

# Fall Semester in the Southwest

## Course Description

Immerse yourself in the American Southwest as you develop leadership and new outdoor skills. Explore hidden canyons, canoe stunning rivers, and trek through an environment found nowhere else in the world. If you're seeking an experience to practice and grow as a leader, whether it's for a gap year from school or to train for a new career, this is the course for you.

### Features

- Duration: 80 days
- Course sections: backpacking, rock climbing, canoeing, independent student backpacking expedition, and wilderness first aid
- Average group size: 12-16 students / 3-5 instructors
- Average age: 20 / minimum age: 17
- Average pack weight: 40-50 pounds
- Elevation range: 2,500-10,700 feet
- Terrain: on and off-trail hiking; remote desert; flat and whitewater river; large granite domes; canyons and high desert ecosystems
- Skills: outdoor living skills and community building, backcountry travel and navigation on land and by river, climbing fundamentals, judgment and decision-making, hazard evaluation, and expedition planning
- Opportunity for students to travel in small groups independent of instructors (based on instructor discretion)
- Notable wildlife: birds, elk, black bear, wolves, coyote, deer, desert bighorn sheep, mountain lion, rattlesnakes
- Certifications and Certificates of Completion: Wilderness First Aid and CPR (20 hours), Leave No Trace Trainer, NOLS Rock Climbing Certificate of Completion

### Overview

This semester in the outdoors involves 80 days of camping out, exploring the Southwest, developing leadership skills, building community, pushing yourself, and having fun. Depending on your semester section choice, the course is comprised of up to five different backcountry sections in addition to a classroom-based Wilderness First Aid (WFA) course. You'll spend your time backpacking, rock climbing, or canoeing, with a final backpacking independent student expedition, all in the incredible cliffs, canyons,

mountains, and rivers of the Southwest. Visit the course page at [www.nols.edu/courses/fall-semester-in-the-southwest/](http://www.nols.edu/courses/fall-semester-in-the-southwest/) for specific section combinations.

Each day your instructors will cover a variety of locally relevant topics, such as plants, fire ecology, local wildlife, and weather. You will also learn about the rich human history in each of the areas you travel through. Throughout this semester you will be introduced to the [NOLS leadership curriculum](#) and will practice different leadership skills and roles on each section. You will learn to build a positive, inclusive group culture where each individual can thrive as a leader.

Between each section, the course will either pass through the NOLS Southwest campus or stop at a campground in Texas, Arizona, or New Mexico. By the end of this course, you'll know about the Southwest's rich natural and human history and have the outdoor skills to pursue your own adventures and lead others in the backcountry for the rest of your life.

## Course Sections

### Backpacking

- Duration: 16-21 days (varies by course)
- Route length: 40-60 miles
- Terrain: on and off-trail, ponderosa pine forests, river canyons and high desert plateaus
- Skills: reading topographic maps and route finding, basic camping and backcountry travel
- Possible visits to historical sites of the Mogollon people
- Location: Gila Wilderness, New Mexico

This section takes place in the [Gila National Forest](#), the nation's first designated wilderness and the largest national forest in the 48 contiguous states. The Gila is located on Mogollon and Chiricahua Apache ancestral lands and is known for significant history that dates back thousands of years. You can still see signs of some of its early civilizations in the form of potsherds and rock art. During your trip you'll have the opportunity to visit the [Gila Cliff Dwellings National Monument](#). A rugged land of deep canyons surrounded by high desert plateaus, the Gila is home to a diversity of unique plants and animals.

During this section, you'll practice outdoor living skills, wilderness travel techniques, Leave No Trace minimum-impact camping, leadership, and teamwork. This section will challenge you with long hiking days, off-trail travel and navigation, and the opportunity to lead your peers. When you are not hiking, you'll spend time learning about a wide variety of topics, including the natural surroundings, diversity and inclusion, and backcountry baking.

As the start of 80 days together, your instructors will also facilitate discussions around diversity, equity, and inclusion to help build the foundation of a positive group dynamic for your whole semester.

## **Wilderness First Aid**

- Duration: 2.5 days (20 hours of class time)
- Emphasis on decision making in the backcountry
- Certifications: Wilderness First Aid and Adult & Child CPR

Your Wilderness First Aid (WFA) course focuses on training specifically applicable to remote wilderness situations. Staff from NOLS Wilderness Medicine will teach this course. Fast-paced and hands-on, this two-and-a-half-day offering covers a wide range of wilderness medicine topics for people who travel and work in the outdoors.

