



Focus on **Belgium Flanders** School Year Program

Belgium is one of the least nationalistic countries in the world. Yet, it has plenty of things to be proud of. Some more famous, such as chocolate, fine cuisine and art, some less, such as the high quality of life and a welcoming attitude. Belgians are very accepting people who love to enjoy life, whether they be the more disciplined Flemish, or the more "Latin" Walloon.

AFS & Your Experience

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

With a network of about 800 volunteers, AFS Flanders hosts more than 130 AFS students and about 20 community service participants during the year.

Landing in Belgium

You will arrive in Brussels, the capital of Belgium and the center of the European Union government. There you will be met by AFS Flanders staff and volunteers who will bring you and the other AFSers to the first Flemish orientation.

Arrival Orientation

The arrival orientation camp, held for four days in Brussels, will give you an introduction to Flemish society, culture, family life and work style. It may also be referred to as a language camp as, among other activities, you will participate in 25 hours of Dutch language study.

At the conclusion of the orientation, your host family will pick you up by car.

Living in Flanders

Lifestyle and Family Living

Family life is very important in Flanders. 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 you will be expected to do your share of the housework and daily chores like the other children in your host family. This reflects the particularly Flemish style of working out compromises and "pragmatic anarchism." Despite the dislike for imposed discipline, the Flemish are well-organized and self-disciplined people.

Flemish 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. Attitudes toward smoking vary a lot as it is accepted by some families and not by others.

You may be placed anywhere in the Belgium Flanders region. Most families are in suburban (40%) or rural (40%) areas, although urban placements are not uncommon (20%).

Dress and Appearance

Dress is casual, but neatness and cleanness are important. Teenagers wear jeans, T-shirts, sweaters and shoes or sneakers. As in many parts of Europe, a wardrobe consisting of a change of clothes for every day of the week is not necessary. You may also bring one nice outfit for special occasions – shirt and tie for men, a dress for women.

Diet and Meals

Flemish cuisine is much more than the good chocolate and beer. Some say that it is actually one of the best in the world despite not being so renowned. For sure Flemish people enjoy eating (they are said to be real *bon vivants*) and families get together regularly for the evening meal, while during the midday meal everyone is either at work or in school.

Flemish cooking is a combination of French and German cuisine. Meat and seafood are common staples, accompanied by bread and potatoes, and often cooked with oil or broth. One of the things Flemish are particularly proud of are *Friet* (chips or fries), which they claim to have invented. Some other traditional Flemish foods are the *stoofvlees* (stewed meat in a sauce prepared with brown beer) or the famous waffles now eaten all around the world.

There is not much junk food, and raiding the refrigerator is not done.

Schools

As the Belgian constitution prescribes local freedom to organize education there are various kinds of schools. Yet, two basic types of schools prevail: those run by the regional, provincial or local authorities (community education) and the independent or “free” schools usually run by religious institutions, principally the Catholic Church. Both systems receive financial support from the government. The law sets standards for all schools, therefore all are quite demanding. Independent schools are allowed more freedom to set their own philosophical approach to curricula while the community education has to be more neutral offering several kinds of educational philosophies.

Most schools are coeducational, with only a few being single sex. The school year runs from early September to late June. Vacations are at the end of October (All Saints), Christmas (two weeks), the end of February (Carnival – one week) and Easter (two weeks). Students attend school Monday through Friday from 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. except Wednesday afternoons which are free. Classes last 50 minutes, and students attend 6 or 7 classes a day sharing the same classroom while the teachers go from one to another. It is not unusual to study 2-3 hours a night and sometimes during the weekend.

Before Christmas and a month before the end of the school year there are exams, and promotion to the next level is subject to grades and approval by the teachers’ council. Because of the rather strict rules, quite a few Flemish students have repeated a year. Compulsory school subjects are: French, mathematics, history, geography, sciences, religion or ethics and physical education. There are optional courses such as foreign languages, arts and computer sciences. School education tends to be rather intellectual and sports or artistic activities have less importance in schools, but most teenagers do these kinds of activities after school.

