visits from your home country during the exchange program. Visits from natural parents, relatives or friends always require prior approval from the host family and AFS Switzerland.

Travelling outside Switzerland with visitors from your home country is not permitted during the program.

IMPORTANT:

Your Swiss residence permit allows travelling within the Schengen Area. (For more information on Schengen, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Schengen_Area.) For other countries, you might need a visa.

Make sure you have your passport AND your residence permit with you whenever you leave the country.

Your Host Family and You

AFS host families are like families everywhere, each one is different. The difference between two families in Switzerland might be as big as the difference between your home country and Switzerland itself.

Although there is no such thing as the typical AFS host family, the following is true for all of them:

- Your host family wants you to live with them. They want to get to know you and learn about your country. They want to teach you about their way of life, and they hope you will like living with them.
- Your host family wants you to be a true family member. This means that you will share the work and responsibilities within the family, follow family rules, and consider the family when you make plans. Always remember that an exchange is not an ego project.
- Your host family wants to help you while you are in Switzerland. So don't be embarrassed or afraid to ask for their advice.
- Your host family is not perfect, just as you are not perfect. You both have to learn many things from and about each other. Assume good intentions and be patient with yourself and with them.

And please always remember: Your host family is **not** paid. They receive no money for having you in their home, they do it because they like the idea of intercultural exchange and therefore expect you to participate actively in their family life.

Family Values and Unspoken Rules

Because every family is unique, everyone has its own customs and family rules. For you, it might be difficult to understand these rules at first, especially the unspoken ones. For the host family members, the family rules seem so natural that they might not even perceive them as rules. Dialogue is very important for you and your host family to learn from and get used to each other. So please ask if you don't understand a behavior or a rule and let them know how you do things at home.

Your Host School

Please keep in mind that the AFS program is an academic program. It may be challenging for you to follow the classes at first, and you will need to take responsibility and proactively reach out for help if you need it. Non-attendance at school and/or misbehavior can lead to the expulsion from the school and the AFS program.

Many host students find school academically very challenging, and they find it hard to make friends at school. Being an exchange student does not automatically make you an attraction. Many Swiss schools have several exchange students every year. Additionally, Swiss students have the reputation that they are quite reserved. Don't take this personally! It does not mean that your classmates are not interested in getting to know you; they are just used to getting to know someone slowly.

Frequently Asked Questions about Swiss Schools

What type of school will I be enrolled in?

The majority of exchange students will be placed in Matura Schools or in Specialized Middle Schools. Sometimes, AFS students may also be placed in the Lower Secondary Level, depending on the age of the student and the school situation in the area of his/her host community.

Matura schools are academically competitive high schools that prepare students for university studies. They offer a broad general education and are divided into several sections (ancient languages, modern languages, scientific, commercial etc.).

How does the grading system work?

Most schools use the following grading system:

- 6 = excellent
- 5 = good
- 4 = satisfactory
- 3 = failing (unsatisfactory)
- 2 = failing (poor)
- 1 = failing (very poor)

In what school year will I be enrolled?

Usually, exchange students are placed in the 10th or 11th school year. AFS Switzerland can neither guarantee a particular level nor a particular school.

Will I be able to choose my classes? What classes are available?

Exchange students cannot choose their classes; they are obliged to take a

given subject combination. Exceptions are made for foreign language classes. Exchange students are often exempted from foreign language classes if they have no or very little previous knowledge. They can use the time to do homework instead. In some schools, there might be the opportunity to attend foreign language classes with pupils from a lower grade.

The following core subjects are compulsory in the majority of schools:

- First national language (German / French / Italian, depending on the region)
- Second national language
- Third national language, English or an ancient language (Latin or Greek)
- Mathematics
- Natural sciences (Biology, Chemistry, Physics)
- Humanities and social sciences (History, Geography, Economy and Law)
- Visual arts and/or music
- Sports

What do the teachers expect from me?

Generally, exchange students are expected to participate actively in class, do the assigned homework and write exams. Nobody expects you to excel. The teachers know that Swiss schools are academically challenging and that it takes time before you know enough German/French to follow the classes. But teachers just want to see you try. If you don't, they will soon conclude that you are not interested at all and might start to ignore you.

The first few months in school can be very frustrating because you cannot follow the lessons and might have the impression that you are not making any progress. If this is the case, talk about your feelings with a teacher, your host family or AFS volunteers. Often, it helps if you concentrate on two or three subjects instead of ten. Try it and you will soon realize that you are making progress. This will strengthen your self-confidence and your motivation.

In what language will the classes be taught?

The classes are usually taught in the native language (German, French or Italian). Special cases are "immersion classes", where some subjects are taught in English.

Will I need to buy a uniform? Books? Other school supplies?

There is no need for uniforms in Switzerland. Exchange students have to buy (or borrow) the books used in school. AFS Switzerland will reimburse books (excluding dictionaries, reading and exercise books) at the end of the year as long as the students can present the receipts and the books are in good condition so that they can be used again. Other school material such as pencils, writing pads, copies etc. must be paid for by the students themselves.

Are extra-curricular activities available? Sports? Music? Art?

