

Course Description

Baja Sea Kayaking

Features of this Course

- Minimum age: 16
- Average age: 23
- Average group size: 14 students / 3 instructors
- 70–100 mile kayaking route
- Emphasis on kayaking techniques and coastal kayak traveling, skin diving and natural history
- Camp on beaches along mountainous coastline
- Day-to-day life in unique desert/marine environment
- Day hikes in the coastal desert
- Snorkeling
- Spin and spear fishing **may** be available

The Expedition

The Baja California peninsula and the Sea of Cortez are beautifully dramatic environments. The land is rugged, dry and mountainous—one of the driest parts of the Sonoran Desert ecosystem—with its own highly specialized, often unique, plants and animals. Next to this desert environment is the sea—a world of multi-colored fish, sea lions, birds and whales that stands in stark contrast to the barren desert along its shore. You'll explore these varied worlds in a sea kayak, with a snorkel, or by foot.

During the course, our emphasis will be on developing proficiency in outdoor living and traveling techniques. Students can expect classes in on-water skills such as paddling and rescue techniques, wind and wave theory, and meteorology; in the rich natural history of Baja California's desert and coast; and plenty of practical experience in Leave No Trace camping techniques, including cooking, sanitation, shelter, and stove use.

This course also includes leadership and teamwork development. Learning to be a contributing member of an expedition can be a challenge with immense personal rewards. When asked what was the most frustrating part of the course, students often refer to individual personality conflicts and living with the same group of people. When asked about the most rewarding aspect of the course participants often mention the opportunity to work as a team and to accomplish the goals of the group. It takes commitment to the group and willingness to set aside personal goals 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 to have fun.

Student Independence

On all National Outdoor Leadership School (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 at NOLS México before and after the field portion of 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 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. 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.



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. However, instructors with emergency 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.

First And Last Day

You will be transported from Loreto to the NOLS México facility on the first day of your course (see your Travel and Logistics document). This is a journey of approximately 1.5 hours, along a very scenic route. At our facility, we will check and issue equipment, get to know each other and have introductory classes. Depending on the course route, we may either leave by kayak from the headquarters the following morning or travel by van to a different launching point. Most courses, depending on the time of year, paddle a route from Bahía Concepción to Loreto.

The course will be picked up on the last morning and driven back to the NOLS facility. You spend the rest of the day sorting and cleaning group equipment, showering and completing course evaluations, that reflect on the course and the new skills learned. Courses end with a non-alcohol banquet on the evening of the last day of the course. Students normally spend the last night at our headquarters and leave early on the following morning. No matter how much is accomplished on the course, students invariably wish they had more time to catch another fish, explore another beautiful arroyo or feel the power of the sea just once more.

The Typical Day

Through most of the winter season here, the prevailing winds build from the north in the late morning, making travel by sea kayak difficult. We adjust our daily schedule around this by awakening before dawn—sometimes as early as 4:00 a.m.—and begin our paddling days with the sunrise. A pre-dawn weather check of paddling conditions helps us decide whether to move that day or not. Travel days begin with a good breakfast and preparations for travel within your cook group. After camps are taken down and moved to the beach, we usually meet as a group to finalize plans for that day's travel and to organize moving and loading the boats. Packing gear into the boats takes from 40 minutes to one hour. We use both single and double sea kayaks, usually in equal numbers. Once boats are loaded, the fleet, often in smaller pods of four to five kayaks, sets out for the next destination. Often there will be a short class or skills-focus on the water before actually beginning to paddle. The lessons go on through the day as the instructors, your group and the environment teach you about leading safe coastal sea kayaking expeditions. These daily passages average between 7 and 12 nautical miles, though, with good planning and favorable travel conditions, passages of 20 nautical miles or more are possible. After arrival, the boats are brought to the beach and unloaded. Passages often close with a short debriefing session to reflect on the events of the move. After you become proficient travelers, you will have the opportunity to lead the day's paddle. Snorkeling, fishing, day hikes, classes, skills practice, planning for the next travel day, discussions, or time for personal reflection are frequent afternoon and evening activities.

