

Southwest Spring Break Hiking

Course Description

Prepare yourself for a spring break that is beyond the ordinary. Learn the basics of backpacking or develop your current skills in one of the United States' most stunning Wilderness areas, developing leadership skills and forming new friendships along the way. If you're looking for a fast-paced and unique way to spend your spring break, this is the course for you.

Features

- Duration: 7 days
- Route length: 20-35 miles
- Average group size: 10-14 students / 2-3 instructors
- Average age: Varies. Options include courses for 16-18 year olds and 18-22 year olds.
- Average pack weight: 40-50 pounds
- Elevation range: 2,500-10,700 feet (depending on course area)
- On and off-trail hiking
- Skills: outdoor and Leave No Trace camping and travel skills, hazard evaluation, judgment and decision-making, reading topographic maps and route finding
- Notable wildlife: birds, black bear, coyote, deer, desert bighorn sheep, mountain lion, rattlesnakes

Overview

This course will give you the opportunity to develop backcountry living and traveling skills in either the [Gila National Forest](#) in New Mexico or the [Galiuro Wilderness](#) in Arizona. You'll begin with the basics—camping, cooking, map reading, stove use, and Leave No Trace techniques—skills that are the foundation for going on backpacking trips of your own. Your group may also practice off-trail travel and possibly ascend a peak.

The desert Southwest is famous for its incredible diversity and wealth of plants and animals. Interpretive natural history topics such as plants, fire ecology, and local wildlife will be taught throughout the course. There will also be opportunities to learn and practice the basic [NOLS leadership curriculum](#). By the end of your course, you'll have the fundamental backpacking skills to start exploring the wilderness on your own and take your friends and family with you.

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 may 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 the vegetation can be dense and is often thorny, adding to the challenge of hiking.

Remoteness

For the duration of your course, 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.

Wildlife

The Southwest is home to rattlesnakes and other potentially harmful reptiles, insects, and mammals. Various species of cactus and other plants with sharp spines can make it a challenge to move around. 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.

The area your course will travel through is 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.

Water Scarcity

Water is the life-blood of the Southwest. Your 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.