

Baja California Field Studies

Program

Marine Biology (Biol 125/126)



Some frequently asked questions about the program.

Thanks for inquiring about the Marine Biology (Biol 125 / 126) courses of the Baja California Field Studies Program of Glendale Community College. If you are interested in participating, you should contact me at some point during your application process. This is to ensure that you have the opportunity to ask me any questions you may have about the program. Please be aware that a passport is needed to enter the US from Mexico, so make sure to apply for one early on, as the process to obtain one takes time. Students accepted to the program are required to attend a pre-trip meeting (you'll be informed of the details at a later time), where I will describe all the specifics of the trip and the classes. Below are a few of the most frequently asked questions about the Marine Biology classes (Biol 125 and 126) of the Baja California Field Studies Program.

I. Where are we going when we travel into Mexico?

We will be traveling to the Baja California Peninsula. “Baja” is 1,300 km long (806 miles) and is considered the fourth longest peninsula in the planet. The peninsula of “Baja” is separated from mainland Mexico by the Gulf of California (also called the Sea of Cortés, after the Spanish conquistador). The Gulf of California has an average width of about 150 km (93 miles) and encompasses a total of about 4,800 km (2,976 miles) of coastline. Glendale College’s Field Station (Estación del Mar Cortés) is in the town of Bahía de los Angeles (see the map on page 6), located on the Gulf coast of the Baja California Peninsula. The bay itself is in the region known as the Midriff Islands and is about 6.4 km (4.0 miles) in width by 16 km (10 miles). Within the bay there are a total of 17 islands and islets, which are protected by the Federal Government of Mexico. These are the islands where we do most of our field activities. Bahía de los Angeles is about 400 miles from the San Diego border. It is a very small fishing town with a population of about 800 inhabitants. The town is very famous among scientists, educators and fishermen because of the beautiful bay and the incredible diversity of life, which provides great opportunities to learn about the natural environment. The Gulf of California is one of the most unique environments in the planet and the islands within it have been called the “Galapagos of Mexico”!

II. What are Biol 125 and 126 about?

Biology 125 (Marine Biology) offers a general survey of the diversity of life and ecosystems in the marine environment. A comparative approach is used to learn about the physiological and anatomical adaptations of the different marine organisms to their environment. Aspects of evolution, ecology, cell and molecular theory are addressed throughout the course. The course also includes an introduction to some basic concepts within geological, chemical and physical oceanography as the basis to understand the environment where marine organisms exist.

Biology 126 (Marine Biology Laboratory) is an introductory science laboratory offering a general survey of the diversity of life in the marine environment and an introduction to some of the major marine ecosystems. Laboratory exercises allow the students to study the comparative anatomy and physiology of some of the major groups of marine organisms. The course also covers basic aspects of navigation, as well as geological, chemical and physical oceanography. The Baja California Field Studies Program offers a unique opportunity in which the students are taken to several field locations where they can learn about the marine environment from a “hands on” approach. The field activities include: underwater observations by snorkeling, comparative observations of terrestrial/marine ecology, and visits to a sandy beach, the intertidal zone, and a small mangrove forest. In some years, we may also visit a Natural History Museum and Aquarium.

III. What is the schedule of classes during the trip?

You will receive a detailed daily schedule of activities during the pre-trip meeting. However, our general schedule will not change. We spend the first week and a half (June 21 – 30) at GCC. (June 27 and the afternoon of June 30 are free for you to study or get things ready for the road trip to Mexico.) Plan to have the afternoons (3:00-7:30 pm) of this first week and half free to attend class at GCC and fieldtrips to local sites. We will be leaving for Bahía very early in the morning of July 1 and return to GCC late in the afternoon of July 15. While in Bahía, our days start early so that we can spend most of our mornings doing field activities. Usually, we come back to the station for lunch but we try to spend at least one night on an island. Every day after lunch, you will have a few of hours of free time followed by either a lecture or a lab. After dinner, there might be a short academic activity again followed by free time. I will also schedule two days with reduced activities so that you can review for the exams. The afternoon and night of the two exam days will also be free.

