A YFU Student writes of her departure from home:

“I was sitting on the plane and all around me were excited students, yelling and impatient to leave. I looked out the window and saw my mother with red, swollen eyes, trying not to cry. Next to her were my father, grandmother, and sister, all waiting for my plane to leave. I didn’t want to leave.“I felt miserable...What was lying ahead of me? I have so many new things to learn and there are so many new people to be my friends. Would it really be that bad or was it just this minute that I felt this way? Could I just leave the past behind and start another life? I would soon find out.”

You may have the same mixed feelings about leaving home. As an exchange student you are a foreigner in a strange land! It is exciting and also frightening, but YFU students have found many ways of getting settled and feeling at home in their host land.

The Moving Experience
When you move from your home country to your host country, the process is the same for most YFU students. It includes Preparing and Saying Goodbye; Traveling and Arriving; and Settling-In.

The first step includes making all the necessary arrangements for your trip, learning about your host country and the YFU program, and packing. It also has the important aspect of saying good-bye to all your favorite places, things, friends and family. As you know, this can be very difficult, and may make you wonder if you have made the right decision.

The second part of the moving experience is traveling to your host country and arriving. It is usually filled with lots of excitement, meeting new people, and seeing new things. It may also be a little uncomfortable because you’ve said good-bye to all the familiar things at home but you are not yet settled in your host country or feeling a part of your new family.

The last step is settling-in. You are learning how to belong to your host family and move about easily and comfortably in your community.

Settling In
To feel at home in your host country, you’ll need to find replacements for the family and friends and personal enjoyments you left behind in your home country. Your host family will fulfill many of the roles your natural family does. They will provide you with a home, food, a caring attitude, and the support and guidance you need as an exchange student.

Will you immediately feel “at home” in your new family? Most exchange students do not. One student says: “Patience is very important. It’s very difficult when students are new. The host family has all their own ways of doing things and all their own friends. Students must start a whole new life.”

Have patience. It will take effort on your part to, learn the expected behavior and routines of your host family. For example, when are you expected to be at meals? What are you expected to help with at home? What are the necessary arrangements with your family when you wish to go out? You’ll need to learn these things by asking questions and observing what other family members do. Become a good family member as quickly as possible.

Developing An Action Plan
In addition to settling-in in your new home, develop an action plan for yourself for learning the things you need to know. Action plans can be lists of things to do or schedules of when to do things. Here is an example of part of one student’s list of things to learn:

1. What are the denominations of money? What is the relative value to my own money system? How and where will I get my money changed? Should I have a bank account?
2. Where do I buy stamps and mail letters?
3. Where can I buy toothpaste, stationary, or other small items I need?
4. How do I use the public transport system?
Make yourself a schedule for what and when you want to learn specific things. For example, during the first part of your stay, you may want to really get to know your immediate neighborhood. What stores, shops, services (post office, police station, etc.) are near? Learn about the transportation system, restaurants, and recreation facilities. After you know your immediate surroundings, you can expand to other parts of the community.

Learning About New Culture
How are you going to learn so many different things? Asking questions is one way. Read YFU’s Transcultural Study Guide to learn ways to understand a culture that’s different from your own.

Careful observation is another method to use. When you see or experience something that’s different, make observations. Then make an educated guess. What do your observations mean in the new culture? Write down your guess. Ask different people if your educated guess is correct. Listen carefully to their explanation. Correct your ideas, if necessary, and apply your newly gained knowledge to new situations.

Here is an example. An international student living in the United States used the observation method to learn an important lesson:

“I had always heard that Americans are very friendly. But I was very confused because all the students at school would say hi to me, but would never stop even for a conversation. I thought what is wrong? Are they afraid of me? I always felt so lonely. My observation was that American teenagers were not interested in foreign students and that they were too busy to become friends with me. I guessed that all of their hello’s and hi’s were meaningless. Finally, I asked my host mom. She and some friends talked to me about Americans. They said that the way to make friends was to join in school activities and to participate a lot with other teenagers with the same interests as mine. So I joined the photography club and the soccer team and from those things I really made new and real friendships.”

One reason “foreigners” feel like they are in a strange place is that they can’t understand and speak the local language very well.

Speaking and Understanding Language
Be courageous! It is difficult to take the risk of speaking a language you aren’t sure of, but the Youth For Understanding students who get the most from their experiences are those who jump right in and learn to communicate.

You Are the One to “Fit In”
It is true, you are now the foreigner. Only you can learn the language and behaviors you need to feel “at home” in your host country. Begin with the ideas we have given you, and continue to learn from and enjoy your YFU experience.

Two Activities
1. Begin writing a journal takes a little discipline to write down what you do each day, new things you’ve learned, and how you feel. If you haven’t left your home country yet, start your journal with your preparations, your “good-byes” and how you feel about going. Later, when you read it, you’ll be surprised how much your feelings change, and how much you learn.
2. Make a list of the persons, places, and things you miss (or will miss) the most from your home country. Try to figure out who or what you’ll substitute for them in your host country. Include ideas of activities you’d like to pursue in your host culture.