Semester in Baja
Course Description

Dive deep into the lessons of outdoor leadership and challenge yourself on a stunning semester in Baja. From the Sea of Cortez to the Sonoran Desert, you'll learn what it takes to lead a group and enjoy wilderness living. If you're seeking an experience to help you grow and pursue adventure for the rest of your life, this is the course for you.

Features

- Duration: 78 days
- Semester sections: backpacking, sea kayaking, and sailing
- Sea kayaking and sailing route length: approximately 100 miles
- Average group size: 14 students / 3 instructors
- Average age: 20 / minimum age: 17
- Elevation range: sea level to 10,000 ft
- Experience a diversity of environments, from marine to coastal desert and peninsular mountain range
- Opportunities for: map reading, observing wildlife, skin diving, fishing, etc.
- Cultural exchange: Share stories and engage with coastal fishing communities you meet throughout your course. This is a great opportunity to practice Spanish language skills!

Overview

The Baja California Peninsula is a land of extremes and contrasts. You'll find yourself in mountain ranges that extend over 1,000 miles down the central spine of the peninsula, the Sonoran Desert, and the Sea of Cortez. You'll explore these contrasting environments on foot, in a sea kayak, and on a sailboat as you develop your leadership skills.

Course Sections

Backpacking

- Duration: 25-27 days
- Route length: 50-100 miles
- Average pack weight: 50 - 60 pounds
- Emphasis on outdoor living skills and navigation

- Location: Sierra San Pedro Martir

During this section, you'll explore huge canyons and thick vegetation. You'll begin with the basics of outdoor living, from tarp setup to cooking to navigation. As you travel, you will have opportunities to lead your group and learn risk management from your instructors. Eventually, you will travel in small groups independent of your instructors for up to a day at a time. By the end of this section, you'll be ready to lead your friends and family on your own backpacking trips.

Sea Kayaking

- Duration: 26-28 days
- Route length: approximately 100 miles
- Watercraft used: single and double sea kayaks
- Emphasis on basic and advanced paddle and rescue techniques
- Location: Sea of Cortez
- 250-pound participant weight limit (this is a function of the kayak's weight carrying capacity)

The Sea of Cortez is a beautiful and dramatic environment where desert, volcanic coastal mountains, and the ocean come together. Watching the weather, judging sea conditions, and learning to assess your group's strengths and abilities are just a few of the things you'll learn on this section.

On most days, you will get up before dawn and begin to paddle. Throughout the day, you will have practical classes on kayaking skills, natural history, leadership, and expedition skills. On days when you do not move campsites, you may practice rough water kayak skills, explore the intertidal zone, go on a day hike, or learn about the desert's natural history. You may also skin-dive and explore the world under the waves.

Coastal Sailing

- Duration: 24-27 days
- Route length: approximately 100 miles
- Watercraft used: 22-foot Drascombe longboats
- Emphasis on coastal navigation and leadership
- Location: Sea of Cortez

On this section, you will learn the fundamentals of sailing as you explore the coast in yawl-rigged open boats called Drascombe longboats. Each of these craft can carry five

people and at least a week’s worth of food and gear. Skills emphasized include coastal sailing, navigation, seapersonship, and leadership.

An instructor will be present on each boat to teach seapersonship, boat handling, anchoring and other nautical skills, but you, the students, will do most of the sailing and take turns in the various crew positions. You'll have time to practice many skills as you journey down the Sea of Cortez, anchoring or beaching the boats each night and camping ashore. On days when you don’t travel, you may have opportunities to review your skills, day hike, and visit local fishing and ranching communities.

Independent Student Group Travel

At the beginning of the course 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

After successful practice with independent student group travel and if your instructors think your group is ready, the hiking section 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 2-5 days (depending on location). 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.

Weather and Other Challenges

Remoteness
The Sea of Cortez and the Baja California Peninsula are environments of harsh beauty. The areas you visit are remote, and you will often be several days from medical facilities. At sea, strong winds may blow up suddenly, making conditions hazardous for travel.

Wildlife
Some desert wildlife, such as snakes and scorpions, are venomous. The undersea world is surprisingly lush compared to the land, but there, too, are hazards that you will learn to identify and manage, including jellyfish or spined shellfish. Your instructors will teach you about scorpions, rattlesnakes, stingrays and other potential hazards so that you can manage the risk they may present.

Weather
You will experience a wide range of temperatures. Rain is possible but infrequent, though strong winds from the north (“El Norte” winds) are quite common, especially in mid-winter. These winds can make sea conditions too hazardous for travel, often for a few days at a time. Watching the weather, judging wind and wave conditions, and learning about the strength and ability of the group and the equipment are what responsible wilderness travel is all about.

Seasonal Conditions
Conditions vary by season. In December and January, it is often windy, and daytime temperatures are usually in the 70s (ºF) but can get down to the low 40s at night, with water temperatures in the low 60s. Late March and April have daytime temperatures up to the high 90s and nighttime lows in the 70s. The water warms up to the 70s and the winds are usually more variable, lighter and less frequent. November and February have milder weather between these two extremes.

Fishing
While not a focus of the course, students may have opportunities to fish. There is no license required to fish from shore using a hand line or a rod and reel. You do require a fishing license to fish from the boats and depending on factors such as weather and risk management, fishing from your boat might be possible. If you are interested, you will need to obtain a Sport Fishing License in advance.
You can purchase your license online at www.sportfishingbcs.gob.mx

Please read the instructions on the license application request and regulations, and remember **to bring your printed fishing license with you to Mexico.**

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.