

Course Description

Alaska Mountaineering

Features Of This Course:

- Snow and ice mountaineering skills development
- Living on glaciers for 60-90% of the course
- Potential for severe weather
- Introduction to avalanche safety skills
- Introduction to snow camping techniques
- Route length: 50-120 miles
- Travel by ski, snowshoe or foot
- Living and traveling in close quarters
- Exposure to glacier travel and crevasse rescue techniques
- Average group size: 12 students/3 instructors

The Expedition

For 29 days, you'll backpack among the towering peaks and immense snow-covered glaciers that characterize Alaska's world-famous mountains. Possible destinations for this course include the coastal Chugach Range in south central Alaska, the interior Alaska Range, or the Wrangell Range along the Canadian border. The Chugach is one of the most heavily glaciated mountain ranges in North America. In the past, courses have traveled the Nelchina, Valdez, Powell and Matanuska glaciers into the heart of these magnificent mountains. The Alaska Range is the backbone of North America's highest peak and harbors the Susitna, McClaren, Trident, Cantwell and Gulkana glaciers. Finally, the Wrangell-St.Elias Range straddles the US-Canada border and is typified by lofty volcanic peaks and the Nabesna Icefield. Routes often wander the south side of this range, and we have initiated explorations of the north side as well.

The route chosen for each course is dependent on many variables (snow conditions, river levels, time of year etc.) and is therefore often decided or changed at the last moment. As a result, we cannot tell you the exact location of your course until your arrival in Palmer. Each potential course area offers unique, diverse challenges in a remote and beautiful setting and requires complete commitment on behalf of the expedition. The routes are classically Alaskan: long, arduous approaches via large valley glaciers, constant exposure to potentially winter-like weather conditions, outstanding scenery and the chance for some challenging climbing. Your classroom for this course will inevitably inspire awe and demand respect.

You'll be on snow and ice for most of the course. Early season courses (May-June) will likely spend most of their time above snowline, while later courses (July-August) may experience more time on bare ice and rocky moraine of the lower glaciers before gaining firm line and snow-covered glacier. Different routes lend themselves to different objectives: your group may have the opportunity to make summit attempts in a playground of peaks, or perhaps the challenge is to traverse an icefield or to get over a pass. Regardless of your route, you will learn the skills you need to live and travel responsibly and efficiently in challenging mountain terrain long after the end of your course.

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. As you travel over the tundra to access the toe of a glacier, you'll master camping, cooking and basic travel skills. En route, your group might be challenged to cross, large glacier-fed rivers or to negotiate slopes of loose scree and dense vegetation, and you'll constantly employ techniques to minimize the chance of a confrontation with bears and other wildlife.

Once you reach 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 at first, giving everyone a chance to get used to the heavy packs, skis or snowshoes, and rope team travel.



As your experience builds and you 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 or peak ascents when you will not 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. Having tolerance for adversity and uncertainty, the willingness to work hard, and respect for your comrades will be critical to the success of the expedition as a whole. Because of the diverse and difficult terrain typically encountered on these courses, there may 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. Students often have independent unsupervised time, usually in town, before and after their course.

Independent Student Group Travel

An emphasis of this course is the development of skills that permit you to be self-sufficient in remote backcountry areas. Our teaching progression for accomplishing this is carefully planned and executed. Initially travel groups, usually of four to six 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 demonstrate the necessary competencies in risk management, outdoor skills and teamwork to the instructors, you may travel in student-led groups without instructors for a day at a time as you hike from camp to camp off glacier. 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.

This course may culminate in a Student Expedition. After successful practice with daily independent student travel and if the terrain is appropriate and your instructors think your group is ready, the instructors may help you divide into student expedition groups (usually four to six students each). With instructor oversight, each group will then select a leader and carefully plan and execute a multi day independent student led expedition. This part of the course builds on the skills you've learned and practiced and allows you to travel without instructors for up to four days. Students are aware of where the instructors and the other student groups are planning to travel and camp. Each Student Expedition group will carry an emergency communication device that will allow students to initiate an emergency response in the event of a serious emergency. In most cases students will have a personal locator beacon, but in some situations they will have a satellite phone, cell phone, radio or possibly another type of device. The instructors with a satellite phone, or additional communication capability, may be up to 24 hours away from the students. Our students often say the student expedition was the highlight of their course.

Hazards and Potential Challenges

It is important to emphasize the nature of this Alaskan mountaineering experience. A large portion of the course is spent on the "approach." Remoteness is what makes these mountains so challenging, and they are often a vast expanse of tundra away from the nearest road. In case of an emergency, outside help might be several days away, and your expedition must be prepared to deal with almost any event self-sufficiently.

Bear avoidance techniques while camping and hiking on the tundra will be integrated into your daily routine. Precautions against bear encounters will decrease the opportunities for solitude and privacy on this course. To minimize risk, group size in brown bear country is generally four persons. You will live, travel and take care of personal necessities always with a group of your peers nearby. This is one the most challenging aspects of living in brown bear country. Other bear avoidance tactics



include meticulously maintaining cleanliness at the cooking sites and making loud calls to warn bears of your presence when moving through areas where visibility is poor.

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.

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 up to four weeks, you'll be living and working in a small community with a group of diverse individuals. Whether it's moving roped-up 40 feet from one another, or camped in a confined, probed 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 hiking 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 admission 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 in exposed conditions.

Focus on a well-rounded routine that emphasizes stamina, endurance, 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.

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, Judgment and Decision-making

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
- Describe an emergency plan for a group in the outdoors
- Demonstrate the ability to perform basic emergency procedures to support a patient until help arrives
- 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 competence as a foundation for leading in the backcountry. 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 health 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
 - 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
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- 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 basic natural history observational and interpretive skills and use them to demonstrate an understanding of and respect for the course environment
- Discuss the history and potential solutions relevant to pertinent environmental issues
- Demonstrate basic knowledge of and respect for local cultures
- 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.

