

SWITZERLAND

"Before I left South Africa for my year in Switzerland, I thought the whole world practically consisted of South African people who differed from myself only slightly! "During my exchange, I learned that people are different and that deeper things separate you from one another than just language or traditions. "Nearing the end of your year, you begin to understand and appreciate your newly found second home just as much as your real one back home. At the end, I began to realize that even though things make us different from one another, many more things make us similar. "After my exchange, I realize that being different is what becomes so beautiful about this experience. Thank you, Switzerland." Raedene Russon, participant from South Africa

The 19th century German writer Goethe called Switzerland a combination of "the colossal and the well-ordered"—and the spectacular Alps, which account for 60% of Swiss terrain, are certainly colossal. Likewise, the Swiss themselves lead meticulously well-ordered lives, most famously as detail-obsessed bankers and watchmakers. They are also polite and respectful of everyone's privacy, which visitors can mistake for aloofness. But in fact, Swiss culture is a friendly stew of four official languages—German, French, Italian and Romansh—each contributing different traditions and cuisines to the national ethos. The Swiss are proud of this diversity, but they are leery of diversifying further. They have been internationally neutral for centuries, even avoiding full membership in the United Nations until 2002 and still not a full member of the European Union, in part to discourage the influence of other cultures. And although the Swiss are committed to world peace, every Swiss male must serve in the army and keep a rifle at home. In fact, many Swiss work at perfecting their marksmanship as avidly as they ski.

AFS & Your Experience

AFS Interkulturelle Programme has been in existence in Switzerland since 1953. About 400 AFS volunteers in more than 30 chapters across the country work hard year-round to provide you with the most satisfying intercultural experience possible. During the school year, AFS Switzerland hosts approximately 230 students from as many as 24 countries.

Landing in Switzerland

When you arrive in Zurich, you and your fellow AFSers will be met by AFS Switzerland staff, volunteers and your host families and go to your new home. If your host family lives far away, you will travel by train to your host community. Before you leave for Switzerland, you will receive informational materials written from the perspective of former hosted students.

Living in Switzerland

Lifestyle and Family Living

The Swiss value hard work, sobriety, thrift and independence. They prize tolerance, punctuality, cleanliness, orderliness and a sense of responsibility. However, the concept of "Swiss people" does not exist; the population is made up of four ethnic groups: German Swiss, French Swiss, Italian Swiss and Romansh. Germans dominate with 65% of the population. The French are located mostly in the west; the Italians in the south. Though ethnic variety divides Switzerland, the Swiss are unified by the common custom of having pets (90% of Swiss families have a cat or a dog).

The nuclear family is the most important social unit. Family privacy is important. On weekends, families are often active together, taking trips or visiting family or friends. Teenagers are generally given a fair amount of independence. To get around, you can rely on well-organized public transportation, but many Swiss also walk and bike. It is easy to get around, and cities are in most cases easily accessible. AFSers most frequently live in suburban areas (60%), rather than urban ones (20%). Even in small towns, though, cultural activities such as theater or music are always available. Placements are generally in German-speaking communities.

Swiss host families, like 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

Swiss teenagers generally wear casual clothes and people dress as in other western countries. Often the same outfit will be worn for a number of days. Bring warm winter clothing such as a heavy jacket, scarf, gloves and boots. For the summer, light clothing, such as jeans and T-shirts, is appropriate. It will also be helpful to bring a musical instrument, if you have one, or outdoor sports gear.

Diet and Meals

The evening dinner is the main meal of the day and is an opportunity for the family to eat together, exchange views and make plans. Swiss families tend to care about healthy foods. They cook with chicken or beef broth rather than with oil, and salads and vegetables are plentiful. Vegetarians will find plenty of options. Breakfast is usually bread, butter and jam, and yogurt or *muesli* (a natural grain cereal). For lunch at school, students usually pack food from home or buy a warm meal in the cafeteria.

