

What AELO Swiss Academy alumni wish they had known on their first day

There's a specific kind of quiet that lands on you in the first five minutes at AELO Swiss Academy, and almost every alumnus I've spoken with remembers it. You walk in clutching a folder of documents, a carefully rehearsed hello, and a suitcase that was slightly too heavy at the airport, and you realize the place is already alive without you. Students are laughing in a corridor you can't name yet. Someone is carrying a guitar. Someone else is debating train timetables in three languages at once, and all of it seems to run on rules nobody handed you.

Here's the exciting part: that feeling of being one step behind lasts, for most people, about a day and a half. Then it evaporates. The trouble is that nobody believes this on day one, so newcomers burn precious energy bracing for a struggle that never really arrives.

That's exactly why we asked alumni from several cohorts a single question: what do you wish someone had told you on your first morning? Their answers were specific, refreshingly unglamorous, and honestly better than any orientation speech. Here they are, organized so you can actually use them.

The nerves are universal, and they burn off fast

One alumna told me she rehearsed her self-introduction for the entire train ride to campus. She had a polished two-minute speech, a joke about her hometown, even a graceful way to explain her unusual surname. Then the welcome session started and nobody did formal introductions at all. People just started talking, and her prepared moment never came. She laughed about it years later, but her point was serious: she had spent a full day of energy preparing for a ceremony that didn't exist.

Let yourself be new. Everyone in that room on day one is at least a little nervous, including the ones who look like they were born knowing where the espresso machine is. Roughly half of any incoming group is quietly worried about the same three things: making friends, keeping up with the work, and whether they packed correctly. You don't need to hide any of it. Saying "I have no idea where this room is either" turned out to be the fastest friendship shortcut anyone could name.

Your timetable is a living thing, so treat it that way

Multiple alumni said the same thing in nearly identical words: the schedule you receive in week one is version one, not the final word. A module shifts to a different afternoon. A guest session gets swapped. A group project gets reorganized around someone's field trip. This isn't chaos, it's just how a lively academy breathes, and the sooner you accept it the happier you'll be.

Alumni who treated the printed timetable as gospel spent their first month stressed and constantly reorganizing. Those who treated it as a draft simply adjusted and moved on. The practical habits that came up again and again: check the student portal each evening during the first fortnight, keep two or three evenings loosely free, and don't book a big weekend trip for the second week of term. Wait until the rhythm settles, then travel hard. One third-year student put the trade-off perfectly: you'll feel slightly disorganized for ten days, and you'll save yourself a month of frustration. That's a fair deal by any measure.



Pack for three seasons in one week

Swiss weather does not do gentle transitions. Alumni describe mornings wrapped in fog, lunch under bright sun, and evenings cold enough to make you question your wardrobe choices, sometimes all within a single day in early autumn. The ones who arrived with one heavy coat and one summer outfit regretted it immediately. The ones who arrived with layers thrived.

And the fun details nobody mentions in the brochures! The tap water is genuinely excellent. The walking is real, in the best and most tiring sense, because Swiss towns love their slopes and their old cobblestones. Swiss sockets have their own distinctive three-pin shape, which surprised several travelers who assumed all of Europe shared one plug. From all those accumulated regrets, here's a day-one kit distilled into five essentials:



- Layers you can peel off and stuff into a daypack
- Shoes you can genuinely walk in, because the streets are steep and old
- A refillable water bottle, since fountains are everywhere and the water is superb
- A plug adapter suited to Swiss sockets if you're coming

from a country that uses the more common two-pin plugs, because Switzerland has its own three-pin standard and the adapter is cheap at the airport while the panic of not having one is not. And finally:

- A small notebook or a dedicated note on your phone, because week one buries you in names, room numbers, wifi passwords, and timetable changes, and nobody's memory is that good.

That's the suitcase sorted. Now for the things no suitcase can hold, which turned out to be the advice alumni valued most.

Ten local phrases will change your whole month

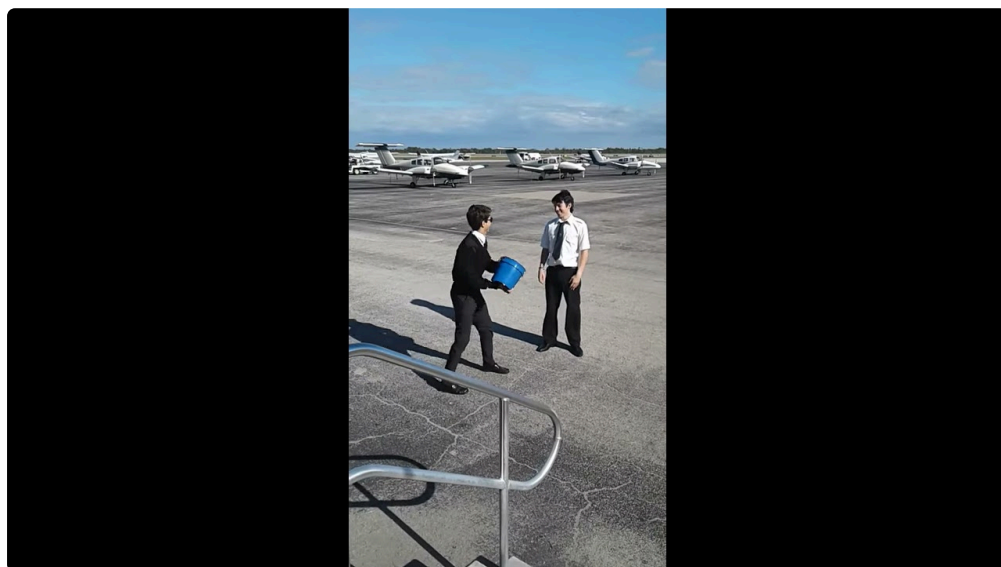
Switzerland has four national languages, and whichever region your campus calls home, the neighborhood around it speaks that language first and English second. Campus itself runs happily in English. The bakery across the street does not, or rather it does, but it lights up when you try.