Successful course completion earns you a NOLS Wilderness First Aid and NOLS Adult & Child CPR certification that is current for two years. Those with previous wilderness medicine training may also use this course for recertification. If you are planning to use this course to recertify, please read the [NOLS Wilderness Medicine recertification guidelines](#) before you arrive.

## **Rock Climbing**

- Duration: 18-22 days (varies by course)
- Emphasis on climbing movement, belaying, anchor building, climbing protection placement
- Location: Cochise Stronghold, Arizona

This section takes place in the Dragoon Mountains, home of Cochise Stronghold and ancestral land of the Chiricahua Apache, Sobaipuri, Hohokam, and O'odham people. [Cochise Stronghold](#) is also one of the country's most beautiful climbing areas. You'll concentrate on a series of skills that begin with basic risk management, movement on

rock, rope handling, and knot tying. You will then progress to belaying, top-rope climbing, rappelling, building anchors, and placing protection.

Your instructors will emphasize developing a responsible, positive attitude toward climbing that will help you build upon your own abilities. If you are ready, there may be opportunities to do a multi-pitch climb or practice lead climbing. NOLS has set standards by which we evaluate each student's readiness and ability before allowing them to lead climb.

You will continue working on your development as a leader through goal setting and pursuing technical skills. On non-climbing days, we will emphasize rescue techniques, leadership skills, local ecology, human history, or day hikes.

On this section you will be base camping, which means camping in a single location for long portions of the section. You will be driving in NOLS vehicles and/or hiking to the climbing areas each day. Base camping allows for extra luxuries that are not as realistic on a typical backcountry camping trip, such as extra sets of clothes, books, and camp chairs. We will send your group out with coolers of fresh vegetables and extra camping items, like lanterns and two-burner propane stoves, that will help make your base camp a comfortable place to spend time in.

Cochise Stronghold is a well-known climbing area, so you should expect to encounter other users who are not a part of NOLS during your trip.

## Canoeing

- Duration: 14 days
- Route length: approximately 120 miles
- Skills: paddle strokes, river and current assessment, and hazard evaluation
- Water difficulty ranges from flat water to Class II rapids
- Location: Rio Grande River; Big Bend National Park, Texas
- 250-pound participant weight limit

The towering canyon walls of the Rio Grande provide your introduction to canoe skills and river travel. This section launches from [Big Bend National Park](#), and the take-out is 120 miles and two weeks downstream. This section of the Rio Grande flows in a gradual progression from flat water to occasional Class II rapids. Depending on student abilities and water levels, some of these rapids will be run in canoes, while the more difficult stretches may be lined or portaged, guiding your canoes through rapids using

ropes or carrying your gear around them. You should expect the majority of travel to be on fairly flat water along this winding desert river.

This Chihuahuan Desert region is rich in both human and natural history. Land-based explorations of side canyons and the Chihuahuan Desert are integral elements of this section. Classes on this section will include risk management, river dynamics, scouting rapids, and western water issues.

Because you will literally be traveling on the US/Mexico border, border issues will be a focus of the curriculum and you may visit local organizations that highlight this. In the past, groups have visited a shelter for migrants, a U.S. Customs and Border Patrol station, as well as a local public radio station that covers border issues.

## **Independent Student Group Travel**

At the beginning of the course, on the backpacking section, your instructors will travel with you to teach travel skills including navigation, leadership, risk assessment, and decision-making. As you develop competence, instructors will gradually give you more responsibilities. Once you gain proficiency and demonstrate competence to your instructors, you may travel in student-led groups without instructors for up to a day at a time—we call this independent student group travel.

## **Student Expedition**

- Duration: 12-15 days total (varies by course)
- Students **may** travel unaccompanied by instructors for up to 2-6 days
- Route length: 50-70 miles
- Skills: expedition planning, advanced topographic maps and route finding, and being able to competently perform all skills, from travel to leadership, learned throughout the course
- Location: Galiuro Wilderness, Arizona

This final section will take place in the Galiuro Wilderness. This range is known as a “sky island.” Sky islands are small and isolated mountain ranges that host incredible biodiversity and are surrounded by relatively barren desert basins. You’ll be hiking through ponderosa pine, juniper, oak and manzanita while looking out over the stark desert below.