Since lessons cover most of the day, there are not many extra-curricular activities offered by schools. A few extra-curricular activities might be offered (sports, band etc.), but they vary from school to school and cannot be guaranteed. Most Swiss students get involved in sports and extra-curricular activities through clubs and associations outside of school. Do not hesitate to ask your host family and/or AFS volunteers about the possibilities in your region!

When does the school year begin and end?

The exact beginning and ending of the school year differs regionally. Generally, the school year runs from mid-August/beginning of September until the end of June/mid-July. In addition to long summer vacations of five to six weeks in July/August, pupils have one to two weeks in fall, two weeks at Christmas/New Year, one to two weeks in winter and one to two weeks in spring. Check out the website of your host school to find out the exact dates of the vacations.

What is a typical school day? How many classes per day?

The school week lasts from Monday to Friday. Classes usually start at 8 a.m. and may last till 6 p.m., although one afternoon is normally off (usually Wednesday). On the whole, pupils have to attend approximately 35 lessons per week, each lesson lasting 45 minutes. The breaks between classes last from 5 to 15 minutes. Lunch break is 1 - 2 hours.

Students are regularly given homework in each subject and are frequently tested on the material that has been covered in class.

Can I get an official transcript? A certificate of attendance?

Most schools give a certificate of attendance to exchange students, but not an official transcript of grades. The reason for this is the difficulty to grade exchange students due to their reduced language knowledge. The decision, however, lies with the school and often depends on the commitment of the student. There is no guarantee given by AFS Switzerland.

Can I get academic credit for my study abroad?

Maybe, but it cannot be guaranteed. The amount and type of credit you receive is determined by your local high school. It is important that you talk with your teachers and guidance counsellor before you depart from Switzerland to see what you need in order to be granted credit. In the past, exchange students have received language, history, or social studies credits. Be sure to keep a copy of any formal grades or transcripts you receive from your host school. It is your responsibility to obtain the documents from your host school regarding your attendance and grades before you return home. AFS Switzerland cannot and will not organize this for you after you have completed the program.

Making Friends

Where and how you make friends will probably be different from what you are used to. Young people in Switzerland tend to have fewer, but closer friends. One of the best places to make friends is your class.

Classmates

The class, which means approximately 25 students stays together for all lessons. You will therefore soon know everybody.

Forget all you know about foreign exchange students in your home country, because in Switzerland there is no glamour attached to this position, and the best you can strive for is to be accepted as „one of the others“. If you find the reception from your classmates cool, it's because they are reluctant by nature and do not spontaneously accept a stranger into the group. But you'll invariably get a warm response if you take the initiative of being friendly, and many are only waiting to be asked to help you!

Leisure Activities

Although education is considered very important, Swiss parents want their children to also spend time with friends and participate in extra-curricular activities, such as scouts, music or sport. There are a lot of clubs for all kinds of activities or hobbies. To become a true Swiss, you should join a club or a team. This is an excellent way to meet people with similar interests, to build friendships and to improve your language skills.

It is common for teenagers to visit friends, go to the movies, concerts etc. during their free time. Don't expect your host parents to be your chauffeur though. You will be expected to organize yourself and use public transport to get around.

Many families do something together on weekends. Plans are usually discussed at the family table, and you are welcome to make suggestions. **Do not expect your host parents to cover all the costs for an outing or for family vacations, however; it is very common to share the costs.**

Relationships and Sex

Different societies have very different ideas about what is considered acceptable for teenagers when it comes to friendships, relationships and sex. Here are some examples of what is considered acceptable by most Swiss people:

- It is common that children and teenagers spend time together at each

other's homes in their rooms playing, talking or listening to music.

- Friendships between girls and boys are very common. Having a date with a boy/girl does not necessarily mean that he/she is interested in sex.
- Holding hands with people of the opposite sex is quite common.
- It is acceptable to show affection to a person of the opposite sex in public.
- Sex before marriage is accepted by most Swiss people. Therefore, many couples live together without being married and many parents accept overnight visits by their teenage children's boyfriend or girlfriend.
- Sex education is a compulsory subject in Swiss schools, including information on contraception and sexually transmitted diseases like AIDS.
- Homosexuality is legal and widely accepted. Homosexual couples have (almost) the same rights as heterosexual couples. In cities more than in villages, it is not unusual to see a homosexual couple holding hands in public.

Religious Practice and Attitudes

Switzerland has no official state religion, but most of the cantons recognize the Roman Catholic Church and the (Protestant) Swiss Reformed Church as official churches. Around 70 percent of the population belong to one of these two Christian churches. Around 20 percent are not affiliated to any religious community. The remaining 10 percent belong to many different Muslim, Christian, Jewish or other religious communities.

The importance of religion depends very much on where you are placed and even more on the individual family. In some (usually rural) regions, religious events play an important role in the community. In others, churches are more important as architectural heritage than as a place of worship.

Some host families go to church regularly and actively participate in their religious community, others see themselves as religious but never go to church. Talk to your host family to find out if religious services and celebrations are an important part of their family life. In the end, it is up to you to what extent you want to be involved, but if you are open to it, it is certainly a good way to show that you want to be part of the family and that you respect the things important to them.

Good Manners

Good and bad manners are not universal. What is perceived as decent and appropriate depends a great deal on the cultural context. Some behaviors that might be perfectly polite in your own country can be perceived as impolite in Switzerland and vice versa. Don't be afraid to make mistakes though. Observe how people behave and discuss your observations with host family members and other people in Switzerland to find out what is considered good manners and bad manners according to Swiss standards.

