

جمعية صديق في كل مكان
برنامج التبادل الثقافي الدولي



**Intercultural
Programs**
Tunisia

Handbook

YOUTH EXCHANGE PROGRAMS



For students Host Families & Counselors

HANDBOOK
INBOUND ORIENTATION

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Introductions

Dear Student,

"Ahlan wa sahlan." Welcome to Tunisia.

You are about to embark on an original learning experience which is unique and rewarding in many ways. We at AFS Tunisia welcome this opportunity to accompany you in your journey of discovery and growth. This modest handbook contains information, advice, and tips on how to make this journey easy and beneficial. It is the product of many years of experience dealing with young people and intercultural learning. Please take the time to read it carefully and refer to it whenever the need arises. During your orientation sessions, AFS Tunisia staff and volunteers will be happy to listen to your concerns and answer your questions. So, do not hesitate to ask.

Good luck and happy sailing.

AFS Tunisia

Objectives of the Academic Year Program

To further international goodwill and understanding between cultures and peoples by enabling students to experience first-hand daily life in a different cultural environment and develop an understanding of some of the challenges experienced by other people and an empathy for their accomplishments.

To enable students to advance their education by studying for a year in an educational environment entirely different from their own, by learning and practicing a foreign language, and by undertaking study of courses and subjects not normally available to them in secondary schools in their home countries.

To broaden young people's own outlook on themselves and others through meeting and living with people of different cultures, creeds, and colors and through facing the challenges raised by intercultural communication.

To give the opportunity to young people to act as ambassadors for their own countries and cultures.

To allow young people to study and observe all facets of life and culture in a host country so that, on their return home, they can pass on the knowledge they have gained through public speaking opportunities and by acting as an advocate for their host country.

To apply what they have learned from the exchange experience to their circles of influence in adult life. This pertains to international relations and to honor the AFS goal of world peace and understanding.

TUNISIA: BASIC FACTS

Geography and Climate

Tunisia covers an area of 162,000 km²/62,550 mi², one quarter of which, located in the south, is desert with a few oases. The rest of the country is relatively green in the northern part, with some forests and agricultural land (growing cereals, grapes and citrus fruits), while the central part is less green with very little forest left but much arboriculture (growing olives, almonds, pistachios, apricots and peaches along with vegetables).

The country is relatively flat, and the highest mountain, the *Chaambi*, located in the central western part of Tunisia, is only 1,544 meters/5,066 feet high. Several chains of mountains and hills exist, particularly in the north. The most important, called *la dorsale*, cuts the country in its center from west to east; it is the backbone of Tunisia.

The country has 1,300km/800mi of coastline along the north and east, starting close to *Tabarka*, near the Algerian border, and ending near the Island of Jerba, close to the Libyan border. The sea is very important in Tunisia from three perspectives: two important economic sectors are dependent on it (tourism and fishing), the sea has a strong moderating effect on the climate, and Tunisians love to go to the seaside during the summer.

The climate is Mediterranean along the coast and Continental inland. The country enjoys relatively moderate temperatures with an average of 12°C/53°F in January, which is the coldest month, and an average of 31°C/88°F in August. In some high areas of the west, temperatures can drop below 0°C/32°F at night in January or February and exceed 40°C/104°F in July/August.

Rainfall is irregular. Some years are very wet while others are very dry: 2002 was the driest year in 50 years, while 2003 was one of the rainiest.

Population

Tunisia has a population of a little over 10 million (2006). The density is 60 inhabitants per km²; and 65% of the population lives in urban areas. Tunis, the capital, is the largest city with almost 2 million. It is divided into four administrative provinces. Other large cities are Sfax (450,000), Sousse (250,000), Kairouan, Gabes, Nabeul and Bizerta.

Language

Classical Arabic is the official language of Tunisia. However, it is restricted to official and formal contexts. A local variety of Arabic (Tunisian Arabic) is spoken in everyday interactions. French is a widely-spoken and used second language. Many educated Tunisians also understand and speak another foreign language besides French.

Government

Tunisia is a republic with an elected President and an elected bi-cameral parliament. The monarchy was abolished in 1957 after the country gained its independence from France in March 1956.

The President of the Republic is the head of state and plays the leading role in conducting the affairs of the country. He is helped by a Prime Minister who is the head of the government, which includes approximately 20 ministers and eight state secretaries. The

President is also the chief of the army.

The President, the Prime Minister and the ministers belong to the ruling party, the *Rassemblement Constitutionnel et Democratique* (RCD). This party has run the country since independence and holds more than 85% of the seats in the Tunisian Parliament. There are seven opposition parties which are young and have yet to develop their constituencies and their potential.

The country is divided in 24 provinces called *Gouvernorat* or *Wilaya*, which in turn are divided into 260 districts.

Religion

98% of the population is Muslim, and Islam is the official religion of the State. There are small Christian and Jewish minorities.

Lifestyle and Family Living

Tunisian culture is an interesting and charming example of Arab Islamic culture blended with Mediterranean, European and Western influences, the result of 3,000 years as a melting pot of Mediterranean cultures combined with a genuine openness to and acceptance of others. The geo-strategic position of the country at the heart of the Mediterranean Basin and as a crossroads of the Arab world has also strongly influenced the country's identity. In addition, Tunisia is historically the country that gave its name to the entire African continent. Although only 5% of its population is black, some of its traditions belong to the African cultural heritage.

With such a diverse and rich culture, and with tolerance and peacefulness as some of the strongest features of its personality, Tunisia offers good opportunities for the most interesting intercultural experience. In large cities, Tunisian youth live along similar patterns as youth in Europe; yet religious celebrations and social rituals are deeply rooted in Arab culture. Tunisian youth dress and behave like Europeans: they like the same kind of music, go to fast-food restaurants and drink soft drinks, and dating is relatively common. Yet back at home, they are sometimes part of a family that is conservative and functions according to the same patterns as those of traditional male-dominant families.

Tunisia is one of most westernized Arab countries. Education, tourism and the media have been strong factors in this, along with the modernist inclination of Tunisia's leaders. The degree of Western liberality, of course, varies from urban to rural sectors and from one region to another: Tunisia is a land of diversity.

