

NOLS PATAGONIA:

PATAGONIA ICEFIELD TRAVERSE

FEATURES OF THIS COURSE:

- Extreme and unpredictable weather
- Little known course route
- Remote terrain
- Bushwhacking and river crossings
- Emphasis on student leadership and responsibility
- Focus on safely traversing the route and not on peak ascents
- Minimum Age: 17
- Average Group Size: 13 Students / 3 Instructors
- Self-contained expedition (no resupplies; this means shuttling loads!)

THE EXPEDITION STYLE:

This five week exploratory mountaineering expedition will attempt to traverse the Northern Patagonian Icefield, Campo de Hielo Norte. A rugged, glaciated plateau rimmed by mountains and deep river valleys, the Campo de Hielo Norte straddles the 47th parallel and stretches more than 100 kilometers north to south and 45 kilometers east to west. British explorer and mountaineer Eric Shipton visited the icefield in 1964 and described the area as "some of the loveliest mountain country I have seen in Patagonia or anywhere else. The region still offers a wide scope for those who enjoy untraveled ground; for mountaineers it is an almost untouched field."

More than 30 years later, that field remains almost untouched. The Campo de Hielo's remoteness and extreme weather keep most mountaineers away and leave many little known glaciers for us to explore. However, exploration does not come without its price. Few people have even attempted this traverse and half of our NOLS courses have been turned back, unable to complete their intended routes. There are no established routes to follow, no guidebooks to read, and no predictable weather patterns to plan around. Given this inherent uncertainty, you must approach the expedition with a flexible attitude. Expect to be frustrated when debating decisions or confronting an unexpected challenge blocking your path, but also plan to gain appreciation for the importance of working together to overcome difficulties.

The Patagonia Icefield Traverse is an expedition in the truest sense. Once we depart from the NOLS farm we will be entirely self-sufficient until we leave the mountains some four and a half weeks later. We will have no re-supplies and many moves will require multiple carries of the same loads to transport our supplies and gear.

Our traverse begins in the valleys surrounding the Campo de Hielo Norte. As we make our way toward the glaciers, our initial focus will be on mastering basic skills such as moving with a heavy pack, staying warm, cooking, securing a campsite, river crossings, bushwhacking and route finding. Outdoor living, travel, and expeditioning skills are practiced with an emphasis on minimizing environmental and cultural impact. Unknown terrain and difficulties can make this portion of the traverse a significant and lengthy challenge unto itself.

On the glaciers you'll learn to choose routes around crevasses and use rope systems to safeguard against hazards. Camping on snow-covered glaciers involves probing and marking a "safe zone" in which to unrope, melting snow for water and cooking, and constructing snow walls to protect tents from strong winds. Some storms have been fierce enough to force the expedition to shelter in snow caves for many days at a time. We'll also introduce basic mountaineering skills---rope handling, belaying, rope teams, and glacier travel---as well as develop the judgment and experience required to travel in remote mountains where outside assistance is far away.

While the Campo de Hielo Norte bristles with spectacular and unclimbed mountains the principal goal of the expedition is the safe traverse of the icefield. The traverse can be thought of as our "summit attempt" and, in fact, represents a formidable task. Traverse attempts have seen fewer completions than nearby peak ascents. By choosing this challenging goal we will learn to create our own definitions of success and apply them to our accomplishments. Safely completing the icefield traverse may be the expedition goal, but it is not a requirement for our success. Successful expeditions often fail to reach their goals. It is what we learn and share that will ultimately be important to our success, not how far we go or if we complete the traverse.

On the final days of the expedition we will return to the valley bottoms and hone our route finding, river crossings, and bushwhacking. At the end of our expedition we will return to NOLS Patagonia headquarters. The final day will be spent cleaning and repairing equipment and enjoying a Chilean barbecue before the next day's return to Puerto Montt.

STUDENT INDEPENDENCE:

On all NOLS courses students will be independent (that is 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:

This course may culminate in a Student Expedition. If your instructors think your group is ready and you have successfully completed some days of independent student travel, you may be divided 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 five days. Students are aware of where the instructors and the other student groups are planning to travel and camp. The instructors may be up to 24 hours away from the students. Our students often say the student expedition was the highlight of their course.

Fasting is an optional part of the curriculum for the student expedition (or optional solo if applicable) on this course. If the instructors think fasting is appropriate for the conditions and student abilities the students may chose to fast during the student expedition (or optional solo). Rations will be carried to allow students to eat in the event of an emergency.

