

Course Description

Southwest Lightweight Backpacking

Course Features:

- Hiking route: 60-90 miles
- Elevations of 6,000'- 7,650' (winter/spring courses) / 6,000' – 10,770' (fall courses)
- Full field days: 12
- Group size: up to 12 students / 2 instructors
- Average pack weight: 22-30 lbs (includes food, water, fuel, group and personal gear)
- On and off-trail hiking
- Travel near or above tree-line
- Minimum age: 18
- Average age: 30

The Expedition

For the past four years, NOLS has been offering one of the only lightweight backpacking courses in the American Southwest. There is one major difference between this course and our other backpacking expeditions: the main goal on this course is to travel light through the mountains using the latest techniques and technology to keep pack weights to under 30 pounds. We've focused the curriculum and added specialized gear so you can enjoy a wilderness adventure without carrying a heavy pack.

This adventure will start in the NOLS Southwest equipment room as you and your instructors select and fit your lightweight gear. You'll then move to the rations room where you will help prepare your food for the expedition. Then the real fun begins—"shaving" the ounces. How light can you go?

Outfitted with 25-30 pound packs (10-15 pounds without food and fuel) you'll be off to one of the southwest's most remote and wild ranges where you will travel light and develop your outdoor skills. Either the beautiful Galiuro Mountains (winter/spring) or the Gila Mountains (fall) will be the site for your lightweight backpacking expedition. The Galiuros are renowned for their rugged terrain, spectacular Sonoran ecology and beautiful vistas. The Gila Wilderness was the first federally designated wilderness area in the United States. The human history of the Gila dates back thousands of years to the time when it was the home of the Mogollon civilization and evidence of these prehistoric cultures can be found while traveling through the area. For 12 days, you'll travel through one of these amazing wilderness areas, experiencing the uniqueness of the Sonoran Desert eco-system.

Lightweight packs will allow you to travel over long distances in a given day. This allows participants to see an incredible variety of terrain over the duration of the course. It also dictates a solid foundation of physical fitness to allow for long days of hiking. You'll also learn essential skills like cooking one-pot meals on an alcohol stove, staying warm and dry with a minimum of gear, and backcountry navigation. You will leave this course with the skills and background necessary to plan and execute your own lightweight adventures.

This course begins with the basics: cooking, camping, stove use, map reading, and *Leave No Trace* techniques. Eventually, the curriculum will move on to more advanced topics that range from environmental issues and leadership techniques to plant and animal identification. You'll be divided into groups of two people for cooking and up to four people for camping. You'll receive valuable coaching from your instructors while learning these new skills.

During the day you will travel in small groups, usually of four to six. Initially, these groups will include an instructor. Later in the course, your hiking group may travel on it's own. NOLS courses are designed for learning to take place through experience. This is not a guided tour or a vacation from responsibility.

Expedition behavior and leadership will be an important part of the course curriculum. You'll learn how to live and work closely with your course-mates while you travel through the mountains. Tolerance for adversity and uncertainty, respect for others, and a willingness to work hard will be critical to both individual and group success.

You should expect ongoing verbal coaching and feedback throughout the expedition, with written performance evaluations at course end.



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.

Weather and Other Challenges

The desert Southwest is known to host extremes in temperature and weather conditions. **Though warm, mild weather is more typical, students should expect anything from monsoon rains and extreme heat, to snow, wind and subfreezing temperatures.** Subfreezing temperatures are common, especially at night. Please make sure you are bringing the appropriate gear from our equipment list to help you keep warm in these conditions. Sometimes these weather changes occur in a matter of minutes, other times storms or cold temperatures can last for days. There will be times when you are cold, wet and tired, but you'll learn to manage these situations. You might even find yourself smiling while you do. In time, your personal adaptation to varied conditions will help you understand and appreciate the remarkable flora and fauna that make the Southwest such a special environment.

The backcountry mountain ranges in which you will travel are rugged desert mountain ranges characterized by deeply incised canyons, steep slopes, rocky terrain and sheer cliffs. Travel in the backcountry can at times be exclusively off-trail, requiring constant attention to route finding. The rock is loose and easily breakable adding to the challenge of hiking. While in the backcountry, we will be far from roads and telephones. In the event of an accident or illness, it may take several days to get to a medical facility.

The Southwest is home to rattlesnakes and other potentially harmful insects and reptiles. Various species of cactus and other plants with sharp spines make it a challenge to avoid becoming a human pincushion. An important part of the curriculum is learning to identify these hazards in order to reduce the chance of injury.

Water is the life-blood of the desert. The hiking route is designed to go from one water-source to another. These water sources are either man-made "tanks" or naturally occurring pools found deep in the clefts of the rocks. Often it is many miles between water sources and it may be necessary to carry a day's supply of water between camps. The Southwest has been experiencing drought conditions for the past few years. If water shortages dictate a change, the location might be moved to another wilderness area for the backcountry portion of this course.

Risk Management

Identifying and managing the hazards of steep terrain, falling and rolling rocks, weather, animals, and spiny vegetation 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 these wild mountains healthy and enjoyable.

Physical Challenge and Fitness

Please read the page in your enrollment packet on physical conditioning. **You will be hiking an average of 5 – 10 miles a day on this course.** Physical challenge is not necessarily a goal for a NOLS course, but they are physically demanding.

Group Living

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. You'll become very close to your fellow expedition members and perhaps some long lasting friendships will be formed. 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. This aspect of the course will be a continuing theme throughout.

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 locator beacons (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.

Drug and Alcohol Policy

The use of any type of illegal drugs, alcohol or tobacco is strictly forbidden during your course. The alcohol policy applies to all students. **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 these variables, it is our intent to see each student accomplish the following outcomes:

Risk Management, Judgment and Decision Making

NOLS teaches wilderness users to practice responsible habits that promote the health and well being of self and others. Each student is expected to:

- Demonstrate a developing knowledge of the hazards in mountain, desert and river environments.
- 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. Each student is expected to:

- Influence the group in a positive way and 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 appropriate situational decision making skills.

Outdoor Skills

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

- Live comfortably in mountain, desert and river environments, including the ability to camp, cook and dress for varied conditions with minimum impact.
- Travel competently in mountainous, desert or river terrain using off-trail navigation, hazard evaluation, backpacking and river-crossing techniques.
- Experience basic rock climbing and canoeing 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. Each student is expected to:

- Practice sound *Leave No Trace* camping and travel 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 responsible, competent, wilderness travelers and leaders.