It is customary to take a number of layover days at different locations. The number of layover days available depends on weather conditions, students' abilities and desires, and decisions made about the pace of the expedition. During layover days, you will have classes on topics ranging from baking to map and chart use to natural history. You may snorkel along the rocky reefs or hike inland for a better look at the desert environment. Other options include learning to Eskimo roll a sea kayak or catch fish for dinner. We usually have an opportunity to visit with some of the fishermen and ranchers who live along the coast. Such opportunities give us a chance to practice Spanish and perhaps to share a meal of home-cooked Mexican food.

Weather and Other Challenges

Rain is possible but infrequent, though strong winds from the north are quite common, especially in mid-winter. These "Nortes" can make sea conditions too hazardous for travel, often for a few days at a time. There may be many days when we decide against traveling. Watching the weather, judging wind and wave conditions, and learning about the strength and ability of the group are the foundation of safe sea kayaking.

The conditions you can expect on your course will depend on the time of year you choose. In December and January, the daytime temperatures are usually in the 70's (°F) but can get down to the low 40's at night and water temperatures are in the low 60's. It will often be windy at this time of year. Late March and April have daytime temperatures up to the high 90's and nighttime lows in the 70's. The water has warmed up to the 70's and the winds are usually more variable, lighter and less frequent. November and February have weather between these two extremes.



Physical Challenge and Fitness

Please read the information in your enrollment packet on Physical Conditioning. Physical challenge is not necessarily a goal for a NOLS course, but some activities are definitely physically demanding. The level of physical challenge experienced will depend on the individual. Part of teamwork involves taking everyone's physical abilities into account when planning the day's travel. Sea Kayaking courses are physically demanding when carrying kayaks and water jugs up a steep beach, diving for long periods, or simply completing a long paddle day. The day-to-day demands of outdoor living can be hard work as well. That said, you may not necessarily have an aerobic work out every day. If you want more exercise than what's scheduled, there is some opportunity to paddle, swim, hike or go running on your own time. Be prepared for the "winded in" days. It will be your responsibility to ensure you get enough exercise on such days, but the instructors will attempt to make many different activities available. Your ability to participate and enjoy activities will depend on your physical condition.

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, 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.

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 outcomes:

Leadership and Teamwork

Students are exposed to theory and practice of outdoor leadership, teamwork and expedition behavior. At NOLS, expedition behavior involves commitment to the group, acceptance of others, and cooperation to achieve goals. Each student is expected to:

- Work effectively as a member of a team, displaying a positive attitude despite hardship.
- Effectively communicate ideas and concerns on an individual and group level.
- Accurately identify personal strengths and areas for growth in developing outdoor leadership.
- Take responsibility for learning through setting and attaining personal goals.
- Plan and carry out safe and environmentally sound expeditions.
- Take initiative in teaching and leadership roles with peers.
- Respond to problem situations using decision-making and planning skills.
- Display an awareness of group strengths and limitations.

Outdoor Skills

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

- Live comfortably in a desert/marine environment; learn to camp, cook, and dress for a variety of conditions.
- Travel competently in desert/coastal terrain using off-trail navigation, hazard evaluation and seamanship skills.
- Take responsibility for the care and organization of personal and group equipment.
- Exhibit good personal hygiene in diverse settings and situations.

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, to demonstrate an understanding of, and respect for, the course environment.
- Understand the history, facts, and potential solutions relevant to pertinent environmental issues.
- Demonstrate basic knowledge and respect for local cultures.



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 a developing knowledge of the hazards in a desert/marine environment and recognize their limitations.
- Describe and consistently perform specific techniques to reduce or avoid hazards.
- Describe an emergency plan for a group in the outdoors.
- Perform basic first aid skills to support a patient until help arrives.
- Use developing experience and judgment to implement sound decisions and follow them through to completion.

As a result of this course, we expect our students to be competent and responsible wilderness travelers and leaders.

