

Course Description

Semester In The Pacific Northwest

Features Of This Course:

- Wide diversity of environments, from marine ecosystems and temperate rainforest to arid rain shadows and deserts
- Wilderness First Aid + CPR (20 hrs) provided by the Wilderness Medicine Institute of NOLS
- Independent Student Group Expedition
- Certifications: Wilderness First Aid, CPR and Leave No Trace Trainer
- Group Size: 10 students with 2 - 3 instructors/section
- Elevations ranging from sea level to 10,000 ft
- Average Age: 20

The Expedition

The wilderness of the Northwest—your home for more than two and a half months—is like no other region in the country. Within several hours' drive of NOLS' Pacific Northwest headquarters are steep and heavily glaciated mountains, temperate rainforests of towering evergreens, several outstanding rock climbing areas, protected water and ocean coastline for sea kayaking, open water for sailboat cruising, and miles of wilderness coastline with precipitous headlands and an abundant intertidal ecosystem. On your semester, you will explore all these environments as you share a great adventure and develop as an outdoor leader.

You may find yourself jamming your hands and feet into granite cracks, hiking up a steep slope of alpine flowers or gazing in wonder into a tidal pool teeming with life. You'll work hard hiking with all your gear on your back in steep, rocky terrain, but you will leave the semester with the skills and experience needed to travel in the wilderness long after the end of your course.

Your 80-day semester is divided into five sections depending on which start date you choose:

Option A: Mountain Travel, Rock Climbing, Wilderness First Aid, Coastal Backpacking, and Sailing

This option includes backpacking and general mountaineering in the North Cascades mountains, rock climbing at either Squamish BC, Leavenworth WA or Smith Rock OR, three days of first aid first aid training, coastal backpacking on the Olympic Peninsula, and sailing in the coastal waters of British Columbia.

Option B: Sea-Kayaking, Rock Climbing, Wilderness First Aid, Wilderness Travel, and Sailing.

The option begins with sea kayaking on the outer coast of Vancouver Island, rock climbing at Squamish BC, three days of wilderness first aid training, backpacking in the North Cascades National Park and Pasayten Wilderness, and sailing in the coastal waters of British Columbia.

While you are in the field, you will live with three or four other students in a “cook group”. These small groups help disperse the impact on the land and provide the opportunity to master the art of backcountry cooking and living. You will also travel in small groups, usually of four to six, again to disperse impact and to enhance learning. The field segment of each section will end with course evaluations.

Mountain Travel Section (Option A)

Your classroom on this section will be the steep glaciated mountains and towering evergreens of the North Cascades. This section teaches you the skills to travel competently in a mountain environment.

We'll travel slowly during the first few days to get accustomed to our boots, our backpacks, and the terrain. Despite your best efforts to take only the essentials, your pack will likely weigh around 45 - 60 pounds in the beginning. Everyday you'll practice and develop the skills it takes to become a competent backcountry hiker. There will be a few non-moving days to explore, learn specific skills, or climb a peak unencumbered by a pack. As the section progresses, instructors (and perhaps students) teach formal and informal classes on a wide range of subjects, including cooking and baking, stove use and fire-building, map-reading and navigation, first aid, plant and animal natural history, ecosystems, geology, weather, and regional environmental issues.



Mountaineering instruction starts with a foundation of basic skills: knots, ice axe use, glacier travel techniques and alpine hazard evaluation. Increased exposure to cold and wind will demand greater proficiency to camp securely and remain comfortable. As we ascend onto the glaciers you'll learn to choose a prudent route around crevasses using rope systems to safeguard against hidden hazards. As soon as possible, opportunities to practice advanced techniques such as fixed rope ascension, ice climbing, snow and ice protection placement, and crevasse rescue will be available. If weather allows, parties may attempt to summit one or more peaks.

Sea Kayaking Section (Option B)

Sea Kayaking skills are built in the protected waters on the west coast of Vancouver Island for the first three weeks of this semester. The protected waters of Zeballos inlet and Esperanza inlet will allow you to develop your paddle stroke before heading out around Nootka Island. With pristine beaches and the chance of sighting bears, wolves, seals and whales, this remote location offers one of the more beautiful areas for an introduction to expedition sea kayaking.

Identifying and managing the hazards of wind and waves, rocky shore-lines, fog, shallow water, swell, currents, open crossings, animals, cold water, and long stretches of exposed open coastline will be a constant theme in our instruction. The consistent practice of risk management techniques and assumption of responsibility for yourself and other group members will help make your expedition in this coastal environment healthy and enjoyable.