IV. What is the cost of the trip and how much should I be prepared to spend during the trip?

The cost of the trip is \$785. This is paid directly to GCC / Baja California Field Studies Program. This trip fee covers: transportation to/from the station, lodging, cook fees and most meals, boat trips, and materials/equipment used during the course. Not included in this fee are:

- Purchase of Mexican Tourist Card at the border (about \$22).
- Two breakfasts, and two lunches during our travel days (about \$16-22).
- Two dinners at a restaurant in Bahía de los Angeles (about \$25).
- Snorkeling gear (you will need at least a mask, snorkel, fins and a 1/8" Spring wetsuit). Prices will vary according to the quality of what you buy, but you should plan to spend about \$100.
- Lecture diagrams, laboratory manual, and field notebook (about \$20).
- Transportation and meals during our first week at GCC.
- Any personal purchases while in Bahía. How much cash you bring depends on what you are planning on spending (e.g., souvenirs, beverages, snacks, etc.)

You will also need to complete your student registration and enroll in both courses (Biol 125 and 126) before the program begins. The College registration fees (as of November '09) are:

- \$104 (CA residents - \$26 / unit) or \$724 (non-residents - \$181 / unit) - Registration fees for the class - Biol 125 (3 units) and Biol 126 (1 unit).
- \$12.50 - Student Services Fee.
- \$12 - Health Services Fee.

V. Where will we be staying in Bahía?

During our stay in Bahía we will be staying at Glendale College's new Estación del Mar Cortés. This is the program's field station. The station includes: a dorm with four separate rooms for male and female students (the student rooms are used primarily as changing rooms and a place to store your gear), a field house with a kitchen and a living room, an academic wing with lecture and lab rooms, and a restrooms complex with showers and toilets with running water. We sleep in comfortable canvas cots on the station's beachfront. Although the station is not Club Med, it represents a comfortable place from which we can organize our excursions into the natural environment of Bahía.

VI. Should I bring my own water?

No. We buy filtered water at several locations in town. This water is perfectly fine for drinking. We also have the capability of filtering our own water at the station using a reverse osmosis process.

VII. Is shower time limited?

Yes. Bahía de los Angeles is in one of the most arid regions of the world. The town usually receives water twice a week from an underground reservoir 30 miles away. This water is not potable and is used for our sinks, toilets and showers. I allow my students to take one shower per day. However, showers must be short and the water should only be turned on when getting wet and for a final rinse. We do have an outside shower where you can take a quick rinse when you return from the field.

VIII. How much physical activity is involved in these courses?

The Biol 125 and 126 rely heavily in field activities. During our stay in Bahía we visit many of the islands near the station. In fact, most mornings (depending on weather conditions) we will be visiting field locations in and around the Bay. We spend a lot of time in the water snorkeling, but also go out on hikes along the shoreline and to the summit of a volcano (the latter one is not mandatory). My previous students are people that wanted to learn more about the marine environment, but also enjoyed such field activities. Furthermore, the participants want to have the opportunity to visit the unique environment of Baja while earning college credit. In my opinion, the field activities are what make this program so unique. Participation in these field activities is required, but you do not need to be an athlete to be able to join us!

IX. Do I need to be a good swimmer and know how to snorkel?

Since we spend so much time in the water. Being able to swim will make things easier. You do not need to be a competitive swimmer to participate, but most of my students have basic swimming skills. However, I have had a few students that did not know how to swim but were able to join us by wearing a flotation device or jacket. (If you fall in this last category, you must not be afraid of the water and will need to consult with me ahead of time.) Snorkeling is easy! The waters of Bahía are perfect to learn how to do it since there is almost no wave action along the coastline.

X. Should I buy the snorkeling gear before the pre-trip meeting?

You will need a mask, snorkel, fins and a 1/8" