

Course Description

Denali Mountaineering

Features Of This Course:

- Travel on the highest mountain in North America
- Exposure to snow camping skills
- One of the most physically demanding NOLS courses
- Limited opportunities for student leadership
- Travel by snowshoe, crampon and foot
- Snow and ice mountaineering skills development
- Exposure to glacier travel, river crossing techniques, and tundra bear camping practices
- Potential altitude gain of 18,000 feet
- Potential for severe weather
- Living on glaciers for 80% of the course
- Living and traveling in close quarters

The Expedition

Towering over the Alaskan tundra at an impressive 20,320 feet above sea level, Denali truly lives up to its reputation as “The Great One.” For 35 days, this famous rampart will be your classroom as we attempt to climb it via the Muldrow Glacier route. The expedition begins with a three-day trek across tundra to McGonagall Pass, crossing the braided channels of the McKinley River. Then it’s up the Muldrow Glacier to Karsten’s Ridge where you’ll climb to the Harper Glacier. Here you’ll establish a high camp from which the summit can be attempted. This route has a remote wilderness flavor that is not found on the more frequented routes. You’ll descend via the same route.

You’ll be on snow and ice for most of the course. You’ll work hard traveling over tundra, ice and snow covered glaciers. You’ll learn the skills you need to climb in the mountains long after the end of your course. You’ll begin by reviewing the basics. Camping, cooking, map reading, stove use, Leave No Trace techniques, and sanitation are the foundation for advanced mountaineering and we will start with these building blocks.

With these mastered, you’ll move into the climbing curriculum. Knots, rope handling, climbing movement, and belaying will all be covered. As your experience builds, you’ll move into more advanced mountaineering skills. Your time traveling to the glacier is used to learn the skills many mountaineers’ lack, such as river crossings, bear camping, and tundra minimum-impact camping techniques. Once you reach the ice, you’ll learn the basics of glacier travel and camping. Glacier living requires roped travel and probed camp perimeters. The hiking distances covered daily will be short at first, giving everyone a chance to get used to the heavy packs, snowshoes, and rope team travel. The importance of student adaptability and learning on the go cannot be stressed enough. Practice time is minimal.

The extreme conditions and technical terrain of this course severely limit the opportunity for student leadership. Your learning is based primarily on participation in the expedition, which is different from the typical progression of leadership in other NOLS courses. We’ll focus on route finding, hazard evaluation, high altitude topics, expedition behavior, and getting to the summit.

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.

Weather and Other Challenges

It is important to emphasize the nature of this Alaskan mountaineering experience. Remoteness is what makes Alaskan mountains such as Denali so challenging. You’ll be living in a winter environment where severe snowstorms and prolonged sub-freezing temperatures are not uncommon. 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. Yet, almost continual daylight provides for long, busy days.



Prudent route selection and continual adherence to risk management practices—a constant theme in our instruction—will minimize the exposure to the 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 mountains healthy and enjoyable.

For up to four weeks we'll be living and working in a close group situation. Whether it's moving roped-up 75 feet from one another, or camped in a 100-foot-diameter probed campsite, living and working situations are tight, necessitating the utmost in cooperation. Selection as an expedition member is in part due to a past demonstration of good expedition behavior qualities on previous NOLS courses.

Weather on Denali is magnificent and challenging. It can be crystal clear with 100-mile visibility or there can be a howling blizzard where you can't see the tent next to you. Prevention of hypothermia and frostbite requires proper equipment, learning how to use that equipment, eating adequately, maintaining fluid intake and conserving energy. We teach these techniques on the NOLS Denali expedition but it is up to all expedition members to practice them consistently and be responsible for both themselves and each other.

Physical strength is an important element in the selection of expedition members. Be aware that this course is more demanding than other NOLS courses and members are expected to arrive in top physical condition. Students in the past have been surprised by the magnitude of the physical challenge. This is a very hard course, especially if the weather is foul. The trip starts out with heavy packs and long miles. In addition, desire is critical. A positive outlook and willingness to work with others is as important as one's physical condition. The chances for a great expedition are enhanced if students come ready and eager to climb.

The Denali mountaineering course will be a demanding experience, both physically and mentally. The altitude will challenge us. We will climb slowly to allow time to acclimatize, but the best techniques are no guarantee against altitude illness. The climb is difficult and the weather on the mountain is unpredictable and extreme. There is no guarantee that your team will summit. Denali demands respect. Come prepared for long days, harsh weather, heavy loads, and the experience of a lifetime.

Fitness Recommendations

Being physically fit will enable you to take full advantage of this opportunity; it will also enhance the strength of the group as a whole, contributing to the ultimate success of the expedition, regardless of whether the summit is attained.

It is essential that participants in this expedition arrive in very good physical condition and health. High altitude mountain travel is demanding, no matter how fit you are. We strongly encourage you to consider your physical condition now and to design appropriate fitness goals for yourself. For more information, please see the Physical Conditioning page of your enrollment packet.

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.

Special Considerations

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. Medication: 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. Commonly used medications can have unfavorable effects at high altitudes. If you plan to take any medication during the climb, please be sure you are aware of possible side effects and discuss it with your expedition leaders.



Course Objectives

Each course is unique due to variables such as route, group dynamics, fitness levels and environmental conditions. Working within this context, it is our intent to accomplish the following objectives in four basic 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. Objectives include the ability to:

- Demonstrate knowledge of the hazards encountered 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. Objectives include the ability to:

- Live comfortably in a mountain environment, learn to camp, cook, and dress for a variety of conditions.
- Travel competently in mountain terrain using map and compass skills, off-trail navigation, hazard evaluation, route-finding techniques, bear camping and river-crossing techniques.
- Master knots and rope handling techniques.
- Display basic mountaineering skills in ice, snow, glacier travel and crevasse rescue.
- Consistently minimize impact upon the environment while camping and traveling by following Leave No Trace principles.
- Accurately assess skills, strengths and endurance in self and others and conservatively apply those limits to given situations.

Environmental Studies

An integral part of every NOLS course is to raise students’ awareness of their impact on the natural world. Objectives include the ability to:

- Display basic natural history observational and interpretive skills.
- Discuss the history and potential solutions relevant to pertinent environmental issues.



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.

Authorized Concessioner

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