

AUSTRIA

"I had never been away from home for more than two weeks, so the fact that it was going to be six months was probably even scarier than not knowing any German. "I returned from Austria a mere six months older, but with what felt like years of wonderful memories, experiences and knowledge. It was unquestionable that I had matured, and even three years later I find people my age running into challenges that I learned to deal with when I was an AFS exchange student. "The feelings of fear, uncertainty and tentative excitement are replaced with confidence and persistence that never go away."
Elizabeth Bowen, sojourner from the USA, 2000

The Alps, with their glaciers, waterfalls, castles and monasteries, cover two-thirds of Austria. No surprise, then, that an Austrian is said to have invented skiing in the 19th century, or that the country's citizens are avid hikers up mountain trails—when they are not cycling along bike paths beside the Danube. Still, the majority of Austrians live on flatter ground in conservative communities that respect courtesy and good manners—and in return extend warm hospitality.

AFS & Your Experience

AFS Austauschprogramme für interkulturelles Lernen was established in Austria in 1949. More than 500 AFS volunteers in the nine regions of the country constitute an association that hosts more than 120 AFS students each year. Participants come from as many as 30 countries including Brazil, Ecuador, Finland, Hong Kong, Iceland, Italy and New Zealand.

AFS will be at your side throughout your intercultural exchange. Even before leaving your home country you will participate in organized AFS orientations and have the assistance of experienced AFS volunteers. Once in your host country you can rely on your local volunteer contact and other chapter volunteers to support you in your experience. Together we will ensure that you have an incredible experience abroad.

Landing in Austria

You will arrive in Vienna, the grand and historical capital of Austria. AFS Österreich volunteers will pick up you and your fellow AFSers and bring you to the Arrival Camp in one of the nine federal states, an approximately 2-3 hour drive from Vienna.

Arrival Orientation

This first Austrian orientation will introduce you to the country, Austrian life and various aspects of the AFS experience. It will last for four to five days and will end with a welcome party before you go by train to meet your host family. Many of you will also meet your future AFS contact person at the orientation. A basic language training will be offered to you shortly afterwards.

Living in Austria

Lifestyle and Family Living

Although Austrians speak German, they have their own distinct customs, attitudes and values. Even though Austria has given hospitality to many refugees it keeps the characteristics of its long, rich cultural tradition. Austrians love to learn. They especially enjoy informal conversations about current affairs. Among the other cultural aspects are the love for the environment and cleanliness, which are reflected also in family life, along with good manners and punctuality.

Although a quarter of the Austrian population is in Vienna, you may be placed in a rural (50%) or suburban (30%) area. In these towns, families are traditional in their ways. This has a lot to do with the particular region, and a relatively patriarchal and authoritarian family structure is common. Nevertheless, Austrians are known to be highly open-minded and innovative people.

Austrian host families, like all AFS host families worldwide, are not paid. They open their homes to students in order to share their community and culture as well as to enrich their own family lives.

Dress and Appearance

Austrian students tend to dress casually. For school, jeans, T-shirts and sweatshirts are fine as Austrian schools do not require uniforms. Other important items to bring include a raincoat for summer, slippers and hiking boots. On special occasions, more formal dress is expected: for women a dress or blouse and skirt; for men a jacket and tie. It is also a good idea to bring warm clothes, like a woolen hat, gloves, scarf, heavy jacket and warm, waterproof shoes or boots as winter can be very harsh, especially in the Alpine regions.

Diet and Meals

Austrians love good food and have a rich and varied cuisine. Austrian pastry is especially renowned. For example, *strudel*, along with *wiener schnitzel* (veal cutlet), is known around the world. Meals generally consist of soup, meat (often pork) with potatoes, salad, vegetables and dessert. Other favorites include sausages, sandwiches, pastries, eggs, many different cheeses and apples. Although Austrians enjoy meat, vegetarian options are often available. Tea, apple juice with mineral water, other fruit juices and soft drinks are popular. Austrian families generally enjoy eating together. Snacking or raiding the refrigerator is not commonly done.

School

Being compulsory since 1774, Austria's public school system has a long tradition. After four years of elementary school, students attend eight years of high school. AFS students will be placed in an AHS (*Allgemeinbildende Höhere Schule*), an academic high school which is mainly a preparation for university studies. The other type of school is the BHS (*Berufsbildende Höhere Schule*), a technical/vocational high school. Austrian students may then attend one of the universities or the six academies of music and arts. You will have to participate in all subjects (about fourteen), although you can choose a minimum of seven subjects in which you will get grades. Several branches of study are offered at AHS, including German and other languages, humanities, business, music, sciences and history.

