

ITALY

Italy, in its dynamic industrialized north as well as in its slower agrarian south, may be the world's most art-filled nation. Italian artists and architects have been producing masterworks for 3,000 years. Today, Italy's Tuscany region alone has more classified historical monuments than any other entire country. Ravishing churches are everywhere, some displaying enough fine sculptures and paintings to fill a museum. Surrounded and stimulated by this cultural largess, Italians can become passionate about almost everything—politics, soccer, opera, fashion, even food, and with good reason: Italian cooking is one of the world's favorite cuisines, whether dished up in high-toned restaurants or in Mom's kitchen.

AFS & Your Experience

AFS Italy or *Intercultura* has been in existence since 1946. It works in cooperation with the Italian Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Education and Culture, as well as with regional and municipal governments and private organizations in Italy. AFS Italy numbers about 3,500 volunteers located all around the country. During the school year, AFS Italy hosts approximately 400 AFSers from as many as 40 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 Italy

Your flight will arrive in Rome, the capital of Italy. After the plane lands and you collect your baggage, you will pass through customs and be met by AFS Italy staff and volunteers.

Arrival Orientation

You and your fellow AFSers will have a one-night orientation near Rome and then go to your host families. After six weeks, you will have four days of orientation and evaluation of the first part of your stay.

Living in Italy

Lifestyle and Family Living

Italians are often described as warm and friendly people. Strong, traditional ties bind families together and are of great importance, although Italian family dynamics vary from zone to zone. Normally, northern Italians are a little more reserved than southern Italians.

There is a wide range of host families; most of them are middle-class. Many host mothers are housewives; fathers generally work and spend many hours away from home. Fathers usually help very little with domestic chores, although this kind of behaviour is changing, especially among young couples.

Young people tend to live at home often until they get married. Teens do not normally have part-time jobs, therefore are dependent on a weekly or monthly allowance from their parents.

Host families are usually quite strict regarding schedules. Students must follow family rules and be helpful with chores. Most parents want to know where a student is going when he/she leaves the house, who the student is going with, etc. and there is a curfew which students must respect. Students are expected to accept all family rules, not try to impose his/her own.

Soccer and politics (Italian and international) are the most popular topics of conversation. People tend to pay close attention to national issues from politics, taxes and school to accidents, kidnapping and tragedies, as well as international politics.

Houses in Italy vary. Generally, there are three types: apartments or condominiums, big country houses surrounded by land, or townhouses with a small garden or yard. Naturally, whether an AFSer will share a bedroom depends on the kind of house; very often they do.

Italians are not very punctual. They usually arrive at appointments at least 30 minutes late. Above all, Italians are happy and easygoing, always ready to have fun or to laugh at a good joke. They place great importance on friendship and loyalty to their family and friends. Italians are usually very willing to help others, even if this means going out of their way.

Selfishness and strong individualism are frowned upon. It is common to offer to share whatever you are eating. It is considered rude if you eat something in front of others without offering.

Italians usually take the initiative when meeting people, especially foreigners. People from other countries are always welcome, and everybody, from small children to grandparents, tries to make visitors comfortable. Foreigners always attract Italians, who are generally friendly and helpful towards them and show a great deal of patience when visitors have difficulty communicating in Italian.

Italians are passionate in the way they talk. In the beginning, you may think that everybody is arguing, but do not worry, Italians normally talk like that—loudly, gesturing with their hands and making emphatic facial expressions. In addition, Italians drive everywhere and are hooked on mobile telephones.

Dress and Appearance

Italians believe it is important to dress well at all times. In general, young people dress informally but with care, wearing jeans and T-shirts during the warm season. Seasonal and regional clothing are appropriate. If you are sent to the alpine region of Italy, come prepared for a long, cold winter. If you will be on the southern Mediterranean coast, winter will be short and rainy, and summer will be hot. Schools seldom require uniforms.

Diet and Meals

Italians normally eat three times a day: breakfast at 7:30 a.m., lunch at 1:30 or 2:00 p.m., and dinner at 8:00 or 9:00 p.m.