WEATHER AND OTHER CHALLENGES:

This is a demanding expedition. The Campo de Hielo Norte is known for its fierce alpine weather and steep, rugged terrain. You may be tent bound or in a snow cave for days while storms rage around you. Conversely, you may also have to search for shade from a relentless sun reflecting off the glittering ice and snow. These varied conditions teach you to camp effectively in the most extreme conditions. Physical challenges can be compounded by the psychological challenge of working with a diverse group of people. In a close and potentially stressful living situation, it is important for each expedition member to contribute to positive group relations.

Given the isolated nature of this area, evacuation to medical facilities can take many days. Weather, terrain, distance and other factors may impede or prevent communication and hamper transportation efforts. These factors make it a very real possibility that many days would pass before being able to reach medical facilities. During the course you will learn how this remoteness effects your activities and how to deal with emergencies far from the help of civilization.

Preparing for a major expedition can be as exciting as the trip itself. You will get the most out of your NOLS experience, and be able to give the most to others, if you begin your commitment now. This may take the form of reading books on Patagonia and mountaineering, taking Spanish lessons, studying maps to acquaint yourself with the area, or talking to others familiar with South America. Reading about other expeditions can provide insight into the challenges of extended trips to remote areas.

Our experience suggests that enthusiasm and commitment are the best defenses against the rigors of alpine travel. Arrive in good physical condition. Expect to push yourself and be ready to lend a hand to others. Come with an open mind ready to grasp educational opportunities that are distinct from your previous conceptions. Venturing into an unknown region with the confidence and commitment to maintain safety through sound judgment is one of the joys of remote mountain travel. If you are interested in learning skills and developing the judgment needed to organize and carry out your own expeditions, this expedition will be an exceptional experience for you.

PATAGONIA ICEFIELD TRAVERSE COURSE OBJECTIVES

Each course is unique due to variables such as route, group dynamics, fitness levels and environmental conditions. Working within this context, it is our intent to accomplish the following objectives in four basic areas.

SAFETY AND JUDGMENT

NOLS teaches wilderness visitors to practice responsible habits that promote the health and safety of self and others. Each student is expected to:

- actively participate as a group expedition member, always being attentive to the mountaineering hazards encountered by the expedition, including severe weather, travel through heavily vegetated valley systems, river crossings, heavily crevassed glaciers, rock and ice fall, steep terrain (ice, snow, rock, and vegetation), and avalanches
- consistently demonstrate an awareness of personal limits in a mountain environment, with particular regard for the remoteness of the expedition
- consistently perform specific techniques taught on the course to reduce or avoid mountaineering hazards
- describe an emergency plan for a group in the outdoors
- demonstrate an ability to perform basic emergency procedures to support and possibly evacuate a patient
- use 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, acceptance of others, and cooperation to achieve goals. Each student is expected to:

- work effectively as a member of a team, often displaying a positive attitude despite hardship
- effectively communicate ideas and concerns on an individual and group level
- accurately identify personal strengths and areas for growth in developing outdoor leadership
- take responsibility for learning through setting and attaining personal goals while also being flexible and responsive to unexpected situations
- take initiative in teaching and leadership roles with peers—display an awareness of group strengths and limitations, balancing personal goals and needs with those of the group
- respond to problem situations using decision-making and planning skills

OUTDOOR SKILLS

NOLS students learn to live and travel in mountains within a framework of personal safety and care for the environment. Each student is expected to:

- consistently minimize impact upon the environment while camping and traveling
- live comfortably in a mountain environment, including the ability to camp, cook and dress for varied conditions with minimum impact
- travel competently in mountain terrain; carry a pack of approximately 70 lbs. while bushwhacking, crossing rivers, traveling on glaciers, and traversing steep terrain
- learn technical mountaineering: display the basic skills in mountain travel, river crossings, snow camping, glacier travel, and crevasse rescue

ENVIRONMENTAL STUDIES

An integral part of every NOLS course is to raise students' awareness of their impact on and place in the natural world. Each student is expected to:

- display basic natural history observational and interpretive skills
- use the above skills to demonstrate an understanding and respect for the environment
- discuss the history, facts, and potential solutions relevant to pertinent environmental issues
- demonstrate a basic knowledge and respect for local cultures
- reflect on the transference of wilderness ethics and practices into daily personal and professional life