WELKOM IN NEDERLAND!

A guide for AFS participants hosted in the Netherlands

Please bring this booklet with you to the Netherlands!
Important contact information

AFS Low Lands vzw
Hendrik Consciencestraat 52, 2800 Mechelen
Tel: 0032 15 79 50 10 (on weekdays between 9 am and 5 pm)

Host family

Name(s) ........................................................................................................................................................................
Phone ...............................................................................................................................................................................
Address ...........................................................................................................................................................................

Local liaison

Name(s) ...........................................................................................................................................................................
Phone ...............................................................................................................................................................................
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Emergency phone numbers

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Please use the blank lines for additional contact information
**Introduction**

The AFS volunteers and staff of AFS Low Lands are all looking forward to meeting you. We are happy to welcome you to our country and organization.

Participating in an AFS experience is something very special: you will meet people from all over the world and you will learn more about their cultures, as well as your own. But more than just meeting people, our wish for you is that you will also integrate into our society, creating a unique opportunity to get to know our culture.

AFS and its volunteers will be there to help you turn this opportunity into a positive and unforgettable experience. Yet ultimately, you will be the one writing this amazing story.

We prepared this booklet for you to help you better understand our culture. Please read it carefully and bring it with you to the Netherlands.

We will be waiting for you!

Wishing you all the best for your AFS experience,

AFS Low Lands
COVID-19 update for participants

Due to the COVID-19 global pandemic, we would like to share some updates with you. These may interfere with other, general information given to you further on in this booklet. We are still in uncertain times, so these precautions and guidelines should be followed.

Note: These regulations are subject to change. If any have changed between the time you receive this booklet and your exchange in the Netherlands, these changes will be addressed at the welcome camp.

Greetings & hygiene

In the Netherlands, it is common to greet with a handshake, a hug, or a kiss. This is currently allowed, however, for many people this is still not acceptable because of the regulations that in the past two years tried to prevent the spread of COVID-19. It is okay to ask, when in doubt, what the other person prefers: if they are not comfortable with hugging, kissing or shaking hands you may greet people by waving or with a simple “hallo”.

When it comes to hygiene the basic advice continues to be: wash your hands, cough and sneeze into your elbow, stay home and do a test if you have symptoms, ensure a good flow of fresh air indoors.

In airports and planes you are required by law to wear a face mask.

The rules and measures are continuously evaluated and changed (loosened or restricted, depending on the levels of contamination). Latest updates can be found here: https://www.government.nl/topics/coronavirus-covid-19 .

School

At this moment, we think and hope that school will continue ‘as usual’ in the coming school year, however it might still be possible that you are expected to take some classes through virtual learning from home instead of in the classroom. If you have a laptop, please bring it to the Netherlands with you. Chances are you will need it.
Preparations

What to bring

Documents
Make sure you have a valid passport and entry visa (if needed) to enter the Netherlands. You will receive all information concerning travel documents from your AFS office. It can take several months to get a visa approved, so please start with your application as soon as possible.

If you are under 18, you will need a legalized parental authorization to travel as well! You will receive the necessary document together with the visa information. You will need this document if you want to travel in Europe, so do not hand it over to the authorities when you leave your home country; just bring it with you.

Money
As in many European countries, the Dutch currency is the "euro" (€). You will need to bring some money for personal expenses (movies, concerts, gifts, transportation, ...). Approximately € 200 per month should be sufficient, but of course this depends on your spending habits.

V-Pay and Maestro are widely accepted in the Netherlands. You could also open a bank account and transfer money to your Dutch account from your home account. Ask your host family to help you open an appropriate account. If you are a minor, you may need an official authorization from your parents. If a bank gives you a hard time to open an account, just try a different bank!

A little cash money could be handy to cover the small expenses during the first days. However, we advise you not to bring too much money in cash, as you risk losing it during your travels. Dutch people prefer to use credit or debit cards, rather than cash.

If you are planning to bring your debit or credit card to use while you are on the program, please check with your bank or card provider to make sure you will be able to get money while you are on the program. Lots of banks and card providers have extra security measures in place for the use of the card while abroad but not limited to the use of a card to obtain cash from an ATM.

Do not forget to pack:

- Information about your hometown and country (pictures of your home, your family and your neighbourhood, your high-school yearbook, traditional recipes, the national flag, pictures of tourist attractions, traditional clothing, ...)
- Some small presents for your host family. The best suggestion we can give is to use your imagination: try walking around in your favourite department store. Your family will love anything which is typical for your country.
- Sports clothes (including bathing suit) and trainers.
• A winter jacket: make sure it is waterproof!
• A laptop – not mandatory (AFS does not insure loss or damage).

Language
Language is the key to integration. It is very important that you learn to speak Dutch as soon as possible!

To help you, AFS will provide additional language classes during the first months of your stay. We organize language weekly, with a volunteer language teacher. Attendance is obligatory! These lessons are organized by the volunteers of the local chapters, so they may vary depending on the chapter that will host you. If you want to follow any extra Dutch classes, you will have to pay for them yourself.

To give you a head start, we will also give you access to Rosetta Stone, an online language-learning program. You will receive your login and an information guide in May. We expect you to complete it before the start of the program. This will take many hours of studying, so stat in time! We will check your level upon arrival!

Knowledge of the Netherlands and your own country
Naturally, this booklet only gives you a very brief introduction to the Netherlands. During the orientation camp, we will provide you with more information. In the meantime, please try to do some research before you arrive.

Make sure you also know enough about your own country. People will be very curious!

Lastly, do not forget pictures/objects about yourself, your family, friends and community, or some of your favourite local recipes, so you can proudly wave your flag.

Attitudes
In general, the success of your AFS experience depends to a large extent on your personal attitude. If you are motivated and want to come to the Netherlands, then you already succeeded in the first big step in getting to know our culture.

