

Course Description

Spring Semester in the Southwest

Features of This Course:

- Backpacking, rock climbing, caving, canoeing and student expedition
- Average Group Size: 15 Students / 3-5 Instructors
- Typical Male/Female Ratio: 50/50
- Average Age: 20
- Minimum Age: 17
- Average Pack Weight: 40-50 pounds
- Elevations of 3,000 - 11,000 ft.
- Wilderness First Aid Certification from Wilderness Medicine Institute of NOLS

The Expedition

A Semester in the Southwest will give you a unique glimpse into the American Southwest's living desert. Your notions of a barren, sandy desert environment will be forever changed as you discover this place alive with plants and animals like coyote, javelina, mountain lions, peregrine falcons, mesquite and cactus. One of the only semesters at NOLS to offer three technical sections, your experiences will vary from the canyons of the Rio Grande to the Ponderosa Pine forests of the Gila Wilderness. You may find yourself jamming your hands and feet into granite cracks, or crawling on your hands and knees through decorated limestone caves. Along with natural history, you'll discover the desert's rich human history and have plenty of time to travel through the areas inhabited by these ancient cultures. In this land of constant sun, you'll also be able to learn the skills—backpacking, caving, climbing and canoeing—and get to finish the semester with a student expedition, the highlight of the semester for many students.

The launch point for your expedition, NOLS Southwest, is located on ten beautiful acres dotted with Saguaros and close to national forest land. From here, you'll watch raptors soaring above, listen to coyotes howling at night, and enjoy the famous desert sunsets. NOLS Southwest is a small facility, with tight-knit and friendly staff who live and work at the branch and enjoy being part of the students' experience. Many are former Semester in the Southwest graduates, creating a comfortable, supportive atmosphere with excellent personalized service.

The semester is comprised of five different sections. These sections, which last from two to three weeks, include backpacking, rock climbing, caving, canoeing and a backpacking student expedition. Between each section, the course will either pass through the NOLS Southwest branch facility or stop at a campground in Texas, Arizona or New Mexico. Each semester section will end with course evaluations.

The transitions between sections are kept as short as possible to allow us to maximize our time in the wilderness. The bulk of your time in-town will be spent reorganizing gear, meeting new instructors, and doing personal laundry or other errands. This is the time when mail is received, telephones are accessible, and you may even bask in a little free time.

Different instructors work each section in order to have the most qualified staff for a particular skill area. One instructor, the course proctor, will remain with the group for the entire semester. This instructor is the key liaison between you and the NOLS community and will provide consistency between sections.

While you are in the field, you'll live with two or three other students in a cook group. These small groups help disperse the impact on the land and enable you to master the art of backcountry cooking and living. You'll also travel in small groups, usually of four to six. Initially, these groups will include an instructor, but later in your course—once you know the intricacies of map reading, route finding, and hazard evaluation—students often travel in small groups on their own.



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 November, December, January and February subfreezing temperatures are common, especially at night. 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.

Physical challenges of the semester include backpacking both on and off trail in steep rugged terrain. Spring courses in the Galiuros and Gila may take you through waist-deep snow. All Gila hiking routes include numerous river crossings that are done by wading through ankle to waist-deep moving water. Rock climbing is taught on vertical cliffs and the approaches are often over steep rocky terrain. Some of the caving is vertical in nature requiring the use of ropes and technical equipment to descend and ascend in and out of the caves. Some caves are muddy and the footing may be slippery. In all the areas traveled during the semester, numerous species of sharp spiny plants are common. Rattlesnakes and scorpions are some of the potentially harmful animals, which students will learn to recognize and avoid.

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 techniques and assumption of responsibility for yourself and other group members will help make your expedition in these wild, beautiful, and untrammled mountains and wilderness areas healthy and enjoyable.

The semester is long, nearly three months. One challenge which 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, 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 semester experience. This aspect of the course will be a continuing theme throughout the semester.

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. 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. As you gain proficiency, the instructor will gradually 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.

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.

Semester Sections:

Wilderness First Aid

The first few 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 the American Camping Association, the United States Forest Service, and other governmental agencies. It may be used for wilderness medicine recertification for those with previous training. We recertify current cards from the following organizations only: WMI, SOLO, and WMA

Galiuros Wilderness

During this section you'll practice outdoor living skills, wilderness travel techniques, minimum-impact camping, leadership, and teamwork. Water can be scarce and it may be necessary to carry it from camp to camp. This hiking section will take place in the Galiuros Wilderness of Arizona. You will hike through 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.

