

FINLAND

"In Finland I was blessed with a perfect family, who supported me, they cared for me and they made efforts to help me out every single time I asked. It's an amazing family." Diogo Valerio, participant from Brazil

Finland was once ruled by Sweden, later by Russia—and Finnish culture, especially its food, absorbed the influences of both countries. Yet today Finland is in most ways unique. Its language is challenging, its architecture is distinctive, and its people keep their society homogenous by discouraging immigration. At the same time, although Finns are personally reserved, they are eager to share their heritage with visitors, and they stage hundreds of arts festivals. They are also among international leaders at interconnecting the world through technology. Ecologically, the World Economic Forum ranked Finland first in environmental health among 142 nations, and the little-developed northern third of the country, lying above of the Arctic Circle, is Europe's last frontier.

AFS & Your Experience

AFS Finland has been around since 1948. About 1,800 AFS volunteers in more than 15 chapters across the country work hard year-round to provide you with the most satisfying intercultural experience possible. During the school year, AFS Finland hosts approximately 120 AFSers from as many as 30 countries.

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 Finland

Your flight will arrive in Helsinki, the capital of Finland. Then you and your fellow AFSers will pass through customs and be met by AFS Finland staff and volunteers. Students placed in central or northern Finland will most likely fly to their host communities later that day or the following morning if late arrival necessitates an overnight stay in Helsinki.

Arrival Orientation

A regional post-arrival orientation is organized for a weekend one or two weeks after your arrival. The orientation will give you a chance to learn more about Finnish society, culture, family life, school and AFS Finland. A language orientation will also be held four to six weeks after your arrival to help you unravel the mysteries of Finnish and Swedish.

Living in Finland

Lifestyle and Family Living

Finns tend to be shy and reserved at first, but as you get to know them they show themselves to be warm, affectionate, gracious and open-minded. They maintain high ideals of loyalty and reliability, and they appreciate good manners, respect for others and punctuality.

Family life is important, even though family structures are diverse. But families have one thing in common: a willingness to open their homes, without compensation, to an exchange student in order to share their community and culture as well as enrich the own family lives.

There is lots of interaction within Finnish families. It is normal for both parents to work, and it is common for everybody to share the daily chores. Plan on making your bed and keeping your room in order. Teenagers are normally brought up to be independent about making decisions for themselves and to be responsible for their actions. Most Finnish families are busy during the week and do not always spend a lot of time together. You will probably have a weekday curfew and a later one on weekends, and the family will expect you to keep them informed of your whereabouts and activities. Let them know if you will not be home when expected.

Most AFSers are placed in small towns and rural areas.

Dress and Appearance

Finns tend to dress casually. Teenagers like T-shirts, jeans, shorts (in the summer), sweats and sweaters. Most girls wear pants instead of skirts. On special occasions more formal dress is expected: for women a dress or blouse and skirt; for men a jacket, slacks and tie. Clothes are expensive in Finland, so you will do well to bring with you what you need.

Diet and Meals

Everyday food tends to be simple but nutritious, and meal times are less formal than in some other countries. The Finnish diet is based on meat, fish, potatoes, pasta, bread and dairy products. Vegetables in the northern climate tend to be seasonal. Although vegetarianism is not rare, vegetarians are difficult to place. Coffee is a favorite beverage, even among teenagers. Salads and *smorgasbord* are popular.

Lunch at school is served about noon or earlier and is free and usually quite healthy. At dinner time, if family members are on conflicting schedules, each person warms up his or her own food, perhaps in the microwave. On weekends, many families live a more communal life and often dine together.

School

The education system in Finland is composed of comprehensive schools, upper secondary schools, vocational and professional education institutions and universities. Compulsory education consists of a free nine-year comprehensive school starting when students reach the age of seven. Students may continue their studies either in upper secondary schools, in vocational institutes or in commercial colleges. Some pupils enter working life after completing comprehensive school.

Upper secondary school is academically oriented and about 50% of the age group attends it. Most upper secondary schools are run by the municipality and only a few by the state or privately. A nationwide student exam is taken after three years of upper secondary school and is usually required for entry into a university. Most AFS students are placed in the first or second class of upper secondary school, because final year students must concentrate on studying for this exam.

Most subjects are compulsory, but there are also elective courses that are worth looking into. You should have at least 25 hours of school per week. You will have several subjects, but you will engage in intensive study of only a few of them at a time, then continue on to other subjects. This is because the school year is divided into five or six terms, and the weekly schedule is different during each term.

Subjects offered by Finnish schools are: Finnish and Swedish, foreign languages—English, German, French and Russian (some schools also offer Latin, Spanish and Italian)—mathematics and physics (basic and advanced), chemistry, biology, psychology, history, physical education and student counseling. At the end of each course, a pupil's work is graded (5 being poor and 10 being outstanding). You must receive at least a 5 to pass.

All teaching, with the exception of foreign languages, is done in Finnish or Swedish. In the beginning, you may find it hard to follow, but as you learn more of the languages, school will become more interesting, so be patient!

School begins in mid-August and ends in the beginning of June at the latest. In addition to a summer vacation (from June to mid-August), students have Christmas, winter and Easter vacations. Some schools also have a fall vacation.