It is evident that you will have to learn to understand and accept habits and ways of thinking that are completely new to you. But with an open, non-judgemental mind, you will go a long way. Feel free to ask questions and do not be afraid to make mistakes. And of course, never ever lose your sense of wonder!
About the Netherlands

Location
The Netherlands is situated in the lowlands of northwest Europe, bordered to the east by Germany and to the south by Belgium. To the north and west is the North Sea. Just beyond the coast and in the middle are the polders, which is land reclaimed from the sea. Much of the country is below sea level and the land is criss-crossed by lakes, rivers, and canals. The highest point is the Vaalserberg in the very southeast, which reaches a height of 321 meters. The name Holland is frequently used instead of the Netherlands, but this actually refers to the western coastal provinces, North and South Holland, which have played an important role in our country’s history. It is not the correct name for the whole country. The Netherlands has a population of 17 million people with an average density of 494 people per km², making it one of the most densely populated countries in the world.

Political structure and culture
The Netherlands has been a parliamentary constitutional monarchy since 1815. The present Head of State is Willem Alexander, who mostly has a ceremonial function. The King stands above religions and ideologies, above political beliefs and debates, and above economic interests. This way, he performs the role of an impartial arbitrator.

Ever since the Middle Ages, The Netherlands has been at the crossroads of the great European trade routes. Dutch merchants swarmed out to every corner of the world as they knew it. Foreign merchants and artists came to the Netherlands endowing the magnificent Dutch cities with prosperity and cultural vitality.

The spoken language is Dutch, a Germanic language, related to English and German. It is spoken by over 20 million people in both the Netherlands and Belgium Flanders. Dutch is also an official language in Suriname and the Dutch Antilles. Besides, it is to some extent still spoken in Indonesia and a variation of the language (Afrikaans) is spoken in South Africa.

Many Dutch people speak English very well. They often enjoy speaking a foreign language, so they may try to practice their foreign languages with you. However, ask your family and friends to speak Dutch with you from the very beginning, even if this takes a lot of time and patience from both sides. Especially native English speakers may have a hard time trying to persuade their families and friends to speak Dutch instead.

Religion
Many Dutch people consider themselves not religious (about 50%). The other half is divided among various religious affiliations: the most common are Christian Catholicism and Christian Protestantism. There is also a widely spread Islamic community. If your family does attend religious services, you are free to join them if you would like to. If your family does not attend religious services, or if you practise a different faith, you may of course attend services of your own faith. Just keep in mind that your religion might not be widespread in the Netherlands, so there might not be a place of worship close to you. If this is the case, your host family is likely to expect you to be able to go there on your own.
Climate

The Netherlands have a sea-climate. We have rather mild winters and ditto summers, but as a result of global warming our winters get colder and our summers hotter. The weather is changeable but moderate. And because it is so unpredictable, it is a never-ending topic to discuss for the Dutch. Rain, sometimes really heavy rain, is one of the characteristics of Dutch weather. Another speciality is wind. It can be quite stormy, especially on the coast.

In winter the average temperature is 2°Celsius (35.6°Fahrenheit). Sometimes it freezes but not too often: minus 15°- 20°C (4° à 5°F) is about the worst you can get. You will need a winter coat, gloves and a scarf. During spring the average temperature goes up from 2° (35.6°F) to 17°C (62.5°F). The average temperature in summer is 17°C (62.5°F). However, it can become quite hot. Temperatures above 38°C (100°F) have been registered recently. You are likely to walk around in a T-shirt and shorts. However, be prepared for rain. The Dutch rarely leave the house without a coat or an umbrella. Autumn is the season for people who love rain. The temperature drops from 17° to 2°C again.

Privacy

One thing you will notice in our country is that the Dutch have great respect for privacy. So if you want to discuss something or want to be introduced to someone, you have to take the initiative and express this. People tend to leave you in peace. So, if you need information or help, just go ahead and ask. The secret to get to know Dutch people is to ask many questions and show an interest in learning about the Dutch way of life.

Direct

The Dutch have a very direct manner of speaking, also when they give their opinion about something. They will often start by giving their opinion, and then back this up by giving the reason why they think this or that. Even if they do not know something, they will often just say so without feeling stupid or embarrassed. The same approach is used when asking you something. They do not mean to criticise your country or habits; they simply want to know something. Direct eye contact is also normal here; not to make direct eye contact is often considered as strange or impolite, or as shyness. Remember also respecting someone’s personal space, it can be different from what you are used to.

Appointments

With most Dutch people it is normal custom to make appointments in their private lives. It is less common to drop in unexpectedly at people, especially not around dinnertime. If someone invites you, ask when you can come and make an appointment for a certain day and time. In general Dutch people are punctual and expect you to arrive on time.

Sense of humour

Some people think the Dutch have a strange sense of humour. People can often say something weird, just to provoke a reaction from you. The Dutch like laughing like everybody else, but at first you may not understand what they are laughing about or you may think it is not funny. Also the other way around, they may not understand your jokes, or think they are not funny. That’s all part of culture too! One thing you can be sure of: your host family or friends will never make fun of you to hurt you. You might be a target at first, but if you manage not to let yourself be provoked into the kind of reaction they are trying to bring about, you will cease to be the butt of the joke.
Freedom Paradise?

You might have been reading or hearing stories about the Netherlands. This is a good way to prepare. Of course, when you are here, you will find out that reality might be different. It might be that you heard about a liberal climate in the Netherlands. Although in general this is true, people in the Netherlands differ from each other like everywhere else in the world. There are very conservative people here too, and those might happen to be your host parents.

It might be that you heard stories that in the Netherlands ‘everything is allowed’: the Dutch seem to allow drugs, on foot or on bicycle a red light seems non-existent... As stated before, this misconception has a lot to do with the way Dutch parents raise their children. Taking responsibility for one’s own actions is a key phrase. You are allowed to drink alcohol from the age of 18, but you are expected to handle this liberty in a responsible manner. Yes, marihuana is more easily available than in some other countries, but as an AFS student you are NOT ALLOWED to use it. When AFS finds out you have been using drugs, you will be sent home without mercy!

