

in their own words: international students share their aeolo swiss academy journey

Brochures are good at certain things. Sunlight on a lake, a smiling chef in a white jacket, the word "excellence" in a serif font. What brochures are bad at is the truth of an ordinary Tuesday: the price of groceries, the third week of homesickness, the moment a teacher looks at you across a seminar table and asks what you actually think.



I have spent enough time around international students to know that the honest version never comes out in a prospectus. It comes out over coffee, when nobody is selling anything and the recorder is running more out of politeness than expectation. So over a few weeks, I sat down with five current students at AELO Swiss Academy and one graduate who happened to fly back for a visit. They came from Hanoi, São Paulo, Nairobi, Bangalore, Bogotá and Manila. They studied different things and arrived in different seasons. What they had in common was a willingness to say the unpolished part out loud.

The quotes below are used with permission and lightly trimmed for length. Nothing else was changed.

"the first month is the hardest month"

Linh is 21, from Hanoi, and in her second year of hospitality management. She arrived in January, which she now describes as "character building."

"I had seen snow in photos my whole life. I touched it for the first time at the bus stop and I cried a little, from the cold and from everything else. My coat was beautiful and useless. I packed for autumn. I had watched so many videos about Switzerland and somehow I still packed for autumn."

The arrival itself went smoother than the packing. A second-year student met her at arrivals with a paper sign bearing her name. "I still have the photo. I thought, okay, maybe this will be fine. That person is now my best friend here, which is a very boring story, but it is true."

Then came week three, which every single student I spoke to mentioned without my asking.

"The third week was the hardest. The snow was not magic anymore. My family was asleep whenever I was awake. The assignments started. I called my mother and told her I had made a mistake. She told me to wait one more

week. It got better. It always gets better after week four. Nobody warns you about week three, so I now warn everyone."

Mateus, 24, from São Paulo, hit a different wall on day one: the grocery store receipt.



"I took a photo of my first receipt and sent it to my father with no comment. He replied with a crying emoji. We laugh [REDDIT](#) about it now. The trick is the store brands. I eat perfectly well on a student budget. It just took me two months of small mistakes to learn how. The first month you pay tuition twice, once to the school and once to the supermarket."

"if the schedule says 9:00, it means 8:55"

The classroom culture came up in every conversation, usually with a laugh attached. Classes at AELO Swiss Academy run small, students told me, somewhere in the range of 15 to 25 people, with seminars smaller still. Small enough that attendance is not anonymous.

Amina, 22, from Nairobi, studies culinary arts and has the sharpest take on the difference from her previous school.

"Back home, the teacher spoke and we wrote. Here, silence means you did not understand, so the teacher will look at you directly and ask what you think. The first time it happened I wanted the floor to open. By the second month I was raising my hand before anyone else. That one change, honestly, is the whole education in miniature. They teach you that your opinion is a thing you are expected to bring to work."

Punctuality was the second lesson, delivered gently but repeatedly.

"If the schedule says 9:00, it means 8:55," Mateus said. "Nobody scolds you. You just notice that the good seats are taken and the teacher has already started. The Swiss do not punish lateness. They simply remove its rewards."

Group work, according to Mateus, was where all of this got stress-tested at once. "My marketing group had five nationalities and, I believe, five private definitions of the word deadline. The strict one won. It was painful and it was the best training I could have asked for, because my job later was exactly that: getting five very different people to agree before Friday."

Linh added a quieter observation. "The teachers notice when you are missing. Not in a scary way. In an 'are you okay' way. The first time I skipped class because I was sad, someone emailed me before noon. In a big school, nobody would have known I existed."

"the internship semester changed everything"

Every hospitality and culinary student I spoke to circled back to the internship semester unprompted. Placements typically run four to six months, students told me, often in hotel kitchens, front offices, or resort operations, with the academy's career office helping to match students, polish CVs into the local format, and run mock interviews.

Amina spent hers doing breakfast service at a mountain resort, with 5 a.m. starts.

"I learned more in five months of breakfast service than in a year of theory, and I loved the theory. When a chef with thirty years of experience tells you your hollandaise is 'acceptable,' you learn what acceptable means. Then you spend three weeks learning what good means. My arms were tired and my French got fast. I would not trade it."