Meeting and Greeting People

In Switzerland, you shake hands when you say hello or good-bye. In the French speaking part, and more and more in the German speaking part too, you'll also see people kissing each other on both cheeks, which for them does not have any deeper meaning than a shake of hands. And of course young people, good friends or family members may kiss when meeting each other. You may find that people say hello and good bye a lot more than you are accustomed to. Say "guten Morgen", "bonjour", or "buon giorno" when you first see your family in the morning – no need to shake hands around the breakfast table, though – and say good bye when you leave the house and say good night to everyone before you go to bed. When there are guests, say hello to every single one, and likewise good-bye when they or you leave.

Furthermore, if you meet friends or family members always ask them how they're doing, and what they did today, last weekend, last week etc. It is considered polite to show interest in somebody's life and it also helps start a conversation.

Table Manners

For many Swiss families, meal times – especially dinner – are a time for the family to be together, exchange the news of the day or talk about plans for holidays etc. Therefore it's important that everyone is there on time.

Usually someone will say "en Guete", "bon appétit", "buon appetito" which means "enjoy your meal" as the starting signal. You should try everything you're offered before stating you don't like something. And always eat what is on your plate. One good way of showing you aren't a guest but a family member is helping to clear the table and do the dishes without being asked. Saying "s'isch guet gsi", "c'était très bon", "era esquisito" ("the meal was very good") at the end of a meal will surely be appreciated by the cook.

Don't: It is considered bad manners to talk with your mouth full, to chew with an open mouth, and to drink or eat noisily!



Typically Swiss?

Swiss people usually don't know what is typically Swiss. For them, this is just the way you do things and they can't even imagine that somewhere else in the world, people might do things differently. Former exchange students are far more competent to tell you about typical Swiss habits. Before you can start to make your own observations, here is a collection of observations from your predecessors. Have fun!

Birthdays are special days. People receive gifts and many families have special rituals such as serving birthday cakes, singing a birthday song or having a birthday party etc. It is polite and expected to open gifts in front of the giver and say thank you.

It is not acceptable to borrow personal belongings from members of the family without asking permission. If you want to borrow something, the answer might be "no".

The TV is not on all day and in most Swiss families never during meals. Most families will have rules on using the TV.

To eat and drink noisily and to chew with an open mouth is considered bad manners.

After use, the toilet paper is thrown into the toilet. All other objects (e.g. tampons, sanitary napkins, cotton wool) go to the waste bin and never down the toilet! Keep the toilet clean and use the toilet brush to remove your traces.

Tap water in Switzerland is clean and drinkable. It is very common that families will serve you tap water during meals. Not all families are willing to buy sodas, as they are considered unhealthy, unnecessary and luxurious.

Most Swiss teenagers don't dress up for school. Wearing the same clothes for more than one day is common, as long as they are not dirty or stink.

An outspoken hierarchy among sisters and brothers is a rare sight in Swiss families, older sisters and brothers are usually not expected to protect and educate the younger ones. Boys and girls have the same social position in the family. It is not common that the brother has to guide or protect his sisters.

Most Swiss people are ecologically conscious. They don't like to waste anything. Garbage is separated for recycling.

Punctuality is very important in Switzerland. 2 p.m. means 2 p.m., if you arrive at 2:10, you are late. Changing plans is not always appreciated.

At meals, it is considered polite to finish everything on your plate. If you leave food on the plate, especially if you have helped yourself, people will think that you are lavish or did not like it.

Most parents discuss conflicts openly. Physical punishment is not accepted.

In small towns, it is common to greet someone on the street, even if you don't know the person.

Although most Swiss are conscious about using water, they use hot water for washing dishes, clothes and themselves. Most families have dish washing machines and washing machines.

In most Swiss families, housework is shared, and hardly any families have maids. It is not unusual that men do the cooking. Men will also do laundry and other housework. There is no difference between boys and girls regarding housework.

In the house, you usually take off your shoes and walk around in socks or house shoes.

Since the climate in Switzerland is not very hot, showering more than once a day is not common. In the morning, the bathroom is busy used by all the family. It is therefore appropriate to not occupy the bathroom for more than 10-15 minutes.

Often families try to have a meal together once a day or they have other rituals to cultivate their family life. Many families also have a family agenda where shared activities are filled in.

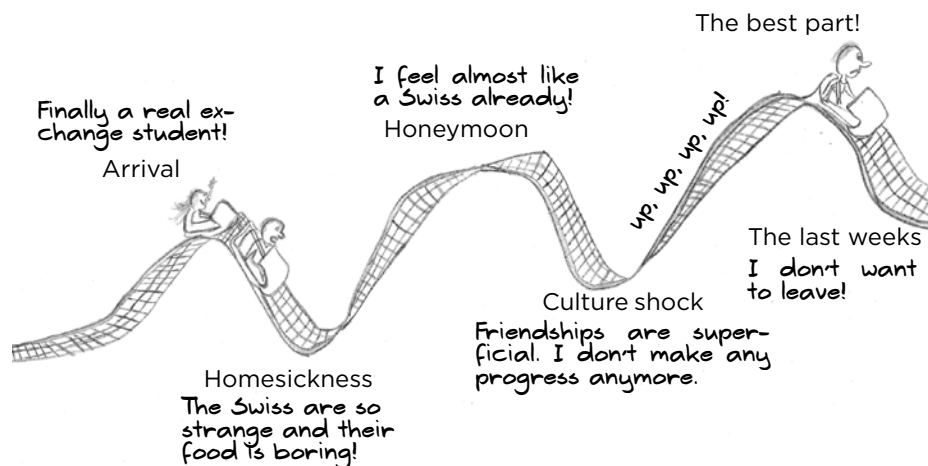
Many Swiss families have pets like cats, dogs, birds etc. that they treat with extreme affection.