As in some other countries it is quite popular amongst teenagers to get tattoos or piercings. If you are considering such a thing, we strongly advise you to discuss this with your natural parents before you leave (or once you are here). Although it is your body, we do not want you to do irreversible things to it while you are here, without the consent of your natural parents. Also keep in mind that your host parents might strongly object to it as well.

You will find out that in the Netherlands rules might not be set as strictly as you are used to, but this certainly does not mean that you can do whatever you like. Finding out what is appropriate behaviour might be a little more difficult even. There is one important rule to remember: in the Netherlands a lot is allowed, but you always have to ask first. We are sure you will succeed in finding out how to behave and hopefully upon return you will love the country like the Dutch themselves and take lots of good memories back home.
AFS Lowlands

The organization
AFS Netherlands has recently joined forces with AFS Flanders: together we are AFS Lowlands. Our office is in Mechelen (Belgium), but our staff members are spread between Belgium and The Netherlands.

The local chapters
At the local level, we have 4 AFS chapters in the Netherlands, which cover about the provinces of North Holland (chapter NoHo), South Holland (chapter SoHo), Friesland, Drenthe, and Groningen (chapter NOORD) and Utrecht (chapter YOU). Each chapter is headed by a chair(wo)man. A great number of volunteers are also outside of the chapters.

One member of the local chapter (or your area outside the chapter) will be your contact person/liaison. You can talk to them whenever you encounter a problem, or even when you just want to let someone know what a great time you are having! They are there to listen to you and to help you out if necessary!

The AFS office
The AFS office’s main task is to help the volunteers to do a wonderful job. However, if you have any questions about the school program, feel free to contact us. We are here to help you out as well.

Of course, the AFS staff also likes to know how our host students are doing, so if you keep a website or send your friends a regular newsletter, let us know! We would love to hear about your adventures!

Please know that you can share any issue with us, no matter how small it is! The volunteers and staff have lots of experience and might be able to help you out, or to make you see things from another perspective. Nothing makes us sadder than to discover that a student has been struggling with something, but never attempted to let us know about it. Whatever you want to talk about, you can count on our discretion.

AFS activities
There will be nationally organized orientations and a number of local get-togethers for all AFS students staying in the Netherlands. Presence at the national orientations is obligatory!

Here are the nationally organized activities, with, when possible, the dates. Write them down in your personal calendar and make sure you keep these dates free. The dates will be communicated at your arrival.
**Rules**

**International AFS rules**

There are three principal AFS rules:

- No drugs
- No driving motorized vehicles
- No hitchhiking

These rules apply **anywhere** throughout the duration of the program. If you break one of these rules, you will be sent home.

**AFS Low Lands rules**

**Visits**

Relatives or friends **may not visit you in your host country without permission from AFS**. Such visits may severely disturb your process of adaptation and fitting in, so you should discuss the possibility of such visits with AFS and request permission well in advance.

**Traveling**

*Exchange students generally like to travel, but that is not the main reason why you participate in the exchange program. The most important part of the AFS experience is life in the host family and at school.* That is why the following rules apply:

**In general**

- AFS must be notified for all trips where you spend one or more nights outside the Netherlands. This is **not necessary** for day trips and trips within the country. For school trips and trips with the host family abroad, you should also inform us in advance.

- Travel and day trips are only permitted during the holidays, **never during the school days** (except for school trips) or **during national AFS activities** (orientations, etc.) By ‘school day’ we mean a day on which the entire class is expected to attend school, both during the year and during the exam period.

- Keep in mind that you may need a visa to travel abroad, so always check this beforehand with the country’s embassy.
Every trip must be requested at least two weeks in advance via travel request module (https://afs.nl/reisaanvraag/) or giulia.porro@afs.org and info@afs.nl

Travel requests filled out less than two weeks in advance may not be processed on time and therefore not approved!

As most AFS offices are closed between Christmas and New Year, travels during the Christmas holidays, or shortly after, must be requested three to four weeks in advance.

One travel request can be made for different AFS students who are going on the same trip. It is important that the name of the student(s) is always filled out as the student who is traveling. Also, if the student who is traveling is the one making the request, it still needs to be done this way. So, always include yourself in the travel request form.

**Traveling with your school or host family**

- Trips that are organized by the school must be filled out on the travel request form. These trips are always allowed, as long as your host family agrees and if you do not miss out on any national AFS activities. However, you must pay for these trips yourself. AFS does not intervene in this. Please fill out the name and mobile phone number of the schools’ travel companion on the travel request form.

- Traveling with your host family or a recognized Dutch organization (local AFS chapter, youth movement, sports club, ...) is of course also allowed (except during school days and national AFS activities), as they contribute to a good integration.

- Travel requests with your school or host family are always processed smoothly, nevertheless we still ask to always fill out the travel request form.

**Traveling alone**

- You may travel for a total of 15 overnight stays outside of the Netherlands during your exchange.

- You are not allowed to travel individually before Christmas. The Dutch AFS office is closed between Christmas and New Year. Travel applications for this period should therefore be requested 3 to 4 weeks in advance. Any late requests may not get approved in time.

- Travel requests for individual journeys (without your host family or school) have a longer processing time. Your host family, your natural parents, and the AFS office must give permission for each trip separately. Only when all these parties have given their permission, will you get your permission to travel.

- When an online form is sent, both you and your host family will have to agree to the travel request electronically by email. The Dutch AFS office will contact the AFS office in your sending country for the written approval from your natural parents. This process might take some time; therefore, it is important to fill out the travel request at least two weeks in advance.
A maximum of 5 AFS students are allowed to travel together. A joint travel request can be submitted via the website, so only one request has to be made for all students involved. Afterwards, all host parents and sending parents will be asked for separate permission.