Tunisian families are quite close-knit. Family members enjoy being together particularly for special occasions such as religious celebrations, weddings, circumcisions and other family events during which the extended family along with friends and neighbors gather to celebrate. (Weddings are sometimes attended by several hundred people.) In daily life, everyone is busy with his or her own occupations (studies or work), but at least one meal is eaten as a family.

Dress and Appearance

Tunisian youth dress casually wearing most of the time pants (jeans) and T-shirts or sweatshirts or a blouse or a shirt. Girls are usually more attentive to their dress and appearance; they try to dress fashionably and wear make up. Schools usually require

girls to wear a uniform; however, this is not systematic.

On special occasions, such as holidays and weddings, people usually dress formally: a dress or a blouse and skirt for girls and pants and jacket with or without a tie for boys. Winter is cold and rainy; a coat or a warm jacket will be needed.

Diet and Meals

Tunisian cuisine is tasty, with much diversity. Tunisians eat a lot of meat, chicken, fish and turkey, along with cereals and all kinds of vegetables. Bread is very good and is a key component of Tunisian diet, especially since several dishes include a sauce (with meat or chicken and potatoes or vegetable), which you eat by dipping the bread in the sauce. Some people use forks and knives, others basically use their fingers (hands are always washed before and after each meal).

The national dish is *couscous*, which is the oldest known dish in the world. It is made of steamed semolina mixed with a light sauce made with meat, fish or chicken along with various vegetables. *Couscous* is eaten with a spoon, although older people in certain regions prefer to use their hands. Tunisian cookbooks include at least 27 different recipes for *couscous*.

Other cereal dishes include traditional *borghol* and *mhames*, made from wheat or corn, and non-traditional, such as rice and pasta. Pizza, another imported dish, is common, although it is usually eaten in restaurants rather than prepared at home. Vegetable salads are also part of the Tunisian diet, including the *mechouia* salad (grilled tomatoes and green peppers).

Dessert is usually fruit, and Tunisian markets are colorful with all kinds. Oranges and strawberries are the most common in winter. April to June is the time for apricots, blackberries and *medlar*. Summer fruits are the melon, watermelon, peaches and grapes. The prickly pear (Hindi) and pomegranates appear in autumn, followed by oranges and dates (one of the best varieties in the world grows in Tunisia: the *Deglet Nour*). Apples and pears are present year-round.

Candies and sweets are also popular; Tunisian traditional pastries are extremely good. When you visit a relative or a friend, you are usually served pastries with coffee or mint tea or a soft drink. Pastries are also served during religious or family celebrations, which are occasions to prepare traditional regional dishes.

Teen Life

Teen life is dominated by school, since a substantial part of the day is spent in class or doing homework. (Some Tunisian students attend extra classes with private tutors who help them in their studies.)

Some teenagers are involved in youth center activities (extra-curricular sports and arts); otherwise, they go out in groups to cafés or to fast-food restaurants and occasionally to the cinema. In summer, discos are very popular as are international summer festivals.

At home, teenagers spend time watching TV. In addition, boys play cards in cafés or billiards and video games in playrooms. (Girls seldom engage in these activities). Internet centers increasingly attract both boys and girls, who like to surf the web or chat.

Dating is becoming relatively common; however, girls will avoid going with their boyfriends to a place where they might meet their siblings or their fathers. Boys and girls treat each other on an equal basis (although exceptions continue to exist).

Curiously Tunisian

- ✎ In ancient Tunisia, Hannibal was the leader of the Carthaginian army in the 3rd century B.C. which almost conquered Rome and which would have changed the history of the Mediterranean World. The strategy he followed in his war against the Romans is still taught in military academies around the world.

- ✎ Ibn Khaldoun (12th century A.D.) is considered the founding father of Sociology.

- ✎ A small Jewish community has been living in Jerba since the fifth century BC. Their synagogue, "la Ghriba," has one of the oldest copies of the Torah.

- ✎ Tunisia has 25,000 classified monuments and sites, including six which are part of UNESCO's list of Mankind's Heritage.

YOU AND YOUR HOST FAMILY

AFS Youth Exchange Programs are entirely volunteer-based. Your AFS host family is not paid. They are hosting you because they are interested in you and want to make you part of their lives.

During your time with your host family, you can expect that you will be treated as a family member. They have probably made special arrangements to have you in their home and often a host brother or sister has temporarily given up their room or agreed to share space. In return, you are expected to honor the household rules and to adapt to the lifestyle. Be flexible and understanding. For the moment, this is your family. You should always make every effort to show respect to your hosts.

The first few days and even weeks may be difficult. You will experience culture shock. This is normal. Focus on the year ahead. It might not always feel like an adventure, but try to always remind yourself that it is truly one. If you do not understand what is expected of you, do not be afraid to ask. It will, no matter what the outcome, be an excellent learning experience.

A great majority of problems that arise in the youth exchange program are due to the student's reluctance to adapt to their new environment. The most important person in your exchange experience will probably be your first host mom. Be attentive to her and try to develop a good relationship. What you learn from your first host family will be the foundation for your relationship with others. It is almost always your host mom who will be most responsible for you, and she is the one that other host families will seek to ask questions about you. Seek her advice and listen to what she has to say.

Be attentive to what you say about your host family. Do not talk in public about your host family, what they do or what they have. It would be easy to hurt the people who look after you. Gossip travels quickly!

IN ALL CASES, be appreciative of whatever your host family has done for you. Your host family and your AFS counselor are more than willing to help you make this a great experience. However, much of your success depends on you.

SAMPLE QUESTIONS TO ASK YOUR HOST FAMILY

In general, ask the questions that you feel are the most important the first night, and then ask the other questions over the next few days. It is often possible to guess the answers to many of the sample questions listed below by simply observing the acts of the other family members. However, there are always subtleties that can easily be missed even by the keenest of observers. So the best solution is to take the initiative and ask. Remember, when in doubt, ask, and always try to be open and honest with your host family and your AFS counselor. Good communication is essential for a successful exchange.

What do I call you?

What am I expected to do daily, other than make my bed, always keep my room tidy, and clean the bathroom every time I use it?

What is the procedure for dirty clothes?

Where do I keep clothes until wash day?

Should I wash my own clothes and underclothes?

Should I iron my own clothes?

May I use the iron, washing machine, sewing machine at any time?

When is a convenient time for me to use the shower/bath (a.m. or p.m.)?

Where may I keep my toiletries?