Swiss cuisine is mainly a union of French and German alpine cuisine. One famous dish is *fondue* in which *Emmenthaler* and *Gruyère* cheese is melted with white wine and eaten with bread cubes. *Rosti* (a crispy, fried, shredded potato) is the Swiss-German national dish. Although Switzerland does not have a seacoast, fresh-water fish are eaten. Switzerland is famous for its chocolate. It is eaten frequently and used often in cooking.

School

Swiss schools require foreign students to have some knowledge of German or French. For AFSers with little or no language background who live near Zurich or Berne, AFS Switzerland organizes four weeks of language training (the whole day, five days per week) after you have been placed with your families and prior to the start of school (students who attend this intensive language training start school upon completion of the four-week course). Most other students attend an intensive language course at a private language school or receive two to four hours of tutoring a week.

Switzerland is divided into 26 cantons, and the school system is under cantonal authority. Therefore, systems and names vary a lot. However, the following generalizations can be made: school starts in August and goes to the end of June or the middle of July. Classes are from 8 a.m. to 5 or 6 p.m. usually Monday through Friday, some with a half-day on Saturday. Vacations include two weeks in the fall, 10 days at Christmas, one or two weeks in the winter, two weeks in the spring and five to six weeks in summer. Students attend approximately 30 to 35 classes a week; each class lasts 45 minutes. One hour is allowed for lunch.

The Swiss school system is very competitive, and you are expected to participate fully and actively. You will probably be placed in a *maturitätsschulen* (high school) which has several sections (classical, modern languages, scientific, commercial). A broad range of academic subjects is available, but the main compulsory courses will be German/French, math, history, geography, biology and physical education. One or more additional languages other than the one spoken in the canton are generally studied. You can receive a certificate of attendance or a transcript if all academic requirements are met.

Class relations may be different from what you are used to. Teenagers in Switzerland tend to have fewer, but closer, friends and to move in smaller circles. Your school classroom is one of the best places to make friends. A class of approximately 20 students will stay together for all lessons. Since lessons cover most of the day, there are not many extracurricular activities offered by schools. Swiss students tend to get involved more in clubs and teams on their own. You can ask your host family, AFS volunteers or new schoolmates for suggestions of activities to pursue outside of school.

Teen Life

Social life in Switzerland may differ greatly from what you are accustomed to. Family activities vary widely. A sociable family will often invite friends and relatives to their homes. On the other hand, you may have a host father who is happiest when you leave him alone with his newspaper. It would not be unusual for your host family to plan a few family activities for you to participate in. They may even want to show you off in their community. You should make yourself available for such occasions. You should also look for a chance to join a club or to get involved in community activities such as village festivals, gymnastics meets or historic celebrations.

Since schools offer virtually no social activities (except an occasional fraternity or orchestra), social life must be organized on your own initiative. You will be expected to create activities outside of school. Many Swiss teenagers play one or more kinds of sports and are members of a sports club or team, and they have practice once or twice a week. Many also play a musical instrument and take lessons in the evening. During the week, high school students usually do not go out because they have homework to do. On weekends, however, young Swiss frequently go out in groups or sometimes with just one friend. They like to meet with friends, go to movies, discos or parties or just hang out in a local café or at each other's homes. Most of the time, girls will be expected to pay for themselves, as equality between the sexes is the norm.

Many young people are involved in scouting. AFSers interested in going skiing should bring extra money since this activity is expensive.

The Swiss appreciate nature and the outdoors. They love to go hiking, skiing and bicycling. You will most likely do a lot of walking and biking to get around. The Swiss also enjoy walks, watching movies and attending cultural events.

AFS Activities

AFS Switzerland will provide you with several orientations. AFS orientations are a chance for participants to meet (often for a weekend or for a few days) and 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.

Some local chapters may organize special events, activities and trips for your enjoyment. During the year they will probably organize fundraising drives to help pay for some of your school-related expenses. After you have been living in Switzerland for three to four weeks, you will get together for a two- to three-day orientation. This will be held regionally on a weekend, and by that time you will be ready to talk about Swiss life and your experiences.