Sanctions! For all the reasons mentioned above, AFS Nederland will take strict action if the guidelines are not followed.

AFS will not give permission for a trip that is not according to these rules.

The AFS-office can revoke their permission for a trip at any time. This may be the case when the travel rules are not complied with, when the procedure is not followed, or when AFS is of the opinion that the trip is irresponsible due to safety or other reasons.

Do not book anything before you have permission from the AFS Nederland office! AFS is not responsible for any trip you booked without our consent, so you may have to cancel your reservations if no permission is granted!

Extended stay (program release)

The procedure for staying longer after your AFS program comes to an end is called “program release”. Both your sending country and AFS Low Lands have to approve this program release; we will evaluate every request on an individual basis, so an extended stay is by no means guaranteed until you have the formal approval of both AFS offices.

If you consider extending your stay after your program, you will need to submit the following documents listed below for a program release. All required documents must be sent at least one month before the end of your program to info@afs.nl. Late or incomplete requests will be denied; we therefore recommend anyone wanting to apply to start at least two months in advance with collecting all the necessary documents.

Required documents

1. Letter (or e-mail) regarding the host family
   A letter confirming that you will leave your host family on the end date of the program OR a letter from your host family confirming that they are willing to host you a bit longer (mention end date), separately from the AFS program.

2. Program release form
   We will be in contact with your sending country to see if they approve a program release. They will ask your parents to sign a program release form to confirm this, of which we also need a copy.

3. Itinerary or motivation
   A copy of your itinerary before you return to your home country, mentioning your plans between the end date of the program and the day you are planning to go home. If there are no specific plans or itinerary, a letter or email mentioning the reason for the program release is also accepted.

4. Medical insurance
   Proof that you are medically insured for the time between the end date of the program and the date of return to your home country. Once your program ends, you are no longer covered by the AFS insurance.

5. Leaving Schengen zone *only for host students traveling on a non-Schengen passport*
   Proof of reservation to a destination outside of the Schengen area during the last month of the program. Examples of such countries are: United Kingdom, Ireland, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Russia, Romania, Bulgaria, Serbia, Turkey, Morocco, Croatia, ... It is absolutely necessary that you
leave the Schengen zone before or on the end date of the program, since this is the only way to undo the sponsor agreement between AFS Low Lands and the Immigration Department. After you leave the Schengen zone, you have to come back as a tourist to the Schengen Area, so you have a tourist visa in your passport. It is absolutely necessary that you leave the Schengen zone before or on the end date of the program, since this is the only way to undo the sponsor agreement between AFS Low Lands and the Immigration Department. After you leave the Schengen zone, you have to come back as a tourist to the Schengen Area, so you have a tourist visa in your passport. Your Dutch ID card needs to be returned to the municipality before the end of the program; which is the same for all students.

For this trip the regular travel rules apply; no exceptions are made. However, making the trip on the end date of the AFS program is allowed.

If you are traveling on a non-Schengen passport, you applied for a visa to stay in the Netherlands. This means that AFS Low Lands submitted a sponsor letter for you and therefore has the responsibility towards the Dutch Immigration Department that you will return to your home country.

Here you can find an overview of all Schengen countries: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Schengen_Area

Return ticket

When all previous steps have been followed and all the required documents have been provided, the AFS Low Lands office will give you approval to rebook a return ticket. In order to book a return ticket, you must contact the AFS office in your sending country. Once everything is arranged, please send a copy of your ticket to the AFS Low Lands office.

Consequences of a program release

After a program release, students are no longer part of the AFS program. The AFS office is therefore no longer in charge and does not provide any further support. Moreover, AFS will no longer intervene in school costs and school regulations.
Everyday Life

Clothing
Dutch youngsters dress very casually (some people would even say badly!). You do not need a wardrobe with a change of clothes for every day. You might want to bring at least one pair of formal clothes. If you are in touch with your Dutch host family before you leave, you could ask them for suggestions.

In general, you will need warm clothes for the cold and rainy winter months, as well as light clothes for sunny Spring and Summer days. We would also advise you to bring some sports clothes.

Eating and drinking
Eating local food is part of the AFS experience. Dutch eat a lot of potatoes and bread. Furthermore, main dishes are: bread or cereals for breakfast, soup, meat/fish, potatoes/rice/pasta, and vegetables for lunch/dinner, or bread with cheese, cold meat and marmalade. Vegetarian food is also becoming more popular. The Dutch lunch is often just a sandwich with cheese (een boterhammetje!).

Breakfast is usually between 7am and 8am, lunch at around 12-1pm and dinner around 6-7 pm. For most families, eating together is considered very important, especially for dinner. Make sure you get to know your host family’s eating ‘rules’ as soon as you can (e.g. At what time do they eat? Can you start eating before everyone is served? Can you leave the table before everyone has finished? etc.). Watch your family closely and do not hesitate to ask questions!

In the Netherlands, it is not unusual for people to drink some wine or beer with their meals. You might also be offered alcoholic beverages, which you can accept if your host family agrees. However, if you prefer not to drink alcohol, you may, of course, refuse.

If there is food that you really dislike, you can politely decline. But do try to make a sincere effort to taste everything. Also, do not take more on your plate than you can eat. It is better to take a smaller portion the first time and then ask for seconds. It is considered polite to finish all the food on your plate.

Famous Dutch dishes include: fries, kroketten, bitterballen stroopwafel, pofferjets, and a lot of cheese.

Transport
The Netherlands is small and has a reliable network of public transport that can take you almost anywhere. Transportation in the Netherlands is expensive, but very well organised. Bus or train can easily reach even the smallest villages. Trains and buses quite often run on schedule. For the use of public transport you will need an ‘OV-chipkaart’, which you can charge with credit. You check in with your OV-chipkaart when you get on the bus or other means of transport, and you check out when you leave.