May I use the family's bathroom toiletries (toothpaste, soap, etc.) or am I responsible for purchasing my own?

What time will meals be served?

What can I do to assist at meal times (help prepare meals, set the table, wash dishes, empty garbage)?

May I help myself to food and drink any time or should I ask first?

What areas of the house are strictly private (parents' bedroom, study/office)?

May I put pictures or posters in my room?

May I rearrange my bedroom?

Where can I store my suitcases?

What time must I get up (on weekdays, on weekends)?

What time must I go to bed (on school nights, on weekends)?

What are the rules for going out at night and at what time must I be home? Can exceptions be made if I ask in advance?

May I have friends spend the night or visit during the day?

What are the rules about me using the telephone? Must I ask first?

May my friends call me?

May I call my friends?

May I make long-distance calls?

How do you want me to keep track of the costs of my telephone calls?

What is the procedure for mailing letters? What address do I use for my incoming

mail?

Do you have any dislikes, such as chewing gum, wearing a hat or curlers at the table, loud rock music or smoking?

Do my host brothers and sisters have any dislikes?

What are the dates of your birthdays?

What are the transportation arrangements (car, bus, bike, walking, etc.)?

May I use the stereo, TV, computer, etc., at any time? Are there restrictions on computer and Internet use?

Would you like me to phone home if I will be more than 30 minutes late?

When we go out as a family, should I pay for my own entrance fee, meals, etc.?

What arrangements should I make for school lunch?

Does AFS pay my cost of travel to school?

Am I to attend AFS meetings? If yes, how will I get there?

What else can I do around the house (yard work, help clean, babysit)?

Please tell me how to interact with the house servants (where applicable).

Is there anything else you would like me to know?

YOU AND YOUR AFS COUNSELOR

AFS Tunisia will appoint a counselor for you. When you arrive, you should ask your hosts who your counselor is and make contact with that person if he/she does not contact you. An AFS counselor is an unpaid volunteer who works with the program because he or she supports the meaning of youth exchange.

COUNSELOR RESPONSIBILITIES

To meet with you regularly, to give you sound advice, and to deal with any problems, fears and worries that you may have.

To orient your host parents as to their responsibilities.

To arrange your schooling and introduce you to your principal/teacher.

To look after your emergency fund and other important papers.

To check that your insurance coverage is suitable to the local situation and to ensure that activities such as sports are covered.

To deal appropriately with any unresolved difficulties between you and your host family and your school.

To give permission for travel and other situations in which permission is due, and to ensure that permission has been obtained from all other parties.

To help you with self-discipline if you find yourself going off track.

To introduce you and to integrate you into AFS and to ensure that you are invited as their guest to meetings and other activities.

STUDENT RESPONSIBILITIES

Ask him/her to develop a list of what is expected of you. If not written, this can be done verbally and you can write down the points.

Use your counselor when you need a shoulder to lean on. It will keep your relationship with your host families less complicated.

Show your appreciation for all that he/she does for you.

Talk with your counselor at least once a month. **CALL HIM/HER TO CHAT IF YOU DON'T RECEIVE A CALL!**

Keep your counselor informed of all your activities.

You must obtain your Counselor's permission to leave town. You must ALWAYS answer the four W's:

WHO will you be with?
WHAT will you be doing?
WHERE are you going?
WHEN will you be returning?

Don't ever lie to your counselor! You need his/her trust, or you may risk being sent back home.

Discuss your problems while they are still small. Don't wait until things are out of hand before you talk to him.

Accept the decisions and discipline of your counselor with grace... even if you disagree. He/she is looking after you for your parents.

Do not play your counselor and your host parents against one another. Make them your friends not your adversaries!

If a situation arises that you feel you need to speak to a counselor of your gender, ask if this can be arranged.

If you and your counselor have a clash of personalities, or if he seems too busy for you, contact the AFS office and ask if it is possible to change Counselors. If that is not possible...then try hard to make the best of things. Adapt your personality and help build the bridge between you.

YOU ARE NOT ALONE

Your exchange experience will be monitored and help is always near. If you need help or if you have a problem, you should first talk to your host family. They are there to help you with day-to-day difficulties.

If your host family can not help you, then you should contact your counselor. You should already be meeting with him/her regularly. But you should also feel free to call for help when you need something. Make sure you carry his/her phone number with you at all times.

SURVIVAL GUIDE

HARASSMENT POLICY

"Harassment is any unwanted physical or verbal conduct that offends or humiliates a student." **Harassment includes inappropriate sexual conduct or comments. Harassment can take the form of deliberate or repeated comments or gestures about a student's home country, language, culture, or personal appearance.**

Harassment does not include counseling, warnings or restrictions placed on a student as a result of the student's inappropriate behavior...unless the counseling is done in a way that unnecessarily belittles or embarrasses a student.

Be sensitive to the fact that there is a potential for misunderstandings in cross-cultural situations. What might be acceptable conduct in one country may be offensive in another. Customs, gestures and manners all differ greatly among cultures. Communication from you is important in resolving problems before they get out of hand. However, when a problem reaches the level of 'harassment', then it is time to take action. Whether it is intended or accidental, harassment is not something you should experience while hosted by AFS. If you feel that you have been subject to harassment, please follow this procedure.

If you can, tell the person to stop harassing you. Make it clear that he/she has crossed a boundary. The word "NO" is a powerful word when it is said firmly and clearly. In most cases this will stop the harassment.

If the harassment does not stop, talk to your host family.

If your family does not end the problem, talk to your counselor.

If your counselor does not stop the problem, then you should notify AFS Tunisia.

Nothing limits your right to express your complaint to whomever you wish. Every effort will be made to resolve your complaint in a confidential manner.

Personal Safety Tips

Tunisian communities are fairly safe environments. However, and like anywhere in the world, risks are present. You should be able to enjoy your stay in your host community if you follow these commonsensical tips:

It is important for you to know what to do and who to contact in case of emergency. So make a list of names and phone numbers of people to contact locally (your host parents and siblings, your AFS counselor, and the AFS office and staff in Tunisia, the consulate of your country in Tunisia) and keep it handy (a special page for this kind of information is provided for you at the end of this handbook).

Make a copy of the important pages of your passport and leave them with your host family for safe keeping. If you lose your passport, notify immediately your host family, your AFS counselor or AFS Tunisia, and your consulate.

