

Course Description

Alaska Backpacking & Sea Kayaking

Features Of This Course:

- Minimum age: 16
- Average group size: 12 students / 3 instructors
- Two field sections: backpacking and sea kayaking
- 30 days with approximately 13 field days on each section

The Expedition

Alaska is a land of incredible fjords, forested ocean coasts, and high arctic tundra. You'll see much of this wild country as you explore it on foot and in a sea kayak. Your month-long adventure will give you a chance to experience two wilderness travel skills—backpacking and sea kayaking—while at the same time getting a chance to explore two very different environments. To maximize your learning the backpacking sections will focus on lightweight techniques. On the kayaking section you will be able to bring a few extra items of comfort, and focus more on the art of outdoor cooking. The order of the sections will vary—on some courses the backpacking will come first and on others you'll start off sea kayaking.

Features of the Sea Kayaking Section

- Paddling route 75-150 miles (weather dependent)
- Opportunity for day hikes
- Fishing (season-dependent) for salmon, rockfish, halibut
- Travel in both single and double kayaks
- Travel near tidal glaciers possible
- Chance of rain throughout the course

Prince William Sound is the classroom for the sea kayaking section. This area offers a spectacular and varied natural history; it is a place for observation, exploration and discovery. The variety of the landscape is compelling. You'll paddle a sea kayak near towering glaciers and past wooded coves. The sea teems with various forms of life including whales, porpoises, sea otters, seals and sea lions. Sea birds wheel in the sky overhead while tidal pools with starfish, anemones and other small creatures dot the shorelines. You'll work hard paddling with all your gear for the expedition stowed in your boat, but you'll play hard as well. Ultimately, your instructors will teach you the basic skills you need to paddle in a protected ocean environment.

These skills begin with the basics, which include camping, cooking, chart reading, stove use, Leave No Trace techniques and sanitation. These are the foundation for wilderness travel. You'll move into the sea kayaking curriculum beginning with paddle strokes, tides and ocean currents, weather, marine hazards, rescue techniques and wet exits. Throughout the course, the instructors hold both formal and informal classes on a wide range of subjects. As the course progresses and students become more comfortable with the environment, the teaching emphasis shifts to outdoor recreation skills. More advanced additional topics include paddling techniques, rescues, ocean hazard evaluation and fishing. Do not be surprised to find yourself sitting in a class about local geology, tides, rain forest botany or sea mammals, or participating in a discussion on different leadership styles and expedition behavior.

You'll be living with two or three other students in a "cook" group during the course. These small groups help disperse the impact on the land and enable you to learn the art of backcountry cooking and living. You'll get lots of coaching from your instructors while you learn these new skills. Before you know it, you'll be savoring homemade pizza and cinnamon rolls—gourmet delicacies that you made from scratch on a single-burner stove.

One of the first things that you will notice upon your arrival in Alaska is the light. While you won't see the sun at midnight in the latitudes where we travel, it will stay light through the night during June and July. This offers unique opportunities for active, long days though your body may take a little while to adjust and learn to sleep when it is still light at 2 a.m.!



Features of the Backpacking Section

- Backpacking route 40-80 miles
- Elevations of 3,000 to 7,000 feet
- Potential for non-technical peak ascents
- Travel through tundra, shrub thickets and gravel river bottoms
- Off-trail hiking, some animal and ATV trails
- Passes may involve travel on boulders and snow
- Opportunities to see wildlife
- Brown bear territory

The Wrangell, Alaska, Chugach or Talkeetna Mountains will be your home for the backpacking section. Here, you'll start below treeline and head into the mountains along glaciated river valleys or up steep mountain slopes, eventually reaching the open country known as tundra. The vistas here are wide, the mountains rugged, and the possibilities endless for returning home with lessons to last a lifetime.

Few established trails exist after leaving the ATV (all terrain vehicle) trails near the roadhead. The seasonal migration tracks of the caribou often lead the hiker to the best route through the mountains. Alaska's mountains have fascinating ecosystems to observe and enjoy. Dall sheep may be seen on the high ridges and moose can be spotted in the lower valleys where the vegetation is lush. More rarely seen, but also living here, are brown and black bear, wolves, wolverines and coyotes.

Many bird species, most of them summer migrants, can also be seen. The tundra itself has a surprisingly rich and varied flora. Both the wetter meadows and the higher, rockier terrain can have spectacular flower displays from mid June to mid August, and wild berries make a welcome addition to the diet on courses, later in the season.

At first, hiking distances will be short to give you time to grow accustomed to your pack. To help ease the loads the hiking section will focus on simplicity and lightweight techniques. You will be asked to leave behind items of comfort and luxury, and have a simpler cooking set-up compared to sea kayaking. Later hiking days will average between four and eight miles. Instructors conduct formal and informal classes on a wide range of subjects. There will be plenty to learn in this mountain environment.