As you probably know, the Dutch people use bikes almost every time they want to go somewhere nearby. Even 10-15 kilometres (6-10 miles) trips are often done on bike. You will see bikes everywhere, because almost everyone has one or even two. Well, the distances are small and the country is almost everywhere as flat as a dime; so why not use your own legs to pedal you wherever you want to go?

It might be possible for you to borrow a bike from your host family, but we recommend bringing some extra money so that you can buy your own (second-hand) bike here. Most teenagers have second hand bikes. If you bring about €150,- you can buy a good bike. There are bikes available for less money but then
of course the quality is less. At the end of the year you sell your bike and if you took good care of it you should be able to get about €50,- for it.

**Addressing and greeting people**

Between friends and wider family, there is a lot of handshaking; girls and boys alike. You shake hands when you are introduced to people for the first time, or when you meet people you already know. You also shake hands to say goodbye. Closer friends and family, especially girls, usually kiss each other on the cheek when they meet. It depends on the region and on the circle of friends whether the boys also kiss or just shake hands. You can closely watch your friends and do as they do!

**One or three kisses?** Foreigners often get confused about the kissing habits of the Dutch. On normal occasions, people usually kiss each other once on the cheek. However, on special occasions, like a wedding or a birthday, people will give each other three kisses, starting on the right cheek.

Ask your Dutch parents straight away what they would like you to call them. ‘Mama en papa’ (mum and dad), or by their first names? Do not feel obliged to call them anything you do not feel comfortable with.

**Extracurricular activities**

In the Netherlands, there is an enormous offer of extra-curricular activities outside of school. Many youngsters are members of a local youth movement or sports club, attend a music or arts academy after school, do community service, ... Ask your host family or your classmates about possibilities of what is offered in your neighbourhood. Keep in mind that AFS does not pay for these activities, so check the price! Apart from participating in clubs and organizations, many people also do volunteering work.

*We strongly encourage you to take up extracurricular activities.* It enables you to integrate more quickly into the community. Besides, you will get to know different aspects of Dutch society and social life.

**Social life and going out**

Your social life will probably centre around your family and/or a small group of friends. Do not expect to be on the go all the time. Some families are rather strict with regards to going out, while others will give you a lot of freedom. *Always ask permission* to go out and tell your parents when, where, with whom, and for how long you will be gone. Do not go out against your host parents’ wishes, even if you think they are too strict.

If you think there is a problem, talk about it with your host family; open and honest communication is very important! When it comes to going out at night, many host families will feel more comfortable if the event is organized by a school, youth movement, sports club, etc.

**Many Dutch people prefer to avoid uncertainty.** That explains why they schedule their social life, and also why they often feel uncomfortable to start a conversation with a stranger, especially when there is no clear goal. As a result, people in your host community are not likely to spontaneously start talking to you until they get to know you better. You may often have to take the first step to get to know new people. Dutch people might not always seem very open and spontaneous from the start, yet once you are in their heart, they are very loyal.

**Living in a Host Family**

**Adapting to your host family**
The first important step is becoming a member of your new family. It is possible that during the first few days, you will be considered more like a guest, even though we have asked your family to treat you like their own child.

If there is anything you feel uncertain about, do not hesitate to ask your host family. It is important that you try to solve any misunderstandings that could arise, as soon as possible.

As we said, Dutch communicate more directly than many other people. Respect is an important value in communication, yet honesty and sincerity are also important. It is not considered rude to disagree with someone (even if that person is older), as long as you do so politely.

For example: imagine that you really do not like fish, but your host mom did not know and made salmon for dinner. When she asks you afterwards if you liked dinner, your reflex might be to avoid saying that you did not like it, because you do not want to be disrespectful or hurt her feelings. However, your host mom would like to know that you do not like fish and would prefer you to be honest about it. A polite way to let her know could be: “The salmon was well prepared, but I do not really like fish in general”.

Be aware that every family is different. Show them that you are grateful; not with expensive gifts, but with a frequent ‘dankjewel’, lending a helping hand, showing enthusiasm and interest in what they have to offer. Appreciation will help to build lasting bonds.

Ask your family right from the beginning about their ‘house rules’, such as curfews, making your own bed, helping with the dishes, etc.

It is also important to know that it is not common for Dutch families to have a maid, so most tasks in the household are divided between the members of the family. Everyone has to keep their own stuff tidy and clean up after themselves. So you will be expected to do your part too.

**Keeping in touch with your family at home**

Of course, you will want to stay in touch with your family and friends at home. However, make sure you do not exaggerate: regularly talking, texting, or chatting with your family and friends back home will only make it harder for you to settle into your host family.

Social media are very practical, but try to limit them to the people in your host country. Seeing everything you are missing out on back home will probably only make you feel more homesick.

Keeping in touch with your family at home also has some consequences for your host family. Make sure you know the house rules regarding phone calls and internet use, and respect them. Also, keep in mind that spending a lot of time calling in your native language may make your host family feel like you do not think they are good hosts. Tell them about what is happening at home!
School

Schools around the world are a place to make friends, to learn, and to prepare for life as an adult. In each country, schools have teachers, pupils, desks, etc. yet their own way of educating its youngsters.

The AFS program is a school program, which means that going to school is mandatory. You will be considered a regular full-time student, and just like the others, you will attend classes every day between 8.30am and 4/5pm. On Wednesdays, many schools finish at noon. Depending on your age and education level, you will be assigned to one of the last three grades of high school.

School in the Netherlands

Content, structure, and organization

There are three different levels of education; pupils can choose a particular course of study.

VMBO

Junior general secondary education (VMBO) takes four years. At the end of these four years students take exams in their own profile, including Dutch and a foreign language. A VMBO-certificate in itself is not a qualification for any particular kind of job. Many students go to HAVO, or choose a vocational school (MBO) after finishing VMBO.

