



## Focus on BELGIUM-FRENCH Community Service Program Adult Program

*“This experience is really good. I have learned to be patient and more responsible. The program has helped me not only to be more independent but also to work with all the responsibilities that I never had before. I will never forget the people I met, including those I work with: they help me through hard times, they help me with speaking French.... They are also my best friends.... It is not easy to get to some country that you don't know and live with people you've never seen, but once you get to know them and you learn a bit about them, you are very happy to stay and have another 'mom and dad,' brothers and sisters also.”*

*Rebeca Samblas, participant from the U.S., 2003-2004*

*“I really feel I have two families now: one in Costa Rica, and one in Belgium-French. I worked with disabled people, and I learned a lot with them. I also made friends at work, friends whom I could talk to when I needed it and to laugh with all the time! Learning French is difficult, but you learn everyday and now I feel I can express myself in French despite my mistakes and my tropical accent.... With AFS, you make friends, people who live the same experience as you but speak other languages . And in Belgium-French, the food is delicious. The weather is cold, but with a good coat and a scarf, and a cup of hot chocolate, you can survive winter!”*

*Maria Navarro, participant from Costa Rica, 2003-2004*

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.

### **Community Service Programs**

AFS's Community Service program gives you the opportunity to share in and contribute to the life of a community in Belgium by living and working alongside its members in a community-based service organization. At the organization, you will be asked to pitch in and offer assistance in whatever capacity might be needed and to share the knowledge and experience you have gained from your home culture in the process. No one expects you to be an expert with all the answers to local problems or the ability to change local conditions. Rather, you are expected to be a willing participant in a process of mutual discovery. This experience will present you with innumerable learning opportunities both personally and professionally.

Worldwide, AFS Community Service program participants contribute their talents and energies to a variety of social programs that range from protecting the environment to teaching children or adults, from assisting the elderly and the disabled to defending human rights, from enhancing public health to helping local businesses become established.

Past participants in Belgium have worked with the elderly and homeless, with schoolchildren and immigrants, and on environmental projects. However, all specifics—including assignments, orientations, logistics and activities—vary depending on the program cycle.

## ***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 year abroad.

### **Arrival orientation**

AFS volunteers and staff meet participants at the airport in Brussels and escort them to a one-day orientation to discuss expectations and fears. Presentations also cover Belgium its citizens, AFS rules, Belgian customs and advice for the first weeks. At the end of the orientation, participants are picked up by their host families. They are also given €150 to spend on French language lessons in their host communities.

### **Additional orientations**

In addition to an orientation at your arrival, AFS Belgium French will provide you with several others. AFS orientations offer participants a chance to meet for several days and talk about expectations for the future program and past experiences. Orientations involve participating in group activities and self-examination. Sessions also provide language training as well as 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 people from many countries and helping them to better understand their own intercultural learning experiences while preparing them to handle their community service assignments.

## ***Living in Belgium***

### **Living arrangements**

Some participants in AFS Community Service programs live with local families, sharing their daily lives, their meals and perhaps a host sibling's bedroom. Other participants live where their community service organization conducts its business. Still others live in rooms provided elsewhere by their local service organizations.

### **Typical day**

Most Belgians start work between 8.00 and 9.30 a.m. They have lunch (half an hour to an hour break) between noon and 1.30 p.m. The end of the workday is usually between 4.00 and 6.00 p.m.

Belgian families prepare a big warm meal in the evening, between 6.30 and 9.00 p.m. ("*le souper*"). Then they spend the evening together at home watching TV, reading, talking, listening to music, calling friends or relatives. Some people also play sports, go to the movies or simply go out for a drink.

Your schedule will depend on the kind of project you are involved in, but you will usually work from 9.00 a.m. to 5.30 or 6.00 p.m., from Monday to Friday. Your weekends will be free.

### **Food**

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. If you are housed with a family, 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.

### **Clothing**

Belgian youth dress casually, and a daily change of clothes is unnecessary.

At work, clothing will depend on the kind of organization and job you have. In non-profit organizations, jeans and T-shirt or pullover are common. But always observe one rule: be nicely dressed!

During the first week, you'll visit your work placement; check out how people are dressed in the organization, and if you are still not sure what you should wear, ask your employer how to dress for your job.

Knowing a little about the Belgian climate might help you decide what to bring. From September to May, the weather is often cloudy and rainy, especially in November and March. In the coldest winter months, December & January, temperatures drop below freezing. You will need a winter coat, warm sweaters, warm shoes and a raincoat.

### **Activities**

AFS Belgium-French has four mandatory orientations: a one-day survival orientation; a two-day post-arrival orientation; two days in the middle of the program (at the beginning of December); and a two-day End-of-Stay at the end of the program. Orientations are held in places accustomed to hosting groups of teenagers and young adults, usually in the countryside.

In addition, each of the six local chapters in Belgium-French regularly organizes cultural or sports activities, meals, visits and so on for all participants and families. About once a month, volunteers organize a special activity for Community Service program participants such as a conference about development or a concert. Local activities are optional, and costs are usually paid for by the participant.

### **Health**

AFS suggests that you discuss the health recommendations for Belgium (which you can get from your government or find easily on the Internet) with your doctor at home, 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.

### **Safety**

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.

### **Travel**

AFS's Community Service programs allow participants to travel on their own through their host countries, typically for a week or more, to explore and absorb each country's cultural diversity.

### **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 community; travel from your host community to your international departure point; AFS's medical plan; placement with your host family or other placement arrangement; 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 are: 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 10 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.

## ***Before You Go***

### **Looking Forward**

Evaluations by previous participants support our belief that if you prepare prior to leaving, you will have the best experience.

Make every effort to improve your French language skills before departure. Then, to familiarize yourself with life in Belgium, visit your local library or search the Internet. AFS International's website, AFS.org, provides links to websites for each participating country.

Although every participant's experience is unique, we strongly suggest that you speak with a recent AFS participant to Belgium. This veteran will be an excellent resource regarding living and working there. If you do not know a veteran, please contact your local AFS volunteer or your country's AFS office.

In addition, AFS will provide you with essential information about your host country to prepare you for immersion in a new and exciting culture.

Finally, Belgians will be curious about your home community. You may be surprised how much they already know about your country's history and politics. Therefore, you will find it helpful to be informed about current events in your home community and country.

### **Documents**

You must have a passport that will be valid for six months longer than your intended stay. In addition to your passport, you will need a visa to enter and reside in your host country. Visas are obtained through the consular offices of your host country, and requirements 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.

### ***How to Apply***

Please contact the AFS office in your sending country. AFS Belgium-French will only consider applications sent by AFS partners.

- Applicants for AFS Belgium French's Community Service program should be between 18 and 28 years old. No experience is required to take part to this program, but participants must have a serious interest in social work.
- At least two years of French is required. Participants must be able to start working one week after arrival. Therefore, they must be able to express themselves in French from the very beginning.
- We have projects related to education, childcare and working with disadvantaged youth, the disabled, the elderly and immigrants. We also have environmental projects.

To locate the AFS office in your home country, go to <http://www.afs.org/contact>

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 website	<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>