

Course Description

Alaska Mountaineering

- 23 and Over -

Features Of This Course:

- Snow and ice mountaineering skills development
- Possibility of living on glaciers for 90% of the course
- Potential for severe weather
- Potential for technical peak ascents
- Introduction to snow camping techniques
- Route length 15-50 miles
- Travel by ski, snowshoe or foot
- Living and traveling in close quarters
- Extensive exposure to glacier travel and crevasse rescue techniques
- 12 days in the field
- Minimum age 23
- Average age 35

The Expedition

Alaska's Chugach Range—the classroom for this course—is one of the most heavily glaciated mountain ranges in North America. This coastal mountain range in south-central Alaska is where a chain of rugged mountains and spectacular glaciers combine to make a mountaineer's dream. After we pick you up in Anchorage, your course will begin at the NOLS Alaska campus in Palmer, Alaska where you will issue gear and rations for the expedition.

The following morning, given good flying weather, you'll board a fixed wing plane and be flown high into the Chugach Range. It will be a busy day full of learning new skills and working hard physically. If the weather is not suitable for flying, there will be ice-climbing opportunities close to your camp.

For the remainder of the course, you'll sleep, eat, work, and play on or near glaciers. This area has ample opportunities for skills development and technical climbing. The details will always be weather-dependent, as the Chugach Range is known for ferocious snowstorms that can dump feet of snow with howling winds. On the other hand, there could be scorching sun reflecting off of the snow with no breeze. At the end of your course, you'll fly out of the Chugach. From there you will be driven three hours to the NOLS Alaska campus to de-issue gear and celebrate over dinner.

Course Description

Your development as a mountaineer will begin with the basics. Learning to live well and to care for yourself, your fellow expedition members, your equipment and the environment in a variety of conditions are the foundation for advanced mountaineering and the focus of our core curriculum. Early on, you'll master camping, cooking and basic travel skills. In addition to snow and ice, you may negotiate slopes of loose scree.

Once you land on the glacier, you'll move into the climbing curriculum beginning with knots, rope handling, rope team travel, self-arrest and belaying. You'll spend time practicing these skills and learning to live and travel responsibly in glaciated terrain. The hiking distances covered daily will be short, giving everyone a chance to get used to the heavy packs, snowshoes (or possibly skis), and rope team travel.



As your experience grows, you'll move into more technically demanding terrain. You'll be exposed to more advanced skills such as crevasse rescue, route finding on a glacier, avalanche hazard assessment, and the use of 4th and potentially even 5th class rope systems for protection during more exposed travel. There will be days set aside for classes and skill practice, ice climbing, or peak ascents when you won't move camp, but you should be aware that a number of factors often preclude successful summit attempts. Your course will take advantage of every opportunity to prepare you for future expeditions in glaciated ranges, and the primary focus of this course is the development of skills and judgment, not "peak bagging."

Group dynamics and leadership are other integral parts of our core curriculum. You'll learn how to live and work closely with your course mates while you travel through the mountains. Tolerance for adversity and uncertainty, a willingness to work hard, and respect for your comrades will be critical to the success of the expedition. Because of the diverse and difficult terrain typically encountered on these courses, there will be fewer opportunities for student leadership on travel days than is common on most other courses at NOLS.

Please see below for a detailed overview of the particular curriculum objectives of this course. At the end of the course, each student will receive a written evaluation of his or her performance in each of the areas described.

Student Independence

On all NOLS courses students will be independent (unaccompanied by instructors) at various times. This will include time in and around camp such as while cooking or performing camp chores. Instructors may allow students to travel away from camp, though this is unlikely given the technical nature of the terrain. Students often have independent unsupervised time, usually in town, before and after their course starts.

Independent Student Group Travel

An emphasis of this course is the development of skills that permit you to be self-sufficient in remote glaciated areas. Our teaching progression for accomplishing this is carefully planned and executed. Initially travel groups, usually of three to five students, will include an instructor who will teach travel skills and leadership. Gradually, as you gain proficiency, the instructor will allow you to take on more responsibility and make more of the decisions. If you have demonstrated the necessary competency to the instructors, you might travel in student-led groups with instructors nearby. We call this daily independent student travel and it is an effective educational tool. It allows you to practice travel skills and leadership and gives you responsibility for the outcome while still having indirect supervision by instructors and the benefit of the NOLS support systems.

