

Course Description

Semester in Baja

Features Of This Course:

- Hiking, sea kayaking, and sailing
- Hiking routes approximately 50 - 100 miles
- Kayaking and sailing routes of 100+ miles
- Minimum age: 17; Average age: 20
- Average Student/Instructor ratio: 14-15/3-4
- Average pack weight: 60 pounds
- Elevations: from sea level to 10,000 ft
- Wide diversity of environments
- Challenging map reading on hiking section
- Mexican cultural interactions
- Variety of sea life; skin diving

The Expedition

The Baja California peninsula is a land of extremes and contrasts. The Pacific Ocean on the west and the Sea of Cortez on the east flank the peninsula. Granite and volcanic mountain ranges extend over 1,000 miles down the central spine of the peninsula. Picacho del Diablo is a 10,126-foot peak in the northern mountains and is snow covered in winter months. Most of the rest of Baja California, while still very rugged and mountainous, is Sonoran desert country receiving less than ten inches of rainfall a year. The geology of the peninsula is easy to see because forests do not hide the soils; nonetheless, there is an amazing variety of desert vegetation. Of the 110 species of cacti, 80 are endemic. The Sea of Cortez (also known as the Gulf of California) and the Pacific Ocean teem with life—whales, dolphins, sea lions and a variety of fish populate the undersea world. For three months, you'll explore these contrasting environments on foot, in a sea kayak, and on a sailboat while you learn the skills you need in order to be able to visit these ecosystems comfortably and responsibly in the future.

Each section of the semester, and the semester as a whole, is considered an expedition. Students will live outdoors and prepare their own meals. All are expected to take care of themselves and help take care of each other. The course will camp together, but will be divided into tent groups of three or four students each, so that every student has ample opportunity to learn and practice camping and cooking skills. Since NOLS is a school, there will be formal sit-down classes presented during the day or in the evening, in addition to the practical experiential learning activities.

The First Days

Your official first day of your NOLS course begins the morning of your pick up at the designated meeting place. **After this point, you will not have the opportunity to contact family or friends.** After a short drive, you will meet your hiking instructors and other NOLS staff, who will help you prepare for the hiking section. Your instructors will check your gear and outfit you with what you'll need for the hiking section. You will bag your rations. In the evening there will be an orientation meeting and a chance to get to know your instructors and fellow expedition members. The following day, you will finish up loose ends, pack up the vehicles and head out to start the hiking section. You will arrive at the road head that evening or early the next day.

The NOLS admissions office will be notified if you do not arrive as scheduled, or if there are any problems. **Please bring one photocopy of your passport or birth certificate. You will need to have 30 dollars in cash to purchase your tourist visa.**

Course Progression

A NOLS semester means living and working with the same small group of people under challenging conditions for nearly three months. The leadership and sensitivity to group dynamics which this requires can be demanding, but semester groups form special friendships after living and learning together through the good times and the challenges.

Your course consists of three different sections: Backpacking, Sea Kayaking and Sailing.



Backpacking Section

After spending a day outfitting, you'll head to the Sierra San Pedro Martir. Huge canyons cut into the backbone of this range, providing shade, water and spectacular relief. The mountains and canyons are steep and the vegetation is thick, so hiking can be difficult. Not only will you work hard carrying everything you have on your back through the mountains, you'll also notice that the gear in your backpack is all you need to live comfortably. The weather will be hot and sunny during the day and can drop below freezing (at times) during the evenings. Very rarely does the rain fall, so cherish it when it does!

The Typical Day

On travel days, you will usually hike most of the day, covering what you need to know in short lessons along the way. On layover days, you'll have more in-depth classes or go on day hikes with light packs. During this first section, you will learn outdoor living skills and backcountry travel techniques. Risk management and hazard evaluation are essential for your health and well being during hiking days, and will be assessed before you are sent out in small groups without instructors. Minimum-impact camping practices, group dynamics, leadership, communication, identification of flora and fauna, and a host of other outdoor pursuits will also be discussed and practiced.

Sea Kayaking Section

This section of your semester takes you to the Sea of Cortez where you will explore the coastline at the interface of three contrasting environments — the desert, the arid volcanic coastal mountains and the ocean. This is a dramatic environment. It can still be very hot in October and November. Windstorms are quite common and can make sea conditions too hazardous for responsible travel. Watching the weather, judging sea conditions, and learning about the strength and ability of the group are what seamanship is all about.

Your expedition will use both single and double sea kayaks. On travel days you will get up before dawn – sometimes as early as 4 am — paddle during the morning and have practical classes on kayaking, natural history, leadership or expedition skills. On windy days you may practice rough water kayak skills, or explore the inter-tidal zone or learn about the natural history of the desert. In some areas day hikes are also a great windy day activity!

You will also have the opportunity to skin-dive and explore the underwater world. When you don your mask, snorkel and wet suit, a whole new world awaits you. We recommend you bring your own mask and snorkel if you have them.

The Typical Day

Through most of the 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 waking up before dawn and beginning our paddle days with the sunrise. During pre-dawn weather checks you will learn to decide whether to move that day or not. Travel days begin very early with a good breakfast and preparations for travel within your cook group. After camps are taken down and moved to the beach, your group will typically meet to finalize plans and to organize moving and loading the boats. Once boats are loaded, the fleet sets out for the next destination. The lessons go on through the day as the instructors, your group and the environment teach you about leading responsible coastal sea kayaking expeditions. These daily passages average between 7 and 12 nautical miles, although passages of 20 nautical miles or more are possible. Passages often close with a short debriefing session to reflect on the events of the move. Snorkeling, day hikes, classes, skills practice, planning for the next travel day, discussions, or time for personal reflection are frequent afternoon and evening activities.

Coastal Sailing Section

Once you've learned the fundamentals, you will explore the coast in yawl-rigged open boats called Drascombe Longboats. Each of these stable and seaworthy craft can carry five people and all their food and gear for more than a week. The emphasis of this section will be on coastal sailing, navigation, seamanship, and leadership.



On travel days, you may have classes in the morning and then travel for a few hours or the rest of the day, depending on the wind. Once you arrive at your new anchorage, you'll take care of the boats, debrief your passage, have dinner and then either meet for a social evening or go to bed. On layover days, you may day sail, participate in classes or other land-based activities such as day hikes, diving or natural history. There will be an instructor on each boat to teach more about seamanship, 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. You'll have practice time to learn many more skills as you head down the Sea of Cortez, anchoring or beaching the boats each night and camping ashore. There may be some days that are too windy for sailing and others when it may be necessary to row, but in general, we find the longboats are ideally suited for Sea of Cortez conditions.

The Typical Day

You may be aboard the boats for long hours during moving days and you will camp ashore each night. The typical travel day begins early with a good breakfast and preparation of the boats for travel. After camps are taken down and moved to beach anchors, we usually meet as a group to finalize plans for that day's travel. Often there may be a short class given before loading the boats. Packing gear into the boats usually takes 40 minutes to an hour. Once boats are loaded, the fleet—from 2 to 4 boats—sets out for the next destination. These daily passages average between 10 and 20 nautical miles, although passages of up to 40 nautical miles are possible. 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 wave action. 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 solidify the lessons of the day. After this, camps are set and an evening meal prepared. Classes, planning for the next travel day, discussions, or fun games are possible evening activities.

It is customary to take a number of layover days at different locations. How many layover days are available depends on travel conditions, the route, and decisions made about the pace of the expedition. Layover days are great times to hone sailing skills and practice boat procedures. They provide time to learn and explore the marine and desert environments and in some places to visit with local people.

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. Away from the field, students often have independent unsupervised time, usually in town, before and after their course starts or between sections of semesters.

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, you may travel in student-led groups without instructors for a day at a time as you go from camp to camp. This independent student travel allows you to practice skills and leadership while still having indirect supervision by instructors and the benefit of the NOLS support systems.

This course may have an independent student group expedition. If your instructors think your group is ready, you may be divided into student expedition groups (usually three to six students each). With instructor oversight, each group will then select a leader and carefully plan and execute a multi-day 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. Students often say that the student expedition was the highlight of their course.

The hiking section of the semester often provides an opportunity for an independent student expedition experience. Depending on factors such as route, weather, group competence, course length, and curriculum progression the sailing section can culminate in boats crewed only by students, with an instructor boat nearby. The sea kayak section may offer traveling in a separate group "shadowed" by instructors, and possibly a short student expedition.



Final Day

As the end of the semester draws near, you will have experienced a broad range of wilderness travel skills. Your judgment and leadership abilities will have varied experiences to draw upon for the future. Although it can be tough to end such an intense experience, focusing on transferring the skills you've learned on your course to your life at home will leave you with a real feeling of accomplishment.

Your course will end on the evening of the date stated in your enrollment letter. You will arrive at our branch in Bahia Concepción that morning. You spend the rest of the day cleaning group equipment, showering and completing course evaluations. Courses end with a banquet with us the evening of the last day of the course as noted in your enrollment letter. Students spend the last night at our Coyote Bay facility and leave early on the following morning. **There is no phone available at the NOLS Mexico base**, so please don't plan on making calls until you arrive in Loreto after the end of your course.

