

Foundation «Интеркультура»
AFS RUSSIA 2018

THE SPIRIT OF DISCOVERY



This handbook belongs to _____

From _____



Contents

Welcome letter	Page	3
1. General information about Russia	Page	4
- Geography and Climate	Page	4
- History	Page	5
- Religion	Page	6
- Language	Page	6
2. AFS Russia	Page	7
3. Your life in Russia	Page	11
- Arrival	Page	11
- Your host family	Page	12
- Your host school	Page	13
- Language course	Page	15
- AFS activities	Page	17
* Check yourself, part 1	Page	18
4. Life in Russia	Page	20
- General information about Russian Families	Page	20
- General information about the School system.....	Page	22
- Extracurricular activities	Page	24
- Social life	Page	25
- Holidays and parties	Page	28
5. Russian peculiarities	Page	29
6. Organizational matters	Page	30
- Packing	Page	30
- Visa and other documents	Page	31
- Customs	Page	32
- Money	Page	32
- Medical issues	Page	33
- Settling-In Tips	Page	33
* Check yourself, part 2	Page	34
Appendix: Check list	Page	36



Welcome letter



Dear friend!

You have made the wonderful decision to come to Russia with AFS and discover the biggest country in the world, its rich culture and hospitable people.

WELCOME!!!

On behalf of AFS Russia, we would like to congratulate you on taking this big step and going on exchange to our country. We are happy whenever students decide to come to Russia to get to know this huge country and learn about its many secrets and mysteries.

Many former exchange students from all around the world consider the time they spent abroad with AFS an experience that changed their lives. An exchange can help you broaden your horizon, make friends, meet a new family, become a more open and outgoing person, break stereotypes and many other things - what you have to do is keep an open mind and embrace this experience.

Living in Russia, like in any other country, may present its challenges. Every exchange student can tell you amazing stories about their stay abroad; but they will most probably also have something to say about times when they were not happy. AFS volunteers and office staff will be by your side to help you have the best experience possible, but it will also require some work from your side.

The first step is to read this booklet from cover to cover. It contains a lot of general information and safety tips about Russia, also things you might have already learned at school or read in books or on the Internet. But we also talk about our people, our customs, and typical behavior, and there's plenty of advice on how you can best prepare yourself for this adventure before your departure.

We are looking forward to seeing you soon!

Volunteers and staff of AFS RUS.

**Please bring this booklet with you to
the Arrival Orientation in Russia.**

1. General information about Russia



Geography and Climate

Russia is the biggest country in the world, covering 17,000,400 sq. km. It covers almost 1/7 of the Earth's dry land. It takes **7 days** to go by train from the very western point of the country to the very eastern one. When it's midnight in Moscow, in Vladivostok it is already 7 a.m. the next day.

Russia shares borders with a lot of countries (China, Mongolia, Finland, etc.). What is nowadays called the Russian Federation used to be part of the Soviet Union, a multinational empire that existed for 75 years and also included many countries that are now neighbours of Russia, e.g. Belarus, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Georgia.

One of the main stereotypes about Russia is that it's very cold here all year round. That is not true! There are different climate zones in Russia. Along with regions covered with snow for **8 months a year**, there are regions, which **have snow very rarely**.

So, it's possible that you will live in a region **with thick snow, reindeer and polar nights** (in the northern part) or near the Black Sea, where the winter is very mild, **snow is rare and melts within a day or two** (in the southern part of Russia) or in the central part with a **"classical Russian climate"** - where all four seasons are clearly discernible - warm springs, rainy autumns, hot summers, frosty and snowy winters.

The Russian landscape is also different. You can find here thick forests (*taiga*), vast plains (*steppe*), the highest mountain in Europe, Mount Elbrus in the Caucasus (5,642m), the deepest lake in the world, Lake Baikal, and many other wonderful places. Russia has a population of about 143 million. More than 100 nationalities live in the country and each of them has its own culture and language.

History



The history of Russia goes back thousands of years. The first signs of Russian towns can be found in very ancient manuscripts. From the 16th to the 18th century, a multinational Russian state was formed after Moscow princes annexed the large Northern Territories, Siberia and the Far East. By the end of this period some non-Russian states, such as Middle Asia, had joined Russia. The country became a huge Empire ruled by powerful tsars. For a long time, Russia was **an agrarian society with few links to the outside**. Only in the mid-19th century did trade with Europe and industrial development become very significant.

In 1914 Russia was involved in the First World War, which resulted in bitter defeat even before the end of the war in Europe. There began a period of political turmoil, which led to the October Revolution of 1917, when the Communists overthrew the Tsar. This was the beginning of the Soviet period in Russian history.

From 1917, Russia was ruled solely by leaders of the Communist Party in a rather authoritarian way. Most foreigners have certain memories of the country long known as the Soviet Union.

On 22 June 1941, Nazi Germany attacked the Soviet Union, marking the beginning of a war that would last four years. The Soviet people referred to it as the Great Patriotic War. It's impossible to find a single family in Russia that didn't lose a family member at that time.

1986 marked the start of the movement toward openness and reform launched by Mikhail Gorbachev, the so-called "perestroika". This, coupled with other circumstances, led to the disintegration and collapse of the Soviet Union, which ceased to exist in December 1991 when the 15 republics of the USSR declared their independence. The peoples of the USSR suddenly were no longer Soviets but citizens of Lithuania, Ukraine, Russia, Kazakhstan... 12 of the former Soviet republics formed the Commonwealth of Independent States.

With Gorbachev's perestroika and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the old economic system, based on centralized planning and equal distribution, failed.

Though economic changes caused middle-class development in Russia, a significant part of the population had to face a number of difficulties for the average family. You should be aware of the fact that Russians are used to a tough life.

Though the Soviet Union ceased to exist, **a lot of traces of this long period** can **still** be found in everyday life, in the habits and the way of thinking of Russian people, esp. of the older generation in spite of all modern technologies, globalization, etc. It's really deeply rooted in the culture and requires respect and understanding.

However, the transition to a market economy has opened new possibilities which didn't exist before. Nowadays people can travel abroad, study in any university of the world they choose, buy apartments, land, or just all kinds of consumer goods and food everywhere - in each small rural shop or in the large capital department stores. The realities of today's Russia will make your experience as an AFS student interesting and challenging.

It is important for Russian people!

During this war more than 27 million of Soviet citizens were killed. But the whole world was protected from Nazi.

The final victory came on **May 9, 1945**.

Since that time Victory Day has been one of the most important holidays which every Russian celebrates.



Religion

There is separation of church and state in Russia. The principle of this separation means that everyone is free to belong to any religious group or not to belong to any. Most Russians belong to **the Russian Orthodox Church**, but still, many other denominations are represented in Russia (like Islam, Roman Catholicism, Judaism, etc.).

Religion in Russia had been prohibited for more than 70 years under Communist rule. Since the fall of communism, religion has thrived with churches and monasteries springing up all over the country. Now religion is widespread.

It's normal to go to church to attend a church service or just enter a church when you pass by it, light a candle, spend some time inside. Visiting church offers some people **reconciliation**. For Russians it is very important to be at peace with yourself.

Most parents baptize their children when they are babies, hoping that saints will protect their child. A lot of people wear a little cross on a necklace to protect themselves from evil. Russians are rather superstitious.

In some parts of Russia the relationship between godmother/godfather and their "godchildren" is rather close. Most Russians celebrate the main religious holidays, such as Christmas and Easter. But not many Russians follow strictly all church rules or fast for lent.

It's normal for Russians to ask: "Do you believe in God?" or ask you to express your views on religion. Decades of Soviet rule have left their mark: a lot of people do not attend any church at all, declaring themselves atheists.

In everyday life there are a lot of expressions with the word "God" - "*Boh*". Like, "Thank God" - "*Slava Bogu*" or "God only knows" - "*Boh znayet*" - which are VERY often used.