In case of a serious accident or emergency, notify immediately your host family, your counselor or AFS Tunisia.

Keep your valuables (money, jewelery, electronic gadgets and other expensive accessories) safely at home; or if you must take them with you, be discrete about showing them. You may sometimes be caught in a crowd (crowded public transportation,

concert places, stadiums, etc.). Be mindful of your belongings on those occasions. Always check with your host family before accepting an invitation to visit with a stranger. You will soon discover that Tunisians are on the whole very friendly and hospitable. A common way of showing friendliness towards foreigners is by inviting them for a quick meal or a bite at one's home. In case you receive such an invitation, it is important that you check with your host family first. Tell your potential host that you have to let your host family know of your whereabouts. If the invitation is genuine, everyone involved will understand and appreciate the gesture.

It is common for Tunisians to show closeness and affection through bodily contact. We greet each other by kisses on the cheeks, although a degree of familiarity with the other person is usually needed. The sight of two friends, male or female, holding hands in public for example is not shocking, and neither is the sight of a packed bus or train. Personal and private space can be reduced to a minimum. However, there is a fine line between physical closeness and sexual harassment and it is sometimes difficult to tell. If you are uncomfortable with physical closeness, particularly between the sexes, do not hesitate to let the other person know. Nobody can force you to hold hands or sit or stand close to them.

CULTURE SHOCK

Culture shock is a reaction most people feel when they are cut off from familiar ways of communication and interaction with others. Most people who move to a new culture experience a series of emotional ups and downs while they are living there, especially during the early months when most major adjustments are taking place. The emotional low points that go along with adaptation to a new culture may cause you some anxiety. These 'down periods' are an indication that you are experiencing culture shock.

CULTURE SHOCK IS REAL!

Culture shock is not always easy to notice. It usually builds up slowly, challenging a person's sub-conscious belief that the way they have always done things in their homeland is the 'right way' to do things.

Culture Shock: A Fish Out of Water

Written and contributed by Elaine Addison

Hannam University, Taejon, South Korea

Kalvero Oberg was one of the first writers to identify five distinct stages of culture shock. He found that all human beings experience the same feelings when they travel to or live in a different country or culture. He found that culture shock is almost like a disease: it has a cause, symptoms, and a cure.

Whenever someone travels overseas they are like "a fish out of water." Like the fish, they have been swimming in their own culture all their lives. A fish doesn't think about what water it is in. Likewise, we often do not think too much about the culture we are raised in. Our culture helps to shape our identity. Many of the cues of interpersonal communication (body language, words, facial expressions, tone of voice, idioms, slang) are different in different cultures. One of the reasons that we feel like a fish out of water when we enter a new culture, is that we do not know all of the cues that are used in the new culture.

Psychologists tell us that there are five distinct phases (or stages) of culture shock. It is important to understand that culture shock happens to all people who travel abroad, but some people have much stronger reactions than others.

During the first few days of a person's stay in a new country, everything usually goes fairly smoothly. The newcomer is excited about being in a new place where there are new sights and sounds, new smells and tastes. The newcomer may have some problems, but usually accepts them as just part of the newness. They may find themselves staying in hotels or with a home-stay family that is excited to meet the foreign stranger. The newcomer may find that "the red carpet" has been rolled out and they may be taken to restaurants, movies and tours of the sights. The new acquaintances may want to take the newcomer out to many places and "show them off." This first stage of culture shock is called the "honeymoon phase."

Unfortunately, this honeymoon phase often comes to an end fairly soon. The newcomer has to deal with transportation problems (buses that don't come on time), shopping problems (can't buy their favourite foods) or communication problems (just what does "Chill out, dude." mean?). It may start to seem like people no longer care about your problems. They may help, but they don't seem to understand your concern over what they see as small problems. You might even start to think that the

people in the host country don't like foreigners.

This may lead to the second stage of culture shock, known as the "rejection phase." The newcomer may begin to feel aggressive and start to complain about the host culture/country. It is important to recognize that these feelings are real and can become serious. This phase is a kind of crisis in the 'disease' of culture shock. It is called the "rejection" phase because it is at this point that the newcomer starts to reject the host country, complaining about and noticing only the bad things that bother them. At this stage the newcomer either gets stronger and stays, or gets weaker and goes home (physically, mentally or both).

If you don't survive stage two successfully, you may find yourself moving into stage three: the "regression phase." The word "regression" means moving backward, and in this phase of culture shock, you spend much of your time speaking your own language, watching videos from your home country, eating food from home. You may also notice that you are moving around campus or around town with a group of students who speak your own language. You may spend most of this time complaining about the host country/culture.

Also in the regression phase, you may only remember the good things about your home country. Your homeland may suddenly seem marvellously wonderful; all the difficulties that you had there are forgotten and you may find yourself wondering why you ever left (hint: You left to learn English!). You may now only remember your home country as a wonderful place in which nothing ever went wrong for you. Of course, this is not true, but an illusion created by your culture shock 'disease.'

If you survive the third stage successfully (or miss it completely) you will move into the fourth stage of culture shock called the "recovery phase" or the "at-ease-at-last phase." In this stage you become more comfortable with the language and you also feel more comfortable with the customs of the host country. You can now move around without a feeling of anxiety. You still have problems with some of the social cues and you may still not understand everything people say (especially idioms). However, you are now 90% adjusted to the new culture and you start to realize that no country is that much better than another - it is just different lifestyles and different ways to deal with the problems of life.

With this complete adjustment, you accept the food, drinks, habits and customs of the host country, and you may even find yourself preferring some things in the host country to things at home. You have now understood that there are different ways to live your life and that no way is really better than another, just different. Finally, you have become comfortable in the new place.

It is important to remember that not everyone experiences all the phases of culture shock. It is also important to know that you can experience all of them at different times: you might experience the regression phase before the rejection phase, etc. You might even experience the regression phase on Monday, the "at-ease" phase on Tuesday, the honeymoon phase on Wednesday, and the rejection phase again on Thursday. What will Friday be like?

Much later, you may find yourself returning to your homeland and -guess what? - you may find yourself entering the fifth phase of culture shock. This is called "reverse culture shock" or "return culture shock" and occurs when you return home. You have been away for a long time, becoming comfortable with the habits and customs of a new lifestyle and you may find that you are no longer completely comfortable in your home country. Many things may have changed while you were away and it may take a little while to become at ease with the cues and signs and symbols of your home culture.