Another activity you can look forward to is the exchange week, when you will have a chance to live in another place in the same language area for one week and meet other AFSers from the same region.

Finally there is the End-of-Stay orientation, a camp where you will get together with other AFSers three to four weeks before you return home. The End-of-Stay will last for about three days and is about looking back at your exchange experience and sharing memories with other AFSers.

Language

If you have studied German, French or Italian for less than two years, AFS Switzerland will organize an intensive language course at the beginning of your experience. Depending on your location, this may mean having lessons with a tutor once or twice a week for the first three months. If your knowledge of German, French or Italian is good enough, you will attend school immediately.

Travel

Although it is natural for you to want to travel while in Switzerland, 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 Switzerland. AFS Switzerland will offer you a half-fare ticket for all train rides within Switzerland, reducing your travel expenses during your sojourn.

Spending Money

Switzerland is an expensive country. 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.

AFS recommends that students bring about \$170 a month for spending money. You may open a bank account once you get to Switzerland.

Safety and Support

Switzerland is a very safe country, and you will do well if you follow the advice of your family and AFS. During your stay, local AFS volunteers will be available to assist you as you learn to live as a Swiss. 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 Switzerland may have additional rules.

Health Precautions

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

Switzerland is located at the heart of Western Europe and is bordered by France, Germany, Austria, Liechtenstein and Italy. Switzerland, proud of a long history of political neutrality, is not part of the European Union. The country can be divided into three general regions: the Alps, which occupy the central and southern regions; the Swiss plateau and the Jura, mountains that border France in the

northwest. Most of Switzerland's big cities are in the Swiss plateau, but Switzerland is more than 60% mountains, often covered with forests.

The climate varies according to altitude and region but is generally temperate. While winters can be long and snowy, summers are mild and dry.

Switzerland's climate ranges from Mediterranean hot around Ticino in the south to more temperate Central European. Temperatures generally vary between 20° and 25°C (70's°F) in summer (June to September) and between 2° and 6°C (35°-40°F) in winter (November to March). The Alps also sustain glaciers.

Population

The population of Switzerland is 7.3 million. Berne is the capital, and Zurich and Geneva are the principal cities. The main groups are defined by their native language: German 65%, French 18%, Italian 10%, Romansh 1%. Switzerland has a big immigrant population, and it is very common to meet non-native Swiss.

Language

The official and written languages are German, French, Italian and Romansh. The Swiss-German dialect is spoken in the German-speaking areas of Switzerland. Romansh is a language that derives directly from ancient Latin and has survived and developed in the isolation of Alpine valleys.

Government

The Swiss Confederation consists of 26 sovereign cantons with a constitution that was adopted on May 29, 1874. Federal authority is vested in a bicameral legislature. A parliament elects the president who serves one year and is succeeded by the vice president.

Religion

Approximately 46% of the Swiss are Roman Catholic, and approximately 40% are Protestant. Religious affiliations generally reflect the native language. Although most French-speaking Swiss are Catholic, the city of Geneva is mainly Calvinist (Protestant).

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

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

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

Swiss 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 Swiss

- ☼ Switzerland is the only country with a square flag.
- ☼ As part of Swiss democracy, all political matters are decided through referendums.
- ☼ Since Switzerland's formation, it has claimed neutrality and therefore is not part of any international political organization.

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 5 months	
Country data	Size	39,770 km ² (15,510 mi ²)
	Population	7,301,994
	Official languages	German, French, Italian, Romansh
	Government	Federal republic
	Currency	Franc, divided into 100 centimes
Useful websites	http://www.eda.admin.ch/washington_emb/e/home/culedu/cultur.html http://www.pvv.ntnu.no/~heidit/felt.html http://www.about.ch/ http://www.myswitzerland.com http://www.switzerland-in-sight.ch	
AFS Interkulturelle Programme websites	http://www.afs.ch/	