HAVO

Senior general secondary education (HAVO) takes five years. At the end of the third year, pupils choose a profile and their exam subjects must include Dutch and a foreign language too. The choice of a profile is very important because pupils need different subjects to qualify for the different HBO (college) courses. After finishing HAVO many students go to HBO: a college of higher professional education.

VWO

VWO courses take six years and prepare pupils to enter university. There are two types of VWO schools: the ‘athenaeum’ and the ‘gymnasium’. Pupils at the gymnasium learn Greek and/or Latin in addition to all the other subjects. VWO students take exams in more subjects than MAVO and HAVO-students do.

We know from experience that a practical study is more suitable for most AFS students.

In the last year of secondary education, students take their exams. This means that for a large part of the year they have to study very hard to keep their grades up and have little time for other pursuits. This is the most important reason why you will probably be placed in the class prior to the exam year. For you this means that your classmates will be younger than you are and sometimes it may be a bit more difficult to fit in. But we hope this will not discourage you. There are always other possibilities to get into contact with peers, like in sports clubs, etc.

Basic secondary education consists of:

Your school days will consist of traditional classes with around 25/30 students and a teacher, but also of smaller working groups or even time to work individually.
All students take:
Dutch, English, another second language (in most schools French or German), General Science, History and Social Studies, Cultural Studies, Mathematics, Physical Education.

Depending on the profile one chooses, one can spend extra hours on subjects that all students take, or add new subjects to the general list. Profiles you can choose are:
Culture and Society
Economy and Society
Science and Health
Science and Technology

Culture and Society
This profile prepares for ongoing education in the fields of Social Studies, Psychology, Law, Languages, and Culture.
Possible subjects in this profile can be:
Greek or Latin, history, Culture and arts, another language, Maths.

Economy and Society
This profile prepares for studies in Social, Economics and Business fields.
Possible subjects in this profile can be:
Economics, Business Administration, Maths, Geography, History.

Science and Technology and Science and Health
These profiles prepare for studies in Science, Techniques, Medical and Ecological fields.
Possible extra subjects in these profiles are:
Biology, Science, Chemistry, Maths

Summed up so drily it must sound quite boring, we guess.

The first school days
Before school starts, or on your first day of school, you should meet with the principal or a teacher at your school, to talk about your class schedule. Do take into account your interests and whether or not you need school credits. Make sure you take all the necessary documents with you for your enrolment in school.

As mentioned before, you will have to make an effort to get to know new people. Dutch tend to be cold and a little bit evasive at first, but then they become very nice people. They are not likely to come and talk to you first. Finding your place in the class community and making friends will largely depend on your own willingness and effort. Yet it is completely worth it: since school is one of the best places to make friends and to integrate in the Dutch society.

Try to do your best from the very beginning in each of your courses. This includes trying to do all the assigned homework and prepare the lessons when necessary. Also participate in all tests and show some study motivation. Without a doubt, your teachers will certainly appreciate this.

All AFS students will be asked to give a presentation about their home country and culture at school or in the community. You might be asked to do this somewhere during the first weeks at school, as an introduction. Later it will surely be a more profound exercise, when you compare social, economical, political, ... aspects from your home country to the Netherlands.
Everyday school life for an AFS student

Overall, the level of secondary school in the Netherlands is very high and demanding. Each year, pupils study 10 to 18 different subjects. It is very common that students have to study 2 to 3 hours in the evening, as well as on the weekends.

The exams take place in June, and for some also before the Easter holidays. The grades are usually presented in numbers from 1 to 10, where 5.5 is the minimum to pass.

A normal day in school starts at 8 - 8.30 am and ends in the afternoon at different times, according to schools; schedules, lunch breaks and pauses also change per school. Students usually stay with the same class group (usually 25 to 30 people) going from class to class to meet the teachers. There are no classes on Saturdays and Sundays.

Every school starts at a different time, depending on the region where you are; summer holiday in high school lasts 8 weeks. There are a few holidays throughout the year: one week in autumn, two weeks around Christmas, one week in February or March, and two weeks around Easter.

If your class is going on a school trip outside the Netherlands and/or on a trip for more than one day, you may of course participate, although you will have to pay for this yourself.

School costs

Costs paid by AFS

- Transportation to and from school in case of storm (if you cannot bike)
- Required school books
  Please take your time to search for your books and ask your classmates; maybe you can buy the books second-hand or borrow them from someone. New books will only be reimbursed if no other books were available. In case you change school during the program, your new books will only be reimbursed if the change of school was approved by AFS.
- Use of the cafeteria
- School trips
  - Day trips in the Netherlands with your school (only one-day trips)
  - Sports day
- Administration costs
  - School insurance
- Language course: language courses organized by AFS Nederland

Costs you will have to pay for

- Dictionary, atlas, bible: these can often be borrowed at school, or you can purchase new ones and resell them yourself at the end of your stay.
- Materials: notebooks, pencils, calculator, drawing material, etc.
- Other meals and drinks at school
- Clothing: school uniform, sports clothing, lab coat, etc.
- School trips:
  - All trips in the Netherlands for more than one day
  - All trips outside of the Netherlands
- Administration costs: registration fee (most schools in the Netherlands do not ask for a registration fee); some schools ask for a voluntary contribution, but it is not mandatory.
- Fee for extracurricular activities
- Official documents: expenses to meet academic requirements and legalization/translation of documents in order to receive credits for the home school system.
- School pictures
- Language course: additional language courses
- Locker rental

**Costs for your host family**

- **Administration costs**: costs such as parent contribution, contribution fee for the parent association, etc. are on a voluntary basis

Please pay attention to certain courses of study, such as: tourism, art, technical direction, cooking, ... These require purchasing specific materials and/or going on more school trips. **Host students are charged for such expenses themselves.**

**Transportation costs**

**Costs paid by AFS**

- Transportation to and from national AFS activities
- Transportation to and from the language courses organized by AFS

**Costs NOT paid by AFS**

- Transportation to and from AFS activities from local chapters
- All other transportation costs

**How to reimburse your costs?**

First of all, it is important that you make good agreements with your host family.

