

Course Description

Gila Range Backpacking

National Outdoor Leadership School

Features Of This Course:

- Hiking route: ~100 miles
- Elevations of 6,500' – 11,000'
- Average group size: 15 students and 3 instructors
- Student expeditions
- Average age: 19
- Minimum age: 16
- Average pack weight: 55 lbs.
- College credit available

The Expedition

More than 70 years ago—and 40 years before the Wilderness Act of 1964—Aldo Leopold recognized the magic of the Gila and recommended that Congress preserve the area. His recommendation resulted in America's first designated wilderness. The Gila was proclaimed wilderness in 1924. Today, the wild qualities that so impressed Leopold can still be found in the forests, mesas and canyons that form the headwaters of the Gila River. Ranging in elevation from 6,500 to 11,000 feet, this area is home to black bear, elk and white-tailed deer, as well as an amazing variety of bird life. For 28 days, you'll hike from pinyon, juniper, and Arizona sycamore up into aspen groves and stands of fir and spruce trees. You'll camp in steep-sided rocky canyons, wander through park-like ponderosa pine forests, and sleep under the stars in open, alpine meadows. You'll work hard on this course, but you'll play hard as well. And you'll learn the skills you need to camp in the mountains long after the end of your course.

Your course will begin with the basics: cooking, camping, stove use, map reading, and Leave No Trace techniques. Two re-supplies of food and fuel during the course help keep pack weights manageable. Once you gain comfort and confidence, we'll move on to more advanced instruction on topics that range from baking yeast bread, river crossings and route finding to discussing environmental issues, leadership, group dynamics or identifying plants and animals. Traveling in the Gila provides the unique opportunity to hike in snow on ridgelines at 11,000 feet and to soak in hot springs along the Middle Fork of the Gila River. The last part of the expedition may culminate, if your instructors think you are ready, in student planned and led expeditions.

The human history of the Gila dates back thousands of years. Occasionally you'll see evidence of the prehistoric Mogollon culture. More recently, the area was home to Native American Apaches and their warrior leader, Geronimo. We will talk about these people and look for signs of their passing as we travel through the area. Currently, parts of the Gila are used for grazing cattle, a hotly debated topic in this region. We'll spend time learning about this and other current land management issues.

The experiential education of a NOLS course emphasizes hands-on application of new skills and learning through personal experience whenever possible. Group dynamics and leadership are an integral part of our curriculum. You'll learn how to live and work closely with your course mates as you travel through remote areas. Your ability to respect your expedition mates, work hard and tolerate uncertainty and adversity will be keys to your success. As your group gains leadership skills and experience working together, you can expect your instructors to give you more responsibility for directing the leadership of your peers.



Throughout the entire course, you'll live outdoors and prepare your own meals. You are expected to take care of yourself 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. Basic ingredients such as rice, pastas, beans, flour, cereals, nuts, cheese, dried fruits, and vegetables are used to create a diverse and balanced diet. An extensive spice kit enhances the variety of tasty meals. Before you know it, you'll savor homemade pizza and cinnamon rolls—gourmet delicacies that you made from scratch on a single-burner stove. 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 field experience ends with course evaluations. This course may run in other locations due to unforeseen circumstances.

Student Independence

On all NOLS courses students will be independent (that is 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, 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 three 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. 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.

Weather and Other Challenges

The Gila can undergo extremes in temperatures and weather. Though warm mild weather is the norm, students should expect anything from monsoon rains and extreme heat, to snow, wind and subfreezing temperatures. Sometimes weather changes occur in a matter of minutes, other times storms or cold temperatures can last for days. It is likely that you will experience a variety of extremes in weather, camping and hiking conditions.



Physical challenges on the course will include backpacking both on- and off-trail in steep, rugged terrain. All Gila hiking routes include numerous river crossings that are done by wading through ankle to waist deep moving water. In all the areas traveled during the course, numerous species of sharp spiny plants are common. Rattlesnakes and scorpions are some of the potentially harmful animals that students will learn to recognize and avoid. At times it may be necessary to scout for water sources or carry water from camp to camp. We will be far from the amenities of civilization during the course. Phones, roads, and medical facilities may be days away.

Identifying and managing the hazards of moving water, falling and rolling rocks, weather, animals, and steep terrain will be a constant theme in our instruction. The consistent practice of risk management and assumption of responsibility for yourself and other group members will help make your expedition in these beautiful wilderness areas healthy and enjoyable.

One challenge that is difficult to explain, but is perhaps the most important to the experience, is the challenge of living, working and learning with the same people day in and day out. Expedition behavior, or the ability to get along with the other members of the group and function as a team, is a vital component of the NOLS curriculum and the course experience.

Gila Range Backpacking 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 accomplish the following outcomes:

Risk Management and Judgment

NOLS teaches wilderness users to practice responsible habits that promote the health and well being of self and others. Objectives include the ability to:

- demonstrate a developing knowledge of the hazards in mountain environment
- recognize and minimize risk to self and others
- understand emergency procedures for the environment.
- demonstrate competent first aid skills
- use developing experience and judgment to implement sound decisions and follow them through to completion

Leadership and Teamwork

Students are exposed to the theory and practice of outdoor leadership, teamwork and expedition behavior. At NOLS expedition behavior involves commitment to the group, a positive attitude and cooperation to achieve goals. Objectives include the ability to:

- influence the group in a positive way; support a positive learning environment
- work effectively as a member of a team
- communicate clearly; actively listen and state personal opinions with clarity
- accurately identify personal strengths, skills and areas for growth in developing outdoor leadership styles
- take responsibility for learning through setting and attaining personal goals
- appropriately manage conflict
- use abilities and initiative in a leadership role with peers
- use situationally appropriate decision making skills

Outdoor Skills

At NOLS our students learn to live and travel in the wilderness within a framework of personal risk management and care of the environment. Objectives include the ability to:

- live comfortably in mountain environment, including the ability to camp, cook, and dress for varied conditions with Leave No Trace techniques
- travel competently in mountainous terrain using off-trail navigation, hazard evaluation, backpacking and river-crossing techniques
- demonstrate ability to be organized and efficient with gear
- consistently arrive prepared for daily events
- demonstrate responsible use and care of personal and group equipment

Environmental Studies

Students develop awareness of how to apply minimum-impact ideas to their lives after the course. Objectives include the ability to:

- practice sound Leave No Trace camping skills
- use basic observation and interpretive skills to demonstrate an understanding and respect for the natural world
- understand the history, facts, and potential solutions to relevant environmental issues
- demonstrate basic knowledge and respect for local and ancient southwest cultures
- understand basic organization and responsibilities of land management agencies

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

