

# Course Description

## Baja Ocean Semester

### Features Of This Course:

- Sea kayaking, sailing longboats and sailing keelboats
- Kayaking and sailing routes of 100+ miles
- Student/Instructor ratio: 14/2-3-4
- Average age: 20
- Minimum age: 17
- Learn seamanship in a variety of vessels
- Wilderness First Aid and CPR training
- Wide diversity of environments
- Variety of sea life; skin diving and fishing opportunities available

### 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 in a sea kayak, in an open deck Drascombe Longboat, and on a large sloop sailboat while you learn the skills necessary 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. During the field sections, 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. NOLS is a school, and, in addition to the practical experiential learning activities, there will be formal sit-down classes presented during the day or in the evening.

### The First Days

YOU WILL NOT BE ABLE TO CALL HOME after we leave Loreto. This is the start of the course. Plan to have your personal business completed before the course begins. We will notify the NOLS admission office if you don't show up or if there are any problems.

Your course will begin with two days of Wilderness First Aid training and a half-day CPR class. After you have completed your medical training, your instructors will check your gear and outfit you with what you'll need for the field. The following day, we'll tie up loose ends, pack up the vehicles and head north to start the sea kayaking section. We plan to arrive at the roadhead that evening.

### 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 hard times.

Your semester will be composed of four different sections: Wilderness First Aid and CPR, Sea Kayaking, Sailing Drascombe Longboat, and Sailing Keelboats.

### Wilderness First Aid & CPR

Your adventure will be just beginning when you arrive at NOLS Mexico, our minimum impact facility. Here you'll have 16 hours of first aid training specific to wilderness emergencies, essential for outdoor travelers and brought to you by the Wilderness Medicine Institute of NOLS, followed by a half-day of CPR training.



## **Sea Kayaking Section**

This section of your semester takes you to the Sea of Cortez where we'll explore the coastline at the interface of three contrasting environments—the desert, 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. In addition, tides and currents can play a role in where we choose to camp and when we travel. Watching the weather, judging wind and wave conditions, and learning about the strength and ability of the group are what seamanship is all about.

We use single and double sea kayaks, usually in equal numbers. On travel days we get up before dawn – sometimes as early as 4 am — travel a few hours, and then have sit-down or practical classes on kayaking, skin-diving, natural history, leadership and expedition skills. On windy days we'll practice rough water kayak skills if conditions allow, and/or we'll shift our attention landward and explore intertidal or desert natural history.

We also teach how to skin-dive responsibly and explore the underwater world. When you don your mask, snorkel and wet suit, a whole new world awaits you.

## **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 waking up before dawn and beginning our paddle 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 very early 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 an hour. 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 experience teach you about leading responsible 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. Snorkeling, day hikes, classes, skills practice, planning for the next travel day, discussions, or time for personal reflection are frequent afternoon and evening activities.

## **Drascombe Longboat Sailing Section**

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

On travel days, we usually have classes in the morning and then travel for a few hours or the rest of the day, depending on the wind. Once we get to our camp, we take care of the boats, talk about our day, have dinner and then either meet for a social evening or go to bed. On layover days, we focus on day sails, 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 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 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 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 usually takes from 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, though with good planning and favorable travel conditions 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 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 this, camps are set and an evening meal prepared. Classes, planning for the next travel days, 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 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.

## **Keelboat Sailing Section**

By the end of your semester, you'll be ready to tackle keelboat sailing, the epitome of teamwork. These 40-foot boats will be your home for the final 10 days of the expedition and will each carry seven students and an instructor. As you move further offshore and closer to your course mates, you'll need to use all of the skills you've acquired up to now – from sail theory to leadership to impeccable expedition behavior – in order to navigate this large, complex sailboat. Periods of calm offer opportunity to learn and practice boat handling under engine power. Finally, the ship's logbook, maintained by the crew of each vessel, will record navigation and weather data and serve as a workbook to enhance the learning process.

## **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 to the instructors, you may travel in student-led groups without instructors for a day at a time as you go 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 have a Student Expedition. If your instructors think your group is ready, you may be divided into student expedition groups (usually six to seven 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. The 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.

## **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. Though 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 the city of La Paz that morning. You spend the rest of the day cleaning group equipment, showering and completing course evaluations. Courses end with a banquet with NOLS staff the evening of the last day of the 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. 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.

You will experience a wide range of temperatures on your semester. Rain is possible but not common. Sea temperatures can range from the 70s to the low 60s. The sailboats can be wet and chilly — particularly when heading into the wind.

We at NOLS do not venture out to prove our courage or to endure hardships needlessly; our goals are safety, 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 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.

### **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 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 am risings on the kayak section take their toll! If you want more exercise than what's scheduled, there is ample opportunity to swim, hike, and run 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 try to make different activities available. Your ability to participate and enjoy activities will depend on your physical condition.

**Please Read The “General Information” Section In Our Catalog** to better understand the basic goals of our courses.

### **Drug and Alcohol Policy**

The use of both alcohol, and any type of illegal drugs is strictly forbidden during your course – this includes during the time in town between your sections for the duration of your course. The alcohol policy applies to all students. Possession of illegal drugs is a serious crime in Mexico and will endanger not just yourself but fellow expedition members as well as the NOLS Mexico program. **Students in violation of the drug and alcohol policy will be expelled from their course. No second chances are given.**

### **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 our intent to have each student accomplish the following:

### **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 semester course is to raise students' awareness of their influence on ecosystems and their relationship with the world and others.

- consistently demonstrate and understand sound minimum impact living and travel skills on personal and group levels
- develop basic natural history observation and interpretive skills in a variety of life zones
- learn effective use of appropriate field references to facilitate self-teaching
- increase familiarity with the geography of the Baja peninsula
- understand the history of and consider potential solutions to pertinent environmental issues
- learn and apply fundamentals of basic field natural history including geology, ecology, ornithology, botany, meteorology and oceanography
- 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, etc.)
- demonstrate basic knowledge and respect for local and regional cultures
- facilitate the transference of wilderness ethics and practices into daily personal and professional life