Weather and Other Challenges

You will find the Baja California peninsula to be a land of harsh beauty. The areas we visit are remote not because they are officially protected as wilderness, but because of the rugged and challenging nature of the land itself. Often we will be several days from medical facilities. The terrain can be mountainous and the hiking steep and demanding. 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 compared to the land, but there, too, there are hazards that you 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.

You will experience a wide range of temperatures on your semester. Rain is possible, but not common. In the Sierra, the daytime temperatures could climb to over 100 degrees and drop close to freezing at night. On the ocean sections, sea temperatures can range from the 70's to the low 60's. The sailboats can be wet and chilly — particularly when going into the wind.

We at NOLS 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 health and well being resides in our knowledge and judgment, and a major goal of all our courses is to help develop these attributes in our students. The 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. 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.

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 physically demanding. On fall semesters, most students find the hiking section the most demanding because of the heavy packs and the rugged terrain in which we travel. The level of physical challenge experienced will depend on the individual. Part of teamwork involves taking everyone's physical abilities into account when planning a day's travel. The marine sections are physically demanding in ways such as carrying kayaks and water jugs up a steep beach, rowing a long boat, or diving, for long periods. The simple day to day demands of outdoor living can be hard work as well, and 4 a.m. risings on the kayak section takes their toll! If you want more exercise than what's scheduled, there is ample opportunity to swim, hike, and run in 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 try to make many different activities available. Your ability to participate and enjoy activities will depend on your physical condition.



Fishing

While not a focus of the course, students may have various opportunities to fish. There is no license required to fish from shore using a hand line or a rod and reel. If you are interested in fishing from your boat or kayak, you will need to obtain a license, and should contact:

CONAPESCA/Oficina de Pesca
2550 Fifth Avenue #15, San Diego, CA 92103
(619) 233-4324 Fax: (619) 233-0344
www.conapescasandiego.org

Please bring a copy of your license with you to Mexico, and read the regulations.

Course Objectives

Each course is unique due to variables such as route, group dynamics, fitness levels and environmental conditions. Working with such variables, it is NOLS intent to have each student accomplish the following objectives. These objectives form the basis of the written evaluations and the assignment of grades at the end of each semester section.

Risk Management and Judgment

NOLS teaches the wilderness user to practice responsible habits that promote the health and well being of self and others.

- Demonstrate knowledge of the hazards in the varied environments in which the semester is conducted and be able to transfer and apply this experience to new environments.
- Consistently perform specific techniques to reduce or avoid hazards.
- Create and show ability to implement emergency plans for groups in the outdoors.
- Anticipate, prevent, evaluate, and care for medical problems in wilderness settings.
- Gain sufficient experience with equipment, the wilderness environment, expedition members and one's own limits to develop judgment and decision making skills necessary to be a capable expedition member and wilderness traveler.

Leadership and Teamwork

Students are exposed to leadership theories and expected to participate in appropriate leadership roles to gain practical experience.

- Consistently display effective teamwork.
- Effectively communicate ideas and concerns as an individual, and with the group.
- Accurately identify strengths, skills, and areas for growth in developing outdoor leadership styles in self and others.
- Take responsibility for learning by setting and attaining personal goals.
- Show capability of planning and carrying out responsible and environmentally sound expeditions.
- Use abilities and initiative effectively in teaching/leadership roles with peers.
- Respond to problem situations using decision making and planning skills.
- Show supportive leadership qualities by actively supporting others in leadership roles and taking appropriate individual initiative.
- Show capability of drawing on various appropriate leadership styles.

Expedition Behavior

Expedition behavior involves teamwork, commitment to the group, acceptance of others, and cooperation to balance achievement of both individual and group goals.

- Maintain an attentive, involved, and positive attitude towards group goals and undertakings.
- Demonstrate maturity and insight through good communication skills.
- Show willingness to accept responsibilities.
- Demonstrate the ability to take initiative in group activities and tasks.
- Support others in their development and growth as the semester progresses.



General Outdoor Skills

At NOLS, students learn to live and travel in the outdoors within a framework of personal health, well-being and care of the environment.

- Live proficiently in all course environments: learning to camp, cook and dress for a variety of conditions with an awareness of minimum impact concerns.
- Travel competently in the course terrain using navigation, hazard evaluation and terrain specific travel techniques.
- 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.
- Learn and apply fundamentals of basic field natural history including geology, ecology, ornithology, botany, meteorology and oceanography.
- Learn effective use of appropriate field references to facilitate self-teaching.
- Increase familiarity with the geography of the Baja California peninsula.
- Demonstrate basic knowledge and respect for local and regional cultures.
- Understand the functions and local concerns of U.S. and Mexican land management agencies.
- Understand the roles and local concerns of competing interest groups (tourists, fishermen and others).
- Facilitate the transference of wilderness ethics and practices into daily life.

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