You will most likely be placed in year 11 with classmates who are 16 and 17 years old. Schools generally do not accept students in year 12 because Austrian students are very busy preparing for national exams during their last year.

While AFSers cannot obtain a diploma, you will receive confirmation of school attendance and if your performance is satisfactory, you may receive a transcript of your grades. You may receive a voucher for schoolbooks redeemable at the bookshop. Otherwise, you will have to buy the books, and AFS will reimburse you. You are highly encouraged to participate in class activities such as school trips, dance courses and "Vienna week" or "South Tyrol week," and in extracurricular activities such as sports teams, theater and skiing club (bring funds to cover these expenses—€450-550).

School runs from September to July. Classes are from 8 a.m. to approximately 2 p.m. Monday through Friday and on Saturdays from 8 a.m. to 12 p.m., although in some areas there is no school on Saturdays. Vacations are at Christmas, in February (term break) and Easter.

Teen Life

You will have a substantial amount of spare time (although a big chunk of it has to be dedicated to homework) during which you are expected to become involved in family and school activities and to meet new friends. Austrian teenagers enjoy visiting each other's houses as well as relaxing and chatting in the beautiful local cafes, watching movies and going out to dance clubs.

In what is Mozart's homeland, music is highly appreciated and many people play music or attend concerts. Austrians love the outdoors and sports, and taking walks is a national pastime. Soccer is the favorite sport, although winter sports obviously have an important role.

AFS Activities

In addition to an orientation at your arrival, AFS Austria will provide you with several others. AFS orientations allow participants to meet (often for a weekend or for a few days) to talk about expectations for the future program and past experiences. Orientations involve participating in group activities and self-examination. Sessions usually provide new information and ways of looking at things while also allowing participants to share points of view. AFS orientations are social, interactive and educational; bringing

together young people from many countries and helping them to better understand their own intercultural learning experience.

About a month and a half after your arrival, you will get together with the other AFSers in your area at a hostel for 2-3 days to talk about your placement and get advice about adjustment issues. The next major orientation will take place locally for 2-3 days and will focus more on intercultural learning.

Each year, local chapters organize activities and trips. Most chapters have monthly meetings in a café where you will be invited to join other AFS participants and volunteers.

To prepare you for returning home, there will be an evaluation camp about a month and a half before your departure. But this will not be the last time you see your fellow AFSers as AFS Austria also organizes a national End-of-Stay orientation on the day before your departure.

Language

Although a basic knowledge of German is appreciated and you should start work on it before your arrival, AFS Austria offers intensive language courses in local language schools close to your host family's home. You will be requested to pay a partial contribution of just €30, as the rest will be covered by AFS. The course will last for two to three months after which you may attend other courses on your own.

Travel

Although it is natural for you to want to travel while in Austria, AFS is not designed as a tourist program. AFS offers the rare opportunity to be immersed in a culture and a country. It is likely, however, that you will have some opportunities to travel with your host family, school or community organization. Independent travel is only allowed during school breaks and after receiving authorization by AFS Austria.

Spending Money

The cost of living in Austria is high, so plan to bring sufficient spending money. AFS recommends that students bring €100 per month.

Host families are asked to pay only for ordinary family events in which you are expected to participate. When you do things such as shopping for yourself or going out with friends, the related expenses are your responsibility, but remember that spending more than your peers and family may create a distance between you and them.

Safety and Support

Austria is a very safe country and you should do well if you follow the normal precautions you would at home.

During your stay, local AFS volunteers will be available to assist you as you learn to live as an Austrian. In the event of an emergency, AFS staff can be reached 24 hours a day by you in your host country and by your natural family at home.

For the welfare of participants, AFS worldwide has two rules: no driving and no use of drugs for non-medicinal purposes. Any student who violates one of these rules will be automatically sent home. AFS Austria may have additional rules.

Health Precautions

In addition to the precautions mentioned above, AFS suggests that you discuss the health recommendations for Austria (which you can get from your government or easily find on the Internet) with your personal doctor to determine what is best for you and your personal needs.

If you require medical assistance during your stay, your host family or local volunteers will be ready to help find it. As an AFS participant, your medical expenses are covered for illness or accident injuries incurred while on the program, exclusive of pre-existing, dental or visual aid expenses.

Documents

You must have a passport that will be valid for six months longer than your intended stay. In addition to your passport, you also need a visa to enter and reside in your host country. Visas are obtained through the consular offices in your region and requirements often vary from consulate to consulate.

