

Course Description

Semester In The Amazon (BRZ)

Features Of This Course:

- Elevations of sea level to 10,000 ft. (3,000m)
- Average elevation is between sea level and 500 meters
- Travel on/off trails and through dense forests and dry scrubland and savannah
- Average temperatures range from 20 degrees C to 38 degrees C (60 -100 degrees F)
- Humidity: 80-90%
- Abundant bird and wildlife
- Average Group Ratio: 4 Students / 1 Instructor
- Minimum Age: 18
- Jungle camping in hammocks and/or tents
- Natural history interpretation and tropical medicine considerations and precautions
- Strong inter-cultural aspect: interactions with Brazilians from all walks of life
- Multi-day river-boat travel between sections is usually part of the expedition
- Hiking Route: ~ 50-80 miles
- Average Pack Weight: 40-60 lbs.

Join NOLS for an expedition to the southern half of the Amazon basin. Brazil's share of the Amazon has the largest intact areas of rain forest in the world and also large areas of unique savannah forests known as Cerrado. It is an area with high biodiversity – one third of all species can be found there – and a great variety of landscapes. NOLS Brazil is the only program that runs extended expeditions in this part of the Amazon basin. It is still an exploratory program; students must be ready to adjust their expectations to the realities of travel in what is still a remote and little developed part of the world.

You will experience some of the incredible diversity of the Amazon region. Your journey will take you from the open grasslands where the southern tributaries of the Amazon rise to the lowland moist forests, close to the Equator, where these tributaries become huge rivers. You will pass through these biological transition zones experiencing unforgettable landscapes and seeing their richness of plant and animal species. Life teems here and there are great opportunities for observing wildlife whether ants and anteaters, macaws and monkeys and many other species of insects, mammals or birds. The rivers too are rich in life in the Amazon basin. 3,000 of the world's freshwater fish species are found there as well mammals such as the pink dolphin and the giant otter.

Brazil is a country with great human and cultural diversity as well. A key part of its history is that of blending of many races there with the indigenous inhabitants. In the last 500 years people have settled there from Europe, Africa and Asia. This diversity is expressed in the great variety of its music, art, cuisine and customs. The people you will meet on your expedition are part of this rich tapestry. Despite the remoteness and difficulties of travel in vast areas of the Amazon basin, there are many communities of people who make a living there. Meeting these people and sharing a little of their lives will also be a part of your experience. These people include the ribeirinhos (river dwellers) who live by small-scale agriculture and fishing along the banks of the rivers, garimpeiros (gold prospectors) who still explore the remotest areas of the Amazon basin looking for minerals, and sometimes seringueiros (rubber tappers). And even in your own group you will have the chance to meet Brazilians – there will be at least one of your fellow students who is Brazilian and your instructor teams will be at least 50% Brazilian too!

The Expedition- Overview

A semester spent in the outdoors constitutes almost three months camping out with periods of travel in between the different areas visited. The focus is firstly on developing the leadership and teamwork skills and the technical outdoor skills that will make the expedition a healthy and enjoyable one. Meeting and living with other people, pushing yourself physically and emotionally, learning about the natural world, experiencing Brazilian culture and of course having fun, are all aspects of the NOLS Brazil experience. Your course will take you through a cross section of the southern part of the Amazon basin. You will see the highlands, known as the Brazilian Shield, where the southern tributaries rise, and the lowlands close to the Amazon River. Note that you will not travel on the Amazon River itself.



There will be many different experiences depending on where you are. You will get to canoe on large rivers, maybe float just after dawn through the mists and listen to the howler monkeys and the dawn chorus of the birds. You will hike through the dry forests of the uplands, a hard sweaty day will may be rewarded by getting to camp by a magnificent waterfall of crystal clear water. You may have to sleep in a hammock, but snug under your bug net you will listen to the night sounds of the jungle, the frogs and cicadas singing, and see fire flies flitting through the trees. You may find yourself helping local people in the manioc fields or being shown how to fish by the village children on the cultural section of the semester.

There will be many wonderful experiences but the reality of a remote expedition in the tropics is that hard work and 100% commitment are necessary to make them enjoyable, comfortable and healthful. They are learning adventures designed to inspire you with the skills and experience necessary to travel internationally and set up your own expeditions in the wilderness long after the end of your course. So keep in mind that the semester presents many challenges such as hot and humid weather, bugs in all their varieties and dense tropical forest to travel through. The challenge is not always an intensely physical one. For each participant it will be different; for many the challenge is a mental and emotional one. The challenge of living together with other people, sharing your life intimately with them, being tolerant and patient, putting the team's needs before your own, these are often the greatest challenges on a NOLS course. In the Amazon region a particular challenge is simple self-care, maintaining a high standard of personal hygiene without which you become prey to many infections and diseases. Whatever the challenges, if you come with the right attitude and a willingness to stay cheerful and positive in the face of all types of adversity your Amazon Semester will be a unique and rewarding experience.

The expedition will be largely self-sufficient and in remote areas. Students will be expected to participate in all aspects of the expedition from the preparatory stages to being fully involved in expedition leadership. Students must assume a high level of responsibility for their own self-care and in interacting in a different culture. **Students must adjust their expectations to the realities of Brazil and the Amazon. Region. Logistical delays are common and part of the experience in an area with little infrastructure.** This semester is not for students looking for a relaxing break—it's for people looking to explore and learn in a challenging tropical environment.

While you are in the field, you'll live with two or three other students in a "tent group." Your tent group will have its own stove, food, and tent. You will sleep in tent with your tent group, or sometime alone in a hammock depending on the area. Tent groups camp near each other, but each group prepares its own meals and handles its own camp chores. Periodically during the semester, tent mates are changed so that you get to live and camp with all the students on the course. When canoeing, we'll travel as a large group on the river, navigating rapids and river miles during the day and camping on the riverside or on rock islands at night. When backpacking we'll hike in small hiking groups of four to six people. One of the focuses of the semester program is wilderness risk management, which includes learning how to avoid injury by understanding the hazards that are encountered and avoiding illness by practicing good hygiene and self-care. All semesters feature first aid training specific to tropical wilderness situations.

The field segment of each section will end with written course evaluations and there will also be periodic verbal evaluations or "check-ins".

Student Independence

On all NOLS courses, students will be independent (unaccompanied by instructors) at various times. This will include time in and around camp while cooking or performing camp chores and sometimes students will hike in small groups without instructors. Instructors may allow students to travel unsupervised a short distance from camp. There will be the option on some sections to travel independently of instructors overnight but this depends on whether the group has demonstrated that collectively it has the necessary skills for this.

Breakdown of the NOLS Brazil Semester

The semester consists of three "field" sections, plus a "cultural" section, a first aid course, expedition prep days and travel in between the various sections. The field sections are the River canoe expedition, the Cerrado hiking section and the Forest hiking section. The sequence of the sections varies according to which of the semester groups you are allocated to. It can begin with either the River section or the Cerrado hiking section.

Prep Days

These take place at our base in Chapada dos Guimarães, in the state of Mato Grosso. You will go there on the first day of the semester. Our base is in a beautiful location and we have 7 acres of garden, orchard and forest to enjoy while you are there.



You will be camping at the base using tents or hammocks for a total of five nights while you do the expedition prep and your first aid course.

There is a great deal to be done before setting off on an expedition of this length in such a remote area. Firstly, all the food “rations” for the whole semester needs to be bagged up and separated for the various sections. This process takes a full day and involves the individual bagging of thousands of pounds of bulk food. A second day is devoted to preparing equipment. Your personal gear will be checked by an instructor who will advise you what to bring and not bring. The gear that is shared by the group such as cook gear, tents, maps, canoe gear, etc. also needs to be checked and packed. These are busy days with many tasks and chores to complete but they are also learning days and you will receive many short lessons on expedition planning.

In the evenings there will orientation talks and maybe slide shows. The base is self-catering and you will also be expected to help out with meal preparation and cleaning.

Wilderness First Aid Course (WFA) With CPR

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. You will cover all the basics of wilderness first aid in this 30-hour course as well as CPR certification. This course takes place after the gear and rations prep days.

Travel Days

Your journey will take you across a vast area of Brazil. Between the various sections you will travel more than 2,000 miles, as far as if you were going from east to west coast in the US. Paved roads are not common in the Amazon region and many places are only accessible by dirt roads or by boat. You will use buses and riverboats that NOLS hires for this purpose and sometimes you will travel by public transport. Travel by plane is also a possibility.

Expect up to 10 travel days depending on weather conditions and unpredictable circumstances. This is an integral part of your experience and is often rich in cultural experience. It can be uncomfortable but it can also be a time to relax – the riverboats in particular offer a unique chance to observe wildlife along the rivers or simply to relax in a hammock.

River Expedition Section

On this section, we'll explore a tributary of the Amazon River in canoes. Typically a month in duration, the expedition will descend one of the hundreds of tributaries of the Amazon River. Daily activities vary from working all day to get around one rapid by carrying all the equipment through the rainforest, to lining canoes through rock channels and over boulders, to paddling 25-30 miles on calmer waters. We camp on either riverside beaches, rock and sand islands, or in the rainforest. We'll be taking bug bite preventative measures, which means using repellent, long pants and shirts, and staying under bug nets at night when the bugs are more active. NOLS has explored various rivers in the Amazon Basin. Exactly which river we will use for your course will be decided prior to the course start, but the most likely is the Rio Juruena and its continuation into the Rio Tapajós. In some cases we may use a river we have not scouted, but it will be very similar to the ones we know. Some days might be spent in the same camp, exploring the surrounding area, visiting with local people, or practicing paddling skills at a rapid. Fishing is a possible activity as well, depending on the river area. The Tucunaré (peacock bass), piranhas, and catfish are all edible and abundant in some areas of the Amazon.

Hiking Section

There will be two hiking sections. The long hiking section takes place in the Serra Ricardo Franco, which is a small mountain range close to the Bolivian border in the state of Mato Grosso. It is on the southernmost edge of the Amazon Basin and its many small rivers flow into the Rio Gupaore, a major tributary of the Rio Madeira itself the largest tributary of the Amazon River. This small mountain range has a great variety of landscapes. Dry upland forests, savannah grassland and moist riparian forests can all be seen in the same day as you travel from its deep canyons to the upland plateaus. It is challenging country to hike in. There are few trails and bush whacking or wading in rivers are often necessary to make progress. But the beauty of the area, its wildlife, waterfalls and diversity of plant life more than compensate. There is also cultural interaction with visits to the small fazendas (farms) where re-rations of food are stored. Navigation by map and compass are key skills that you will learn there as well.

The other hiking section is shorter and takes place in the lowland forests further to the north. Typically we use the Parque Nacional da Amazonia or the Parque Nacional Campos Amazônicos. On this section you get the opportunity to experience



the rain forest on foot. Natural history is the main focus on this section.

On one of the hiking sections you will get the opportunity to travel in small student groups without instructors for a number of days. This is dependent on the group passing an assessment to ensure that collectively it has the necessary skills for this.

Independent Student Group Travel

An emphasis of this semester, and often this section 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 instructors will allow you to take on more responsibility and make more of the decisions. When you have demonstrated the necessary competency to the instructors, you may travel in student-led groups without instructors for a day at a time as you travel from camp to camp. 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.

Student Expedition

This course may culminate in a Student Expedition. After successful practice with daily independent student travel and if your instructors think your group is ready, the instructors will 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 locator beacon that when activated in the event of a serious emergency will initiate a response from local search and rescue agencies. The instructors with a satellite phone may be up to 24 hours away from the students. Our students often say the student expedition was the highlight of their course.

Cultural Section

You will be exposed to cultural opportunities throughout your semester. Knowing a bit of the language (Portuguese) before you arrive in Brazil or trying to arrive earlier in Brazil to study Portuguese will greatly enhance your experience. Previous students highly emphasize this point. Contact NOLS Brazil (jon_kempsey@nols.edu) for more information on possibilities. We will have cultural opportunities on most of the semester sections, especially the river section. We will stay for a few (3-5) days in a ribeirinho (river bank dwellers) community where students divide into pairs and live with a local family in their daily lives. To facilitate greater cultural interchange we ask that all students bring a small **photo album** that shows some basic aspects of your life (family, friends, home, city, pets, favorite activities). Other opportunities include riverboat travel, community projects, and scientific research. Due to cultural issues we will be limited in our abilities to take photos at some areas. Some cultural sections are included within the river or hike section.

Weather And Other Challenges

There are seasonal variations in the Neotropics that have more to do with rainfall than any great variance in temperatures. The rainy season varies within the vast Amazon basin, which straddles the Equator, but we try to concentrate the semester during the dry season, although this does not preclude experiencing rain. Days are generally uniform in length (12 hours of daylight from roughly 6 a.m.-6 p.m.) throughout the year. In the Neotropics temperatures and humidity can be very high during the day (up to 100 degrees F and 80-90% humidity) and you will have to protect yourself from sunburn and dehydration.

