Spring Semester in the Himalayas

Course Description

Spend 80 days immersed in the landscapes and cultures of the Indian Himalaya. Through Wilderness First Aid, Mountaineering, Whitewater Rafting, and a Cultural Homestay, you'll challenge yourself, develop outdoor and intercultural skills, and grow as a leader.

The Spring Semester in India culminates in an extended backpacking expedition through the Eastern Garhwal and Kumaon Himalaya. If you're looking for an experience beyond the tourist track, this semester is for you.

Features

- Duration: 80 days
- Course sections: Whitewater Rafting, Cultural, Mountaineering peak climb & skills, and Wilderness First Aid
- Average group size: 12-15 students / 2-3 instructors
- Average age: 20 / minimum age: 18
- Average pack weight: 45-60 pounds
- Opportunity for intercultural exchange on a homestay with a local family
- Opportunity for students to travel in small groups independent of instructors at the end of the mountaineering section (based on instructor discretion)
- Certifications:
    - 20-hour Wilderness First Aid and CPR from NOLS Wilderness Medicine
    - Leadership Certificate on completion of semester

Overview

You'll spend your semester in the Kumaon and Garhwal regions of the Indian Himalaya, rugged, glacier-carved mountain ranges known for trekking, mountaineering, and whitewater rafting.

The course introduces you to several outdoor disciplines and provides opportunities to develop practical leadership skills. You'll meet your instructors and course mates at New York's John F. Kennedy International Airport before traveling together to the NOLS India base in Ranikhet.

Ranikhet is a quiet, wooded town at approximately 6,150 feet in the Kumaon Hills. You'll return to the base between course components as you prepare for each stage of the semester.

Your course begins with Wilderness First Aid training, followed by a 10-day Backpacking Expedition exploring and learning cultural components of the Uttarakhand Himalayas, Whitewater rafting on the Kali & Saryu Rivers, a Cultural Homestay in Majhkhali, and a glacier Mountaineering expedition. Throughout the semester, you'll take on increasing responsibility,

practice leadership, and develop the outdoor and intercultural skills needed to contribute effectively to your group.

Note: Order of sections mentioned may change depending on seasonal conditions.

Course Sections

Wilderness First Aid (WFA)

- Duration: 3 days
- Certifications: WFA and Adult & Child CPR
- Location: NOLS India in Ranikhet, India

The semester begins with a three-day Wilderness First Aid (WFA) course. Presented by staff from NOLS Wilderness Medicine, the course teaches appropriate treatment for conditions you may encounter in the backcountry, including shock; head and chest injuries; fractures and dislocations; wounds and burns; illnesses caused by extremes of heat, cold, and altitude; and cardiac, respiratory, and neurological emergencies.

You'll also participate in training in adult cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR). This training will help you develop the judgment and decision-making skills needed to respond when unexpected situations arise during the course.

Backpacking

- Duration 12 days
- Route length: 50 miles
- Elevation range: 7000 to 12000 ft
- Emphasis: Introductory outdoor skills, natural history, local language, & village interaction.

After completing Wilderness First Aid, you'll begin the backpacking section of the semester in the Garhwal Himalayas. You'll travel through the Indian Himalaya on ancient, cobbled trails, passing through dense forests and remote villages.

Along the way, you'll have opportunities to interact with communities where cattle-powered agriculture and high-altitude shepherd migrations remain part of daily life. Shepherds travel with flocks of goats and sheep to higher elevations for seasonal grazing.

The journey also introduces you to outdoor travel skills, the natural history, and the culture of the region.

Whitewater Rafting

- Duration: 18 days
- Elevation range: 3,000-5,000 feet

- Emphasis on paddling skills and risk management
- Watercraft used: paddle rafts and oar rigs
- Location: Kali & Saryu Rivers, Eastern Kumaon

This section takes place on the upper reaches of the Kali River, which also forms the international border between India and Nepal. The river flows past terraced farms of Kumaoni and Nepali villages, freshwater streams, sandy beaches, thick tropical jungles, and plantations.

Instruction begins with an overview of paddle rafting and captaining skills, loading and rigging the boats, mastering stroke combinations, and the communication skills needed to effectively maneuver the rafts. You'll then move on to advanced topics like hazard evaluation, hydrology, and rescue techniques.

As you develop your skills, you'll practice paddle strokes, scout rapids, evaluate river hazards, apply risk-management principles, and use both paddle rafts and oar rigs. By the end of this component, you'll have a foundation for continued participation in whitewater paddling.

Cultural Homestay

- Duration: 12 days
- Location: Village of Majkhali, stay with local host families
- Emphasis: Cross-cultural exchange
- Classes: Local natural history and cultural studies
- Opportunities to practice Hindi language, knitting, folk dance, traditional farming & community service.

The village of Majhkhali will be the base for this experience. At approximately 6,200 feet, this small community near Ranikhet offers views of the Greater Himalaya on clear days.

You'll pair with a course mate and live with a local family, experiencing aspects of daily life in rural India. You'll share meals with your host family and contribute to household activities.

