



# Focus on Belgium French School Program

*“Since the first day, I have been welcomed like a son and a brother by my new family. Throughout the year, I had the feeling that I had never left my real family. On the contrary, my new family offered me all I could miss: love, assistance and understanding. I have also been warmly welcomed at school. I was the only foreigner there and I think that in my whole life I have never said hello to so many people in one day, with so much emotion.”*

*Luis, sojourner from Mexico*

Belgians in the south speak French, a Romance language; those in the north speak Flemish, which is Germanic. The two Belgian cultures reflect a similar difference: southerners, whose land is more forested and hilly, have a distinctly French joie de vivre. Belgium’s art, food and architecture have been influenced by Rome, Spain, Austria, France, the Netherlands and Germany, each of which ruled the country during the past 2,000 years—giving Belgians a healthy skepticism of authority. But such skepticism has not made French-speaking Belgians insular. They are comfortable embracing the world’s contemporary culture while living among streets and squares that still feel medieval.

## ***AFS & Your Experience***

AFS Belgium has been in existence since 1948. Today AFS Belgium is separated into two regional operations; the AFS headquarters in Brussels houses separate national offices for AFS Belgium Flanders and AFS Belgium French. AFS Belgium French covers the French-speaking southern region of Belgium and Brussels where 80% of the population speak French. AFS Flanders covers the Dutch-speaking northern region of the country.

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 Belgium French***

When you land in Brussels, the capital of Belgium, you and your fellow AFSers will collect your baggage, pass through customs and be met by AFS Belgium French staff and volunteers.

### **Arrival and Post-arrival Orientation**

Upon arrival, you will have a half-day orientation, during which you will meet AFSers from around the world and learn basics and tips for how to get along during your first weeks. At the conclusion of your first Belgian orientation, you will be picked up by your host family and travel to your host community.

One month later, you will attend a weekend-long post-arrival orientation. You will participate in discussions and receive a lot of information about life in Belgium: culture, customs, attitudes and expectations. AFS Belgium French takes care of your host family as well, and some host family members will attend a daylong orientation event.

## ***Living in Belgium French***

### **Lifestyle and Family Living**

*"L'Union fait la force - Eendracht maakt macht" (Strength lies in unity)*

*Belgian national motto*

Thanks to many contacts with various cultures, Belgians are tolerant, flexible, modest, sincere, warm, friendly and open-minded. They value privacy, enjoy a safe and comfortable life, work hard and are self-disciplined. People will be glad to know you, but you may have to make the first steps toward establishing contact. By showing enthusiasm and interest, by using your charm, tact and openness, you will build real bonds with your new family and friends.

Your special sojourn will be built day-by-day from sharing ordinary everyday life with your new family. Family life is very important in Belgium. Teenagers are used to deferring to parents at all times, and parents maintain authority and expect the children to follow their rules as long as they live at home. Both parents usually work, and students and children are expected to do their share of the housework and daily chores.

Family members and their friends and relatives will usually be close to each other, but in general, Belgians do not maintain very close contact with their neighbors. It is possible that apart from your family and their friends, few people in the community will know about you or be acquainted with AFS.

Most AFSers are placed in small towns and rural areas. Public transportation is well organized and safe.

Belgian 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 life.

### **Dress and Appearance**

Dress is casual but neatness is important. Young adults wear jeans, T-shirts, sweaters and shoes, instead of sneakers. Belgian weather in the summer is warm and sunny but can also be windy and rainy, and winter can be windy and rainy too. It is advisable to bring a winter coat, warm sweaters, warm shoes and a raincoat.

As in many parts of Europe, a wardrobe consisting of a change of clothes for every day of the week is not necessary. Please do bring one nice outfit for special occasions: slacks, tie and dress shirt for men, skirt and blouse or a dress for women.