As an AFS students you will be most probably places in the 5th or 6th grade (the 11th or 12th year) of what are called “general secondary schools” (ASO). These are academic schools, but it is possible to attend an artistic (KSO), technical (TSO) or vocational secondary school (BSO). For students enrolled in the last year of secondary school, there is usually an optional school trip abroad lasting about ten days. The costs vary from €300 to €400.

Even if in the last year you will probably not receive a diploma, but you will obtain a certificate of attendance and a full grade report.

Teen Life

While every situation is unique, your social life will probably center around family and a small group of friends. Flemish youth enjoy attending concerts, going to the movies and sharing a drink or meal together. Besides sport activities they also enjoy participating in youth movement activities (such as the Scouts or social and political groups). The two most popular sports are soccer and cycling. It is a good idea to speak to your host parents early on about the rules of the household with regard to socializing.

AFS Activities

In addition to an orientation at your arrival, AFS Flanders will provide you with several others. AFS orientations are a chance for participants to join together (often for a weekend or for a few days) to talk about both 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 their own points of view. AFS orientations are very social, interactive and educational; bringing together young people from many countries and helping them to better understand their own intercultural learning experience.

The second national meeting will be halfway through your stay, when you will meet in February for a weekend orientation. It will feature evaluation activities as well as leisure ones on Saturday night.

Besides local activities and orientations that may be organized by volunteers during the year, you will get together with the other AFSers in your region shortly before departure. This is a two-day evaluation orientation at the beginning of July, often referred to as the End-of-Stay.

Language

Participating in a Belgium Flanders program, Dutch will be the language you will commonly speak. Besides the intensive language course you will attend at your arrival, you will be provided with an individual CD-ROM based language course that you will follow at school and at home. This will be supported during the first trimester by teachers' follow-up sessions organized in your local chapter.

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 whether they be with your host family, school, community organization, local chapter or AFS Flanders. We strongly discourage traveling on your own or with friends.

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, but remember that spending more than your peers and family may create a distance between you and them.

You should bring about €120 per month in traveler's checks for spending money.

Safety and Support

Belgium is a very safe country, and you should do well if you follow the normal precautions you would use home and the advice of your host family.

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.

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 reach on the internet) with your personal doctor, to determine what is best for you and your personal health needs.

If you need 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 accident injuries incurred while on the program, exclusive of pre-existing, dental or visual aid requirement 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.

Country Information

Geography and Climate

Belgium is nestled 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 in two main regions that partially reflect the language division. On the north are the Dutch *Flanders*, with flat lands. On the south is the French *Wallonia*, dominated by the picturesque Ardennes (the mountain range between France and Germany).

Belgium has a temperate climate with mild average summer and winter temperatures. It has lots of rain, especially during March and April.

Population

Belgium is densely populated, with about ten million people living in slightly more than 30,000 Km². Brussels is the capital city and Antwerp, to the north, is the principal industrial and port city. The two major ethnic groups that form the Belgian population are Flemish (58%) and Walloon (31%).

Language

There are three different 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). Nevertheless many Belgians speak both languages. German is 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%) in a passive way.

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 get yourself ready, first make every effort to learn some key Dutch words and phrases so that you arrive with at least some basic knowledge of the language.

Additionally, 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 Flanders. This person will be an excellent resource to you regarding living life as a Belgian. If you don't know any alumni, please contact your local volunteer or national AFS office. In addition, AFS Flanders 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 year!

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

Student Age (upon arrival)	16y to 18y 6m	
Program Period	Late August to mid July, 10.5 months	
Country data	Size	30,510 km ² 11,899 Mi ²
	Population	10,274,595
	Official Language	Flemish/Dutch, French, German
	Government	federal parliamentary democracy under a constitutional monarch
Currency	Euro, divided in 100 cents.	
Useful website	www.flanders.be	
AFS Flanders Web Site	http://www.afsvlaanderen.be/	

Why Belgium Flanders

- 30,518 km² of trendy cities, great country life and a breathtaking green modern and sparkling society, based on the quality of living where friends and family come first.
- Belgium is known for art and architecture, historical cities and a rich past. It even is better known for its local delicacies (chocolates, beer and fries).
- The kind of school you will like to go to: lots of different courses, high quality and modern infrastructure, interesting community service projects.
- Top AFS partner organization (number 1 in quality satisfaction surveys in 2003).
- **Belgium Flanders: Little spot, great living!**