Language

The official language is Russian, of course. The Russian alphabet is Cyrillic. Russian belongs to the East Slavonic Branch of the Indo-European family, which ties it to Greek and Latin. Its closest spoken relatives are Ukrainian and Belarusian. Over the centuries, its vocabulary and style have been influenced by German, French and English. Modern Russian also includes a large number of international political, technological and scientific terms.

Russia is very multicultural. As such, Russian is certainly not the only language spoken in Russia. About 100 others are used across the country. But Russian is official throughout the nation.

What is really interesting about the language is that **any Russian** can be **understood in any part of Russia**, in spite of the territorial dialects spoken in different parts of our huge country. These territorial differences mostly concern intonation and the pronunciation of vowels.

Nevertheless if you are placed in a region, like Republic of Chuvashia or Tatarstan, you will have an opportunity to learn the second language as well as Russian. Some AFS students do it successfully.

2. AFS Russia

As in every AFS country worldwide, AFS in Russia is mainly supported by volunteer work. These are people who work for the organization because they believe that its mission is worth spreading and who do not receive any kind of payment. Volunteers are mostly teachers at host schools, former exchange students or members of former host families.

Foundation "Intercultura" (AFS Russia)



The office with its full-time employees is situated in Moscow.
Address: Office#100, entrance 4, 20\8, Malaya Andronyevskaya Street, Moscow, Russia, 109544.
Telephone: +7 495 987-32-75
E-mail: info-russia@afs.org
Website: afs.ru

Intercultura Foundation (AFS RUSSIA) has been operating in Russia since 1989. Since 1993 it has been a Partner of AFS Intercultural Programs Inc. and a part of the international AFS network.

Since then, AFS Russia has hosted thousands of students from more than 40 countries.

How AFS works in Russia

Exchange students are hosted in different areas of Russia. Every year new chapters and new host schools appear on the AFS Russia map. Every chapter has its own volunteer network and plan of activities. Every mandatory and optional activity could be organized differently from town to town, from year to year.

Placements in Moscow, the capital of Russia or St. Petersburg ("second capital") are very rare. AFS students hosted in Russia are **mostly placed in smaller towns** as they are safer and offer **a chance for the best possible experience**.

You can see the map of **AFS Russia's HOSTING regions on pages 8 and 9**.



AFS Russia HOSTING regions



The map of **AFS Russia HOSTING** regions

As you can see only the western part of Russia up to the Ural Mountains is covered by AFS. Even this part of Russia is big enough. It is almost equal the territory of all the European countries taken together!



AFS work in Russia is coordinated by the office and regional staff. This division helps to structure the AFS network and make it efficient.

Here is the structure according to regions and chapters

	AFS Chapters	Chapters that MAY join for orientations	Chapters that MAY join for camps/trips			Other events	
1	Nizhniy Novgorod Arzamas	in Nizhniy Novgorod	<div>- Autumn camp in Kazan’ // - Autumn trip to Siberia (12-15 students) - Spring trip to Moscow in 1 or 2 groups (depending on the number of participants) - St. Petersburg trip in 1 or 2 groups (depending on the number of participants)</div>			<div>«My vision of Russia» spring trip (15 participants) - Contest</div> <div>Winter social project (30-35 participants) – Call for participants</div>	
	Kirov region: Kirov, Kirovo-Chepetsk, Slobodskoy	In Kirov					
	Udmurt region: Zavyalovo, Votkinsk, Mozhga, Izhevsk, Italmas	in Zavyalovo					
	Cheboksary, Novocheboksarsk	in Cheboksary					
	Kazan’						
	Yekaterinburg	in Yekaterinburg					
	Perm’						
	Tolyatti	in Tolyatti					
	Tuymazy						
	Surgut region: Surgut, Lyantor, Nizhnesortymskiy	in Surgut					
2	Vladivostok	In Vladivostok (* may join Autumn trip/camp for “blue region”)					
3	Yaroslavl’ region: Yaroslavl’, Lubim, Rybinsk, Danilov, Kostroma, Volgorechensk	in Yaroslavl’	Autumn Camp in Sochi	Spring trip	St. Petersburg trip		
	Krasnogorsk	1) in Klimovsk 2) in Klin 3) in Alexandrov		Spring trip	St. Petersburg trip		
	Klimovsk						
	Alexandrov						
	St.Petersburg						
	Klin	1) in Klimovsk 2) in Klin 3) in Klin		Spring trip	St. Petersburg trip		
4	Krasnodar region: Krasnodar, Korenovsk, Dinskaya, Afipskiy , Severskaya	in Krasnodar	Autumn Camp in Sochi	<div>- Spring trip - St. Petersburg trip</div>			
	Volzhskiy	Volzhskiy					
	Astrakhan’						

Comments:

- 1) The chapters are merged into 3 regions **divided by AFS Russia**; it is **not an official division** of the Russian territory, it is done to make it easier for volunteers to work and organize AFS events for students. Some smaller changes are possible every year, as not every place hosts the same amount of students every year and new places are added frequently.
- 2) All the changes depend on volunteers' availability and are regulated by the AFS RUS office.
- 3) Some smaller places may not be in the list.
- 4) Learn about the difference between ORIENTATIONS and CAMPS on page 17 **"AFS activities"**.



3. Your life in Russia

Arrival

You will be met at the airport upon your arrival in Russia; AFS staff and volunteers will be waiting **at international arrival** and will be wearing AFS shirts and holding up signs. So don't worry that you won't recognize us. As for you, all students usually have yellow AFS luggage tags on their suitcases (which will be given to you by AFS in your country) but it will be easier for us to recognize you if you also wear some kind of AFS clothing if you have any.

Right after your arrival you will go to the arrival orientation camp.

The **Immediate Post Arrival Orientation** will take place in a youth camp outside of Moscow. You will share rooms (around three to four people) with other AFSers from different countries who will arrive the same day as you. The orientation will last **around three days** and will be conducted **in English**. (The first orientation for trimester students and those who start their program in winter is different. They will be informed about the details before departure.)

You will be briefly introduced to Russia and the most important aspects of life here. Furthermore, you will have a short language class to familiarize you with the most important phrases, in case you don't know them already. Please be prepared to introduce yourself and your country, as parts of our activities there will include presentations of each country. There will also be sports, games and other fun activities there.

Please note there will be no Internet at the camp site and you will not have an opportunity to make a long-distance call. You can call only if you have your own mobile phone.

After your arrival in Russia, you must be registered at the local police station within seven days.

All foreigners who arrive in Russia are required to pay a registration and residence permit fee (EURO 60 or USD 80). AFS RUS will make it on behalf of you. (This information concerns year and semester students) So, please pay this amount of money to AFS in your country so that our Partner can reimburse our expenses or be ready to pay it **at the arrival camp in cash only**.

IMPORTANT!

If you bring a musical instrument with you, go through the **"red corridor"** **after you have gone through passport control and collected your luggage**.

You must get a customs declaration form!!!

For details read the part **Organizational matters**.

Customs, page 31.

Except the sum mentioned above (EURO 60 or USD 80), you won't need any money **in the camp or on your way** to your chapter.

At the arrival camp, you will need to hand the following documents to an AFS Russia staff member:

- Your passport;
- **Notarized translation** of travel document/passport into Russian(only the first page);
- **Notarized translation** of the birth certificate into Russian;
- **Migration card** (you get it at the airport upon arrival);
- **Parental authorization with apostille** (AFS office of your country will provide the sample of it);
- 3 color photos **at matte surface paper** (3cm X 4cm).

We'd like to draw your attention once again to the fact that you will have to give your original passport to AFS in Russia in order for them to get you registered. The registration procedure takes several days. Your migration card will be stamped and you will be given a special residence permit number and a registration document, which will be handed back to you with your passport. During the registration period you won't be able to use traveler's checks or withdraw money from credit cards in a bank. **Bring some cash with you!**

When the orientation camp is over you will go off to your host destination. You will either **fly**, if you live very far away, or **go by train** or **by bus**, possibly also on an overnight journey. Of course, volunteers will travel with you and take care of everything. If it's a long journey, AFS will provide you with food on your way to the host family. When you arrive in your host town, they will introduce you to your waiting host families.



Your host family

Maybe you have already hosted an exchange student yourself or otherwise asked yourself why a family decides to host a foreigner. The answer is simple: they are interested in the experience; interested in your culture, your country, your traditions, your language; they want a new son or daughter in their family; they want their own children to find out more about world; they want to learn and gain something from this experience.

Every host family is different, just as families in your home country are different. You will usually have a mother, a father and one or two brothers or sisters, but some families nowadays are also made up of a single parent with children or an elderly couple whose children have already grown up. Often, you will have a *babushka* and *dedushka* (grandma and grandpa) living nearby or even in the same house. You might have siblings your own age or different ages or simply some cousins (who are also called *brat* and *sestra* in Russian).

A host family is an AFS participant like you are. Some of them have hosted before or sent their own children abroad, but most of them are new to the program and are just as eager and happy to meet you as you are to meet them. And they will also need time to adjust to a new family member 😊

Your teenage host siblings might feel a little jealous of you. Don't be surprised. You are taking away a lot of the attention they have been used to. The best way to avoid it is to include them as much as possible in your activities, ask their advice and let them know that they are important to you.



A smile and the words *spasibo* (thank you) and *pozhaluista* (please) will always help you in any situation.

Please, keep in mind that they do not get paid for hosting you but do it out of good will. It is very important that you keep this in mind and not only show them your gratitude for accepting you as a new family member, but also show that you accept them as your new family.

Most of our host families don't speak English or other foreign languages. Your host brothers or sisters study some foreign languages at school but **don't expect them to be fluent**. If you know little or no Russian upon your arrival, these circumstances will **help you improve your language skills very quickly**. If you show an active interest in the family's interests and daily life and ask a lot of questions, you will not only learn Russian better but also soon feel like a part of your new family.

A host family's main concern is being able to send their hosted student home safely at the end of the program. They feel a high sense of responsibility for your safety and well-being as one of their children. Because of this, they may seem over-protective towards you with many rules that appear to restrict your day-to-day activities.

Every family has its own rules and values, its preferences and things they don't like. Some of these "rules" will be explained quite openly in your host family, others "go without saying" and are therefore not even mentioned. Watch closely how your family live and you will soon discover which "rules" are important in your host family. Be prepared and open to get to know a different kind of family life and don't judge too quickly.

Please don't forget that your host family naturally also has certain expectations about your mutual experience. They have decided to welcome you so that you have the opportunity to get to know our way of life, but also to learn about life in your country. That's why you should **bring along a few photos, slides about your country, recipes, music, videos**, etc. You will need these, because everywhere people will want to know details about the town/region you live in, your family, what people eat or like to do, etc. Your host family expects you to be interested in information exchange.

Remember! You are not a guest; you are a member of the family who should be ready to share everyday life and household chores with the family!

It might be a good start to get in touch with your host family, when you receive your placement papers.

AS A RULE

Your school coordinator is an AFS volunteer and AFS contact person who helps you at school every day.



Your host school

An important thing for you to know is that **the official invitation** which allows you to get a **visa to go to Russia** is issued by your host school. And the type of visa you get if you stay for a semester or year program in Russia is a **student visa**.

AFS is a school program, and attendance at school is mandatory for you even if you have already finished school in your home

country. Most AFS schools have already hosted students before and sometimes even sent their own students abroad; but even if it is a new school, there is no need to worry. Russian students are usually very interested in meeting foreigners and even if they don't speak a lot of English, they will often try and ask you questions about your home country.

One of the peculiarities about AFS in Russia is that it is school-oriented. Luckily our chapters are closely connected with schools. Schools usually find host families. That's why the teacher contacts the family, informs you about AFS events and helps solve problems with the families if they arise. **The school is also a participant in the AFS program like you and your host family.**

You will most likely be enrolled in the 10th grade of a Russian *shkola* or *gimnasia*, a normal secondary school. This means that your classmates will be 15 or 16 years old, so maybe a little younger than you are. Sometimes we also place AFS students in the 11th grade (the last year of school), when they are already 17 or 18 years old. Still, we usually **avoid doing this** since students in their last year of school are normally **very busy preparing for final exams**.

AFS students usually have an **individual timetable**: lessons at primary school are **combined with** the lessons with students your own age. Your school coordinator will help you to organize it in the most effective way.

Even when exchange students can already read and write Russian, we still recommend they **go to a primary school several times a week to learn Russian** with the 1st or 2nd grade, esp. during the first part of the program. The children there also just learn how to write and are usually very happy to have a foreigner amongst them, even if a foreigner doesn't understand a thing they're saying ☺ Don't worry, just enjoy it - children are usually very patient when it comes to teaching you new words and are often proud to have a foreign friend whom they can give sweets and small gifts.

School books are rather expensive. As you will need school books only for a short period of time, you should try to loan them from your host siblings, your contact teacher or the school library.

As you pick up Russian during the course of the school year, you will be expected to participate in class more and more. Teachers know that you don't understand much in the beginning, but will still talk to you **in Russian only** and sometimes ask you to make a presentation about your home country for your classmates. It is good if you are prepared for occasions like that and bring a national costume, a flag or something else for people to look at.

Lunch at school

AFS doesn't reimburse school lunch expenses because **your host family will provide you with food for lunch**. If you want to eat at school you either have to buy a snack at school canteen and pay for it yourself or **you bring something from home** or you may **have lunch at home** right after school (as classes are usually over at 1pm or 2pm).

Reimbursement for school transportation

If you live close to your school you will go there on foot. In this case **NO transportation reimbursement is necessary.**

If you live far from your host school, there are two options:

REMEMBER!

If you don't hand in your monthly account of school transportation expenses and the bus/tram/etc. tickets **on time**, the **volunteer won't be able to reimburse them for you.**

- either your host mom/dad will drive you together with your host siblings,
- or you will **use public transport** and go to school and back home yourself. In this case your transportation expenses **will be reimbursed every month by AFS.**

BUT, you will have to provide an account of your expenses and hand it to the AFS volunteer together with the tickets **by the assigned date monthly**. Your AFS volunteer will show you how to do it.

At the end of the school year

Every AFS student in Russia should sit 3 (three) exams at the end of the school year (**Russian** as a foreign language and **two optional subjects** but not his/her native language). It does not matter if he/she has already graduated from school in his/her sending country.

If you attend classes regularly, schools together with AFS RUS give a **CERTIFICATE OF ATTENDANCE** with an academic transcript to AFS students at the end of the school year.

Please keep in mind that the **reputation of AFS at your school is very important for us**. AFS Russia needs the support of your school. The interest and motivation, which you demonstrate to your teachers and classmates will not only help you to finish your program successfully, but will also affect the opportunities of future AFS students.



Language course

Language is a bridge to culture and people. Practice shows that after a couple of months, most of the students become very good at Russian. We would like you make an effort at studying it seriously, because, firstly, it might be difficult to communicate in foreign languages everywhere outside big cities, and, secondly, isn't it what you are coming here for?

AFS RUS and Host schools provide:

- Pre-departure language and culture guide from April 20th till August 5th;
- Russian lessons in primary school;
- Russian lessons with volunteers during the year.

AFS Russia provides future hosted participants with pre-departure language and culture information/study guide to help you prepare for the program in Russia.

Each of you will be sent the language learning schedule and materials **to your e-mail (the one in your application form)**.

The course is supposed to last from **April 20th till August 5th**. The materials provided will give a general overview of the Russian language and culture, as well as an idea of what you will experience during the program.

