



Week 1 Integration

ExpatsatHome Essential Guide

Week 1 Integration: Reflect, Recharge, and Reset

Introduction: You Made It Through Week One!

Hello and welcome to your official Week 1 review. First, take a deep breath. You did it. You navigated a new city, a new culture, and a whole new set of challenges for seven full days. That is a monumental achievement.

How are you feeling? Perhaps it's a whirlwind of excitement and discovery. Or maybe, if we're being honest, it feels a little overwhelming, tiring, or even lonely. You might be asking yourself, "What have I gotten myself into?"

Please know that every single one of these feelings is completely normal. The first week of any international move is a strange and intense cocktail of emotions. It's the thrill of the new mixed with the exhaustion of constant problem-solving. This guide is designed to help you pause, process everything that has happened, and set a gentle, sustainable pace for the journey ahead.

In this guide, we will:

- Acknowledge and celebrate your "small wins."
- Address the common challenges every expat faces.
- Guide you through a structured reflection on your first week.
- Help you set one small, powerful goal for Week 2.

Let's slow down, look back, and move forward with intention.

Key Concept: From Survival to Foundation

Your first week is primarily about survival. Your brain is working overtime processing new sights, sounds, languages, and systems. Finding the supermarket, figuring out which tram goes where, successfully ordering a coffee—these aren't small tasks. They are complex logistical and cognitive exercises.

The "Why": The mistake many new expats make is to measure their first week's success by big, unrealistic standards ("I should have made friends already," "I should be fluent"). This leads to burnout. We need to reframe success.

The "What": Success in Week 1 is survival. It's building the most basic foundation. Every time you leave your apartment and return, you have succeeded. Every small problem you solve is a brick laid in the foundation of your new life. These small steps, which we'll call "wins," are not small at all. They are everything.

The Negativity Bias

Your brain is naturally wired to focus on what went wrong or what is still difficult. It's a survival mechanism. That's why we must **consciously** and **intentionally** look for the good things, the successes, and the moments of progress. This isn't just about feeling good; it's a strategic tool for building resilience.

Week 1 Reflection: A Guided Journal Exercise

This is the most important task for this week's integration. Take 20-30 minutes, find a quiet spot with a cup of tea or coffee, and use the following prompts to honestly reflect on your first seven days. This isn't for anyone else—it's a tool for you to understand your own experience.

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Part 1: Your Wins & Moments of Progress

- What was one moment this week where you felt proud of yourself, no matter how small? (e.g., buying bread in German, as Laurine mentioned, or navigating the metro without getting lost).
- What is one practical thing you can do now that you couldn't do when you first arrived? (e.g., you know where the nearest pharmacy is, you've figured out the rubbish collection days).
- Describe a small, positive interaction you had with someone. It could be a smile from a cashier, a helpful stranger giving directions, or a friendly nod from a neighbour.
- What is one beautiful or interesting thing you saw this week? (e.g., a piece of street art, a beautiful park, an interesting building).

Part 2: Your Challenges & Sticking Points

- What was the single most difficult or frustrating moment of the week? Describe what happened and how it made you feel.
- What is one thing about Brussels or Belgian culture that confused you? (e.g., store opening hours, the multiple languages, a social custom).
- When did you feel the most tired or overwhelmed? What was the situation? Recognizing your triggers is key to managing your energy.
- What is one task on your to-do list that feels particularly daunting? (e.g., the commune registration, setting up a bank account).

Part 3: Your Emotional Landscape

- Without judgment, list three to five emotions you felt most strongly this week. (e.g., excitement, anxiety, loneliness, curiosity, frustration).
- What are you most excited about for the coming weeks? What are you looking forward to?
- What is one worry or fear that is on your mind right now? Acknowledging a fear is the first step to disarming it.

Part 4: Looking Forward with Kindness

- Based on your answers above, what is one small, kind thing you can do for yourself in Week 2 to make things easier or more enjoyable? (e.g., take a break from paperwork, revisit that beautiful park, buy yourself a nice pastry).
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Step-by-Step Guide: Tackling Common First-Week Hurdles

Let's be honest about the challenges. It's not all waffles and sunshine. Here are the most common hurdles and practical, step-by-step ways to approach them.

1. The Sting of Loneliness

Even in a bustling city, it's incredibly easy to feel alone.

- **The Challenge:** You're disconnected from your support network in a place where you know no one.
- **The Solution:** Focus on "passive socialisation"—being around people without the pressure to interact.

Step-by-Step Action Plan:

1. **Visit a Park:** Don't just go to a park; go with a purpose. Take a book or a podcast to Parc de Bruxelles or the Parc du Cinquanteaire. Sit on a bench for 30 minutes. The simple act of being in a shared public space can reduce feelings of isolation.
2. **Explore a Market:** On Sunday morning, visit a local market like the one at Place Flagey or the massive Gare du Midi market. The goal isn't to shop, but to wander. Observe the interactions, listen to the sounds, and feel the city's rhythm.
3. **Find a "Third Place":** A "third place" is somewhere that isn't home or work. Find a local café. Order a coffee and stay for 20 minutes. Becoming a semi-regular face can create a subtle but powerful sense of belonging.

2. The Language Labyrinth

You may have studied French, but Brussels French (with its unique expressions and fast pace) can feel like a different language.

- **The Challenge:** Feeling intimidated or embarrassed when you don't understand or can't express yourself.
- **The Solution:** Reframe every conversation as practice, not a test.