Rock Climbing Section (All Semesters)

You'll travel by van and stay at established campgrounds near either Squamish British Columbia, Leavenworth, Washington or Smith Rock, Oregon to learn the intricacies of rock climbing. "Base camping," and the resources of established climbing areas permit sharp focus and rapid development of rock climbing skills.

This section emphasizes the skills you'll need to pursue this activity on your own after the course, beginning with basic risk management and movement on rock, top rope climbing, rappelling, protection placement, anchor building, and seconding multi-pitch climbs. Depending on the progression of you and your fellow students, you may move into more advanced topics such as lead climbing, aid climbing, and cliff rescue.

A positive attitude about climbing is essential to maximize natural ability. One of your biggest contributions on this section can be to foster a supportive atmosphere in which each student can progress at his or her own rate, gaining confidence while developing skills.

Wilderness First Aid (All Semesters)

Two and a half days of your semester will be spent participating in a Wilderness First Aid course taught by the Wilderness Medicine Institute of NOLS. Fast paced and hands-on, this course covers a wide range of wilderness medicine topics for people who travel and work in the outdoors. This course is pre-approved by such organizations as the American Camping Association, the United States Forest Service, and other governmental agencies. Those with previous training may also use it for wilderness medicine recertification. We recertify current cards from the following organizations only: WMI of NOLS, SOLO, and WMA.

Coastal Backpacking (Option A)

The Olympic Peninsula is a sampling of the Northwest's ecological extremes, all gathered together within walking distance. Here you'll find dry forests of hemlock and Douglas fir, extensive alpine tundra with access to glaciers, temperate rainforests of cedar and spruce, and miles of road-less Pacific coast. You'll explore the wonders of these ecosystems as you backpack through them.

Some days we'll hike along wide sandy beaches, while other days will challenge us with miles of boulders, drift logs, or rocks covered with slippery seaweed. We won't always be able to stay along the shoreline, though, due to high tides or headlands jutting out into the ocean. We'll leave the beach and head into the forest, where dense vegetation can cause a mile or two of progress to take hours. In periods of heavy rainfall, swollen rivers sometimes require the group to wait overnight or even turn back.

Here the moon will govern our day more than the sun. The rise and fall of the tides determine when we can travel and where we can camp. You will employ a tide table along with the topographic map as you plan a prudent travel route.



Appreciation of the coastal environment is enhanced by discussions about plants, marine life, geology, weather, cultural history, and environmental issues. While hiking the coast it is common to observe river otters and harbor seals, ospreys and bald eagles, and an abundance of sea birds such as loons and cormorants. The cold oxygen-rich water supports some of the most productive tide pools in the world—urchins, anemones and sea stars abound. While hiking through the Makah Indian Nation we will have the opportunity to observe petroglyphs and ruins of the ancient village of Ozette. The “Ozette Dig” is one of the more significant archaeological finds in North America, dating back through 2,500 years of fishermen, whalers, and hunters.

At the end of the section, students may have the opportunity to backpack for several days without instructors. This may occur either on the coast or on an inland rainforest and mountain route. Since they typically occur toward the end of the semester, these "small group expeditions," usually consisting of five students, are an excellent challenge to your developing judgment and leadership skills.

Wilderness Travel (Option B)

The heart of the Pasayten Wilderness boasts almost 150 peaks over 7,500 feet in elevation. Rugged ridges in the west flatten into expansive plateaus toward the east, with deep drainages on both sides. Here you will travel through gently sloping stands of Lodgepole Pine that give way to high mountain lakes and open meadows as you gain altitude. Traveling in the Pasayten includes challenging off-trail travel as you travel into the remote wilderness. We'll travel slowly during the first few days to get accustomed to our boots, our backpacks, and the terrain. Despite your best efforts to take only the essentials, your pack will likely weigh around 45 - 60 pounds in the beginning.

At first, hiking distances will be short to give you time to grow accustomed to your pack. To help ease the loads there will be two or three re-supplies of food and fuel. Later, hiking days will average between four and eight miles. Instruction includes map reading, first aid, leadership, plant and animal identification, fishing (route dependent), ecosystems, geology, weather, and environmental issues. It is not uncommon to have two or more classes a day.

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Sailing Section (All Semesters)

The Gulf Islands of British Columbia's Strait of Georgia will be your classroom on this section. You'll learn about the ebb and flow of tidal waters, and cruise into picture-perfect coves. On every island, a different wilderness or shore experience invites you to explore from a peaceful anchorage. Expect to cope with cool, wet weather and enjoy the brilliance of blue sky and distant snowy peaks.