One alumnus learned ten phrases on the flight over: a greeting, a thank you, a please, an excuse me, a request for the bill, and a handful of survival words. He swears those ten sentences earned him more smiles, better recommendations, and one unforgettable free pastry than anything else he did that month. Another alumna waited three months to start learning greetings and called it her single biggest first-term regret. The cost of trying is almost zero and the payoff is immediate, so this is the easiest win on the entire list. Learn the local hello before you land and use it the very first morning.

The trains run on time, so run on time too

Swiss punctuality is famous for a reason, and alumni describe the moment it clicks as almost funny. A departure listed for 14:03 leaves at 14:03. Not 14:04. Once you internalize that, the whole country opens up, because the rail network is dense, clean, and astonishingly reliable, and it will carry you to lakes, mountain towns, and city weekends with almost no planning stress.

The practical wisdom here is small but repeated by nearly everyone: download the national rail app in your first week, buy your ticket before you step on board, and look into the student travel discounts available for your length of stay early rather than in your final month. Several alumni paid full fare for weeks before discovering a discount they qualified for the entire time. And one more thing they insisted on: don't save Switzerland's beauty for later. The person who waited until exams were over to visit the lakes found that the best spontaneous trips happened in the gaps between classes, with people met that same morning, on trains boarded on a whim. Say yes early and often.



Ask early, ask anyone, ask the front desk first

Here's a story that came up more than once in slightly different costumes. A new student misplaces a piece of administrative paperwork, or misunderstands a deadline, or can't work out how to register for a module, and quietly panics for two weeks. Two weeks of imagining worst-case scenarios, losing sleep, and drafting increasingly dramatic emails that never get sent. Then they finally ask someone, and the whole thing is resolved in ten minutes, usually with a laugh and a "that happens to everyone."

The lesson alumni kept underlining: at AELO Swiss Academy, asking a question on day one is treated as normal, and suffering in silence is the only actual mistake available to you. The reception and student services teams have heard every version of every confusion a hundred times. Faculty genuinely want questions during the first week, because a question asked early shapes the whole term. The alumni who thrived all shared one habit: they asked something, anything, every single day for the first two weeks, even when the question felt small. That habit did more for their confidence than any amount of quiet preparation.

Expect a wobble around week three

Nobody feels homesick on day one. Day one is too loud, too new, and too full of free food for homesickness to get a word in. The wobble arrives later, on a plain gray Tuesday in week three, when the novelty has thinned and the workload has thickened [REDIT](#) and someone's birthday video from home shows up in your messages at exactly the wrong moment.

Alumni were unanimous that this dip is nearly universal and that naming it in advance takes away most of its power. It is not a sign you made a mistake. It is not a sign you don't fit in. It's the standard emotional weather of anyone who has just moved their whole life across a border, and it typically lifts within days. The coping strategies that came up again and again were wonderfully unglamorous: schedule a proper video call home, cook the comfort meal from your own kitchen, take the long walk you keep meaning to take, and tell one person on campus how you're feeling. That last one matters most. The moment you say it out loud, you discover that half the people around you felt the same thing the week before and were also waiting for permission to mention it.

First-week friends are a starting point, not a contract

This one is delicate, because the friendships formed in the first seventy-two hours feel enormous and permanent, and some of them genuinely are. But alumni were honest about a pattern: the group you bond with on day one, over shared confusion and shared luggage, is a starter group. By week four or five, course groupings, clubs, and plain chance start reshuffling everyone, and that reshuffle is healthy.

The people who struggled were the ones who treated their day-one group as a life sentence, staying loyal out of politeness while quietly wondering whether other circles might suit them better. The people who thrived kept saying yes to every invitation through the entire first month, even when they were tired, even when the invitation came from someone outside their original group. One graduate described her closest friendship today as having started in week five, with a person she'd barely exchanged a word with on day one. Keep floating. The settling comes later, and it settles well.

The message alumni would send back in time

When I asked each person for the one sentence they'd beam directly into their own past, the answers converged on a single theme. Nobody said "study harder." Nobody said "pack different clothes," though a few came close.

What they said, in one form or another, was this: you're going to be fine faster than you think, so stop bracing and start noticing.

Notice how quickly the corridor full of strangers becomes a corridor full of names. Notice that the timetable sorts itself out, that the wobble passes, that the front desk can fix nearly anything, and that a ten-word greeting in the local language turns a transaction into a conversation. The nerves you're carrying onto campus are the exact same nerves everyone around you is politely hiding, and they dissolve in shared laughter within days.

So here's the distilled wisdom, straight from the people who lived it: layer your clothes, learn the phrases, ride the trains, ask the question, and let the first-week friendships breathe. The academy has a way of catching people who arrive willing to be beginners. Trust that, and your first day becomes what it should be, which is not a test you can fail but the opening scene of something you'll be telling stories about for years.