Saying "thank you" is very important in Switzerland. The Swiss say thank you all the time: at the dinner table when someone passes the salt, after dinner to the cook, for every gift or special treatment you get, but also in restaurants and small shops when you receive a service.



Highs and Lows

During your time in Switzerland, you will go through different emotional stages. Being in a foreign country with a new home, new friends and a new family can be an emotional rollercoaster.



It is important to know that ups and downs are normal. Most students experience them one way or the other. However, the timing and the intensity of the ups and downs are different for every student.

Homesickness

An exchange experience is exciting but also challenging. Your new life in Switzerland can sometimes be confusing or frustrating. At the beginning, you cannot express yourself in the foreign language as you would like to; habits and behaviors may seem strange; you may be tired because of the many new impressions, or you may sometimes feel like you are in the wrong place.

Feeling homesick is absolutely understandable and completely normal when leaving your safe haven for this adventure abroad. Do not let it get to you!!

If this happens to you, do not tell only your parents back home. If your parents know that you are homesick or feel uncomfortable in your host family but nobody in Switzerland knows about it, the only thing that will happen is that your parents will be worried, but the situation itself will not change. **What you definitely should do: Share your feelings with people in Switzerland.** Talk to your host family or to your local AFS counselor!

Importance of Learning the Language

Learning the language can be a very frustrating task. You will probably find it difficult to believe that the AFSers before you have ever succeeded. But they did, and you will, too. However, it doesn't come by itself. Learning a language takes constant, conscientious effort, and it takes courage. Don't be afraid of having a bad accent or of making mistakes. Get out there and talk!

Particularly in the beginning, you'll be tempted to communicate with people in English. It's so much easier, and you'll always find the Swiss eager to show you their talent (or lack of) in speaking English. But think about the following: As long as you talk to people in English, you'll only get to know their "English thoughts". In order to really understand what people think or feel, one needs to talk to them in their own language.

So, in a sense, the success of your stay depends very much on you learning the language; being able to communicate with your family and friends, keeping up in school, taking part in everyday Swiss life. You'll miss out on so much if you don't learn the language!

Weight Gain and Weight Loss

Some claim that the abbreviation AFS stands for "another fat student". Gaining weight is an absolutely normal process during your stay abroad. Different food, a different eating routine and the constant temptation of something new to try all play a part. Don't worry and carry your additional pounds with pride. You will lose them again a few months after the program, just by being back home and in the everyday life your body is used to.

While most students gain weight during their stay in Switzerland, there are also some who will lose a few pounds. You'll probably end up walking and biking a lot more than usual. Many Swiss families also eat a lot of vegetables and less meat than in many other countries, and hardly ever any deep-fried food.

A word to students from Latin America and Southern Europe: It is common to have cold dinners of bread and cheese at 6 pm, not a hot meal. So don't think this is just a snack, it is actually the last meal of the day!

Share Your Feelings – Contact AFS Support

For you, the most important local volunteer is your participant contact person (PCP). In Switzerland, we call the participant contact person Götti or Gotti in German, or marraine or parrain in French. This means godmother or godfather.

Your Gotti/Götti is usually a couple of years older than yourself and has been abroad just like you. He or she can understand your emotions and knows about

the difficulties, because he or she has been in the same situation. If everything works out well, your Gotti/Götti will be a great friend who listens to you when you feel the need to talk about frustrations at school or problems with a host sibling. In fact, in times of trouble, whenever they might arise, your Gotti/Götti is the first person to turn to.

Just as you have your AFS godfather or godmother (Gotti/Götti), your host family also has a local counselor (FCP – Family contact person). This is usually a former host mother or host father. The family's counselor and your counselor work together as a team to make sure that you and your host family have a good time together.

In Case of an Emergency

If you need immediate assistance and are unable to reach any of your local volunteer contacts, please contact the staff at the national office directly. On arrival, you will receive the contact information of the responsible staff member and a 24-hour number for emergencies during non-business hours. Make sure you always have this number with you.

AFS Switzerland Help Point on Facebook

In addition to the local AFS volunteers and the staff members, there is the AFS Help Point on Facebook. This Facebook site is run by experienced volunteers. You can send a private message and will get a reply within 24 hours.

The most important thing is that you talk about your problems. Address the problem when it is still small. Problems that you try to ignore have a tendency to become bigger and bigger. And big problems are a lot more difficult to resolve than small ones. We know that for some among you it takes a lot of courage to talk about personal things to people you have not known for long and who speak a different language. But we encourage you to be brave! Based on many years of experience and the feedbacks from many exchange students before you, we are sure that you won't regret it.