Italians generally have a light breakfast of coffee with milk or tea along with cookies, crackers or bread with jam or honey. Do not be afraid to ask for a more substantial breakfast that includes fruit, cheese or bread. Lunch is the biggest meal of day, with a big plate of pasta cooked with all kind of things (tomato sauce is the most familiar), followed by meat, fish, cheeses, vegetables or salads. Afterwards there may be fruit and dessert. Dinner is a little smaller than lunch, but with bigger portions of meat, fish or vegetables together with cheese, ham and bread. Vegetarians are difficult to place.

During meals, Italians drink water and wine but seldom soft drinks, and often they watch the news on TV. After lunch Italians love to drink coffee, and sometime they have a nap (especially in the south).

After you finish eating, your host family will always tell you “have some more” and if you do not, they will complain about it, but never be afraid to tell them that you are just too full to eat more.

Meals are important moments of the day, and family members always eat together when they are at home. It is a great time for socializing and talking about what has been going on at work, school and with friends. You should offer to help with the meals and not expect to be waited on. The Italians eat very fast, holding the knife in the right hand and the fork in the left. They keep both hands on the table while eating and between courses. Italians are very proud of their cooking, which they believe to be the best in the world.

School

The Italian Constitution guarantees the right to education for all, regardless of means, up to the highest level; freedom in teaching methods; and an education free of ideological manipulation. The Constitution also gives the State the power to set requirements for education at all levels and establishes that at least the first 10 years of education (from ages six to 16) are compulsory and free of charge for all.

Italian schools are divided into Elementary school (five years), Middle or Junior school (three years), and high school (five years, with the first two compulsory).

The Italian system has different kinds of high schools: Classical Liceo, Scientific Liceo, Linguistic Liceo (all Academic schools), Artistic Liceo, Art School (both Artistic schools), Technical Institutes and Vocational Institutes.

The school year runs from mid-September to mid-June with two weeks off at Christmas and one week off at Easter, along with various other national or local holidays throughout the year. The school week is usually from Monday to Saturday, 8 a.m. to 2 p.m.

In high school, students are given daily homework, and they might have a daily oral test (with grades) in each subject about all they have studied during the previous two to three weeks. There are also monthly written tests for each subject.

The grading system: 10 & 9 outstanding; 8 & 7 very good, 6 good, 5 average, 4 poor, 3, 2 and 1 failing. Student-teacher relationships are formal; behaviour is evaluated and can affect final grades. Students whose grades are less than 6 in more than three subjects must repeat the whole year.

Students do not change classrooms every period. They stay in the same classroom with the same people for all their high school years.

All subjects are compulsory, and their number can vary from eight to 13, according to the kind of the school. At the end of the last high school year, students must take a state examination (written and oral) that covers everything studied in every subject during the past three years. Once they have passed this exam, students get a certificate, called a diploma, which allows them to enter a university.

Italian schools are very demanding. Intercultura students are expected to study hard and to participate in school life as Italian kids their age do. AFS students should ask their program counsellors or school counsellors to help them choose at least four to five subjects that they must concentrate on. They are usually placed in the third or fourth year of high school. Attendance and participation is compulsory for AFSers.

Teen Life

Because schools do not organize many extracurricular activities, students usually organize their free time on their own. Foreign students who have been in the program have noticed that young Italians talk a lot in the afternoon about what they are going to do later, but rarely ever do what they had planned earlier.

On weekdays, teens first complete their homework, then walk around with friends in the town square or up and down the main streets. Sometime they get together at a friend's house, or they go to places where they can play sports or do other activities.

Young people can generally stay out until late on Saturday night and, if the family is more liberal, perhaps one or two other nights during the week. On weekends, they usually go to pizzerias, pubs or discos. They also go to movies, theaters, concerts, sport events, the beach or the country.

Remember that your family will expect you to keep them informed of where you are going, with whom and when you will be home.

AFS Activities

In addition to an orientation at your arrival, AFS Italy will provide you with several others. AFS orientations are a chance for 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.