Hazards and Potential Challenges

It is important to emphasize the nature of this Alaskan mountaineering experience. Remoteness is what makes these mountains so challenging, and they are a vast expanse of glacier and tundra away from the nearest road. In case of an emergency, in ideal conditions evacuation would take several hours, but in poor weather outside help might be several days away. Your expedition must be prepared to deal with almost any event self-sufficiently. Your instructors will discuss what to do for each challenge, including the unlikely possibility of a grizzly bear encounter on the glacier.

Weather

You will be living in an environment where severe snowstorms and prolonged sub-freezing temperatures are not uncommon. More challenging still is the often-abundant rain that somehow penetrates even the most reliable rainwear. We learn to be humble in regard to weather. The actual amount of climbing and technical skill development we achieve will always be contingent upon it. You will learn to avoid and manage cold injuries and to live comfortably in adverse conditions. On the other hand, it can be a constant chore to protect yourself from the intense UV radiation, and you are as likely to be challenged to stay cool when the glacier becomes a solarium, as you are to stay warm when the sun dips below the horizon. It will be light nearly 24 hours a day at this time of year.

Terrain

Prudent route selection and continual adherence to risk management practices—a constant theme in our instruction—will minimize the exposure to inherent dangers of crevasses, falling and rolling rock, falls on steep terrain, cold moving water, avalanches, and harsh weather. The consistent practice of risk management techniques and assumption of responsibility for yourself and other group members will help make your expedition in these wild, beautiful mountains healthy and enjoyable.



Group Dynamics

For two weeks you'll be living and working in a small community of diverse individuals (be that age, outdoor experience, occupation, or other standard measures of diversity). Whether it's moving roped-up 50 feet from one another, or camped in a confined campsite, living and working quarters are tight, necessitating the utmost in cooperation, patience and tolerance. Please consider the ramifications of this prior to committing to the expedition, and recognize that the success of the expedition as a whole is entirely dependent on the ability of its members to support one another in trying circumstances.

Physical Challenge

You can expect that your group will encompass a wide range of physical abilities and comfort limits: While many of our students are both mentally and physically challenged on their course, some find that they were not as challenged they had expected or hoped they would be. Assess your fitness level well in advance of your course and review the fitness recommendations below to design an appropriate fitness goal and plan for yourself. Stick to it! You will get so much more out of your course if you can dedicate energy to things other than just making it to camp in good style on a moderate day. If you are already at the top of your form, consider working on your patience instead: Go for a five mile run and then ask old Mrs. Smith across the street if she'd like to go for a walk around the block. (For this to be effective training, both the five-mile run and the walk around the block should take the same amount of time).

Medical Issues

Please be aware that chronic knee or ankle ailments have been a source of problems in the past. If you have a history of such problems, please contact us to discuss it. It is important that the admissions office is advised of any updates to your medical records.

Medications

It is important that you have a current diphtheria-tetanus immunization. We need to know if you have had an adverse reaction to Erythromycin, Vicodin, Keflex, Ibuprofen, or Aspirin. If you plan to take any medication during the course, please be sure you are aware of possible side effects and discuss it with your expedition leaders.

Personal Electronics

A key element to a NOLS education is time spent in wilderness. The benefits of this include being closer to nature, time away from society and civilization, and being in an environment where natural forces predominate and students have the opportunity to develop good judgment and practice self-reliance. NOLS does not permit students to use personal cell or satellite phones or other communication devices including personal tracking devices (e.g. SPOT), while in the field. Additionally, students are not permitted to take personal music players (iPods, MP3 players, CD players, etc). Instructors will be carrying sufficient communication equipment (usually a satellite phone) to handle any emergencies that may arise.

Fitness Recommendations

Almost continual daylight provides for long, busy days. Your fitness goals should focus on being able to sustain a moderate level of exertion for hours on end rather than "quick sprint" fitness. Students on Alaska Mountaineering courses quickly realize that it's not about getting to camp quickly, it's about getting to camp efficiently with energy enough to carry on for the many hours it often takes to build sturdy camps out of snow in exposed conditions.