Host Family Changes

"So, if I don't like my host family I can always change, right?" This is not entirely correct. A host family change can only occur after a process of discussion that involves you, your host parents, and the local counselors. Issues and misunderstandings that were causing tension can often be clarified during this process, and the parties involved might agree that change is not necessary. Through this communication process, the relationship between you and your host family is often strengthened as you work out your differences and begin to understand each other better.

Working out differences and learning about different cultures and customs, by both the participant and the host family, is one of the goals of the AFS program, so do not be afraid to talk to your host family or your local counselor about any concerns you have regarding your new living situation. You should also not be surprised if someone in the family has some concerns about having a new family member in the house. It takes time and good communication skills to get to know one another and to become integrated into a new family. Be patient, and remember to share your feelings, even if you are not used to doing this in your home country. Open communication from the very beginning of your AFS experience has the potential to make it one of the most rewarding and enriching experiences of your lifetime.

Contacting Parents and Friends

Especially in the first few months, it is hard for exchange students to concentrate on their new life if they are in constant contact with their friends and family back home. To be constantly reminded of those you are missing can make it extremely difficult to arrive in Switzerland – not physically, but emotionally.

Frequent contact and communication with family and friends back home can have a negative impact on your immersion and cultural adjustment process, it can lead to homesickness and to frustrations on the host family's side because they interpret the frequent contact as a sign that you do not want to spend time with them.

It is difficult for every student to find a good balance between his / her old and new life during the course of the exchange experience. The suggestions below have proved helpful to former exchange students to keep both their host family and their parents back home happy, and also to overcome difficult moments and homesickness:

- Especially in the first months, refrain from spontaneous contacts with your friends and family. Plan phone calls and Skype conversations. Do not talk more than 30 minutes and not more than once a month.

- Write e-mails or even old-fashioned letters instead.
- Limit your time online. Do not spend more than 30 minutes per day on the Internet. Time passes very quickly if you read all your friends' Facebook posts and chat with them on WhatsApp etc. – time better spent talking to your host family or even just watching a Swiss TV show.
- Disconnect – turn off push notifications on your mobile phone, leave it in your room when you are in the living room with your host family etc.
- Write down your impressions, hopes and concerns in a diary.
- Talk to people in Switzerland. Tell your host family, your classmates, or your AFS counselor how you feel. Tell them what you miss and what you find difficult. This takes courage but it is worth it! Not only will you be proud of yourself for opening up. It will also allow the people around you to get to know you. This builds trust and deepens the relationship.
- Get out of your room! Accept invitations offered to you, even if you are not in the mood. A walk with your host mother and the dog? Shopping with your host sister? An invitation to play soccer with some classmates? Seize every opportunity!

Money Traps

Many former exchange students have had experiences with what we call „money traps“. This means, they spent a lot of money on things that were not necessary. Therefore, we asked them to put together some useful advice for the next generation. The following suggestions from your predecessors will help you to make wise decisions and use your money well, rather than making the same mistakes they have made.

Make a budget

It takes a while to understand how expensive something is in a different country and a different currency. So try not to spend all the money you have in the first two months, but make a budget! For many students it is the first time they have to do something like this, so ask your host family and AFS volunteers for their opinion and for help.

Expensive mobile phones

Some prior exchange students spent almost all their pocket money on mobile phones. Usually, phone companies offer fancy new phones for almost no money, but only if you make an expensive 12-month contract. Once signed, there is no way to get out of this contract.

Therefore: **Do not sign a mobile phone contract, go for a prepaid option!**

This way, you always know how much you are spending and are not throwing away your money on things you don't need. There are a lot of good prepaid offers. Discuss them with your host family and AFS volunteers to find the best solution for you.

Drink tap water

No Swiss teenager buys bottled water. Tap water is of good quality and you can have it everywhere for free. So all you need is an empty (reusable) bottle that you can refill everywhere.

Compare prices

Be careful not to spend too much because you have heard that Switzerland is expensive. Ask your host family, your classmates and AFS volunteers if a price for an item you would like to buy is acceptable in Switzerland. There can be huge differences from store to store, so do not hesitate to talk to people.

Borrow things

Before you buy hiking boots, a snowboard or other expensive items, talk to your host family, your classmates and AFS volunteers to find out if you can borrow it from someone. A second advantage is: You will have less trouble when you pack your suitcase at the end of your exchange.

Social Media Fair Play Rules

Social Media offers many opportunities to stay in touch with your loved ones back home, other exchange students and your new friends and family members in your host country. If you write your own blog or use other social media such as Facebook or Twitter, remember the following key principles:

Privacy settings

Check your privacy settings. Who can see what you post? Who are your friends? Who sees when your birthday is, where you live etc.? Make sure that only friends can access your profile. Remember that many people (your host family, teachers, students, etc.) may have access to information linked to you, including pictures.

Facebook, Twitter and Blogs are not private

Your blog or Facebook account are not your private diary. Many people can read your texts and see your photos. And they can share them with others you do not even know. For this reason, it is important that you think twice before you post something. Would you publish the same text and picture in a newspaper? Do you have permission of the people on your photos to post them on

your blog or on your Facebook account?