You will also start learning basic Russian with *DuoLingo*. It is a free language-learning platform that includes a language-learning website and app along with a crowd sourced text translation platform and a language proficiency assessment center. *DuoLingo* is ad-free and offers all its language courses free of charge. The app is available on iOS, Android and Windows 8 and 10 platforms.

How the learning process is organized

Following the instructions you join the on-line AFS Classroom on learning Russian. You are recommended to spend at least 2-4 hours per week learning Russian and 1-2 hours on culture.

Every couple of weeks you should complete an online test at *DuoLingo* so that we could track your progress.

If you find difficulty in using resources in English, you may use *Speak Russian CIE* (in French, Chinese, Japanese, German, Spanish, Italian) website for pre-program language instruction, which doesn't exempt them from doing the pre-program test herein. We strongly encourage you to use other suggested materials to practice reading in Cyrillic alphabet, listening to short conversations, and reading country and culture related materials.

The deadline to finish the course is **5th of August**. The time is required to check your progress before your arrival. If you don't use this free intensive course possibility, you will have to finish it within a month upon arrival to Russia and take an exam with your local school volunteer.

Anyway, we strongly encourage you to use this pre-departure language course possibility BEFORE your arrival. Your results will be viewed as your motivation for the program in general.

Later on, AFS schools/chapters organize a year-long language classes for all exchange students. The teachers are AFS volunteers. They will run lessons once or twice a week depending on their availability. These classes will be provided for students attending one school or living in the same city (depending on how the chapter work is organized and on the number of students). AFS Russia provides all the participants with language books and materials at the beginning of the school year. These books cost 20€ / 25\$ (should be paid upon arrival).

At the end of your stay all the students pass a test in Russian organized by AFS RUS. If you wish you can have the possibility of taking a state examination test in Russian as a foreign language at a university and get a state certificate (costs covered by the students).

As you see, you are expected to study a lot ☺. But this does not mean that you have to sit with your head buried in books every day! You can learn Russian simply by participating actively in your family's life, listening attentively when spoken to, watching TV, reading the newspapers or books (many students start with children's books) and most importantly by talking, talking, talking ... Don't be afraid of making mistakes! It is a normal part of learning a foreign language and Russians will not get mad at you if you don't get things right in the beginning. They understand that their language is very complicated and

usually react very positively to foreigners who decide to learn Russian. **The less you rely on English, the sooner you will be able to speak Russian** without thinking about it.



AFS activities

Depending on your local AFS structure, you will have different AFS activities over the course of the year. Apart from camps and language courses, these might include small trips, excursions, visits to museums, parties or visits to other schools.

AFS Russia distinguishes between two types of AFS events: *orientatsia* (an orientation) and *lager'* (a camp/trip).

An *orientation* **is a mandatory activity paid for by AFS**. For year program students, there will be four *orientations*,

- **Immediate Post Arrival Orientation** (right after your arrival)
- **Full Post Arrival Orientation** (about one month after your arrival)
- **Mid Stay Orientation** (about five months after your arrival)
- **End of Stay Orientation** (about two or three weeks before your departure, some time in June).

For semester and trimester program students there will be three orientations.

- **Immediate Post Arrival Orientation**
- **Full Post Arrival Orientation**
- **End of Stay Orientation**

These *orientations* are part of your program. All students from your chapter or sometimes from some neighboring chapters will be gathered to talk about their stay. They will help you understand and analyze your new environment (family, school, friends, etc.) and are usually very interesting for all participants.

Camps or trips, however, work differently. These **are additional events organized voluntarily by AFS Russia**, by AFS staff and local volunteers, just to give you more opportunities, more experience, more knowledge, more fun and to make your program more memorable! It's up to you to take part in it or not.

As they are **not mandatory** AFS activities, *camps or trips* including travel expenses **must be paid for by the student him/herself**.

Usually, AFS volunteers organize **three big ones**: Autumn and Spring Camps and a **trip to St. Petersburg** at the end of May or in the first part of June.

They are special activities because not only exchange students, but also Russian students are invited, as they are usually set during school holidays. You can bring along your host siblings, class mates or other friends if you wish to. This is a great opportunity to meet Russians your own age and make friends outside of school.

Their length and location can vary. They can be held for three days up to one week and include only one or two chapters, but sometimes more. **They are always organized regionally and coordinated by the AFS office and volunteers**. Activities can include sports (like swimming or hiking), games focused on intercultural learning or the AFS experience, presentations about different countries or excursions (for example visiting museums, parks, monasteries, castles, etc.). Sometimes, a *camp* is simply a trip to another town or city.

Fill in this table! You can get some of this info at different times: before departure, at the Immediate Post Arrival Orientation or upon arrival to your local chapter!

I will be placed in	
My host family's surname is	
My host family's address	
My local chapter is	
My region is	
My AFS volunteer / school coordinator is	
My Full Post Arrival Orientation will be in ...	
My Mid Stay Orientation will be in ...	
My End of Stay Orientation will be in ...	
My additional trips/camps	
My autumn trip is to ...	
My spring trip is to ...	
My trip to St. Petersburg	

There are two more opportunities for you to travel during your stay:

Winter social project: 30 to 35 AFS students can take part in it as half volunteers-half participants in the camp for Russian teenagers. The expenses are covered partly by AFS students, partly by AFS RUS.

The trip to the South: 15 winners of the contest «My vision of Russia». The expenses are covered partly by AFS students, partly by AFS RUS.



Check yourself, part 1

If you read the information attentively you can answer the following questions:

- What MUST you do at the airport if you bring a musical instrument to Russia?

- Where will you go right after your arrival?

- What documents must you bring to the arrival camp?
 - _____
 - _____
 - _____
 - _____
 - _____
- How much is the payment for registration and residence permit _____ EURO or _____ USD). Where should it be paid? _____
- What is the purpose of the arrival camp? _____

6. What will you do during the arrival camp? (main activities) _____
7. Why don't we place AFS students in the 11th grade? _____
8. Who provides school lunch for the student? _____
9. If you use public transport to get to school, will you get any reimbursement? _____
10. What must you prepare every month to get your transportation reimbursement? _____
11. How many exams will you have to take at the end of the year? _____
What are they? _____
12. What are the opportunities to study Russian provided by AFS and host schools?
 - a) _____
 - b) _____
 - c) _____
13. When is the intensive course of Russian usually held? _____
14. Will you get the book for the language course? _____
15. Will you have to pay for it? _____
16. Will you get reimbursed for this language book? _____ When? _____
17. What is the difference between the *orientation* and the *camp/trip*?
The *orientation* is _____
Will you have to pay for the *camp/trip*? _____ Why? _____
Is it compulsory to participate in the *camp/trip*? _____
18. How many orientations will AFS RUS organize during your program? _____
19. Who are 3 main participants of the AFS program?
 - a) _____
 - b) _____
 - c) _____

True or False

- a) AFS work in Russia is organized according to Chapter and Region. _____
- b) You live like a guest in your host family and are not supposed to help. _____
- c) Most Russian people can speak English. _____
- d) Your host family needs time to adjust to a new member. _____
- e) At the end of your program you will get a certificate stating that you studied at school _____
- f) Trips and camps are not coordinated by anyone. You travel wherever you want. _____



4. Life in Russia



General information about Russian Families

Home and Family Life

There is a lot of hospitality and openness in every family. You will always find a warm welcome and support among the people you will live with.

The majority of people live in apartment buildings, especially those who live in towns and cities. In rural areas, some people live in individual houses.

These apartments, by world standards, are small, but nevertheless very cozy. The family life usually takes place in the living room or in the kitchen and Russian families really like to spend time together, so it's not very common to spend evenings sitting alone in one's room. Most likely, you will share a room with your host sibling.

It is also normal for Russians to sleep on the sofa at night not in bed. So, don't be surprised if you are offered a sofa as your permanent sleeping place.

