

Course Description

Himalaya Backpacking

Features of this Course

- National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS) core curriculum in a remote expedition format
- Human and natural history of the Kumaon / Eastern Garhwal Himalaya
- Camping for two weeks over 10,000 feet
- Attempted crossings of snow covered passes over 13,000 feet
- Cross-cultural experience
- Hiking route: 95–120 miles
- Average pack weight: 40–45 percent of body weight
- Average group size: 14 students / 3–4 instructors
- Course begins and ends in New Delhi, India.

India

Empires of great size and complexity existed in India far earlier than anything comparable in Europe or other parts of the world. India encompasses one of the world's oldest religions and civilizations. The origins of its current social structure can be traced back thousands of years. Yet India, as an entity, exists as a comparatively recent aggregate unified by the British. It gained its independence in 1947.

A land of diversities, India covers an area equal to the United States west of the Mississippi River. Sixteen languages and 200 dialects are spoken within its borders. Considered the largest democracy in the world, India's population of one billion people remains fairly well spread out. India offers a varied experience: it is as vast as it can be crowded, as luxurious as it is impoverished; the plains are as flat and scenic as the Himalayas are rugged and magnificent; and the transport is as exhilarating as it can be uncomfortable.

The Expedition

The Kumaon and Eastern Garhwal region of the Indian Himalaya—site of this course—is a rugged, glacier-carved range world-famous for its climbing, trekking and whitewater rafting. These mystic mountains are sacred to the Hindus and continue to be a place of meditation for sages and holy men. Here myth, religion, folklore and the natural environment embrace each other. Well-known, 7,000-meter peaks like Nanda Devi (Kumaon area) and Trisul (Eastern Garhwal area) are situated in this vast region of primeval forests and diverse natural history. These mountains also comprise the headwaters of the holy Ganges River.

The Himalaya Backpacking course offers the opportunity to interact with cultures very different from western cultures. Attempting to learn about and understand Indian culture is a much-appreciated sign of respect. Most travelers have experienced greater monetary advantages in life than the average Indian citizen and can be regarded differently because of this. Politeness and the cultivation of a sincere interest in other cultures are always appreciated in this situation. Such displays of respect are the first step in overcoming economic and cultural differences.

This backpacking course is an exciting opportunity to learn and expand your horizons. You will immerse yourself in the culture and natural history of India, while focusing on the NOLS core curriculum of Leadership and Teamwork, Outdoor Skills, Environmental Studies and Risk Management.

Trekking in the Himalaya is something few people experience as fully as you will on this NOLS course. You will backpack through these mountains surrounded by the perennial snow and ice of the famed Himalaya. Your journey will begin with a bus ride from New Delhi. This ride is a chaotic adventure in third world travel. The two days required to reach the roadhead are split with a rest day at the NOLS base in Ranikhet. At an altitude of 6,000 ft, Ranikhet is a quiet and wooded town where you will rest and pack your food and gear for traveling into the mountains. You will then continue the bus journey to either Munsiri or Lohajang. Weather and trail conditions will determine the choice of route. The Munsiri route travels into the Milam Valleys along well-traveled trails. This area was an important link in the ancient trade route between India and Tibet; you will pass deserted 300-year-old villages that bear testimony to the once thriving business between the two countries. The Lohajang route traverses around the west side of the Trishul massif before crossing Kuari Pass. Pilgrims on their way to pay respect to Nanda Devi have historically used this area.



Along the way, your course may cross several passes over 13,000 ft. Gaining and losing 3,000 ft of elevation on some days, you will hike through forests of maple, oak and rhododendron and pass villages where water buffalo-powered agriculture is still the main way of life. These remote areas are rarely seen by western visitors and are home to the Himalayan black bear, Himalayan thar, fox, bharal (in the deer family) and the ever-elusive snow leopard.

You will work hard traveling over steep, rocky terrain at high altitude with all your gear on your back, but you will play hard as well. You will also learn the skills required to travel in the high mountains long after the end of your course. These skills begin with the basics—camping, cooking, map reading, stove use, Leave No Trace techniques and sanitation—skills that are the foundation for advanced backpacking.

During your course you will live with two or three other students in a “cook group.” These small groups help disperse impacts on the land and enable you to master the art of backcountry cooking and living.

Language

Hindi is the national language of India. English is spoken mainly in the cities and is recognized as the second national language. Fully one-third of the time on your India course will be spent in close contact with the porters, tea stall owners, bus drivers and local hill people of northern India. Even a basic understanding of Hindi will make your time on the course more rewarding and educational. We recommend taking some time before your course to study one or more of the books and tapes on Hindi language listed in the suggested resources section below.

Weather and Other Challenges

Between sweltering New Delhi and the mountains, temperatures can vary from 100 to 0 degrees Fahrenheit. Mountain weather is fickle. On any given day, temperatures may fluctuate widely. Courses may experience snow and rain, or long stretches of sun and blue sky.

To travel in the Himalaya you will cross whitewater rivers, scramble across teetering boulders, and sweat your way up high mountain passes. You will travel over steep slopes of snow and loose rock and on exposed mountain trails. Prudent route selection and continual adherence to risk management practices will minimize the risks from the inherent dangers of moving water, falling and rolling rock, falls on steep terrain, avalanches, altitude and harsh weather.

Some of the risks and potential dangers of this expedition are no different than those found on any NOLS course, while others are unique to our operation in India. You'll be miles away from the amenities of civilization such as telephones, ambulances and hospitals. From these mountains, evacuation to modern medical facilities is difficult and may take several days. Packs can be heavy (65–75 lbs) and are carried over very rugged terrain. Getting to and from the mountains requires travel in both private and public vehicles on roads that are often in poor condition and shared by drivers of dubious ability. Tropical environments harbor a wide variety of unusual diseases, such as malaria. This list of hazards is not meant to intimidate you; rather it is meant to increase your awareness of possible risks, so you can make an informed decision about participating in this course.