Each sailing section consists of ten students divided between two cruising sailboats (approximately 36' in length). You'll bring a wealth of experience developed in the mountains to this section. Teamwork and “expedition behavior” skills are as crucial in the boat as they are in a storm-bound tent. You'll continue to refine your leadership and decision making-ability as “First Mate” of the day.

A full curriculum of new skills beginning with terminology, rigging, knots, sail trim, helmsmanship, tacks and jibes, builds on skills from previous sections. You will learn anchoring techniques and considerations, marine radio use, and how to deal with fog and stormy weather. Periods of calm offer opportunity to learn and practice boat handling under engine power. Prudent sailing practices and drills in crew overboard procedures will minimize the risks of sailing in these cold waters. Your land map and navigation experience will be the starting point for developing coastal piloting skills.

Life and travel on the sea will lend another perspective to tidal phenomena as we work with the strong tidal currents often found among the islands. In the evening you will plot a passage and see it become reality, the next day. 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. Students often have independent unsupervised time, usually in town, before and after their course starts or between sections or 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, usually 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 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 5 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. Our students often say the student expedition was the highlight of their course.

Weather and Other Challenges

Weather is an essential complement to the curriculum of the entire semester. Snowstorms are common in the Cascades and Olympic Mountains. Strong winds and horizontal rain can occur anywhere, turning an otherwise simple hike, or anchoring, into a prolonged ordeal. Despite adequate equipment and prior planning, there will probably still be times when you are cold, wet, and tired. Learning to manage these situations competently and with a smile is part of the wilderness experience.

More than a collection of skills, a NOLS semester is a challenging adventure shared with others. You will get the most out of your experience and be able to give the most if you arrive committed to being a positive, responsible member of the expedition.

One way to begin your commitment to the expedition is to arrive in good physical condition. You certainly do not have to be a world-class athlete to excel on a NOLS course; in fact, we have found that enthusiasm and commitment are the best defenses against the rigors of backcountry travel. However, arriving in good shape will enhance your ability to capitalize on learning opportunities. We suggest a daily exercise and stretching routine that builds endurance, flexibility, coordination and strength.

Travel in the mountains and oceans can be tough. Often you'll be off-trail bushwhacking through thick vegetation or scrambling over tricky terrain. Rivers can be hard or impossible to cross. You will traverse steep slopes of loose rock, snow or grass, and struggle up high mountain passes. You'll sail in seas that make you woozy. But the hard work is worth it. There's nothing quite like taking your pack off at the top of a pass, feeling the wind dry the sweat off your back, and looking down at miles of new country opening up before you. It's exhilarating.

Throughout your course, you'll be miles from the amenities of civilization. Telephones, ambulances, and hospitals may be several days away.

These hazards and challenges are not meant to intimidate you, but they are the reality of living and traveling in the wilderness. Identifying and managing hazards—whether we're talking about falling rock, stormy weather, animals, moving water or steep terrain—will be a constant theme in our instruction. Managing risks and assuming responsibility for yourself and your colleagues will help make your expedition in these wilds and beautiful places healthy and fun.



When asked what was the most challenging part of their semester students often refer to the group dynamic challenges of living with the same group of people for 80 days. When asked about the most rewarding aspect of the course most participants talk about the strong friendships that developed as a result, and the opportunity to work as a team and to accomplish the goals of the group. Just as you need to be physically fit you also need to be mentally ready to take on the challenges of a semester in the Pacific Northwest. There will be days when you will help to care for a sick tent mate and other days when you will need a hand to overcome some hurdles. A positive attitude will help you and the group to have the best semester ever.

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.

Behavior on the Expedition

Each person's values, beliefs and actions affect those of the rest of the group -- balancing these is an important part of expedition behavior. We want you to have a positive and healthy learning experience. Therefore we expect all students to respect the values and beliefs of other members of the expedition. The best expedition members have positive attitudes, apply new skills and ideas at the first opportunity and come motivated to work hard with people they have never seen before. They care about others, hold the welfare of the group equal to their own, and understand that an expedition succeeds when all its members complete each day successfully. NOLS is a tobacco-free environment. There is no tobacco use allowed on any course or in NOLS facilities. In addition, to help ensure a healthy environment for its students and instructors, NOLS prohibits the use of or possession of illegal drugs and alcohol on any course. Violation of this policy will result in expulsion.

Lastly, NOLS will not tolerate harassment. If you feel your values, or beliefs, are not being respected by NOLS' staff or students, it is essential that you speak up so the issues are addressed.

If you have questions, please feel free to call NOLS Admissions at 800-710-NOLS.

Re-reading this material a few days before the start date of your course will help you to be well informed and ready on the first day.