In the beginning it will probably seem weird to you that Russians **do not enter the house with their shoes on**, people wear slippers in the house or just go barefoot. **Immediately after they come home they put on their slippers and change into comfortable clothes.**

The reason is that feeling comfortable at home means a lot to them and that they don't like to carry the "dirt of the streets" into the flat by wearing the same clothes as outside. Parents in Russia have to work a lot. Fathers usually come home late in the evening, so a shared meal when all the members are together doesn't happen very often, usually only on Sundays.

Another strange thing for foreigners is that there is no fixed time for meals; people may have a snack or drink tea or coffee when they feel hungry.

Russia is a country of **high-context culture**. This means that **a lot of things are not said directly but must be understood**. Usually Russians expect their family members to **see** or **feel**, what should be done. For example, if you see, that the dishes are dirty, clean them, or if your host mother comes home, carrying two big bags of food, help her, even if she refuses your help in the beginning.

Some Russian families who live in a bigger city, own a "Dacha", which is a small house in the countryside, where they like to spend their weekends growing their own vegetables and fruit and simply relaxing.



VERY IMPORTANT!

Russia's curfew law:

It is illegal for **minors under the age of 18** to leave their homes/be outside between the hours of **10pm and 6am without an adult**.

Relationship between family members

As you may know, Russian society is shaped by an authoritarian way of thinking, so the relationship between generations is also shaped by respect and appreciation.

Russian parents are mostly very protective of their kids. They usually make important decisions regarding their children themselves without discussion. They want to know everything about their children's lives and care very much

what their son/daughter wears, eats, how and where they spend their free time. They must always know where and with whom their kids go out and at what time they are supposed to come home. They worry about their children's health ... **This is the Russian way to show love and care.**

So, make sure that your host parents are aware of your plans and know where you are. If you're not allowed to come home late, it's usually for your own safety. Don't make your host mother worry, listen to her advice regarding your health and call her to let her know that everything's all right.

Sometimes Russian families plan to clean the flat together on one day of the week, so you should be at home to help them.

Generally family is very important in Russia. For example, in central European countries teenagers like to spend more time with their friends and people of their own age, however in Russia it's still common to sit together with the family in the kitchen, talking about daily life.



Food

To feed kids is one of the main concerns of parents. Don't be surprised if your host mom or granny will ask you every second if you are hungry. This is their way of showing their care and love to you. Of course it's your choice to eat or not but **don't forget to say "thank you"** after every invitation and, certainly, **after every meal.**

Tea

If you are invited "to drink tea", it doesn't mean just drinking tea. It means you are going to have a long, heart-to-heart talk. Russians love to "drink tea" which actually can be not only tea but coffee, some cookies, sandwiches, pies etc. ☺

Russians can drink tea several times a day. This is normal. This is a **very Russian** way to talk or discuss serious questions in a relaxed atmosphere, to solve problems, to share one's feelings or show one's love and affection. **DON'T MISS family tea time. This is a great opportunity to become a real member of your host family.**

Culture of sharing

It might be normal in your culture to buy, for example, a bar of chocolate and eat it on your own when you are in a company of other people. Yes, it's quite understandable, but absolutely inappropriate in Russia. It will be considered very mean. A Russian person will **FIRST** offer his chocolate to his friends (who usually take a small piece of it or say "No, thank you") and **ONLY THEN** he eats it himself. Russian culture is a culture of sharing. There is a saying that «even in need a Russian person will share his last piece of bread with anyone by him», and never eat it himself.

This unspoken "rule" works when you are with friends or with your family members.

General information about School

Basic structure

The educational system in Russia is mostly provided by the state (meaning most educational institutions are public and free of charge) and consists of three main parts:

- *detskij sad* (kindergarten)
- *shkola* (school)
- *universitet* (university)

Children go to *detskij cad* only if their parents want them to, it is not mandatory. Still, most Russian children go to kindergarten when they're about five years old. They start school at the age of 6 or 7.

INTERESTING

Shkola goes from the first to eleventh grade. All classes are usually held **in the same building**, which means that you will see **students of all ages** between classes and also, that the noise level is probably a little higher than what you're used to.

Since 2005, all 11 years of school are compulsory, but after 9th grade the students get to choose if they want to stay at their *school* or switch to a *kolledzh*, a specialized school where students focus on learning a profession in addition to their normal classes.

The school year starts on September, 1 and finishes on May, 30. Students of the 9th and 11th grades have their final exams in June.

Students attend school 6 days a week.

A class (around 25 to 30 students) stays together for their entire 11 years of school. This means that exchange students will study in an environment where people already know each other very well and have developed friendships. It might seem scary to enter a group where everyone but you already knows each other very well, but look at the positive side: it's unlikely that you'll ever be just an anonymous new face in a Russian school. The Russian students usually take foreigners in very kindly and make them become a new member of their network.

Students finish secondary school at the age of 17 or 18, about 75% of them decide to go to university. This makes Russia one of the countries with the highest rate of university graduates worldwide. Gap years after graduating from school or any other kind of delay before starting university are not common.



A normal day at school

Russian schools usually teach a variety of subjects: Russian, Russian Literature, Math, Physics, Chemistry, History, Geography, Biology, Foreign Languages, and some others. The foreign languages most commonly taught are English and sometimes German, but some schools additionally teach French, Italian or Spanish. The students cannot choose their own subjects; furthermore, every day has a different timetable.

The best grade in the Russian school system is a 5 (called *pyatyorka*), the worst is 1 (*edinitsa*), which is rarely ever given to a student. *Dvoyka* (2) is already very, very bad and most parents will not accept any grades below 3 (*troyka*) or 4 (*chetvyorka*).

Schools start classes at 8a.m. or 8.30a.m. A school day typically consists of six different subjects (six 40-45-minute lessons) with breaks between every lesson. Those breaks usually last between 10 and 20 minutes and give the students not only the chance to get to their next class (the teachers stay in their own classrooms) but also to go to the *stolovaya*, the school cafeteria.

The *stolovaya* does not only sell little snacks and drinks available for everybody, but also different salads and hot dishes. Typically, every class gets served one hot meal and a drink per day; these have to be paid for at the beginning of the school year or sometimes every month and are usually very cheap. School food is quite good since everything is usually made from scratch and even the bread and *pirozhki* (delicious buns with sweet or savory fillings) are baked directly at school by the kitchen staff. But it is not a problem if you bring a snack or a lunch box from home and eat it there.



First day of school

The first day of school every year is the first of September, a very important day on the national calendar. It's officially called *den' znaniy* (day of knowledge), but people colloquially refer to it simply as *pervoye sentyabrya* (first of September). There are no classes on this day, but it marks the end of the summer holidays and everyone looks forward to this day.

Schools are usually decorated nicely for this first day and every student, very often accompanied by his or her parents, comes to school wearing their nicest uniform. After a ceremony that usually includes dances, singing, lots of toy balloons and that introduces the first-years to the entire school, students give small presents to their teachers. These are often chocolates, flowers or maybe a special kind of tea or coffee; if you bring something small for your class teacher, you will surely make a very good impression. Also, remember to wear something nice - this will be the first of many *prazdniki* (holidays) you will have to dress up for.

The ceremony is often also used as an opportunity to introduce the exchange student to the school. If that is the case in your school, there's no need to be nervous. Just smile and nod - the new people you are looking at will soon be your friends.



Behavior in schools

The days of the Soviet Union are long gone - so foreigners can drop their images of strict Russian schools situated in grey buildings where students are neither allowed to run nor laugh. On the contrary, schools are very open places and the teacher-student relationship is usually very close.