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 starts or between sections of courses.

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. We call this daily independent student group 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.

The dual-skill nature of this course makes it very unlikely that there will be time for multi-day independent student group travel on either section...If a Student Expedition were to take place; it would be only after successful practice with daily independent student travel. Your instructors would help you divide into student expedition groups (usually four to six students each), select a leader and carefully plan and execute an overnight independent student-led expedition. Students would be aware of where the instructors and the other student groups were planning to travel and camp. The instructors with emergency communication capability might be up to 24 hours away from the students.



Weather and Other Challenges

In the summer, there can be plenty of rain. Be prepared for it to rain or drizzle for the majority of the course. Storms can prohibit paddling for a few days. There will be times when you will be wet, cold and tired, but you will learn to manage these situations, and maybe even smile as you do. Sunny, warm summer days are a welcome break.

Bear avoidance techniques while camping and hiking 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 of the most challenging aspects of living in brown bear country. Other bear avoidance tactics include meticulous cleanliness at the cooking sites and making loud calls to warn bears of your presence when hiking.

Identifying and managing hazards will be a constant theme in our instruction. You'll be miles from the amenities of civilization. Telephones, ambulances, and hospitals may be several days away. Managing risks and assuming responsibility for yourself and your colleagues will help make your expedition in this wild and beautiful place healthy and fun.

The group will learn to work together, and as you learn about and depend upon each other for safety and comfort, strong friendships can develop. Learning to be a contributing member of an expedition can be a challenge with immense personal rewards. Leadership and teamwork will be stressed on this course. It takes a lot of commitment to the group and a willingness to set aside personal goals at times for an expedition to succeed. Just as you need to be physically fit you also need to be mentally ready to take on the challenges and have a blast.

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. For this reason, students are not permitted to take personal music players (iPods, MP3 players, CD players, etc.), cell phones, satellite tracking devices, or satellite phones on NOLS courses. Instructors will be carrying sufficient communication equipment (usually a satellite phone and a ground-to-air or marine band radio) 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. Walking for a few hours for a few hours on uneven terrain with a light to moderate backpack is a good way to prepare.

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. Working with these variables, it is our intent to accomplish the following outcomes:

Risk Management, Judgment and Decision-making

NOLS teaches wilderness users to practice responsible actions that promote the health and well being of self, others and the environment. Objectives include the ability to:

- Demonstrate basic knowledge of the dangers in a cold-water environment.
- Demonstrate basic knowledge of the hazards in this mountain environment e.g. bears, river crossings, rock fall, and weather.
- Describe and consistently perform specific techniques to negotiate or avoid hazards.
- Formulate and put into effect an emergency plan for a group in the outdoors.
- Learn and apply basic first aid skills appropriate to this environment.
- Display an awareness of weather and sea conditions appropriate for safe travel.
- Gain experience and judgment to implement sound decisions and follow them through to completion.



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

At NOLS our students learn to live and travel in remote areas within a framework of personal health and care of the environment and the equipment. Objectives include the ability to:

- Live comfortably in maritime and mountain environments: learn how to dress for a variety of conditions.
- Camp and cook with a minimum of impact.
- Safely explore the shore and coastal forest by foot.
- Demonstrate respect and care for all personal and expedition equipment.

Environmental Studies

An integral part of every NOLS Course is to raise students’ awareness of their effect on self, others and the environment. Objectives include the ability to:

- Consistently perform sound minimum-impact living and travel skills by following the Leave No Trace principles; in two different environments.
- Develop a basic understanding of the history, facts and potential solutions to pertinent environmental issues.
- Demonstrate basic knowledge and respect for local cultures.
- Use basic observation skills to demonstrate an understanding, appreciation and respect for the natural world; earn characteristic flora and fauna of the area
- Gain knowledge of public land management and discuss means to be involved in issues of interest.
- Strive to integrate wilderness practices and ethics into daily personal and professional life.

Sea Kayaking and Backpacking Skills

The necessary skills for responsible travel are taught throughout the course. The teaching progression is dependent on students’ abilities and the weather conditions experienced on each particular course. Objectives include the ability to demonstrate an understanding of the following:

- Basic paddling strokes; forward, reverse, sweep, draw, low and high braces.
- Basic self and assisted rescues.
- Coastal hazards; wind, waves, weather, currents, tides and geography of the coastline.
- Responsible group travel.
- Travel efficiently in mountainous terrain using map and/or compass skills.
- Utilize off-trail navigation and route-finding techniques to mitigate hazards.
- Employ sound bear camping and travel techniques.
- Demonstrate a thorough understanding of different river crossing techniques.

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.