Focus on a well-rounded routine that emphasizes stamina, flexibility and strength. Finally, don't ignore the need for balance; this will serve you well in the moraine and boulder fields where the ability to quickly find your center of balance as you move from one step to the next will enable you to dance, rather than stumble your way through. For more information, please see the Physical Conditioning page of your enrollment packet.



Alaska Mountaineering Course Objectives

Each course is unique due to variables such as route, group dynamics, fitness levels and environmental conditions. Within the given parameters, we intend to accomplish the following objectives in five areas:

Risk Management and Judgment

NOLS teaches wilderness visitors to practice responsible habits that promote the health and well being of self and others. Each student is expected to:

- Demonstrate knowledge of the hazards in a mountain environment.
- Consistently perform specific techniques taught on the course to reduce or avoid hazards.
- Use experience and judgment to implement sound decisions and follow them through to completion.
- Display sound judgment and an awareness of group and self-limits.

Leadership

At NOLS, we define leadership as “timely, appropriate actions that guide and support your group to set and achieve realistic goals. Great leaders create an environment that inspires individuals and groups to achieve their full potential.” On this course, the emphasis will be on gaining mountaineering competence as a foundation for leading in the mountains. We expect each student’s leadership ability to grow by accomplishing the following:

- Gain an understanding of the four types of leadership: self-leadership, active followership, designated leadership and peer leadership.
- Demonstrate a willingness to grow in each of NOLS’ seven leadership skills:
 1. Gain outdoor skills competence and thus be a better leader in the outdoors.
 2. Demonstrate positive expedition behavior, by serving the goals of the group.
 3. Tolerate adversity and uncertainty with a positive attitude.
 4. Actively cultivate your self-awareness as an outdoors person and a leader.
 5. Work to understand the leader’s vision and when appropriate develop your vision as a leader. Follow through with appropriate action to help the group achieve its potential.
 6. Improve your judgment and decision-making skills, learning the pros and cons of various decision-making styles on the continuum between directive and consensus.
 7. Practice effective communication skills from active listening to public speaking.
- Gain understanding of your own signature style of leadership.

Outdoor Skills

NOLS students learn to live and travel in mountains within a framework of personal well being and care of the environment. Each student is expected to:

- Live comfortably in a mountain environment, learn to camp, cook, and dress for a variety of conditions.
- Travel competently in mountainous terrain using map and compass skills, off-trail navigation, hazard evaluation, route-finding techniques, bear camping and river- crossing techniques.
- Accurately assess skills, strengths and endurance in self and others and conservatively apply those limits to given situations.

Mountaineering Skills

While advanced skill emphasis will vary, students can expect to be exposed to a complete foundation of basic glacier mountaineering skills and will be expected to:

- Correctly tie fundamental climbing knots and display efficient rope-handling techniques. Due to the volume of material that you will cover, we suggest that you practice tying the fundamental climbing knots before your course. Those knots can be found in the books listed in the Recommended Reading section at the end of this document.
- Demonstrate appropriate crampon and ice-ax techniques for snow, ice and mixed terrain.
- Display appropriate belay skills in a variety of mountaineering systems (rope-team, running belay, *etc.*).
- Competently build simple snow and ice anchors.
- Recognize a responsible route through crevassed terrain and where avalanches are a hazard.



Environmental Studies

An integral part of every NOLS course is to raise students' awareness of their impact on the natural world. Each student is expected to:

- Consistently perform minimum-impact living and travel skills by following Leave No Trace principles.
- Display curiosity about the natural history of the course environment.
- Discuss the history and potential solutions relevant to pertinent environmental issues.
- Reflect on the transference of wilderness ethics and practices into daily personal and professional life.

Transfer of College Credit

NOLS cannot guarantee that credits from courses are transferable. Transfer of credits is at the discretion of the receiving school and depends on the comparability of curricula and accreditation.

Recommended Reading

We recommend reading NOLS Wilderness Mountaineering by Phil Powers or The Illustrated Guide to Glacier Travel and Crevasse Rescue by Andy Tyson prior to your course.