After successful practice with independent student group travel **and if your instructors think your group is ready, your course may culminate in a multi-day, student-led**

**expedition.** Usually, for the student expeditions you will travel in a group of four to six students independently of instructors for two to six days (depending on location and competency). This independent expedition caps off your NOLS experience and gives you a chance both to put into practice the skills you've learned and to appreciate the relationships you've formed with your expedition-mates over the duration of your course.

Independent student group travel is carefully planned with your instructors and emergency plans are created for each group. Your instructors may be up to 24 hours away, but each group carries an electronic emergency communication device to alert the NOLS emergency response system in the event of an accident. Ultimately, on this course you will develop the competence to travel independently in the wilderness and with your family and friends.

## 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 or other activity during the solo and your instructors will be nearby. Many people find this experience a good way to reflect on the course and immerse themselves in the environment.

Fasting may be an optional part of the solo. If the instructors feel that fasting is appropriate for the conditions and the group, students may choose to fast during their solo. Rations are carried to allow students to eat in the event of an emergency.

## Service Component

This course may include one or more educational service projects with either land managers or local non-profit partners in some of the semester operating areas. Service projects could consist of activities such as trail building, trail maintenance, seed collection or erosion control work. Whether your course includes a service project will depend on the available resources of the local non-profit and/or land agency.

## Weather and Other Challenges

### Weather

The 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.** Sometimes these weather changes occur in a matter of minutes, other

times storms or cold temperatures can last for days. Subfreezing temperatures are common, especially at night. Please make sure you bring the appropriate gear from our equipment list to help you keep warm in these conditions. 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 own adaptation to varied conditions will help you understand and appreciate the remarkable flora and fauna that make the Southwest such a special environment.

### **Terrain**

All areas in which you will travel are rugged 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 can be loose and easily breakable and various species of cactus and other plants with sharp spines can be dense, occasionally adding to the challenge of hiking.

### **Wildlife**

The Southwest is home to rattlesnakes and other potentially harmful insects, reptiles, and mammals. Some of the areas your course will travel through are home to black bears. NOLS, in collaboration with bear biologists, has developed specific practices to minimize the risk of a bear encounter. Your instructors will teach these practices to you and you will have to follow them every day. Bear avoidance practices may include carrying bear deterrent pepper spray, meticulously maintaining cleanliness at the cooking sites, not having food in tents, and practicing proper food storage.

An important part of the curriculum is learning to be aware of your surroundings and being able to identify these hazards in order to reduce the chance of injury.

### **Remoteness**

For the duration of your course, while you are in the backcountry, you'll be many miles from the amenities of civilization. Telephones, ambulances, and hospitals may be days away. All NOLS instructors maintain wilderness medicine certifications and are equipped with well-stocked first aid kits to provide care in the event of an emergency.

### **Water Scarcity**

Water is the life-blood of the desert Southwest. On your backpacking sections, your daily hiking routes are typically designed to go from one water source to another. These water sources are either mountain streams, human-made "tanks," or naturally occurring pools found deep in the clefts of rocks. Often water sources are many miles apart, and it may be necessary to carry a day's supply of water between camps. The Southwest has

been experiencing drought conditions over the past several years. If water shortage, or conversely, flooding, dictates a change, the location for any backcountry portion of this course might be moved to another wilderness area.

### **Group dynamics**

You will be living and working in a small and diverse community around the clock and in sometimes difficult conditions. This will require cooperation, patience, and humility. The success of the expedition is dependent on the ability of its members to support one another in trying circumstances. On all of our courses, we strive to foster a course culture free from racism, sexism, xenophobia, classism, homophobia, and transphobia, and in which these and other hallmarks of systematic oppression do not impact anyone's ability to learn and thrive in the outdoors. Working together towards a common vision can be one of the most rewarding and memorable aspects of any NOLS course.

### **Learning Goals at NOLS**

NOLS courses teach wilderness and leadership skills on expeditions and in classrooms. You will apply these skills to challenges in a supportive learning culture with high expectations. Your course will provide you with the opportunity for a positive, transformative experience intended to inspire you and empower you to act.

We craft NOLS courses so graduates will be able to assume leadership roles; live and travel in the outdoors; act with confidence and competence; respect and collaborate with others on expeditions, on teams and in 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.

*We believe positive, ethical leaders change the world. Join NOLS and become one of these leaders.*