You should also be prepared for the demands of the tropical forest. Insects are perhaps the most omnipresent aspect of the tropical fauna; there are mosquitoes, sand flies, sweat bees, wasps, ticks, beetles butterflies, moths, ants, etc. in abundance. You may have to get up and move camp in the middle of the night because leafcutter ants are snipping up your tent and pack. You may get multiple bee stings. On some courses some students have even experienced botfly larvae hitching a ride in their bodies. Although their reputation is often worse than the reality, they are creatures of the rainforest and travelers inevitably come into contact with them. Anyone with previous **severe** anaphylactic allergic reactions (compromised airway) in their medical history is asked to not apply for this semester, as the possibility of some insect bite during the semester is high.

Students should also be aware of the presence of malaria, rabies, yellow fever, dengue, leishmaniasis, and other less known diseases in the Brazilian Amazon course area. We will be taking precautions to prevent disease transmission, however there is always a risk of contracting some of these diseases. **A Yellow Fever vaccine is required before arriving in Brazil to start**



the semester; these vaccinations are good for 10 years. We will also be using prophylactic anti-malarial medications. More information is provided in the Travel and Logistics document for this course.

Remoteness from Medical Care

Throughout the semester, we may be miles from the amenities of civilization. Our remoteness also means evacuation to a medical facility can take up to two or more days. Telephones, ambulances, and hospitals may be several days away. We do carry satellite phones on courses, but this does not guarantee prompt communication or transport. Learning to manage risks and to assume responsibility for yourself and your colleagues is an expectation of all students.

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.

General 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 see each student accomplish the following:

Risk Management and Judgment

- Demonstrate knowledge of the hazards in the Amazon River, forest, and other environments encountered and practices that diminish the likelihood of injury due to those hazards.
- Display an awareness of animal and disease risks specific to the Amazon and how to minimize those risks.
- Demonstrate sound judgment and decision-making skills based on knowledge of equipment, the wilderness environment, other expedition members, and one's own limits.
- Display an ability to prevent, evaluate, and care for medical problems in a wilderness setting.
- Understand the connection between hygiene and health in a tropical environment and practice methods to promote good health and hygiene.
- Formulate and show the ability to implement contingency plans for groups in the outdoors and in remote areas.

Leadership and Teamwork

- Assume leadership responsibilities in day-to-day logistics and organization of the course.
- Accurately identify personal strengths and skills and areas for growth in developing leadership styles.
- Take initiative in helping to plan your course, teach classes, facilitate discussions, and conduct group meetings.
- Develop the ability to plan and carry out responsible and environmentally sound expeditions while also considering cultural sensitivity.
- Initiate resolution of interpersonal conflicts.
- Practice high standards of expedition behavior; display a positive attitude despite hardship.
- Make efforts to communicate with all expedition members and develop an atmosphere of mutual respect despite differences.

Outdoor Skills and Travel

- Travel competently in Amazon river, forest and Cerrado terrain, learning to camp, cook, and prepare for varied environmental conditions.
- Use GPS and compass to travel responsibly in challenging rainforest, river and savanna terrain.
- Take responsibility for the care and organization of personal and group equipment.
- Be familiar with sources of information on international travel and be able to plan an expedition.
- Be aware of the hazards of traveling in a developing country and how to minimize these hazards.
- Learn and apply basic wilderness first aid skills, hygiene considerations, and self-care.
- Consistently demonstrate sound minimum impact living and travel skills on personal and group levels and be able to apply this knowledge to varied settings.



Environment and Cultural Studies

- Become familiar with the different cultures of people encountered during the course.
- Show an understanding, appreciation and respect for the natural world; identify typical fauna and flora of the Amazon basin's eco-regions.
- Develop an understanding of land management in Brazil and the problems arising from population and resource pressures on wilderness areas.
- Demonstrate familiarity with the geographical and cultural diversity of Brazil.
- Consistently be aware of and practice environmental and cultural minimum impact.

River Expedition Skills

- Learn and practice hazard identification and avoidance in moving water and whitewater.
- Learn basic and advanced tandem canoe strokes and maneuvering techniques.
- Learn basic river rescue techniques; and basic and intermediate whitewater skills.
- Learn to manage and implement canoe expedition techniques: lining, walking and portaging canoes.
- Learn to care for, pack, maintain and repair collapsible canoes.