Once it is published, you have no control

Everybody who sees your texts and pictures can forward, copy, share or save them. Even if you delete a post afterwards, you do not know if someone else has already used it. Bear this in mind and make smart choices about what you want the world to see about yourself and your exchange experience.

Be respectful

Denigrating or demeaning comments about other people, cyber bullying etc. are not tolerable. When in doubt about whether something that you are planning to post is appropriate, consider these questions and discuss the answers with a host parent or an AFS volunteer:

- Am I revealing any personal information about someone without his or her permission?
- Am I revealing personal information about myself that might be misused?
- Am I revealing personal information about my host family without their knowledge and/or permission?
- Even if I have permission, is it wise and safe to share this information on my website, blog, etc.?
- Would I want somebody else to post similar information about myself?

Conclusion

To conclude, a final word from the true experts, namely your predecessors.

„Now your head must be spinning with advice. Take this booklet as an encouragement, which it is sincerely meant to be, and never forget that it is very difficult to generalize any situation over here (or anywhere else in the world for this matter). Don't be afraid of making mistakes and of laughing at yourself. Your greatest asset is your good will, and people will love you for it. Jump in headlong and swim with the stream – it will carry you! We wish you the best of luck and we envy you for being able to start what we are sad to finish.“



IV. Appendix

Important Numbers and Addresses

Please cut out the following two cards. Fill in the spaces and store them in your wallet. They are for your security, should you lose your phone or if you get lost.



Host Family Name & Address:

Host Family Phone/Mobile Number:

Bus (route) and Name Bus Station:



Local Contact Person Name & Address:

Local Contact Person Phone/Mobile Number:

AFS Emergency Number:

Police: 117 Fire Brigade: 118 Ambulance: 144

AFS Office: 044 218 19 19

Safety Handbook

Introduction

A primary objective of experiential learning programs such as those offered by AFS is to help participants learn through observation, question, dialogue, discussion and experience. From experience, AFS staff and volunteers understand that the opportunity to learn is great, but it is not necessarily easy. Participants encounter complex situations along the way and there is the potential for confusion, fear and misunderstanding. If students are left to their own devices, the consequences could be very distressing. For these reasons, with the help of host families, the local community, AFS contacts and school personnel, AFS has devised a system of program support for all participants, providing a wide range of supportive activities and services. The purpose is to provide a safety net, a consistently supportive environment in which participants can ask questions, obtain advice and help.

AFS cannot supply all the possible answers but through our support systems, we can help to guide participants towards asking appropriate questions.

It is not possible to anticipate all possible situations pertaining to individual safety concerns. Many of these issues are specific to individual countries or parts of a single country. In general, AFS recommends talking with the host family, AFS local committee members and staff from the host school soon after the student joins the host family home about any of the information in this guidebook and any question students may have about specific personal issues. AFS suggests that students ask their host family about any issue they are concerned or worried about, as the information about the host country prevalent in movies and in media publications may not be accurate for the entire country or the specific area in which the family lives.

Within this context, what follows are some topics and general suggestions.

At Home

Safety Issues

Your host family will probably not know what you are concerned or worried about. So do not hesitate to ask them questions about safety, e.g. Can I go out at night alone? Are there areas I should avoid? Although there are common safety issues in Switzerland, they may still vary from region to region. So ask your host family about their particular situation.



General Safety Questions

- What should I do if an emergency occurs? Whom should I call?
- Where do you keep the emergency telephone numbers?
- Do you have first aid equipment? Where is it?
- Do you have a fire extinguisher? Where is it?
- How do you secure the house?
- Do you lock your doors and windows? When do you do that?
- Am I going to have a house key?
- What do you advise me about answering the door when I am alone?
- How do I react when a stranger calls at the door?

Answering the Telephone

If you feel uncertain about answering phone calls especially because you have to answer in a foreign language, ask your family: How do I have to respond when answering the phone? What information should I give? What information should I not give?

Outside the Home

Transportation

There is a great variety of transportation ranging from the train to your own bicycle. Public transportation is very common and usually safe. Switzerland is, in fact, a very safe country. In the following section, we will indicate some suggestions to you when using any kind of transportation.

Public Transport (Bus, Boat, Tram and Train)

It is very common to use public transport in Switzerland. Public transport in Switzerland is very reliable and safe.

However, be careful at night. Try to look for compartments with other people in it rather than be alone in a train carriage. It is also advisable to avoid being alone in train stations at night. Ask your host parents about the situation in your region, as they will know best.

Make sure that you always have a valid ticket. If you don't and get caught, you will get a fine of 100 Swiss Francs (approx. 105 USD)! Ticket inspectors are usually pitiless even if you start crying and tell them a moving story of a lost exchange student who does not yet know how the ticket machine works.

As there are so many trains and buses in Switzerland, most host students are a bit overwhelmed at the beginning. Every year, some of them get lost at some point because they take the wrong train. For this reason, make sure you have

your host family's phone number with you when you start taking trains on your own. Don't be embarrassed to call them when you are lost. They will be able to guide you home safely.

Walking

Walking to and from places is usually safe. However, there are areas where you should be careful at night. Ask your host family about these specific areas, as they know best which places are safe and which are not. We encourage you to let your host parents know whenever you are concerned or frightened. When going out, inform your host family where you are going and how you can be reached, and how and when you intend to get back home.