Even though teachers sometimes yell at students who have misbehaved or are very noisy, they usually don't stay angry for long and a sincere apology will never be ignored. Still, it is expected that you show your respect by talking to a teacher in a calm and polite manner, standing up when a teacher enters the classroom or knock on doors and waiting for permission to come inside before going into a classroom yourself. Teachers are usually addressed using the polite form (вы) instead of the informal ты you will use to talk to your classmates and are called by their first name and patronymic. This is a Russian

phenomenon - for example, your teacher might be called *Elena Alexandrovna*, meaning *Elena, daughter of Alexandr* or *Mikhail Nikolayevich* meaning *Mikhail, son of Nikolay*.

Another way to show your school your respect is by wearing the *forma*, which translates as **“school uniform”**, but is actually more of a dresscode. For most schools, this means formal clothing in muted colors, so mostly black, grey, dark blue and white. Some schools are not very strict and also accept other colors, but some don't even accept jeans, so **don't forget to bring other dark pants too**, just in case.

Students also dress up more than in other countries - many boys wear ties and shirts to school, sometimes even a suit. Girls also often look like they're working in an office, dressed in high heels, skirts and fancy blouses. An acceptable outfit for you can be just black pants and a white T-shirt, but bring something nice anyway.

If you don't have any appropriate clothing, the host family usually helps taking the student to the shop to buy something which will be acceptable for school.



Extracurricular activities

Of course, your family will try to involve you in family activities, show you the town, go to the cinema with you, etc. AFS volunteers will organize some local events or parties (it can be an International Food party, or Christmas party or going to the theatre or some museum). But nobody is going to entertain you every day.

BE BUSY: The more you are occupied, the easier you will make friends and have experiences.

Otherwise, if you do nothing, you will close yourself off, which may lead you to you to feeling lonely and homesick.

You and only you should take the initiative and make your life active and interesting.

Very often schools have several options to choose from, like a soccer/volleyball/basketball team, a drama or singing group, bead weaving etc. These school activities are usually free or rather cheap.

Apart from these, AFS students can be involved in extracurricular activities outside school: go to art/music school, dance or karate classes, swimming pool, etc. The costs will have to be paid by you. However, your host family or the

volunteers can help you choose an activity which will not be expensive or get a student discount for you.





Social life

Friends

Friendship in Russian culture is one of the most important values of life. Very often a friend means more than a relative. You can share all your feelings, problems, sorrows and happy moments with your friend. A friend is always ready to help.

You will have opportunities to make friends with Russians at school, among neighbors, at the international AFS camps, etc. Don't miss this opportunity! If you have a friend in Russia it means you have somebody to come back to!

Very often host brothers and sisters are not friends, they are “relatives”. It's good, of course, if you have become friends with them and share the same interests and often spend time together. But it's normal if you make friends with other people.

Guests

Khodit' v gosti is very important in Russia; families like to invite friends or extended family members over for special occasions like birthdays or other holidays (*prasdniki*). Some families simply go to visit the grandparents on weekends. Still, no visit to a Russian house is complete without food and tea.

For some holidays, there are special dishes almost every family will eat. And every time you have guests (*gosti*) over, your host mother will usually not just serve one single dish, but various small dishes, different kinds of salads and plates with vegetables, including different kinds of beverages. They're all put on the table and guests can eat whatever they want. Don't eat too fast! Such meals are usually very cheerful and can last two or three hours;

Your hosts will often “remind” you to eat more, as they're worried that you'll leave their house while still hungry. A polite “*Spasibo, ya naelcya / naelac*” (first for boys, second for girls) will show them you are already full. When your host asks you to try a new dish, it is polite to accept and try a little bit. You might also get offered alcoholic drinks. Here it is important to keep in mind that it is okay for you to try new things, but no host parent will accept his or her teenage child drinking! Just because the host keeps insisting, it doesn't mean that it's okay for you to drink more than a small glass of champagne! This is just the Russian way of showing hospitality.

Even if you're only at a friend's house after school, your host will offer you a variety of foods. If you don't want anything, declining just once is not enough; but you should not feel obliged to eat everything that is offered. Saying “no” firmly, but very politely is something you will become good at in Russia :)

For Russians, **it is not polite to show up empty-handed**. Chocolates, some cookies or flowers for the hostess (it has to be **an odd number**, even numbers are only given for funerals) are often brought along as polite thank-you gifts.



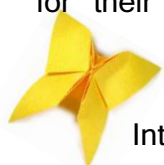
Relationships between men and women

Equality between both sexes is a part of the Russian constitution, so officially there is no difference between men and women. However, society still has strict ideas of the roles of men and women. These might be changing already, especially in bigger cities, but traditional behaviour of boys and girls could still be different than in your home country.

Russian women are very strong; they don't choose between children and a career, because it is expected for them to have both. Many of them are supported by their own mothers, the *babushka* of the family, who often cooks, cleans and takes care of the little children while the parents are at work. If there is no *babushka*, the woman usually takes care of the household alone; fathers will rarely help, but teenage boys are still expected to fulfill their household chores.

Russian men know and appreciate the work their women do every day, so they also honor them! A man (or boy) is expected to behave like a gentleman, help a woman (or a girl) carry heavy things, help her take off her jacket or hold doors open. Many men even stand up in the metro or bus to offer a woman their seat - not just if she is pregnant! The role of the mother is held very high in Russian society and no man would dare to forget to congratulate his mother on the 8th of March (International Women's Day). When men are in love, they are not ashamed to talk about their feelings, as many great Russian poets wrote wonderful poems about love and it fills Russians with pride to listen to and understand them.

Things between boys and girls are a little less strict. You might still be surprised how little friendships between boys and girls exist - especially with foreign girls, boys might be very shy. When going out together, even if it's just as friends, the boy is always expected to pay for the girl. It is okay for teenagers to have a girlfriend or boyfriend, but your host parents will want to know about this and meet him or her as they will otherwise worry very much. It is not okay for teenagers to have sleepovers with the other sex, even if it just as friends! Premarital sex is not a taboo anymore, but Russian parents do not regard it okay for their teenage children to have sex.



Internet

Internet is widely available in Russia these days. Not every family has Wi-Fi, but almost everybody has an Internet stick at home and most cafés, parks and malls also offer free Wi-Fi.

As wonderful as the Internet is these days, **it can be fatal to your success** as an exchange student! We understand how hard it can be to be far away from home and how tempting it can be to just switch the computer on and talk to your friends at home and actually understand the language they're talking in, but we highly advise you not to do it. You can't live in two worlds at once; the more time you spend on the Internet, the less time you spend in your new life and the longer it will take you to get used to it. Because of this, we do not recommend you to bring your own computer. You've come to Russia to live in Russia, not online! Students without their own computer often learn the language a lot faster, as their contact to their natural family and friends is limited and those who bring their own laptops get homesick more often.

Furthermore, using the Internet a lot can be a source of conflict in your host family.

Your host siblings will probably be used to having the computer to themselves all day long and it might take them some time to get used to this new situation of sharing. Even if you see Russian teenagers using the Internet a lot, this is no excuse for you to do the same thing.

Phone

For US students:

US cell phones **do not work in Russia**. It means you will have to buy a phone. Usually students buy a cheap one just for calls and text messages. Sometimes your host family may give you a telephone if they have a spare one.

Cell phones have become a common thing nowadays. Every participant brings his/her cell phone, thus, communication has become much easier. Mobile connections are not very expensive.

Of course, you will need a local SIM card for your cell phone; your host family will help you to buy it when you arrive. It is wiser to get them in the city/town you are going to spend your AFS-year since in Russia there is roaming between cities.

AFS, in regard of international practices, consider you to minimize your calls home.

Remember! You are responsible for all your calls: local, long distance and international calls as well as paying for Internet usage everywhere you use it.

Facebook appropriate behavior

When students get the placement information, they usually start communicating with their host families on Facebook. Before adding your host family members as “friends”, we advise that you review the content on your social media pages. Don’t post photos and comments which could be misinterpreted. Remember, your host family gets the first impressions about you from what you publish on your pages.