Reverse culture shock can be very difficult. There is a risk of sickness or emotional problems in many of the phases of culture shock. Remember to be kind to yourself all

the time that you are overseas, and when you get home. Give yourself time to adjust. Be your own best friend. If you do these things you will be a much stronger person. If you do these things, congratulations, you will be a citizen of the world!

Common symptoms of culture shock include:

- Over eating
- Boredom
- Easily upset
- Isolation
- Homesickness
- Sleeping too much
- Idealizing homeland
- Inability to concentrate
- Unexpected crying spells
- Negative attitude toward host country

Most people react to culture shock in any of three typical ways:

- They try to make other people do things their way.
- They isolate themselves from the culture.
- They learn to adapt.

The first two reactions are entirely normal and common, but in the long run they do not offer the opportunity to absorb more than just a small part of the new culture. In addition, the first two make it nearly impossible for you to be successful and can result in major adjustment problems. The third reaction is much more desirable.

We try to encourage our students with the motto, "It's not right, it's not wrong, it's just different!"

In order to help you deal with culture shock, we suggest the following:

It is important that you recognize the symptoms. When you see the first signs, try to focus your energy in more positive directions. Get more involved in family activities, such as preparing the meal, walking the dog, raking the yard, washing the car, shopping for groceries, etc. It is important that you get involved and stay involved. Remember that life will only get better!

We encourage you to limit your telephone calls home to no more than one or two a month and to limit your e-mails as well. Frequent contact with family and friends back home can delay your adjustment. Your natural parents should be made aware of these suggested limitations. It is important to have their support for this, especially in the early months.

You will certainly have periods of homesickness, especially around special holidays. Consider sharing some of your special celebrations with your host family. This can be a wonderful learning experience for everyone and will ease any loneliness you are feeling.

MORE ON CULTURE SHOCK

The culture shock stage begins roughly at the end of the first month and extends sometimes until the fourth month. Seasoned host families report that a student experiencing culture shock might:

Dread going to school because classmates are 'arrogant' and the Tunisian educational system is 'disgusting'.

Lash out in anger because of an innocent remark at the dinner table; or make a retreat to the bedroom for hours.

Long for family and friends back home who 'really understand'.

Withdraw at times, become irritable, ignore rules or exhibit unusual shyness.

Describe confusing or threatening situations as 'stupid' or 'dumb'.

Complain about feeling unloved or unjustly criticized.

Escalate minor squabbles with other family members into standoffs.

Find it difficult to hold normal conversations.

THINGS YOU CAN DO TO SURVIVE THIS PERIOD

Discuss the meaning of culture shock with your family and talk about your feelings. Remind yourself that culture shock behavior is normal. (Sometimes students think this only happens to 'weak' or 'immature' students). Remember these points:

It's OK to miss home and to feel bad. Sometimes talking about it helps the pain go away. So if you want to talk, go to your host family or find a nearby friend.

Culture shock is normal. It can be difficult to be away from home for a long period of time. Your host family can never take the place of your real family, but they care for you very much. You can depend on their support.

Get out of your room and get active!

Call or e-mail home less frequently. You might initially feel better after talking to family, but an hour later, you will feel more homesick.

WARNING SIGNS THAT SHOULD BE BROUGHT TO THE ATTENTION OF YOUR COUNSELOR IMMEDIATELY

Excessive sleeping or insomnia

Significant weight gain or loss

Prolonged acute depression

Constantly feeling sick and/or feeling like you do not want to go to school

Excessive calls or e-mail home

Excessive calls or e-mail from parents

Disrespectfulness

Serious communication barriers with host family

Students begin to say he/she MUST go home

Suicidal tendencies and/or behavior

THE ADJUSTMENT CYCLE

The Host Family Survival Kit: A Guide for American Host Families by Huff and King (P.O. Box 700, Yarmouth, ME 04096) lists eight common stages that students go through during their year in a new culture. Knowledge of these stages may help students and host families recognize and understand patterns of behavior on the part of students. These stages are not universal, but most students experience many of them in different degrees during their stay in a different country.

Stage 1 Application Anxiety

December-July (before arrival)

Anxious to receive information about host family anxious about own ability to handle change.

Stage 2 Arrival Fascination

August-September

Elated high expectations overwhelmed by attention, respect and concern.

Stage 3 Culture Shock

September

Excitement and novelty wear off. Must deal with new environment. Changes in sleep patterns. Disorientation, mental fatigue, frustration, confusion and homesickness occur. Students complain about host family, school and host country in general.

Stage 4 Surface adjustment:

October December

Language improves, communication is easier. Student is comfortable within a small group of friends.

Stage 5 Mental Isolation

December January

Boredom, isolation and lack of motivation. Little stimulus to overcome difficulties. Holiday season is particularly difficult.

Stage 6 Integration and Acceptance

February June

Achieved when student is at ease with host family, school and friends. A deeper understanding is attained.

Stage 7 Return Anxiety

April June

Student doesn't want to leave; is apprehensive about returning home. Great confusion

Stage 8 Shock Re-Integration

After June (after return)

Life at home has changed; student wants to share more about the year abroad than people care about.

THRIVING NOT JUST SURVIVING

Approaching an Intercultural Experience Positively

The intercultural writer Margaret Pusch notes that the three skills critical to being effective in an overseas experience are:

- The ability to manage psychological stress
- The ability to communicate effectively
- The ability to establish interpersonal relationships

“Cross-cultural experience is stressful and cultural 'fatigue' does occur: in fact it is argued that it is only with this fatigue that one is receptive to understanding and accepting cultural differences.” (Ken House D5060) Understanding the basis of our culture is a starting point for understanding another culture. There is a common saying among Youth Exchange Volunteers: Nothing is better or worse just different!

Learning the language is both difficult and rewarding. Exchange students are expected to try hard to learn enough to communicate effectively with their hosts and not to rely on the few who know a few words of your language or the perpetual use of hand motions and mime. Honor your hosts by learning their language.

At the heart of 'interpersonal relationships' is attitude. Developing successful relationships with host families, classmates and AFSers, as a foreigner, requires effort but it is likely to result in life-long friendships. Adjusting your attitude to those around you can be summed up in a simple credo: 'If it is to be it is up to me.' With a responsible attitude, an exchange student will thrive not just survive!