When walking alone late at night, try to walk in streets that are well lit and that have a lot of people.

In general, you should take your host parents' advice seriously and follow their recommendations.

Riding Your Bicycle

In Switzerland, you will see many people riding their bikes going to school, to work or just for fun. You will very likely have the possibility to borrow a bike from someone. Before you ride it in the streets, ask your host family about traffic regulations in Switzerland. They may be different than in your home country.

If you are not used to riding a bicycle, traffic can be challenging, especially in cities. We suggest that you ask a host family member to accompany you on your first attempts to conquer the Swiss streets with your bicycle. Make sure that your bike has good brakes and a functioning light. This is very important especially in winter because it gets dark very early. If you ride in the dark without a light, this is not only dangerous, but you can also be fined.

AFS Switzerland recommends wearing a helmet when you ride your bike.

Car

As you already know, AFS participants are not allowed to drive cars. Do not get into a car with strangers. Hitchhiking is strictly forbidden. Participants either driving or hitchhiking are dismissed from the program and must return home immediately.

The blood alcohol content (BAC) level in Switzerland for drivers is 0.5‰, which equals roughly one glass of beer or wine. Do not get into a car if you feel the driver has drunk more than the amount allowed by the law.

Also, please note that in Switzerland it is compulsory to wear seatbelts for all passengers in a car. You should therefore always fasten your seatbelt automatically when entering a car - even if you won't be driving long.

Public Places

Going to public places and walking around outside is usually very safe. As stated before, you should try to avoid being alone at night in train stations. There are also some other areas you should avoid (e.g. certain areas in Zurich). In general, you are safe if you do what the locals do. Therefore, take your host parents' advice seriously and follow their recommendations.

Weather

Skiing, hiking, climbing etc. in the mountains is very popular and it is certainly an interesting experience. However, the weather in the mountains is a factor you have to take seriously. It can change surprisingly fast: in a very short time a blue sky can be replaced by fog, snow or rain depending on the season. So remember, the weather in the mountains is quite unpredictable and it is therefore dangerous to risk anything and get lost.

When in the mountains, try not to be alone, but rather with your host family or with local people. They know best where and when you have to be careful. Always have your cell phone with you.

Theft

Because Switzerland is generally very safe, this might give you a false sense of security. But theft happens here as it does everywhere in the world, so it is wise to be careful:

- Ask your host family, the school contact person or your school mates about the situation in your school and your host community.
- Make sure you always lock your bicycle. Unfortunately, bicycle theft is very common in Switzerland.
- Beware of pickpockets, especially in crowded places.
- Do not to leave your wallet, money or other valuables unobserved in school. The best thing is not to take things of great value such as jewellery to school at all.

Authorities and emergencies

In Switzerland it is expected that citizens and visitors carry I.D. and/or a passport. Should the police stop you, and you are without I.D, you may be taken in for questioning. This is the decision of the individual police officer.

Occasionally, the police may check and question people in the street. If this happens to you, there is nothing to worry about. Show respect and cooperation with authorities, even though you are innocent of any crime and may think that you are being treated unfairly.

If you do not understand what is being said, tell the police and tell them that you are an exchange student. Always carry your residence permit with you. This is important not only in the event of being questioned by authorities, but also in the unfortunate event of a personal accident.

In any kind of an emergency (accident, crime etc.) the best is to call the police first. Below, you will find the most important emergency numbers (any abuse of these numbers will be punished with a fine):

Police	117
Fire brigade	118
Ambulance	144

Also call your host family, the local contact person or the AFS office to inform them. Make sure you always carry the card with the important numbers with you.

In case of a national emergency you should follow the advice of the government or the local authorities. AFS Switzerland will immediately contact the students and host families in order to provide the necessary help. However, Switzerland is a very peaceful country and such a case is unlikely to happen.

Other Important Issues

Laws in Switzerland

AFS students are subject to the law of the host country. Neither AFS nor the national government of the students' home country has the ability to protect the student from punishment with respect to drugs, thefts and other illegal offences. We recommend reading the foreign travel advice about Switzerland published by your foreign ministry to find out if there are important differences between the laws in your home country and Switzerland.

Liability insurance

AFS Switzerland strongly recommends taking out a liability insurance which covers damages and injuries caused to third parties. If you break something or cause injury to someone, the costs can be enormous. It is very important that you have an insurance for such cases as these costs are not covered by AFS. If you do not yet have liability insurance, look for options in your home country before the program starts. One option available to students from all countries

is the travel benefits package for participants offered by: <http://www.esecutive.com/afs>

Drugs

Unfortunately, drugs, especially marijuana, have become common in certain schools. The availability of drugs does not change the fact that they are illegal and dangerous.

The two most important pieces of advice AFS Switzerland can give you regarding this issue:



- If someone offers you drugs, say no. AFS has a strict no-tolerance policy regarding marijuana and any other kind of illegal drugs. Usage of or involvement with drugs results in dismissal from the program and immediate return to the home country.
- If you are worried that a friend might have a drug problem, talk to an adult you trust. Share your concerns with your host parents, a local AFS volunteer or a teacher.

Alcohol

According to Swiss law, teenagers, aged 16 and older, are allowed to buy wine and beer but no hard liquor before aged 18. There is no law that forbids the consumption of alcohol.