### **Diet and Meals**

Belgian cuisine is well known around the world for its chocolates, pastries, *frites* – “French fries, which the Belgians claim to have invented—and beer, invented by Flemish monks. Each region in the country offers its own specialties, available in restaurants, often with exceptional qualities. *Endive*, or chicory, a vegetable that was accidentally discovered by a Belgian farmer, is called “white gold.”

Belgian families like to cook and eat together. You will learn Belgian table manners by observing the family habits. Usually you do not start the meal before the mother or father does, nor do you get up before everyone is finished. Belgians like to take their time, enjoying their food as real *gourmets*.

Belgians eat lots of meat, bread and potatoes and often cook with oil or broth. Fish and seafood are important. There is not much junk food and raiding the refrigerator is not done. Vegetarianism is not easily accommodated.

It is sometimes customary to drink wine or beer with meals in Belgium. You may be offered alcoholic beverages. You may accept if it is consistent with your family’s rules as well as your own values.

### **School**

While in Belgium, most participants attend the last or next-to-last year of high school.

Before school starts, or on your first day of school, you should meet with the principal to present yourself and talk about your class schedule. You will be treated like all the other students of the school for whom it is compulsory to attend all classes.

When deciding about your schedule, you may want to try out several courses for a few weeks in order to see how advanced they are before making your final decision. Compulsory school subjects are French, mathematics, history, geography, sciences, religion or ethics and physical education. Optional courses are foreign languages, arts and computer sciences.

A normal school day starts at 8 a.m. and ends at 4 p.m. There is a break of about one hour at noon and two other 15-minute breaks during the day. Also, Wednesday afternoons are free.

Between January and March, there is a global education activity called the “*Semaine sociale*” (Social Week) where all AFS students work in a social organization or in community service for one week or during three weekends. This activity is organized to show you another face of your host country.

The school starts around September 1. Students take vacations for one week around November 1, two at Christmas, one around Carnival, two at Easter, and summer vacation starts on July 1.

Examinations are given three times a year, and promotion to the following grade is subject to approval by the teachers' council. Because of the strict rules, a majority of Belgian students have had to repeat at least one year of school.

School education (compulsory until the age of 18) tends to be rather intellectual (based on the acquisition of knowledge) and quite demanding. Teenagers often study for two or three hours in the evening and sometimes during the weekend. This means also that little time is left for emotional-creative education, so that most teenagers pursue these activities outside of school. Sport activities are sometimes linked to school, but then they are mainly competitive team sports and only take place during free time (Wednesday afternoons and weekends).

### **Teen Life**

While every situation is unique, your social life will probably center on family and a small group of friends. Belgian youth enjoy attending concerts, going to the movies or a lecture and sharing a drink or meal together. Many of them enjoy scouting activities on weekends. It is a good idea to speak to your host parents early on about the rules of the household regarding socializing.

School activities are very demanding and rather intellectual, which is why outside activities are practiced in youth clubs. You can practice athletics, basketball, volleyball or netball. Also available are public swimming pools, sport centers, football clubs and riding schools.

Music, drama, singing, drawing, painting and sculpture are taught in special schools called *Académies*, with classes after school or in the evening. A fee of €150 per year is required.

### **AFS Activities**

In addition to an orientation at your arrival, AFS Belgium French 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; they bring together young people from many countries and help them to better understand their own intercultural learning experience.

The next national orientation camp will be the Mid-stay orientation. You will have the opportunity to evaluate the progress you have made, the difficulties that you have faced and your expectations for the rest of your stay. You will be informed about all AFS activities by a bi-monthly newsletter "*L'Inter*."

Your AFS social life will be organized mostly on the local level. You will also be expected to participate in a community service activity, about which you will learn more once in Belgium.

The End-of-Stay orientation is about looking back at your experience and sharing memories with other AFSers. It is also about thinking of the future.

## **Language**

You will be placed in a French-speaking family and in some cases one that speaks German as well.

You will benefit from French classes for which you should budget €150. It is strongly advisable to take active part in language courses with a teacher

## **Spending Money**

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.

