

Course Description

Baja Coastal Sailing

Features of this Course

- Minimum age: 16
- Average age: 21
- Average group size: 14 students / 4 instructors
- 75–150 mile sailing route
- Emphasis on outdoor and sailing skills, and on coastal navigation
- Travel in Drascombe longboats
- Camp on beaches along mountainous coastline
- Day-to-day life in unique desert/marine environment
- Day hikes in the coastal desert
- Excellent opportunities to see marine life
- 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 sailboat, with a snorkel, or by foot.

Our 22-foot Drascombe longboats are very versatile open (without a cabin) boats. Similar craft were once carried on the tall ships for use in exploring coastal areas. They are very seaworthy and are designed to sail well under a variety of conditions. With them, we can teach the same elements of sailing and seamanship that would be used on much larger crafts. When the wind dies, one or two people will row them. Rowing skills are a requisite to handling the Drascombe under sail. Under oars, it is possible to travel a long way down the coast. Rowing puts us in touch with an earlier era when there were no motors and oar-power was the supplemental power of every sailing vessel. Physical challenges are an important aspect of any National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS) course and rowing provides that physical activity in the sailing curriculum. In itself rowing can be a rewarding mode of wilderness travel, and is an important life skill for anyone who spends time on boats. The boats are also often equipped with a small outboard motor as a backup to enhance the safety and self-sufficiency of the expedition.

These proven sailboats allow us to travel in the waters of the Sea of Cortez (also known as the Gulf of California), and also to navigate into tiny coves and semi-protected beaches to camp at night in places inaccessible to larger yachts. We live in the natural world on this course, so our schedule must be flexible and match the natural rhythms of the area. Depending on wind patterns, sea conditions, and tidal currents, our travel schedule may vary considerably. We may get up before dawn to catch the tide or sail until dusk to take advantage of a favorable breeze. There are bound to be some long, challenging days on the water, but there should also be time to wonder at the stars, or at the starfish in a tidal pool.

During the course, the emphasis will be on developing proficiency in outdoor living and traveling techniques. Students can expect classes in on-water skills such as sailing, rescue techniques, wind and wave theory, and meteorology; 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, and 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.



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 prepare rations, check and issue equipment, get to know each other and have introductory classes. Depending on the course route, we may either leave by boat from the headquarters the following morning or travel by van to a different launching point.

The course will be picked up on the last morning, or the evening before, and driven back to NOLS México. You spend the last day at our facility 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 facility and leave early on the following morning. No matter how much is accomplished on the course, students invariably wish they had more time to see one more dolphin, explore another beautiful arroyo, or feel the power of the wind in the sails just once more.

The Typical Day

You will be aboard the boats for long hours during moving days and camping ashore each night. The typical travel day begins early with a good breakfast and preparations for travel within your cook group. After camps are taken down and moved to the beach anchors, we usually meet as a group to finalize plans for that day's travel. Often there will be a short class given before loading the boats. Packing gear into the boats takes from 40 minutes to one hour. Once boats are loaded, the fleet—from two to four boats—sets out for the next destination. These daily passages average between 10 and 20 nautical miles, though with good planning and favorable travel conditions, passages of 40 nautical miles or more are possible. There will be an instructor on each boat to teach boat handling, navigation, anchoring and other nautical skills, but you will get your turn in each of the crew positions as it will be the students who do most of the sailing. This will be a chance to truly experiment with the things you've been taught.

After arrival, the boats are anchored, brought to the beach, and unloaded. Many places we visit do not provide good protection for the boats from the weather. In these situations, the boats are brought onto the beach for the night and re-launched for the next travel day. Passages often close with a short debriefing session, either in boat crews or as an expedition, to reflect upon the events of the day. After debriefing, camps are set and an evening meal prepared. Classes, planning for the next travel day, discussions, readings, or fun games are frequent 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. Layover days are a great time to hone sailing skills and practice boat procedures. 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 taking a day sail or catching 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

The Sea of Cortez and the Baja California peninsula are environments of harsh beauty. The areas we visit are remote; often we will be several days from medical facilities. At sea, strong winds may blow up suddenly making conditions hazardous for travel. Some of the desert dwellers, such as snakes and scorpions, are venomous and the plants defend themselves with thorns. The undersea world is surprisingly lush by comparison with the land, but there, too, are hazards that we must learn to identify and respect. Even the main highway is narrow, twisty and used by some vehicles in poor condition and by drivers of widely varying levels of skill and judgment.

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. Watching the weather, judging wind and wave conditions, and learning about the strength and ability of the group and the equipment are what safe coastal sailing is all about. There may be many days when we decide not to sail because of the weather; at other times we may need to row due to lack of wind. Additionally, for courses visiting the northern gulf, there is a significant tidal range (11 feet) and associated strong currents. These will necessarily influence our travel in this area.



At NOLS, we do not venture out to prove our courage or to endure hardships needlessly; our goals are risk management, education and enjoyment. These goals are achieved not by artificial means, but rather by our understanding and awareness of potential hazards. In a natural world without guardrails or warning labels, our safety lies in our knowledge and common sense, and a major goal of all our courses is to help develop these attributes in our students. Your instructors will teach about scorpions, rattlesnakes, stingrays and many other potential hazards so that they may be avoided.

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.

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. Sailing courses are physically demanding when carrying water jugs up a steep beach, rowing a longboat, diving for long periods, or simply completing a long travel day. The day-to-day demands of outdoor living can be hard work as well. That said, you may not, necessarily, be getting an aerobic work out every day. If you want more exercise than what's scheduled, there is some opportunity to 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.

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 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, usually of three or four 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.

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.



- Employ leadership styles appropriate to the situation; support others in leadership roles.

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.

Coastal Sailing and Seamanship Skills

The skills necessary for travel by small sailboat are taught throughout the course. The teaching progression varies with student abilities and the weather conditions experienced on each particular course. Each student is expected to demonstrate an understanding of:

- Coastal navigation and passage planning.
- Coastal hazards; wind, waves, weather, currents, tides and geography.
- Beaching, anchoring and launching procedures.
- Sail handling, helming, and rowing.
- Use of safety equipment including radios and signal flags.
- Sailing upwind, downwind, and in heavy weather.
- Boat handling under power.
- Swamping and crew overboard recovery.
- Comfort in the water, including skin diving skills and safety.

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, in order to cultivate 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

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 marine and desert environments and the ability to transfer this experience to new environments.
- 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.