She is careful, though, to describe it honestly rather than romantically. "It was hard. Some shifts were eleven hours. I missed a family wedding. If a student tells you the internship is pure magic, they are either lucky or lying. It is work. It is just work that changes your resume and your confidence at the same time, which is rare."

Daniel, the graduate visiting from Manila, finished his diploma a few years back and now works as an assistant front office manager at a hotel on Lake Geneva. His view of the placement system is the most balanced one I heard.

"The academy did not hand me a job. It handed me a network, a work ethic, and then opened the door to interviews. I had to walk through myself. That is the right balance. The students who expected a job on a plate struggled. The students who treated the internship like a six-month interview did very well. Same system, different attitude, different result."

"budgets, bicycles, and the Sunday silence"

Priya, 23, from Bangalore, is the one to ask about money, because she tracks every franc in a paper notebook.

"Every single one. My friends tease me. But I have never run out of money before the end of the month, and two of them have, so I tease back."

Across the students I spoke to, monthly spending including rent landed somewhere between 1,500 and 2,200 francs, depending on whether they shared rooms, cooked at home, and how often the ski slopes called. Priya's own strategy is unglamorous and effective: a shared apartment, a second-hand bicycle, the half-fare travel card, and a Sunday cooking session with flatmates that produces four days of lunches.

"The bicycle cost me sixty francs from a student who was leaving. Best money I have spent in this country. And the mountains are free. It is the only free thing in Switzerland and it happens to be the best one."

The Sunday silence deserves its own paragraph, because it genuinely surprised everyone.

"The first Sunday I thought the town had been evacuated," Mateus said. "Everything closed. No noise. I walked around like the last person on earth. By the third month it was my favorite day of the week. No shops, no errands, no guilt. You hike, or you cook, or you sleep. Switzerland teaches you to rest the same way it teaches you to be on time: by refusing to negotiate."

"three languages before lunch"

Sofia, 20, from Bogotá, is in her first year and lives the most linguistically crowded life of anyone I interviewed. Classes in English, French lessons twice a week, a German-speaking roommate, and Spanish at home on video calls with her family.

"Some days my brain cooperates. Some days I open my mouth and three languages fall out in the wrong order. My roommate finds it very funny. She is right, but I have not told her that."

Her most practical discovery was the tandem partner setup, where students pair up to trade languages over coffee.

"My French improved faster in one semester of coffee conversations than in every app I paid for before I came. If you are shy, this is the cheat code. You have to talk, the other person has to talk, and the coffee makes it feel like friendship instead of homework."

Her advice to new arrivals is blunt: learn fifty words of French or German before you fly. "Ordering a coffee, asking for help, saying sorry. Fifty words. It changes how people look at you, and honestly, it changes how you feel about yourself in the first week, which is the week that matters."

what they wish they had known

I asked everyone the same closing question: what would you tell the version of yourself holding the acceptance letter? Their answers overlapped enough that it feels right to keep them as a short list, in their spirit if not always their exact words.

- Arrive two weeks early if your visa timing allows. Every student who did this said the first month of classes felt calmer and more theirs.
- Learn those fifty words of the local language on the plane. It pays for itself in week one.
- Bring proper shoes. Two students said this independently, both laughing, both serious. Boots before coats.
- Read the student handbook before day one. Housing rules, insurance, exam dates. It is short and it prevents small disasters.
- Join one thing in the first month. One. A sport, a club, a language café. Not five. One is how you meet people; five is how you meet exhaustion.

the part nobody puts in the brochure

At the end of each conversation I asked whether the whole thing had been worth it. Nobody said the program was easy. What they said, in five different accents, was that it was fair. Expectations were stated clearly, help was available if you asked for it early, and nothing about the grading felt like a mystery. For people building lives far from home, fairness turned out to be the thing they valued most.

Daniel put it in a way I have not been able to improve on since.

"My intake had eleven nationalities in one classroom. We argued about everything. Food, football, the correct way to write an email. We never once argued about whether the place was worth it. That was the only unanimous vote."

And Linh, who cried at a bus stop in January, gets the last word.

"In June I swam in the lake with the same people I met at orientation. Ask me in January if I would come again and I might have said go home. Ask me any other month and the answer is yes. A hundred times yes."