Alcohol is part of the everyday culture in Switzerland and will probably be offered to you on many occasions. It is, for example, quite usual to have a glass of wine for supper. Therefore, it is very important that you learn how to deal with this situation.

Despite the liberal approach, never forget that alcohol is a drug. For your own safety, excessive alcohol consumption is forbidden during the AFS program. For AFS Switzerland, excessive means more than 2 glasses of wine or beer. At official AFS events, alcohol is not allowed at all.

Here are some important facts on the negative effects of alcohol:

- Studies have shown that teenagers are more sensitive to alcohol than adults. But many teenagers overestimate themselves and think they can handle it. This increases the risk that they drink too much and lose control.
- Alcohol affects your ability to judge situations adequately. You might do things that you regret afterwards. You can also easily be taken ad-

vantage of or even become a victim of crime, e.g. sexual abuse.

- If you drink too much, you cannot control your movements anymore. The risk of accidents increases.
- You put your health at risk. Alcohol intoxication is dangerous. You may need medical attention, and in the very worst case, it can even kill you.

For your own safety, AFS Switzerland expects you to stick to the following rules:

- If you want to try alcohol, that's fine. A glass of wine or beer at a party or during dinner is ok. But don't exaggerate.
- If you don't want to try, that's fine too. Never let anyone talk you into drinking alcohol.
- Never drink more than two units (1 unit = a glass of beer or a glass of wine).
- No hard alcohol. Don't touch vodka or other hard liquor, also when mixed with soft drinks.
- Don't drink more than once a week.
- Never drink when you feel unwell.
- Never drink when you have taken medicine (no matter if prescribed or over-the-counter).
- Say no when you don't feel like drinking or if you don't like the taste of alcohol.
- Look out for others: Tell your friends to stop if they are being excessive. If you think that a friend has an alcohol problem, share your concerns with an adult you trust.

Any student who violates the above rules risks immediate dismissal from the program and being sent home.

If you have any doubts or questions regarding this issue, please do not hesitate to talk to your host family, a local AFS volunteers or a staff member at the AFS office.

Sexual Harassment

Cultures differ in their views of appropriate sexual behaviour and practices of young people. Often clarification of attitudes may be necessary, and here again the advice of people you have come to know and trust is very valuable. Knowledge about the people you socialize with is important, and this is acquired best through immersing yourself into your host culture. Equally important are your own values and beliefs regarding your behaviour. Do not compromise them, especially not regarding your sexual behaviour. Have the courage to say no!

Especially at the beginning of your exchange, you may be unsure how to interpret certain situations. You may ask yourself if you are being sexually harassed or if a particular person's behaviour would simply be considered friendly by Swiss standards. Trust your own instinct and feelings. If something makes you feel uncomfortable, it is important that you take your feelings seriously and share them with your host siblings/parents and friends. In many cases, they will be able to help you understand if someone's behaviour is appropriate or not and give you useful advice. You can also turn to teachers at school, local AFS volunteers or the AFS staff at the office for advice or help.

Unfortunately, sexual harassment can happen in any country. Especially young women are subject to harassment, e.g. if a man should whistle after you, you should avoid eye contact with him. If a car pulls up beside you, do not get in. If you realize that someone is following you, try to go to a public place (e.g. shop, restaurant) and ask someone for help.

If you experience a situation that makes you feel uncomfortable, the most important thing is to share it with an adult you trust. Rest assured that AFS volunteers and staff will take you seriously, so don't be embarrassed or afraid!

AIDS and Other Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STD)

AIDS means "Acquired Immunity Deficiency Syndrome". A cure for this illness has yet to be found. AIDS is transmitted by sexual contact only. AIDS is NOT transmitted by contact such as drinking or eating from somebody else's glass or plate, touching, kissing etc.

Sexually active participants should use condoms. Condoms are highly effective in preventing the sexual transmission of HIV, the virus that causes AIDS. In addition, consistent and correct use of condoms reduces the risk of other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). The contraceptive pill does NOT protect against AIDS.

For further information, there are many associations in Switzerland that can give you advice. Here are some addresses:

Aids-Hilfe Schweiz, Konradstrasse 20, 8005 Zürich
Tel. 044 447 11 11, www.aids.ch, aids@aids.ch

Point-Fixe, Av. Gare 17, 1003 Lausanne
Tel. 021 320 40 60, www.pointfixesida.ch, info@sida-vd.ch

Weapons

Civilians are prohibited from carrying guns unless they have a special licence. However, any Swiss man who is found eligible has to do military service. Most of them have occasional training sessions until they have fulfilled their duty around the age of 30. Between training sessions, they have to keep their gun at home. So don't be afraid if you see a weapon in your host father's or older host brother's cupboard. It is also possible that you will see men in civilian clothes with an army weapon on their back on their way to the compulsory annual shooting practice.

Conclusion

The best advice AFS Switzerland can give you regarding issues of personal safety is the following:

- Learn the language as quickly as possible in order to be able to understand what is going on around you.
- Get to know your host culture well through questions, dialogue and discussion with your host family, peers, AFS local contacts, AFS camp leaders etc.
- Take any concerns from your host family and school seriously and follow their advice.
- And remember: Express your concerns!

Have a safe stay in Switzerland!



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