School itself is free to you. AFS will pay for the traveling costs to and from school if you must use public transportation. Schoolbooks are expensive, and because you will need each book for only a short time, you should try to borrow schoolbooks from your host siblings, your contact teacher, the library or the AFS office. If, however, you need to buy some books, AFS Finland will purchase them for you. Other school supplies (such as pencils and notebooks) as well as the class photo you will have to pay for yourself. Schools do not require uniforms.

Teen Life

As an exchange student, you will live a normal Finnish life, with homework to do and not much free time on weekdays. Some schools offer photography, computer sciences, drama, sports and language clubs, which may take up some of your time.

Finns spend their free time in a variety of ways. If you participate with your exchange family in its interests and activities, go for walks, visit the excellent local libraries, meet friends, and get involved in after-school activities, you will enjoy yourself and feel at home.

On weekends, teenagers like to go to movies, discos and parties, and those with driver's licenses like to go driving. Much of the time, young people go around in groups of girls and boys, meeting at popular places for socializing. If you go out on a date, it is not polite to let your date pay for everything. Normally daters pay for themselves.

Students are usually invited to join school trips, community and regional events (e.g., festivals) and to give presentations about their own countries.

Finns love sports such as camping, swimming, jogging, bicycling, skiing, basketball and ice hockey. *Saunas* are a traditional way for people in Scandinavia to relax. One thing to keep in mind is that Finns, like their Nordic neighbors, tend to be liberal and open-minded, and those who take *saunas* typically do so naked, even when both sexes are present.

Spending Money

Remember, the cost of living is high in Finland, so plan on bringing sufficient spending money. AFS recommends that about US\$1,600 in traveler's checks will be sufficient for a full academic year to cover your spending money needs. Host families are asked to pay only for ordinary family events in which you are expected to participate. When you do such things as shopping for yourself or going out with friends, the expenses are your responsibility.

Spending more than your peers and family may create a distance between you and them.

Safety and Support

Finland is a very safe country, and you should do well if you follow the normal precautions you would use in your home country.

During your stay, local AFS volunteers will be available to assist you as you learn to live as a Finn. 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 either of these rules will be automatically sent home. AFS Finland may have additional rules.

Health Precautions

In addition to the precautions mentioned above, AFS suggests that you discuss the health recommendations for Finland (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 any 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 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 of your host country, 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

Finland is located in Northern Europe, bordering the Baltic Sea, Gulf of Bothnia and Gulf of Finland, between Sweden, Russia and Norway. The terrain of Finland is divided into four parts. Archipelago Finland begins in the southwestern coastal waters and ends in the Aland Islands. Coastal Finland is a band of clay plains extending from Russia to the Swedish border. Seldom exceeding a width of 100 kilometers, plains slope upward to a central plateau with an interior lake district. This core region contains more than 55,000 lakes set within country's densest forests. Rising above the central plateau, upland Finland extends into Lapland, where forests gradually yield to the harsh arctic climate. Above the timber line are barren sections of land and numerous bogs. Upland Finland is crossed by country's largest and longest rivers.

The climate of Finland is relatively mild considering Finland's proximity to the Arctic Circle. This is due to the influence of the Gulf Stream in the North Atlantic Drift currents moderate temperatures somewhat; though winter still lasts up to seven months in the north, and most years the Gulfs of Finland and Bothnia freeze, making icebreakers necessary for shipping. Long days in summer permit farming far to the north. Continental weather systems can bring warm summer temperatures and severe cold spells during the winter.

In Helsinki, late June and July are the brightest and warmest time of year, with 20 hours of daylight and an average temperature of 17C° (64°F).

Population

The population numbers about five million. Helsinki is the capital and principal city.

Language

Ninety-three percent of the population speaks Finnish, a language that has common roots with Estonian and Hungarian. Swedish is also an official language, and both are spoken in bilingual areas.

Government

Finland is a western parliamentary democracy. The President is elected for six years by popular vote and appoints a cabinet. The 200 members of the legislature serve four-year terms. Finland has maintained political neutrality with the major political powers and is on good terms with both the East and the West. Finland became a member of the European Union in 1995.

Religion

The majority (95%) of Finns belongs to the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland, but churchgoing does not always play a big role in family life. Freedom of religion is important to the Finns; you should feel free to worship as you wish.

Launching Your AFS Experience

Evaluations by previous participants support our belief that those students who prepare prior to leaving have the best experience. In order to get ready, first make every effort to learn some key Finnish words and phrases so that you arrive with at least some basic knowledge of the language.

To familiarize yourself further with life in Finland, make use of your local library and/or the Internet. A lot of general information is available about Finland and its culture.

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

Finnish 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 also helpful to be as informed as possible about current events in your community and country.

Curiously Finnish

- Ten percent of Finland's territory is constituted by lakes, which number more than 187,000.
- In Lapland (northern Finland), which is above the Arctic Circle, the sun never sets in early summer and never rises in early winter.

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)	16 to 18 years old	
Country data	Size	336,959 km ² (130,099 mi ²)
	Population	5,176,000
	Official languages	Finish, Swedish
	Government	Parliamentary republic
	Currency	Euro, divided into 100 cents
Useful websites	http://virtual.finland.fi/ http://www.visitfinland.com/ http://finland.cimo.fi/ http://www.projectfinland.org	
AFS Finland website	www.afs.fi	