MISCELLANEOUS TIPS

Below is a list of suggestions on how you can prepare, improve, and benefit from your AFS experience. These tips and suggestions are the result of years of experience in cross-cultural exchanges.

If you are on medication have written physicians orders with you. Prescriptions drugs should be carried in their original containers with the pharmaceutical labels. Communicate with your host family and counselor about your medical needs.

With your family at home, discuss a plan to follow in the event that there is an emergency during your year abroad: i.e. illness or death in the family, etc. You should try to anticipate your wishes and those of your family if you are confronted with a situation in which your early return home is a consideration. There have been occasions when a student has had to be told by phone of a death of a friend or a family member, though they are not necessarily expected to come home. Most often when a student is called home for a family emergency it is not an option to return to your host country. Any emergency that causes you to leave should be very serious.

Smoking is discouraged. If you state in your application that you do not smoke, you will be held to that position throughout your year. Your acceptance and host family placement is based on your signed statement. Under no circumstances are you to smoke in your host family's bedrooms.

Become an integral part of the Host Family, assuming duties and responsibilities normal

for a student of your age and other children in the family. Respect your host's wishes.

Learn the language of your host country. The effort will be appreciated by teachers, host parents, AFS members and others you meet in the community. It will go a long way in your gaining acceptance in the community and those who will become lifelong friends.

Do not spend all your time with the other exchange students.

Choose friends in the community carefully. Ask for and heed the advice of host families, and counselors in choosing friends.

Do not borrow money. Pay any bills you incur promptly. Ask permission to use the family telephone, keep track of long distance calls and reimburse your host family each month for the calls you make.

You will be under AFS Tunisia's responsibility while in the country. AFS rules and regulations state that travel and extra activities must be authorized by AFS Tunisia first. Parents/guardians must avoid authorizing any extra activities directly to their son/daughter. If the student has relatives in the host country or region, they will have no authority over the student while the student is in the program.

Visits by your parents/guardians, siblings and/or friends while you are in the program are strongly discouraged. Such visits may take place only with consultation with and consent by AFS Tunisia and only within the last quarter of the exchange or during school breaks. Visits are not allowed during major holidays, even if occurring during school breaks.

Avoid serious romantic involvement. Abstain from sexual activity and promiscuity.

Letters home can make an excellent diary and written record of your exchange experience. Hand-write your letters to your family and friends and mail them. It will create a good diary of your year abroad. It's a good idea to number letters so it is easy to tell if one is missing from the sequence.

Telephoning is easy, but can be expensive. Be conservative in your calls and always use a calling card. Keep in mind that excessive calls to home, especially during periods of depression, will not always help and can prevent you from overcoming culture shock.

Attend as many AFS meetings as possible. Expect to help with AFS events and functions. If and AFS activity conflicts with personal plans, the AFS function takes precedence.

Use clean language at all times, in order not to offend your hosts. Swearing and telling dirty jokes does not endear you to your hosts and neither will it enhance your own country's image.

Saying 'Thank You' is important in our culture. Make sure you thank people who take you places and do things for you. A 'thank you' note is especially appreciated.

You may or may not be expected to fast during the month of Ramadhan in the Islamic calendar. Try to fit in with your hosts' habits and practices in this month. If you have to eat or drink at home or in public, do it discretely. Whatever you do, maintain a respectful attitude towards religious practices in your host family.

You can not work to earn money. Learn to live within your budget.

Maintain a wide circle of friends of all ages. This is the secret of success. Spending all of your time with high school students and/or other exchange students will keep you from experiencing your new culture the way that you need to.

REPRESENT YOUR HOME COUNTRY AND AFS AS IF YOU WERE AN AMBASSADOR ON ASSIGNMENT!

By using appropriate manners and behaviors in your host family, you will make it easier for your host parents to be good hosts. Consider the situation from their point of view whenever you can.

Use of the bathroom is an area of potential friction. Make sure that your use of it fits in with the rest of your host family. Don't use all the hot water with lengthy showers every day.

You will probably gain weight. Don't be fussy when it comes to food it won't matter. It is the change in environment and food preparation that causes the weight gain. Dare to try the foods and enjoy what is new and different about them. You will enjoy the experience and you can rest assured that when you return home at the end of the exchange year, any weight gain you suffered will probably come off easily.

Being immersed in a new culture takes a lot of energy. Make sure you get enough rest so you can get up in the mornings with the rest of your host family. Don't make them wait around while you sleep in!

Greetings and farewells are very important in all countries. Acknowledge everyone when you arrive or leave (on a daily basis). You will find differences in customs between your peers, your host families and other social groups. For instances, teens often simply 'speak' a greeting (Hi! Hey!); families often hug AND kiss or pat a shoulder. Pay attention and adjust to the situation.

You will experience some periods of homesickness after your arrival and definitely this will happen again at Christmas. Tell your host mom. She probably expects it. Write home talk about the things you are doing and seeing cry for a few minutes but stay busy and focused and it will pass. DO NOT use this as an excuse to phone home more or get on internet chat lines. That will make things worse. WE ARE NOT MAKING THIS UP! The key to feeling better is to keep moving and stay busy. Exhaust yourself with activity.

If you become ill even if it's only a sore throat tell your host parents immediately. Do not visit a doctor without consulting your hosts.

Ask your hosts to tell you if you do anything which they see as inappropriate or objectionable. You might offend someone with a gesture or a phrase that means something entirely different in your home culture from what it does here.

Watch television with your hosts. It will help you learn the language and culture.

Be friendly and curious. A smile is understood for what it is in all cultures. Your hosts will not be offended or bothered if you ask them to explain customs, beliefs, and food to you. People will appreciate you if you take interest in their culture.

You may accumulate a lot of souvenirs during your exchange year. Plan on sending small boxes home by regular mail, in order to avoid expensive overweight charges on your return flight home. You should check with the airline to determine what your luggage weight limits are going to be. They can be very strict. Be also informed about customs regulations. If you are carrying things home with you, list all purchases and pack them together to expedite your time spent in Customs.

WRITING HOME

You may be having fun but your parents NEED to hear about it, too!