Consulates charge fees for their services, and obtaining your visa can be a complicated and lengthy process requiring a great deal of paperwork, patience and persistence. It is your responsibility to obtain your visa and pay the fees. However, AFS will let you know how to proceed and will provide you with the documents you need to apply for the visa.

Program Prices

All participants are required to pay participation fee **and** do a mandatory fundraising. To get further information, please visit our website www.afscanada.org or contact us.

The program price covers the following: round-trip international travel with your AFS group; travel in the host country to your host family; travel from your host family to your international departure point; AFS's medical plan; placement with your host; orientation in your home country and your host country; 24 hour emergency assistance in your home and host countries; a global medical assistance organization to support extreme emergencies; a network of trained volunteers who support you throughout your experience.

In order to keep costs low and provide good service, AFS utilizes a network of volunteers and staff in 50+ countries around the world. Volunteers need training, support and assistance from professional staff in each country. Other expenses you will normally need to pay in addition to the program price: passport and visa fees, required inoculations, expenses for eyeglasses, contacts and dental care, school uniforms (where applicable) and personal spending money. Your housing and food are provided by your host family as part of their commitment to our program.

Country Information

Geography and Climate

A landlocked country in central Europe, Austria is bordered by eight nations: Italy, Switzerland, Liechtenstein, Germany, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, and Slovenia. The south and west feature Alpine regions with high mountains studded with lakes and apple orchards. To the north are the forests of the Bohemian Massif, divided from the Alps by the great Danube valley.

Austria generally enjoys a mild climate; spring and summer are temperate (with a high temperature of 35°C/85°F), while winters in some mountainous areas can be very cold. Autumn is a lovely, mostly dry season with temperatures between 10°C (50°F) and 20°C (70°F). Winter weather varies depending on altitude: the temperature range varies between -10°C (15°F) and +5°C (40°F).

Population

The population of Austria is 8.2 million, with 1.7 million living in Vienna. In Austria, people from many different nations live together (mainly from Eastern Europe).

Language

The official language is High German, although each region also has its own dialect.

Government

Austria is a federal republic composed of nine states (*Bundeslaender*). The president is elected by popular vote for a term of six years. The bicameral legislature consists of the 58-member of *Bundesrat* and the 183-member *Nationalrat*.

Religion

Approximately 78% of Austrians are Roman Catholic and approximately 5% are Protestant. Other religions, mostly Islam, count for 17%.

Launching Your AFS Experience

Evaluations by previous participants support our belief that those students who prepare themselves prior to leaving have the best experience. In order to prepare yourself, first make every effort to learn some key German words and phrases so that you arrive with at least some basic knowledge of the language. To further familiarize yourself with life in Austria, make use of your local library and/or the Internet. There is a lot of general information about Austria and its culture.

Although each participant's experience is unique, we strongly suggest that you speak with a recent AFS participant to Austria. This person will be an excellent resource regarding living as an Austrian. If you do not know any alumni, please contact your local volunteer or AFS Interculture Canada office. In addition, AFS Austria will provide you with a special packet of country-specific information.

Austrian people will be curious about your home community. You may be surprised to find out how much they already know about your country. Therefore, it is helpful to be as informed as possible about current events in your community and country.

Curiously Austrian

- ☀ Austria has one of the world's oldest school systems, dating from 1774 when the reigning Empress Maria Theresia declared it mandatory.

How to Apply

You first have to fill out the Preliminary Application form that you can find on our website at www.afscanada.org. If you don't have access to Internet, call us at (514) 288-3282 or 1-800-361-7248 and we will send you the document by mail.

Quick Facts

Student age (upon arrival)	15 years 5 months to 18 years	
Country data	Size	83,858 km ² 32,705 mi ²
	Population	8,169,929
	Official Language	German
	Government	Federal Republic
	Currency	Euro, divided in 100 cents.
Useful website	http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/attoc.html http://www.austria.gv.at/e/oesterreich/index.htm http://bau2.uibk.ac.at/guerti/weanarisch/ http://www.austria-tourism.at/ http://www.bmaa.gv.at/index.html.en	
AFS Austria website	http://www.afs.at/	

Why Austria

- ☀ Austria's beautiful scenery has a lot to offer (Alps, lakes, rivers, hills and very flat areas). It is a small country, so it is possible to see all of Austria during an AFS school program. All sorts of indoor and outdoor activities are available.
- ☀ Austrians are open-hearted people, very friendly and famous for their *Gemuetlichkeit*.
- ☀ Austria has a very high quality of life.
- ☀ Austria is a very safe country and has a stable government.
- ☀ Austria has a tremendous cultural background. There are also many cultural events throughout the year as well as many theaters, operas, concerts and other opportunities.