Being on the program students often use Facebook or personal blogs to share their experience, emotions, thoughts, etc. Think twice before you share comments/pictures about Russia or your host family. The information or the way you express it might be considered offensive by AFS RUS or your host family. Of course, you are free to discuss your life in Russia, but be careful not to hurt people. It may cause you problems or influence your relations with host family or friends. **Do not post anything on social media pages that would be embarrassing for your host family or natural family to see.**

All this is only for your own protection.



KEEP IN MIND

- There is **a law prohibiting the transmission** of negative information about individuals.
- **AFS's reputation** is a very important issue for AFS RUS as well as for your country as an AFS Partner.

Holidays and parties



National holidays are:

New Year - December, 31	January, 1
Russian Orthodox Christmas	January, 7
Defender of the Fatherland Day	February, 23
International Women's Day	March, 8
Easter	depends on Church calendar
Labor Day	May, 1
Victory Day	May, 9
Russia Day	June, 12
Unity Day	November, 4

On Russian national holidays and birthdays of family members the family gets together to have dinner. Russians tend to dress up for holidays. It is a tradition in Russia to give presents on holidays and special occasions (such as a birthday).

To all members of the family - at New Year and in some families for Christmas;

To your mother, other female relatives and teachers - on Women's Day;

To your father and other males - on February, 23;



There are many professional holidays in Russia such as Builders' Day or Doctors' Day. They are celebrated in that very professional area and are not national.

But one professional holiday all people celebrate is **Teacher's Day on the first Sunday of October**. Children and their parents greet teachers with flowers, small presents and good wishes. Schools organize special events with concerts, talent shows, etc. Be ready to take part in them!

While getting ready to leave for Russia, try to keep in mind that you will be expected to give **birthday** presents to the members of your host family.

Acceptable gifts from you can be postcards, crafts from your native country and other small things. Even something small, like "only" a fridge magnet, will already make a good impression. Flowers and sweets are always very welcome for women and girls.

You might need some small presents for your family, friends and schoolmates when you first arrive in your region.

At school it's also expected to greet teachers on those dates as well as on the 1st of September, the first school day.

5. Russian peculiarities

Be aware but not confused



- There is no concept of privacy in Russian culture. Parents don't knock when they come to their children's room, your stuff may be moved around (or even used) without letting you know. You can be asked any kind of personal questions. **You should share if you buy some food and bring it home.**
- Russian culture is **not direct**. People don't like to **say negative things openly**. It is considered to be very RUDE. So, the student **learns to feel** what the "right thing to do" is. Thus, "No" often means "maybe", "yes" could be "no". An indifferent face doesn't mean indifference; not every loud conversation is a quarrel; smiling to a stranger is very rare. This is a traditional way of communication between people.
- Living with Russian host families on our program, you can be struck by, and sometimes even put off by how frequently people touch, hug and kiss each other. Family members and friends also touch each other frequently, may sit closer to each other etc. There is no sexual connotation to such closeness or touching, it is a sign of love and care.
- Blowing out your nose in any public place, for example, in the classroom during the lesson or when sitting at the table, you may notice that people are staring at you in surprise. It is considered very rude. People will think you are ill-bred. If you feel you need to blow out your nose, go to the bathroom or to the corridor.
- According to Russian law teenagers and young people under 21 are not allowed to buy and/or consume alcohol. Beer is also considered an alcoholic drink in Russia. Make sure you read and signed AGREEMENT of UNDERSTANDING.
- The majority of Russian host families won't accept the participant who smokes. Besides according to the LAW underaged are not allowed to buy cigarettes. Even if you smoke you should respect the rules and abstain from smoking on the program.

What's discussed and what's NOT: "POLITE" topics of conversation

Everyone and every culture has topics of conversation that can be **openly discussed in polite society**, as well as topics or words which are **taboo or considered very rude**. In Russia, as in any other country, there are social "rules" or patterns of behavior which are polite or appropriate for "well brought up" people.

AFS students coming to our country can easily be offensive without knowing it.

For example, somewhat paradoxically, issues dealing with the body, bodily functions, and sex have traditionally been absolutely taboo to the point of creating a nearly Victorian society. This is now changing. Young people are more comfortable with such topics than their parents are, thus, creating a generation gap.

On the other hand, don't be surprised when asked questions about money – how much one earns, how much rent is paid, how much an article of clothing costs. This is entirely acceptable in Russia.

Furthermore, be ready to get advice from different people (from your host family members to complete strangers) on a wide range of topics usually having to do with health: button up your coat; put on a scarf; don't wash your hair every day; don't sit on a cold stone, etc.

Superstitions

Russians are highly superstitious. Here are a few examples of what you will encounter here:

- Whistling indoors is supposed to be bad luck, as you “whistle your money away”.
- When you forget something and have to go back to your house to get it, you're supposed to look at yourself in the mirror. Otherwise, your day won't be successful.
- Meeting a woman carrying an empty bucket on the street is also considered bad luck.
- Etc.

There is a lot to explore during your exchange program ☺ and it's no use saying that it is silly; this is just part of the Russian culture.



6. Organizational matters

Packing

You will live almost a year in Russia but it doesn't mean you have to bring a year supply of toothpaste or all types of clothes. It's better to buy warm boots here than to bring them from your country and finally realize they are not warm enough. Don't forget you will travel with your luggage and you will be responsible for carrying everything yourself.

PUT INTO YOUR SUITCASE:

- Clothes and personal belongings for everyday life (T-shirts, sweaters, jeans, underwear, toothbrush, etc.);
- Put some clothes that can pass as “school uniform”
- Some clothes for special events (holidays, parties) - a suit and a tie for boys and a dress/nice blouse and a skirt for girls;
- Gloves, a scarf, a warm cap will be very useful from the middle of October to the middle of April in Russia.
- A photo/video camera can also be helpful to collect your memories.

KEEP IN MIND

If you have to **fly** from Moscow to your chapter, you should take into account that **domestic flights in Russia** have weight limits (**20 kg**). If you have more than 20 kg, you will have to pay excess baggage fees.

Being an AFS student you fulfill the AFS mission of providing intercultural learning opportunities to people and help them to develop the knowledge, skills and understanding needed to create a more just and peaceful world.

Thus, during of your AFS year you will participate in many AFS activities and presentations. You are expected to present your country and culture. It would be useful if you brought:

- a flag of your country;
- your national dress or some elements of it;
- a film about your country, some pictures, posters any other materials which can help you to present your country (important historical facts, description of games, fairy tales, folk music, songs, poems, etc.);
- pictures of your parents, relatives, friends and pets;
- Pictures of your home, places where you like to spend time in you town;
- pictures of your school, its classrooms, gym, yard;
- some recipes of your national food;
- some small souvenirs, etc.;



Visa and other documents



Please pay attention to some tips regarding different documents:

- If you are going to stay in Russia **for a semester or a year** you will be provided with a visa invitation issued **by your host school**. It is necessary to apply for **a student visa**.
- If you participate in the **Trimester Program** you will be invited **by AFS RUS** and get a **3-month humanitarian visa**. Please remember it when applying for your visa to Russia.
- Upon arrival in Russia you will get a **MIGRATION CARD** when you go through passport control. You just show your passport to a customs officer and he/she will give you back a small white piece of paper with printed information on it. This is your migration card. They will also stamp your passport and migration card before giving them to you. **Please keep the migration card safe until you LEAVE Russia**. If you lose this document it will cause you a lot of problems with authorities and you will have to pay a large fine.
- Volunteers will help you get a new visa and with the registration procedure as it's very complicated.
- It is very important that you make **PHOTOCOPIES** of your passport, visa, migration card and registration document and **carry them around**. NOT the originals!
- The **volunteer will keep your original documents** (passport, migration card, registration card). If you need the original documents to take the money from the bank or you travel or go somewhere to live in the hotel, etc., inform your volunteer in advance. It is organized in this way because of long registration and visa procedure and for safety reasons.
- You are responsible for your money and credit cards.