💡 **Tip:** Belgians are generally very understanding, especially in Brussels, where they are accustomed to dealing with non-native speakers. It is absolutely okay to say, "**Pardon, je ne comprends pas. Pouvez-vous parler plus lentement, s'il vous plaît?**" (Sorry, I don't understand. Can you speak more slowly, please?).

Step-by-Step Action Plan:

1. **Master Five Key Phrases:** Don't try to be fluent overnight. Focus on mastering five essential phrases for daily transactions (see our Vocabulary section).
2. **Listen Actively:** When you're on the tram or in a shop, just listen. Don't try to understand every word. Get a feel for the rhythm and melody of the language.
3. **Use Technology:** Have Google Translate's conversation mode ready on your phone. It's not a crutch; it's a modern tool for communication. No shame in using it.

3. 'Admin Fatigue' and the Paperwork Mountain

The commune, bank accounts, utilities, health insurance... the bureaucracy can feel endless and is often the most tiring part of moving.

- **The Challenge:** The sheer volume of paperwork and appointments is overwhelming and drains your energy for anything else.
- **The Solution:** Pace yourself. You cannot and should not do it all at once.

⚠️ **Important:** The biggest enemy of administrative progress is burnout. Trying to do too much in one day will lead to mistakes and frustration, which will only slow you down in the long run.

Step-by-Step Action Plan:

1. **One Task a Day:** Dedicate your energy to only ONE major admin task per day. If you go to the commune, that is your “win” for the day. Don’t try to also call the internet company and open a bank account.
2. **Prepare Your Dossier:** For any appointment, check the website **that morning** for required documents. Create a physical folder for each task (e.g., “Commune Registration”) and put all necessary papers inside.
3. **Schedule a “Zero Admin” Day:** Intentionally schedule at least one day in Week 2 where you are forbidden from doing any paperwork or making any official phone calls. Your brain needs a break to recharge.

Your Week 1 Integration Checklist

Use this checklist to ensure you’ve covered the key steps of this reflection process.

- ☐ Take time to sit down and honestly acknowledge my feelings about the first week.
- ☐ Identify and write down at least three of my “small wins.”
- ☐ Complete the full “Week 1 Reflection” guided journal exercise.
- ☐ Read through the common challenges and identify which one resonates most with me.
- ☐ Choose ONE small, achievable, and enjoyable goal for Week 2 from the “Goal Menu” below.
- ☐ Share one of my wins in the ExpatsatHome community forum to celebrate with others.
- ☐ Schedule at least one hour in the coming week to do something purely for fun.

A Goal Menu for Week 2

Your goal for Week 2 is to build confidence, not to create more stress. Pick just **one** of the following.

- **The Culinary Explorer:** Try one classic Belgian dish. This could be ordering **moules-frites** (mussels and fries), trying a rich beef stew like **carbonnades flamandes**, or grabbing a fresh **gaufre de Liège** (Liège waffle) from a street vendor.
- **The Neighbourhood Navigator:** Pick one street in your immediate neighbourhood that you haven’t walked down yet, and explore it from end to end. Look for interesting shops, a local park, or a nice-looking bakery (*boulangerie*).
- **The Library Scout:** Find your local library (*bibliothèque* or *bibliotheek*). You don’t have to get a card yet. Just go inside, see what it’s like, and find out their opening hours. They are quiet, welcoming spaces and often have free Wi-Fi and community notice boards.
- **The Public Transport Pro:** Master one single transport route. For example, the tram line from your apartment to the Grand-Place. Ride it there and back just for the sake of it, so it becomes familiar and easy.

Vocabulary: Your Week 2 Toolkit


Focus on these essential phrases. Use the French version in most of Brussels.


English	French (FR)	Dutch (NL)
“Hello”	“Bonjour”	“Hallo / Goiedag”
“Goodbye”	“Au revoir”	“Tot ziens”
“Please”	“S’il vous plaît”	“Alstublieft (A.U.B.)”


"Thank you (very much)"	"Merci (beaucoup)"	"Dank u (wel)"
"Excuse me / Sorry"	"Pardon / Excusez-moi"	"Pardon / Excuseer mij"
"I would like..."	"Je voudrais..."	"Ik zou graag..."
"How much is it?"	"C'est combien?"	"Hoeveel kost het?"
"The bill, please."	"L'addition, s'il vous plaît."	"De rekening, alstublieft."
"Town Hall"	"Commune / Maison communale"	"Gemeente / Gemeentehuis"
"Do you speak English?"	"Parlez-vous anglais?"	"Spreekt u Engels?"

Laurine's Insider Tips

A few final thoughts from my own experience as an expat and a local.

 **Tip: Embrace the "Bonjour" Culture:** In smaller shops, bakeries, and pharmacies, it's customary to say "Bonjour" when you enter and "Au revoir" when you leave, even if you don't buy anything. It's a small gesture of politeness that goes a long way in making you feel part of the local fabric.

 **Tip: Carry Some Cash:** While card payments are widespread, especially for larger purchases, many smaller bakeries, night shops (*night shops*), and stalls at open-air markets will prefer cash or have a minimum spend for cards. It's always wise to have 10-20 euros on you.

 **Tip: Public Transport Validation is Key:** When you get on a tram, bus, or metro, you **must** validate your ticket or MOBIB card at the small scanner, even if you have a monthly pass. Checks are frequent, and the fines are steep. Make it an automatic habit the moment you board.

You have accomplished so much already. You are capable, you are resilient, and you are right where you need to be. Be kind to yourself, celebrate your progress, and take it one day at a time. You've got this. **Courage!**