AFS recommends that participants bring about €120 per month in traveler's checks or credit cards for spending money. Spending more than your peers and family may create a distance between you and them.

## **Travel**

Although it is natural for you to want to travel while in Belgium, 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 Belgium French. We strongly discourage traveling on your own or with friends.

You are not permitted to remain in Belgium after your AFS sojourn. After you finish your exchange year, you must return to your home country and can only revisit Belgium and your host family in the future.

## **Safety and Support**

Belgium 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 Belgian. 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 Belgium may have additional rules.

## **Health Precautions**

In addition to the precautions mentioned above, AFS suggests that you discuss the health recommendations for Belgium (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 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. AFS will help you obtain the visa and provide you with instructions regarding the required documents.

## **Program Prices**

Please [contact the AFS office in your home country](#) for information about program price and scholarship possibilities and what the program price covers for the various program offerings. In most cases 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**

Belgium is situated between the Netherlands, Germany and France, with 65 km of developed resort coastline where the North Sea meets the English Channel. About the size of Taiwan, Belgium is divided into two main regions that partially reflect the language division. In the north is the Dutch *Flanders*, with flat lands. In the south is the French *Wallonia*, dominated by the picturesque Ardennes, with forests, deep valleys, historic cities and medieval castles between France and Germany.

Belgium has a temperate climate with mild average summer and winter temperatures. It has lots of rain, especially during the winter months. Average temperatures for summer are 13–21°C (54–72°F) and winter averages from 0–6°C (32–43°F).

### **Population**

Belgium is densely populated, with about ten million people living in slightly more than 30,000 Km<sup>2</sup>. Brussels is the capital city, and Antwerp, to the north, is the principal

industrial and port city. The two major ethnic groups in the Belgian population are Flemish (58%) and Walloon (31%).

### **Language**

There are three language regions in Belgium. In Flanders (northern Belgium), Dutch is spoken by 6 million inhabitants, while French is spoken by about 3.5 million in Wallonia (southern Belgium). Many Belgians speak both languages. German is also spoken by the 70,000 inhabitants of the German area near the eastern border. English is also widely understood.

### **Government**

Belgium is a Constitutional Monarchy. The head of state is King Albert II. The head of government and a new constitution was adopted in 1994. The new constitution created a federation of three regions based on the three languages spoken.

### **Religion**

The majority of the population is Roman Catholic (75%), while the rest are mostly Protestant.

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

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

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

Belgian 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.

If you have not already received a full AFS application packet, please contact your local AFS volunteer or national office to request one. We wish you a wonderful experience!

### **Curiously Belgian**

➡ Belgium is one of the biggest producers of cartoons and comic strips in the world. To mention just few of them: *Tintin*, *The Smurfs*, *Lucky Luke*, *Marsupilami* and *Spirou*.

➡ Belgian chocolate is considered among the best in the world.

➡ Belgium has the lowest percentage of poor people in the world.

➤ In a book on different European characters, R. Hill describes the Belgians as “open-minded opportunists,” noting their pragmatic and accepting attitude.

➤ Many towns stage re-enactments of medieval times once a year, when the whole town is set to look and live as centuries before.

## ***How to Apply***

To become a participant in this country's School Program, contact your nearest AFS office. To locate an AFS office, go to <http://www.afs.org/contact>

Student Age (upon arrival)	16y to 18y 6m	
Country data	Size	30,510 km <sup>2</sup> 11,899 mi <sup>2</sup>
	Population	10,274,595
	Official Language	Flemish/Dutch, French, German
	Government	Federal parliamentary democracy under a constitutional monarch
Currency	Euro, divided into 100 cents	
Useful website	<a href="http://www.belgium.be">www.belgium.be</a>	
AFS Belgium French webpage	<a href="http://www.afsbelgique.be/">http://www.afsbelgique.be/</a>	

AFS program destinations are not always available to residents of all countries. If a program interests you, please contact your nearest AFS office to find out if it is an option for you. You can locate your nearest AFS office at <http://www.afs.org/contact>