You can get your costs back after filling in all the required information in our reimbursement forms (https://afs.nl/gastgezin/gids/#afs-nav-declareren).

If you have any doubts concerning certain costs, do not hesitate to ask your host family, or contact the AFS Lowlands office.
**Tips for Personal Safety in the Netherlands**

The following tips are not meant to scare you, on the contrary, we just want to help you to avoid any troubles or incidents during your stay in the Netherlands and allow you to make the most out of it. The Netherlands is a relatively safe country, but people do not deal with the issue of personal safety the same way as in other countries. Therefore, it is important that you read the following tips very carefully.

**AFS recommends that students always talk about any questions that they may have, even regarding specific personal issues. This dialogue, in combination with following the rules and advice given by the AFS staff, volunteers, or your host family, will surely be your best safeguards.**

**Personal safety issues**

**In or around the home**

In the Netherlands, people usually lock their doors and windows when they leave, except in some small and rural villages where everybody knows each other. In cities, most people also lock their front door when they are home.

Your host family will most likely give you a key to the house; please be very careful not to lose it. Never keep your keys together with an ID card or any document stating your address in the Netherlands. In case you lose your keys, your family might decide to replace all the locks on the doors. You must be aware that this could be on your charge.

It is best not to keep large amounts of money at home. Instead, you can open a local bank account and deposit your money. Your host family can help you to open an account.

Here are some important points you should discuss with your host family:

- Do you keep the doors of the house locked at all times? If not, when should the doors be locked?
- What should I do if I am home alone and a stranger is at the door? Is it safe to open the door? What should I tell them?
- Will I have my own key to the house?
- In case there is a problem while I am home alone, or in case I have lost my key, who should I ask for help? Neighbours? If so, which ones?
- Where are the emergency phone numbers listed?
- Does the family have first aid equipment and a fire extinguisher? Where are they?
- How should I answer the phone? What information should I not give to strangers?
- Are there any appliances (gas stoves for example are quite common in the Netherlands) that might cause problems and that I should be aware of?

**Outside the home**

Your host family knows their community and is thus in the best position to give you advice about how to get around, and places you should avoid. In general, you should take their advice seriously and follow their recommendations. Ask them what they recommend to help you feel more secure.
Pickpockets and robberies are not very widespread. Nevertheless, you should be careful, especially in cities or crowded areas. In general, you should not carry large amounts of money or very valuable things. If you have opened a bank account, you will easily find ATMs to withdraw money, in cities and most villages, and even in many supermarkets.

Be careful in school as well and keep your valuables (wallet, cellphone, ...) with you at all times.

**When you are going out, please let your host family know where you are going and, if possible, a telephone number of where you will be or who you are with.** Also tell them at what time you expect to be back and let them know if you cannot make it back in time.

Always think about how you will get back home. Check the public transportation's timetable beforehand, because many services do not continue throughout the night. If you intend to come back by car with a friend, make sure they are not drunk. **Do not accept rides from people you do not know well. Also, remember that hitchhiking is strictly forbidden.**

Here are some important points you should discuss with your host family:

- Are there unsafe neighbourhoods or places in the area? During the daytime or after dark?
- Are there public transportations I should avoid late at night?
- What should I do if I am approached by someone I do not know? What is the best way to reply?
- If I am at a party and I want to leave, but I have no means to go back home, will you agree to come and pick me up? Or can I call a taxi?
- If I am ‘stuck’ somewhere, is there anyone (outside the closer family) I might call? What is their phone number?

**At school**

Generally speaking, schools in the Netherlands are very safe. Still, like in many countries, drugs sometimes circulate in high schools. Whenever you feel uncomfortable, there are always people ready to help in your school. It could be your homeroom teacher, a teacher you feel comfortable with, or the principal of the school. Most of the time, students do not have a locker at school. You should therefore avoid taking valuable items with you to school.

**Illegal drugs and alcohol**

**Illegal drugs and substances**

A lot of people find it easy to link the Netherlands to drugs. With ‘soft drugs’ like marihuana available at so-called coffee shops, students who have chosen the Netherlands to spend their high school year may be tempted to give them a try. Soft drugs are indeed more easily accessible here, but contrary to popular belief, they are not simply legal to own. In January 2013, the government adjusted the policy of tolerance on soft drugs to counter criminal activities and disruptions. In basic terms, this means that only permanent residents of the Netherlands are allowed in the so called ‘coffee shops’ to buy and consume soft drugs.
**AFS** has a zero-tolerance policy when it comes to drugs, and you are strongly advised to stay away from them. Should you go against this advice and be caught in the act, **AFS** has no other option than to send you back to your home country. Also note that **AFS** regulations are clear that students caught smoking drugs or taking drugs of any type will be immediately expelled from the programme and sent home. **AFS Netherlands** will enforce these rules strictly!

The same applies to situations in which an **AFS** participant is involved with drugs. It is important to understand that involvement does not only mean actually using drugs, but also having drugs in personal possession, frequently visiting places where drugs are used, or knowingly associating with people using such substances.

**Alcohol**

From the age of 18 you can legally buy all kinds of alcoholic beverages, but they will ask for a legitimation to prove your age. Dutch teenagers are expected to handle drinking alcoholic beverages in a responsible manner (but of course not always do). The same will be expected of you. Drinking under 18 is prohibited, so if you are under 18 you can’t drink on the program. This can even cause sanctions and you can be sent home. In the Netherlands the drinking of alcohol is not meant to get drunk; it is just a part of social life, you can get offered at several occasions even at home with your host family, explaining that if you are a minor you cannot drink while you are on the **AFS** program. The drinking of only non-alcoholic beverages is fully accepted. You will find out that having fun is not dependent on alcohol.

