

# Course Description

## Southwest Outdoor Educator

### Features Of This Course:

- Backpacking for 18 days
- Rock climbing for 11 - 12 days
- Designed for practicing or aspiring outdoor educators
- Hiking and climbing in the Sonoran Desert
- Minimum age: 18
- Average age: 28
- Average pack weight: 45 - 50 lbs.
- Group size: up to 16 students / 3-4 instructors

### The Expedition

The Southwest's Sonoran desert is famous for its incredible diversity and wealth of plants and animals. It's not the barren, sandy place that often comes to mind when people imagine a desert. On this course, you'll travel through cholla cactus, mesquite, ocotillo and palo verde trees. Quail, songbirds and raptors share the skies, and desert bighorn sheep, mountain lions, and javelina move across the land. For 18 days, you'll explore either the Kofa National Wildlife Refuge or the Galiuro Wilderness learning the backcountry living skills you'll need to lead others on wilderness trips. Then you'll move to either Cochise Stronghold or Joshua Tree National Park —where you'll develop rock-climbing skills for 11 - 12 days.

The Southwest Outdoor Educator is designed to provide you with the opportunity to develop the knowledge and skills necessary for teaching and leading field-based wilderness education programs.

The course begins at NOLS Southwest in Tucson, Arizona. After an orientation to the course and our facility, we'll issue equipment, bag food and pack backpacks. There will also be an opportunity to talk with the NOLS administration about the organization and logistical aspects of our programs. We can discuss everything from federal land permits to equipment planning and rations and give you a perspective on running an outdoor program. That evening you will have time to utilize the NOLS Southwest library to gather resources for the class you will teach during your course. The first night will be spent camped at NOLS Southwest in Tucson.

Early in the morning, on the second day, you will load your pack and head to either the Kofa National Wildlife Refuge or the Galiuro Wilderness for the backpacking section of the course. The Kofa encompasses 660,000 acres of classic desert basin and range country on the border of Arizona and California. Two parallel mountain ranges—the Kofa and Castle Dome Mountains—rise sharply from the plains and provide a home for the desert bighorn sheep that this refuge was created to protect. Most of camps in the Kofa will be near water tanks that the sheep use. The Galiuro is one of the many mountain ranges called “sky islands”. This name comes from the fact that these ranges are isolated pockets of alpine vegetation and lush forests surrounded by barren desert basins. Here, you will hike through ponderosa pine, oak, and manzanita while looking out over stark deserts below.

On this section, we'll start slowly to allow time for you to grow accustomed to carrying a pack that may weigh in excess of 45 - 50 pounds. Initial classes will focus on basic wilderness living skills such as tent pitching, stove use and map reading. *Leave No Trace* camping in arid environments will be a prominent theme throughout the course. This is the time for you to learn new techniques as well as refine the skills you may already possess. Even seasoned outdoor educators can learn from observing the teaching techniques employed to teach the basics.

As expertise increases, you'll become more involved in decision-making, leadership and hazard evaluation. Reading topographic maps and route finding will be an integral part of daily travel. Students will be teaching a 15-30 minute class on a topic pertaining to the course curriculum. This will provide an opportunity to receive feedback on style, content and effectiveness of your teaching techniques. Topics usually relate to the NOLS core curriculum or desert natural history.

On day 19 of the course, you'll depart from the backcountry and head either back to NOLS Southwest or to a campground facility to clean gear and shower. There you will also re-supply the field rations and pick up your climbing equipment. You'll



then drive to either Cochise Stronghold or Joshua Tree National Park and establish a base camp for the last 11 - 12 days of the course. This transition day begins early in the morning and finishes late. Please do not plan on attending to personal affairs during this time.

During your climbing section, you'll be introduced to basic climbing systems: anchors, knots, rope handling, signals, belaying and rappelling. The emphasis is on teaching you how to evaluate anchors and supervise top rope sites. There may also be opportunities for 'mock' lead climbs and multi-pitch climbing. This section is not intended to teach in-depth climbing techniques. You'll leave the section with the skills required to supervise top rope climbing under controlled conditions.

While base camping, you will still sleep in tents with floors. In addition, you will learn the fine arts associated with living comfortably in that setting. Fresh veggies will be part of your ration. You'll cook on two-burner propane stoves. An extra book for bedtime reading or cotton pants for climbing might seem like luxuries after finishing your hiking section. When you don't have to carry these items on your back, you can afford to bring a few small extra comforts.

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.

### **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 an Independent 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. 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.

### **Solos**

On this course you may have an opportunity to do a solo when you spend a day and night alone. There is no hiking during the solo. Many people find this experience a good way to reflect on the course and immerse themselves in the environment.

### **Weather and Other Challenges**

The Southwest can be host to 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.** During the months of January and February 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 Kofa, Galiuro, Cochise Stronghold and Joshua Tree are all 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 Fitness**

Physical challenge is not necessarily a goal for a NOLS course but they are physically demanding. Each section of your NOLS course will offer different levels and types of physical challenge. For more information, please see the Physical Conditioning page of your enrollment packet.

### **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 – this includes during the time in town between your sections for the duration of 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 competent, responsible wilderness travelers and leaders.**