During the day, you'll gather with your course mates to learn about the natural and cultural history of India and the surrounding Himalaya. Classes cover landscapes, forest use, farming as a means of livelihood, local food products, the economy, and alpine ecology. Most days also include yoga theory and practice. Opportunities to focus on Hindi may be available for interested students.

By the end of the homestay, you'll have participated in village life and gained experience engaging respectfully with ways of living that may differ from your own.

Mountaineering

- Duration: 32 days
- Route length: 85-110 miles

- Elevation range: up to 17,000 feet
- Emphasis on skills for travel on glaciers, snow, and ice, as well as intercultural exchange
- Wildlife you may see: Himalayan black bear, Himalayan tahr, fox, bharal (blue sheep), and barking deer
- Location: Kumaon Himalaya
- Opportunity for students to travel in small groups, independent of instructors, at the end of the course (based on instructor discretion)

Your expedition will trek and climb in the Kumaon region of the Indian Himalaya. This rugged, glacier-carved range is sacred to Hindus and world-famous for its climbing and trekking.

This section will focus on the basics of alpine travel: moving in steep, rocky, or snow-covered terrain, building snow anchors, using ice axes and avalanche beacons, caring for and using mountaineering ropes, placing rock and snow protection, and climbing a peak. Your course may stay in one camp and practice skills for several days at a time, or your course may involve a lot more travel, with you learning skills along the way.

Your instructors will strive to balance teaching formal classes and summiting the peak. Sometimes, due to weather, injury, or student health, the peak ascent may not be attempted. No matter what the outcome, you will learn a significant array of mountaineering skills and will have ample opportunities to put them to use, preparing you to pursue a lifetime of mountain travel.

Independent Student Group Travel
At the beginning of the course, your instructors will travel with you to teach skills including navigation, leadership, risk assessment, and decision-making. As you develop competence, instructors will gradually give you more responsibilities.

After you demonstrate sufficient proficiency, you may travel in student-led groups without instructors for up to one day at a time. NOLS calls this independent student group travel (ISGT)

Student Expedition
After successfully practicing independent student group travel, and if your instructors determine that your group is ready, the course may culminate in a multi-day student-led expedition (ISGE).

For the Student Expedition, you'll typically travel in a group of five to seven students independently of instructors for two to six days, depending on the location. This expedition allows you to apply the skills you've learned and build on the working relationships developed during the course.

The expedition is carefully planned with your instructors, and emergency plans are created for each group. Your instructors may be up to 24 hours away, and each student group carries an electronic emergency communication device connected to the NOLS emergency-response system.

Through this progression, you'll develop greater competence to travel independently in the wilderness with family and friends.

Weather and Other Challenges

Weather
Between sweltering New Delhi and the high mountains, temperatures can vary from 100° to 0° Fahrenheit. Mountain weather is unpredictable. On any given day, temperatures may fluctuate widely.

Courses may experience snow and rain, or long stretches of sun and blue sky.

Terrain
Traveling in the Himalaya, you may cross raging rivers, scramble across boulder fields, and sweat your way up high mountain passes. You may travel over steep slopes of snow, loose rock, and exposed mountain trails.

Prudent route selection and continual adherence to risk management practices will mitigate the hazards associated with moving water, falling and rolling rock, falls on steep terrain, avalanches, altitude, and harsh weather.

Remoteness
You'll travel far from many of the amenities found in developed areas, including telephones, ambulances, and hospitals. Evacuation from the mountains to modern medical facilities can be difficult and may take several days.

Backpacks may weigh 45–60 pounds and must be carried over rugged terrain. Travel to and from the mountains may involve roads in poor condition.

Please note that personal satellite phones and SPOT devices are illegal in India, so please do not bring one along.

Instructors carry necessary emergency communication devices.

Health
Staying healthy in Asia is frequently a challenge for visitors, and gastrointestinal distress is a common theme. Tropical environments harbor a wide variety of unusual diseases, such as malaria in lower elevations. In addition, some students may experience some initial discomfort from the effects of altitude.

Self-care, good hygiene habits, and consulting your doctor for appropriate medication and inoculations go a long way in managing these risks. Assuming responsibility for yourself and

your coursemates will help make your expedition in these wild and beautiful mountains healthy and rewarding.

Learning Goals at NOLS

NOLS courses teach wilderness and leadership skills through expeditions and classroom instruction. You'll apply these skills to challenges in a supportive learning culture with high expectations.

The course provides opportunities to grow through experience, develop practical judgment, and take increasing responsibility.

NOLS courses are designed to help graduates:

- assume leadership roles;
- live and travel in the outdoors;
- act with confidence and competence;
- respect and collaborate with others on expeditions, teams, and communities;
- care for themselves and others;
- understand their strengths, habits, and areas for growth;
- function under difficult circumstances;
- make informed and thoughtful decisions;
- communicate effectively;
- connect with natural places; and
- appreciate living simply.

You'll finish the semester with tested outdoor skills, practical leadership experience, and a deeper understanding of life and landscapes in the Indian Himalaya. The Spring Semester in India provides specific experience in backpacking, backcountry living, outdoor leadership, and student-led expedition travel.