Caving

The caving section is approximately two weeks long. During this time, you'll explore extensive and world famous cave systems near Carlsbad, New Mexico. Only a handful of permits are given out for some of these caves. As a result, you'll visit caves where relatively few people are allowed. Caving takes you into a remarkable underground world. Surreal formations, mysterious passages and a delicate ecosystem define this three-dimensional landscape known to few. The curriculum during this section includes underground movement, technical travel skills, geology and the biology of caves, cave conservation and management concerns, and hazard evaluation. Depending on location and time considerations, courses may also be exposed to cave photography, or cave survey and inventory. There may also be an opportunity to participate in a service project for a federal land agency. This section is a fast-paced and exciting learning experience.

Canoe Expedition

The towering canyon walls of the Rio Grande River provide your introduction to canoeing skills and river travel. The river section launches from Big Bend National Park and the "take out" is more than 100 miles and two weeks downstream. The Chihuahua desert region is rich in both human and natural history. You'll enjoy true remoteness on this section, where you will be many miles away from the nearest road.

This section of the Rio Grande flows in a gradual progression from flat water to occasional class II or III rapids. Depending on student abilities, some of these rapids will be run in canoes, while the more difficult stretches will be portaged. Portaging around rapids is a normal and useful canoeing skill. You should expect the vast majority of travel to be on flat water along this winding desert river. Traveling the river in canoes will give you an opportunity to experience wilderness travel on water.

Land-based explorations of side canyons and the Chihuahua desert are integral elements of this section. Classes will include water risk management, river dynamics, scouting, and river rescue. There may be potential for a solo on this section.

Rock Climbing

Up to eighteen days of your semester will be spent on the climbing section. This time is spent exploring Cochise Stronghold, one of the best climbing areas in the country. The focus of the section is on developing responsible, competent and confident climbers. You'll concentrate on a series of skills that begin with basic risk management and movement on rock, rope handling, and knot tying and then progresses to belaying, top-roping, multi-pitch climbing, rappelling, anchors, and protection placement. Each student has the opportunity to progress at his or her own speed. The instructors emphasize developing a



responsible, positive attitude toward climbing that will help you build upon your own natural abilities. If students are ready, there may be opportunities to practice lead climbing. NOLS has set standards by which we evaluate each student's readiness and ability before allowing them to lead climb.

Our emphasis on leadership will continue during this section in the form of personal leadership. You'll be encouraged to set appropriate goals and to work hard to accomplish those goals, whether it's learning how to place protection, setting up a top-rope anchor, or even learning to lead climb. It's up to your efforts whether you accomplish these goals.

During non-climbing days you might be resting your muscles, but you'll likely stay active learning cliff rescue techniques around base camp, bird watching or going for a hike among the many granite domes.

Other popular activities on this section, either before or after climbing, are stretching, yoga and jogging with other students or instructors. You'll also learn how to base camp in style and when you're ready to go on a climbing road trip after your course, you'll have all the skills you need to live well.

Student Expedition in the Gila Wilderness

The final section of your southwest semester will be focused on doing your own student-led expedition. Before heading into the field, your semester group will have the opportunity to plan your hiking rations, gear and route. This component is unique to southwest semesters and allows you to put to use all of the skills you have learned on your course. Student expeditions will last anywhere from three to seven days and the instructors may be up to 24 hours away from the student expeditions. The Gila hiking section is an exciting adventure spent exploring the first federally designated wilderness area in the United States. This is home to an unusual diversity of plants and animals that range from desert-adapted species to those more commonly found in northern latitudes. The human history of the Gila dates back thousands of years, to the time when it was the home of the Mogollon civilization. Evidence of these prehistoric cultures can be found while traveling through the area. The Gila also served as a refuge for Geronimo and his band of Apaches. A highlight for many students on this section is the opportunity to soak in hot springs along the Middle Fork of the Gila River.

NOLS Southwest reserves the right to make changes to course area locations due to unforeseen circumstances such as forest fires, permit restrictions and/or other unusual circumstances.

Spring Semester 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 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, desert, river, and underground 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. Objectives include the ability 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. Objectives include the ability 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, caving and canoe 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 responsible, competent, wilderness travelers and leaders.