Because you have probably always lived at home, it is unlikely that you have ever considered 'adopting' the habit of writing letters to your family. However, it is a blessing that your family will enjoy during this exchange and again, when you begin your college years and perhaps move away from home in adult life. The telephone, fax and email are 'convenient' alternatives, but most certainly are less personal and less comforting. A personal handwritten letter is priceless.

Write regularly. Make your letters detailed. Talk about your thoughts, your everyday experiences, the differences and similarities between home and your host community, your feelings, etc. Besides the comfort it provides to your family, it will also be a permanent memory of details that you are definitely going to forget as the months and years pass by. When you return home, your parents and relatives may be willing to return the letters to your care so that you can supplement your memory book.

A variation of this piece of advice comes from a former exchange student who suggested this idea: Write a daily journal on letter paper instead of in a book. Note the dates and number the pages carefully. Every week or two mail the letters home, along with photos or clippings. Your family can enjoy the exchange at a distance, and when you return home, you can place the letters in a bound journal or scrapbook.

A former exchange student, Karen Connelly, spent 1986 as an exchange student in Thailand at the age of 17. In 1993, she published *Touch the dragon: a Thai Journal*. Her book won the Governor General's Award for Non-Fiction in Canada. In 1994, it reached #1 on Canada's best-seller non-fiction list. Her book was later serialized by Reader's Digest and in a television series.

OK you may not publish your own personal journal...then again, maybe you will. But if you record nothing more than some rolls of film, you will regret it later. So, PROMISE YOURSELF THAT YOU WILL WRITE HOME REGULARLY.

Of course, you should make that essential phone call the moment you arrive at your host home and assure your parents that you are safe. Use the telephone to say 'happy birthday' to family members, or to OCCASIONALLY hear their voices. But definitely write about the things that you wish to remember.

RULES & EXPECTATIONS

THE FOUR D'S

Cardinal Rules for Youth Exchange Students

There are many situations in which you can find yourself on a plane home...early. The most obvious cause would be if you break the laws of your host country...that is if you are not in jail. The Four D's address offenses that can get you into trouble and might result in your exchange being terminated.

DRUGS

Possession of drugs is a criminal offense. Taking drugs is a criminal offense. Any association with drugs, drug users or drug dealers will violate the intention of and spirit of youth exchange. If you find yourself in the company of anyone who falls into this category get out of the situation as quickly as you can. You were selected because you are a leader. Do not behave like a follower.

Smoking cigarettes is not necessarily illegal (depending upon your age) but it is offensive to many people. If you have identified yourself as a 'non-smoker' on your application, you will be expected not to smoke. There will be no exceptions.

If you have identified yourself as a smoker, and you are going on exchange, you must be sensitive to your host families at all times. Clothes and hair will carry an odor. There are a large number of asthmatics who experience allergic reactions to cigarette smoke and odor. Be respectful and aware of the reactions of those around you.

DRINKING

Regardless of the legal drinking age in your host country, you are not permitted to drink alcohol with friends at parties or in bars. Alcohol abuse may be grounds for termination of your exchange year. You can expect to experience peer pressure and you are expected to resist it. You should tell your peers that if you drink, you could be sent home.

Avoid at all costs being a passenger in a vehicle being driven by a drunk driver. Call your host parents or another AFSer and ask for a ride. If it offends your 'friends', then you should not consider them to be true friends. Although we want you to 'fit in', this is NOT the way to do it.

DRIVING

Whether you have a driving license or not, you may not drive a motor vehicle while on exchange. This includes cars, motorcycles, scooters, farm vehicles, power boats, snowmobiles, personal watercraft, etc. Third party liability is a complicated issue, and insurance regulations are strict. You can not afford to be involved in an accident in which you are the driver. Do not take this risk.

You may find that a bicycle is useful and a common form of transportation. If you ride a bicycle, remember 'situational awareness'; in other words, be aware of all that is happening around you and ride carefully.

DATING

It is a bad idea to become heavily involved in a romantic relationship during your year abroad. It will lead to emotional stress, the temptation to become sexually active and will distract you from focusing on achieving the objectives of your AFS exchange. One of these objectives is to meet lots of people and enjoy many activities. Do not turn down invitations because your focus has become limited to one person. You may date, but not seriously.

It is a good idea to enjoy the company of friends of both genders in 'group' activities. Being in a relationship can be demanding on your time, emotions, and energy. If you feel a situation is getting out of hand, talk to your Counselor, and NOT YOUR PEERS.

Very often, sex, drugs, and drinking go hand-in-hand. You should avoid the parties that look as if they might go that way.

TRAVEL POLICIES

TRAVEL WHILE ABROAD

The intent of the AFS Youth Exchange Program is to provide you with an academic year abroad which will encompass cultural and language immersion. It is not a year of vacation. AFS has your best interests in mind, so do not put them in a difficult position with requests to travel when and where you wish.

You are not permitted to travel outside your District, except when being taken by AFS staff or volunteers on assignment, your host family or an adult person pre-approved by your host family. If more than two school days are to be missed, then written permission must be obtained from the school principal.

You must not travel outside your city of residence alone.

You must not hitchhike at any time.

AFS's greatest concern is for your safety. Please respect the precautions that have been established. AFS has your best interests in mind at all times.

TRAVEL IS A PRIVILEGE, NOT A RIGHT.

The aim of your year overseas is to live in another country, in the style of that country's people. It is not a year-long holiday. Hosts tire quickly of students who are always seeking to be entertained. You will not come to understand or meet the people if you are traveling from one tourist spot to another. Do not expect to be shown everything and go everywhere. Your host parents certainly wish for you to enjoy your stay, but like your natural parents, they may not have time or money to travel often.

Do not compare your situation with other students who may appear 'lucky'. Think of the students who may follow next year. Your actions may determine whether or not people are willing to host again!

Be yourself. Have Fun. Accept your year for what it is. This is a wonderful opportunity to see and learn in another country and another culture. Travel is not the objective.

TRAVEL COSTS

AFS Tunisia will cover your travel costs when you are traveling within AFS sponsored and approved activities. Cost of other types of travel are at your charge.

The costs of an open return airfare (which allows you to return home at any time), passport and visas are to be paid by the student's natural parents. Costs related to an emergency or early return home, or other unusual costs incurred by the student, are the responsibility of the student's natural parents.