If you are invited to a party or a special event, and you are not sure if it is safe to go, **AFS** recommends that you first try to find out a little about the party or event: where it is being held and who will be there. Usually your host siblings, parents, friends, or teachers at school, can provide information about the event and the people expected to attend. Your host parents may also forbid you to attend certain parties or events. You should respect your parents’ advice, even if other people you know are going.

If you find yourself in a place where you are not feeling comfortable, because drugs are being used or because you are not at ease with the people, you should never be ashamed to leave. If you do not want to hurt people’s feelings, you might say you need to leave because you are tired or simply not feeling well.

In the Netherlands, many cities have special celebrations and festivals, which sometimes even last for several days and bring about large gatherings. These celebrations are mainly about fun and joy, but, like in any crowd gathering and especially if there is a lot of drinking going on, some people cannot refrain from excesses. When attending public celebrations, we strongly suggest you to not go alone or only with exchange students. Either way, you should always be careful regarding safety, drinking, ...

**Sexuality**

How do Dutch people deal with the issue of sexuality: are they open about it or is it rather taboo?

There are different attitudes. Some adults do not really talk about sex or sexual education with their children. Other families are very open about the subject. Among teenagers, there is much less taboo. Be prepared that your host family and siblings might seem more liberal or more conservative about sexuality. If either attitude makes you feel uncomfortable, do not be afraid to talk about it. If you decide to have sexual intercourse, **always use protection**. Condoms are widely available in pharmacies and supermarkets; other contraceptives are also easily accessible. Do know that if you are older than 18, it is legally forbidden to have sexual intercourse with someone who is younger than 16.
In the Netherlands, boys and girls may go out together without being in a ‘relationship’. There is no chaperoning for young people. This does not mean that everything is socially acceptable or meaningless. Exchange students should be careful about the message they may be sending by dressing or behaving in a way that could be considered provocative. You will have to learn these unwritten rules and practices by observing people and by asking questions to friends, family, siblings, ...

**Sexual harassment**

*Because of different cultural perspectives regarding sexual harassment, it is important for you to be aware of what is considered proper behaviour. Below are a few tips:*

- Treat everyone you meet with respect.
- Listen to what people are saying to you and act accordingly. In other words, if someone says no, you should accept their decision!
- Get to know your AFS liaison and other respected people in your host community. They will be able to provide you with valuable information about what is and what is not acceptable.

Sexual harassment and rape can happen in any country. Especially women are at risk of being harassed or raped. We would like to draw your attention to the following advice:

- AFS participants should not go to unknown places (parties, bars, events, etc.) alone or with people they do not know well.
- They should avoid isolated places and never accept a ride or a drink from someone they do not know well.
- When feeling harassed by someone in a crowded place, they should move away and try to contact other people or get their attention.
- When they think they are being followed, they should try to enter a public place (shop, restaurant, etc.), or even knock on the door of a house to ask for help.

Do not be afraid to stand up for yourself. Listen to your intuition and follow your best judgment. Have the confidence to say NO if anyone makes you feel uncomfortable about anything. Also remember, it is never too late for you to tell an adult if anything is bothering you. If someone – anyone – touches you in a way that makes you feel uncomfortable, you have the right to say no. Whether it is peer pressure about sex, drugs, or doing something that you know is wrong, be strong and stand your ground. Do not be afraid to express how you feel.

**LGBTQI+**

The Dutch society is, in general, rather accepting towards the LGBTQI+ (Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Queer/Questioning Intersex) community. The Netherlands was the first country in the world to legalize same-sex marriage (2001) and to legalize same-sex adoption (2001). Reflecting this society, AFS Nederland has a growing number of openly LGBTQI+ participants and volunteers, same-sex host families, and participants who grew up in a same-sex family.

Public displays of affection (kissing, holding hands, ...) are allowed and generally acceptable for heterosexual and same-sex couples alike, although just as with any other matter, some people are more accepting than others.
Emergencies

Always keep the phone number of your host family with you. In case of an emergency, you should try to contact your host family, an AFS local contact person (we suggest you write down numbers of people from your local AFS chapter), or the national office.

As in most countries, adolescent boys are more likely than girls to find themselves being questioned by the police. AFS advises you to show respect and co-operate with the authorities, even though you may be innocent of any crime and think you are being treated unfairly. If such a situation were to arise, it would be unlikely that you would understand what is being said by the authority figure. In general, the best advice would be to say that you do not understand what is happening and identify yourself as an exchange student.

You must always carry your foreigner identification card, which you will get at the beginning of your stay. This is important; not only in the event of being questioned by the authorities, but also in the unfortunate event of a personal accident, or if you become the victim of a crime and may not be able to communicate effectively.

In case of security issues or terrorist alert

The Netherlands is, generally speaking, a very safe country. But there is always the possibility that something goes wrong: a robbery, a rather violent demonstration, a terrorist alert, a big traffic accident...

In all these situations, it is wise to inform your host family that you are safe. Always carry their contact information with you. You can contact the AFS office 24/7, on this number: 06 10114858.

AFS Low Lands directly monitors the safety of all of you. We contact AFS in your home country to let them know about your situation. In case of worry, your parents can always contact the AFS office in your home country, who will then be in touch with our office. For your own security, AFS may change the policy for independent travel based on the advice of the authorities.

Insurance

We strongly recommend you and your parents to take out a third-party liability insurance that covers you during your entire stay in the Netherlands. This kind of insurance covers damage you might incur to your host family’s property, for example if you accidentally break an expensive vase, or a laptop,... Every year we have students who accidentally break something, which can be very costly for the host family and/or the student. So please, make sure that you are covered!