There will be a Weekend Orientation Camp for all students approximately six weeks after arrival. This will last for four days (three nights), giving students a chance to talk about their experiences so far. Volunteers have a chance to evaluate the students and to help them if needed.

Then there is a final evaluation camp (End of Stay) approximately three weeks prior to the students' departure. This lasts for four days (three nights) and serves to evaluate the students, their experiences and the amount of

language and culture they have absorbed. It also gathers the students for one last time to learn and share thoughts about their experiences. Both the survival orientation camp and the evaluation camp are organized on a regional basis, and participation is mandatory.

In addition, many local chapters organize activities for students and host families throughout the year, such as parties and excursions to other cities in Italy. Excursions may be at the students' expense. Usually in March, local chapters organize an exchange week in which the students can choose to experience another part of Italy.

Language

Local chapters are responsible for organizing a language course for the students, meeting two or three times a week according to each student's language preparation. The number of hours varies from 40 to 60.

Travel

Although it is natural for you to want to travel while in Italy, 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 many opportunities to travel with your host family, school, community organization, local chapter or AFS Italy. We strongly discourage travelling on your own or with friends.

Spending Money

The cost of living in Italy is high, so plan on bringing sufficient spending money. AFS recommends that students bring €200 to €250 per month for spending money. Students can also use travellers' checks or credit cards, or they can open a bank account. Every student, however, should arrive in Italy with at least €100 in cash.

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

Italy is a 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 an Italian. 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 Italy may have additional rules.

Health Precautions

In addition to the precautions mentioned above, AFS suggests that you discuss the health recommendations for Italy (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 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

Italy is shaped like a boot. The "heel" and some coastal areas are low in elevation, but the country is generally mountainous: the Italian Alps lie along the northern border, and the Apennines form a spine down the peninsula. Italy borders France, Switzerland, Austria and Slovenia in the north, and the rest of the country is surrounded by the Mediterranean Sea with 7,500 km (4,700 mil) of coast.

The main islands of Sicily and Sardinia are also rocky or mountainous. The Po River basin in the north holds some of Italy's richest farmland and most of its heavy industry. Agricultural areas in the south are subject to droughts. The climate is generally temperate. However, the country is long and narrow, and the climate varies between the north and the south. This affects the different lifestyles of the populations in these regions.

Population

The population in Italy is of 57.6 million and is growing at 0.2% annually. Most people are ethnic Italians, but there are also small groups of Germans and French as well as Slovenians, Albanians and other immigrants.

Language

Italian is the official language, although there are different dialects from city to city. There are significant French- and German-speaking minorities as well as Slovene speakers close to the Yugoslavian border.

Government

Italy's government has a president, a prime minister, a bicameral legislature and a Council of Ministers. The prime minister and the Council of Ministers govern the nation. The country is divided into 20 regions, some of which would like to have more autonomy from the central government.

Religion

The majority of Italians are Roman Catholic, although religious devotion is often neglected. Many Italian celebrations are Catholic holidays, and there are also some national holidays such as Liberation Day, Labor Day, and the Anniversary of the Republic. Celebrations are often spent with family and friends in large gatherings. During these occasions, large, traditional meals are prepared.

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 Italian words and phrases so that you arrive with at least some basic knowledge of the language.

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

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

Italian 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. We wish you a wonderful experience!

Curiously Italian

- * In Italy, it is against the law to make a coffin out of anything except wood or nutshells.
- * Santa Claus does not bring gifts to the children of Italy but rather a kindly witch *La Befana*.
- * Wine and lemonade merchants in Italy in the 1600s called coffee "Satan's drink" due to its threat to their markets. These merchants asked the Pope to issue an edict condemning coffee. However, their plan backfired when Pope Clement VII tasted coffee, liked it and blessed it to make it a Christian drink.

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 to 18 years	
Country data	Size	301,278 km ² (116,293 mi ²)
	Population	57,679,825
	Official language	Italian
	Government	Parliamentary republic
	Currency	Euro, 1€ = 100 cents
Useful website	http://www.nationmaster.com/country/it	
AFS Italy website	www.intercultura.it	