PARENTS VISIT AT THE END OF THE EXCHANGE

Some countries prohibit - and most strongly discourage - visits by parents during the student's exchange year. Family visits are definitely disallowed during holiday times. It is

of great cultural significance for a student to experience holidays with their host culture and it is also very meaningful for the host country and host families to share these celebrations with their 'adopted' son or daughter. If you don't understand- please try to at least respect this guideline.

Experience has shown time and again that students experience severe culture shock for a second time after their natural parents depart for home and leave the student behind to finish the year. It is most stressful for the student who must re-experience the pain of separation. However, host families and youth exchange counselors are often exhausted with effort to help these students who are suffering because the emotional changes will include anger, resentment, withdrawal and deep sadness. . . .similar to the stages of grief.

GOING TO SCHOOL

ALL AFS EXCHANGE STUDENTS ARE REQUIRED TO ATTEND SCHOOL FULL-TIME, TO PARTICIPATE IN SCHOOL LIFE IN A MEANINGFUL WAY, AND TO TAKE ALL PRESCRIBED TESTS AND EXAMINATIONS. Even if you have completed high school in your home country, do not ask or expect to be enrolled in college or university classes.

In Tunisia, and following the agreement between AFS Tunisia and the Tunisian Ministry of Education, you will be placed in a public school as a "third year secondary school" student, the pre-graduation year, science track. Curricula in public schools are set by the ministry of education. At the 11th grade, students are placed in tracks (math, science, literature, technology, business administration, economics, etc.) and they do not choose their subjects or classes. Changing classes is not allowed except for exceptional and convincing reasons.

The school year starts on September 15th and ends the first week of June. It includes one-week vacations in November and February and two-week vacations in late December/early January and late March/early April.

The average time spent in school is 32 hours per week, unevenly distributed between weekdays (from three to six hours per day) and between classes (from one to five hours per week), depending on the field of specialization. On Friday afternoons, Saturday afternoons and Sundays, schools are closed.

Typical classes in secondary education are math, biology, physics and chemistry, computer science, French, English, German, Spanish, Italian, Arabic, history, geography, civic education, religious education, philosophy, artistic education and physical education. In some branches, other classes are added such as economics, statistics, management, financial mathematics and technology. The language of education is French for scientific, economic and technology classes, and Arabic for literature, philosophy and social sciences.

Homework is common in secondary education; an average of 90 minutes daily will be necessary for preparations. In addition to their regular classes, many students also do go to private tutors for reinforcement. Evaluation is done through regular tests and quizzes during the trimester and then through a one-week examination period during the first week of December, the first week of March and the last week of May. Grades are given out with a possible high score of 20, and certain classes are considered more important and account for a larger share of the average, which needs to be higher than 10 for passing. The daily schedule may be demanding and discipline is strictly observed. Public schools in Tunisia may lack a few facilities and may be crowded but education there is of a high standard.

YOUR BEHAVIOR AT SCHOOL

As an exchange student in a foreign school, you will be fairly obvious and you will be considered a representative (i.e. an ambassador) of your country by teachers and other students. Your behavior good or bad will be noticed. Be respectful of your principal and your teachers. Obey the school regulations, even if other students do not. You will be expected to complete homework assignments the same as any member of

your school class. Language may be an obstacle...but nobody will ask you to do more than your best.

Be aware of dress code and customs of your fellow students. You may be different, but respect those around you.

Be aware that schools are places in which drugs, sexual harassment, and violence are not uncommon.

Not all students are nice and some may try to take advantage of you. Be friendly but choose your friends with care. Avoid the 'wrong crowd' and situations that might lead to breaking the law. You can be prosecuted for crimes in your host country, the same as any other resident of that country. AFS can not protect you from this.

Participate in school and sports activities outside of the classroom. It is the best way to meet others and begin healthy friendships.

Although you are there to learn their language and culture, be prepared to accept every opportunity to give talks about your country in your school and in other places within the community. Most of the people you meet will probably never have the chance to visit your home country, but they may be interested to know about it.

When you speak do so carefully. Avoid making 'good-bad' comparisons that might embarrass you or hurt others.

Reports & Year-End Wrap-Up

REPORTING TO AFS TUNISIA

In addition to your regular contacts with your AFS counselor, a monthly report is expected from you during the entire year. Your reports are due on the last day of every month and a final comprehensive report is due a few days before you return home. In addition to constituting a written record of your exchange experience, writing these reports may help you to stay focused on your AFS experience and become aware of the changes in your perspectives and the maturing process that are bound to happen.

The report need not be long. Here are some suggestions for what you can include.

Tell us about your personal experiences: Have you had any illnesses, problems with host families, problems in school. What solutions have you found?

Tell us about your social activities: Have you gone to any social events, parties, dances, etc?

Have you traveled?

Have you visited other exchange students?

How are you doing at school: new subjects, clubs, sports, friends, etc.

Your AFS activities: meetings attended, speaking. Your relationship with your counselor.

What are you learning about yourself and about others? What do you like here and what you don't like?

DEBRIEFING and RE-ENTRY SHOCK

Re-adjusting to your home culture after a year abroad will be equally as difficult as it was to adjust to your host country when you first arrived overseas. Things have changed while you've been away. Your home, family, friends and culture have not stood still. You will have changed too. You have become 'multi-national' in your thinking and in some of your beliefs.

After the initial excitement, both you and your family should expect a re-adjustment period. You will likely have the same culture shock symptoms that you experienced in the beginning of the exchange year. Your friends may appear indifferent to you and perhaps even jealous of your experiences. You will probably find that you no longer have the same things in common anymore. Things may not be the way you remembered them and your attitude towards some aspects of your own culture may have changed.

This is called re-entry shock. Just remember: It's normal, and you will get through it!

Practical Information

Please fill in the blanks on this page with the appropriate information and keep it for your records.

This handbook belongs to:

(Your name) **(Country of origin)** **(Year)**
Home address in country of origin:

Tel:

Host family:

Address:

Tel:

Your AFS counselor:

Name:

Tel:

AFS Tunisia:

Office address:
7, Rue d'Autriche
1002 - Tunis
Tunisia

Phone: +216 71 792579
Fax: +216 71 792579
E-Mail: afsinfo@afs-tunisia.org.tn
Web Site: www.afs-tunisia.org.tn

Notes

Use these blank pages to take notes during orientation