Customs

In case you've brought **musical instruments** (especially **strings instruments like a violin or a cello**) with you, **make sure you declare it**, go through the red customs corridor and keep the customs declaration until your departure. Otherwise it will be impossible to take your instruments through customs and out of Russia.

Money

The official currency in Russia is the ruble. The exchange rates have been changing constantly now.

ATMs are widely found. If you exchange money at a bank you have to show your passport as well. Traveler's checks and major credit cards (AmEx, Visa and MasterCard) are accepted almost everywhere. Still, don't fully rely on them. It is **important to bring some cash with you** because you will probably have difficulties with checks and credit cards in smaller places. Budget carefully and plan ahead as much as possible during your stay, not waiting until you are completely out of cash to think about exchanging a traveler's check.

BE AWARE:

It's a wrong stereotype that Russia is a cheap country.

At first Russia can look cheap to you because of the currency rates but it is not as cheap as you might think. It will take some time to get used to a new currency. So, the advice is to be careful with your expenses especially at the beginning of the program.

Our host families are asked to pay only for ordinary family events which the hosted students are expected to join in on. The student is responsible for his/her pocket money for extra things.

We recommend that you have about 100-120 € per month as pocket money, so that you can afford spending money on normal leisure activities like going to the cinema (approx. 350 rub), grabbing something to eat (approx. 300 rub), having coffee (approx. 150 rub), drinks (approx. 350 rub), going to a café (approx. 450 - 600 rub), clothes, toiletries etc.

Be aware of **other possible expenses**

- If you decide to take dance classes or singing lessons, go to the swimming pool, art/music school, etc.
- Your school can organize trips/excursions for the students; if you decide to participate in these school activities you will have to pay yourself.
- Apart from orientation events which are part of the AFS program, AFS RUS usually organizes trips or camps during every school vacation. These are **additional activities** which you pay for if you take part in them. Last year prices were:

The autumn camp costs from 250 to 320€. There were 2 *camps* in two different places according to the regions (in the North and in the South).

The winter Social project cost about 260€. The price depends on the placement, and travel expenses.

St. Petersburg trip was about 370€.

For more details read **AFS activities**, pages 17, 18 and a document called "AFS Rules and Travel Policy in Russia".

Medical issues

If you have **ANY** health problem, please let your host family know **immediately**. The family will notify your AFS local contact or AFS staff!!! You may also inform them yourself. AFS Russia will arrange professional medical assistance. As **you have International Medical Insurance through AFS**, please read carefully your Participation Agreement about medical assistance.

Along with the professional help, Russian families use a lot of methods of “folk medicine” (herbs, honey, etc.). It means that if you catch a cold or have a runny nose, your host family will treat you and take care of you.

Anyway, **bring some first aid medicine you are accustomed to**. You are also **responsible for providing yourself with any special medicine** that you use at home if you need any.



Settling-In Tips

The following list of settling-in tips has been developed, based on experience working with exchange students and host families.

ALTER YOUR EXPECTATIONS

BE prepared to alter your expectations; the host family you think you “know” from the placement info and letters you may have received can be different from what you expect. On the other hand you are probably not exactly what the host family envisions either.

BE PATIENT

BE patient; there is no instant adjustment to everyday Russian life. Your excitement is at a peak. Don't be surprised if you feel overwhelmed in the beginning, get tired easily or have an “Is this all there is?” attitude.

DON'T ASSUME EVERYTHING YOU SAY IS UNDERSTOOD

DON'T assume everything you say in your language is understood, even if your host family indicates it is. Be prepared to repeat words using alternatives, speaking more slowly (but not more loudly) than you normally would, and avoid slang-type expressions. Some members of your host family might not know English (or other language that you will use to communicate) at all. Don't get upset. Use your body language. This will also motivate you to start learning Russian right away.

DON'T MISINTERPRET

DON'T misinterpret or get defensive about comments that sound anti-foreign. Your host family may have some highly unrealistic expectations about you and your home country. Nevertheless, those comments should not be interpreted as offensive, rather as argumentative or question-type.

RELY ON YOUR AFS LOCAL CONTACT

In AFS Russia the local contacts are mostly school teachers. **RELY** on your AFS local contact (teacher) for information, advice, and support.



Check yourself, part 2

If you read the information attentively, you can answer the following questions:

Family life

1. At what time must you be at home if you are outdoors without an adult? _____
2. Is it more likely that you will live in a house or an apartment? _____
3. Why do Russians take their shoes off and change into different clothes when they get home? _____
4. Are you expected to help your host family in the household or will they tell you what to do? _____
5. How are you expected to react when offered food? _____
6. What do you say after every meal, when leaving the table? _____
7. What is the most important family time in a Russian house? _____

School

8. Which grade are you most likely to study in? _____
9. Do you have classes on Saturdays? _____
10. When's the first day of school? Are you expected to do anything special on this day?

11. What will you call your teachers by? _____
12. What is considered to be an acceptable outfit for school? _____

True or False

13. Your host family will have WiFi. _____
14. Spending a lot of time in your room with your door closed is common Russian behavior. _____
15. Your host parents will often ask you whether you've eaten or not. _____
16. Many women become housewives after they have children. _____
17. When you are invited to another person's house, give an even number of flowers to the hostess. _____
18. You should give some sort of present to your host mother on the 8th of March.

Visa and other documents

19. How long will you be in Russia for? Therefore, what kind of visa do you have to apply for? _____
20. What happens to your passport after you arrive to Russia? _____

21. Do you have to pay special attention to anything if you are from Latin America? _____
22. What kind of document will you receive when you enter the country? What are you NOT supposed to do with it and why? _____

23. Are you supposed to carry your documents around at all times? _____
24. When is it important to have the originals on you? _____
What are these original documents? _____

25. What kind of luggage are you supposed to declare, if you have any? _____

Money

26. What is the exchange rate of the Russian ruble to your currency? _____
27. How much money do we advise you to bring every month? _____
28. How much does a coffee usually cost? _____
29. What are you expected to pay for yourself? _____
30. Are there any kinds of expenses you should take into consideration when talking to your natural parents? _____

Good luck!

Please don't forget to bring this handbook to Russia.

Appendix: Check list

Things you should have ready upon arrival in Russia:

- ☐ Agreement of understanding (signed)
- ☐ Notarized translation of travel document/passport into Russian(only the first page);
- ☐ Notarized translation of the birth certificate into Russian;
- ☐ 3 color photos on matte surface (3x4 cm)
- ☐ EUR 60 or USD 80 for registration
- ☐ Parental authorization with apostille
- ☐ This handbook

Personal things we strongly advise you to have in your suitcase:

- ☐ Small Russian dictionary
- ☐ Small presents or souvenirs for your host family/future classmates/teachers, etc.
- ☐ Some nice clothes, incl. shoes
- ☐ Pictures/movies/a slideshow about your home country and/or town
- ☐ Pictures of your life at home: family, friends, your house, school, hobbies ...
- ☐ Your national costume, a flag, map or some small souvenirs from your country

Things you should think or talk through with your parents before leaving:

- ☐ Pocket money
- ☐ Usage of ATM/credit cards
- ☐ Frequency of home calls/letters or emails home
- ☐ Agreement of understanding

Make sure!

You have received the language learning schedule and materials to your e-mail on the 24th of April.

By now, you should have received the following materials prepared by AFS Russia and sent by AFS in your country.

1. The handbook “The Spirit of Discovery” (the document you are reading at the moment)
2. Safety tips for participants to Russia
3. AFS rules and Travel Policy in Russia

If, by chance, you have not yet received one or more of them for some reason, please, contact the AFS National Office in your country right away, so that you can read through them prior to your departure. This will, to some extent, reduce your initial anxiety when facing a new language and a new way of life.

We appreciate your cooperation!