Identifying and managing mountain hazards will be a constant theme of our instruction. Managing risks and assuming responsibility for yourself and your colleagues will help make your expedition in these wild and beautiful mountains healthy and rewarding.

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.

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 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 hike 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.

Fitness Recommendations

We feel that the Kumaon Himalaya provides an excellent setting for learning and applying expedition camping skills, off-trail travel and glacier climbing techniques; it also provides an opportunity to apply technical mountain travel skills at high altitude. Being physically fit will enable you to take full advantage of this opportunity and will also make your NOLS course a healthier and more enjoyable experience.

It is essential that students participating in this expedition arrive in very good physical condition and health. High altitude mountain travel is demanding, no matter how fit you are. Our goal is to inspire those students in poor or fair condition to catch up and get into better condition. We’re not trying to encourage students already in very good condition to get into even better condition, but we strongly encourage you to consider your physical condition now. For more information, please see the Physical Conditioning page of your enrollment packet.

Course Objectives

Each course is unique due to variables such as route, group dynamics, fitness levels and environmental conditions. Working with these variables, we intend to accomplish the following objectives in four areas:

Leadership

Students are exposed to the 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 the health and well being of self and others.
- Actively participate in the decision-making process and respond to problem situations using decision-making and planning skills.
- Take responsibility for learning through setting and attaining personal goals.
- Take initiative in teaching and leadership roles with peer, employ leadership styles appropriate to the situation and support others in the leadership role.
- Provide effective oral and written feedback.



Outdoor Skills

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

- Live comfortably in a mountain environment; learn to camp, cook, and dress for a variety of conditions.
- Travel competently in mountainous terrain using map and compass skills as well as off-trail navigation, hazard evaluation, route-finding, bear camping and river-crossing techniques.
- Accurately assess skills, strengths and endurance in self and others and conservatively apply those limits to given situations.
- Take responsibility for the care and organization of personal and group equipment.

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 a basic knowledge of and respect for the local Indian culture.
- Display basic natural history observational and interpretive skills and use them to demonstrate an understanding of and respect for the course environment.
- Discuss the history and potential solutions relevant to pertinent environmental issues.
- Reflect on the transference of wilderness ethics and practices into daily personal and professional life.

Risk Management, Judgment and Decision-making

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 knowledge of the hazards in a mountain environment.
- Consistently perform specific techniques taught on the course to reduce or avoid hazards.
- Describe an emergency plan for a group in the outdoors.
- Demonstrate the ability to perform basic emergency procedures to support a patient until help arrives.
- Use experience and judgment to implement sound decisions and follow them through to completion.
- Display sound judgment and an awareness of group and self-limits.

Suggested Resources

Himalaya Mountaineering

Shipton, E. (1997). *The six mountain-travel books*. (2nd ed.) The Mountaineers Books.

Tilman, H. W. (2004). *The seven mountain-travel books*. The Mountaineers Books.

India

Ackerley, J. R. (1990). *Hindoo holiday: An Indian journal*. Simon & Schuster.

Aitken, B. (2003). *Riding the ranges: Travels on my motorcycle*. Penguin Books.

Aitken, B. (2003). *Footloose in the Himalaya*. Sangam Books, Ltd.

Alter, S. (2001). *Sacred waters: A pilgrimage up the Ganges river to the source of Hindu culture*. Harcourt.

Bond, R. (2005). *Delhi is not far: The best of Ruskin Bond*. Penguin Books

Bumiller, E. (1991). *May you be the mother of a hundred sons: A journey among the women of India*. Ballentine Books.

Cameron, J. (1974). *An Indian summer*. McGraw-Hill Companies.

Corbett, J. (1991). *My India*. Safari Press, Inc.

Dhar, S. (2005). *Raga'n josh: Stories from a musical life*. Permanent Black.

Frater, A. (1991). *Chasing the monsoon: A modern pilgrimage through India*. Knopf Publishing Group.

Guha, R. (2006). *How much should a person consume? Environmentalism in India and the United States*. University of California Press.

Kala, D. C. (1999). *Jim Corbett of Kumaon*. (2nd ed.) Sangam Books Ltd.

Khilnani, S. (1998). *The idea of India*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

LaPierre, D. & L. Collins. (2000). *Freedom at midnight*. (New Ed.). South Asia Books.

Mistry, R. (1996). *A fine balance*. Knopf Publishing Group.

Moraes, D. (Ed.) (2001). *The Penguin book of Indian journeys*. Viking Books.

Mukerji, K. (2006). *The lost world of Hindustani music*. Penguin Books.

Rushdie, S. (2006). *Midnight's children*. Random House Inc.



Indian Natural History

- Ali, S. (2007). *The fall of a sparrow*. Oxford University Press.
- Ali, S. (2003). *The book of Indian birds*. (13th ed.) Oxford University Press.
- Corbett, J. (1993). *Man-eaters of Kumaon*. Oxford University Press.
- Prater, S. H. (1990). *The book of Indian animals*. Oxford University Press.

Learning Hindi

- Language/30. (1990). *Hindi: Start speaking today!* Audio cassettes. Educational Services Corporation.
- Delacy, R. (1998). *Hindi & Urdu phrasebook*. (2nd ed.) Lonely Planet Publications.
- Rough Guides. (2006). *The Rough Guide phrasebook: Hindi and Urdu*. Rough Guides, Ltd.

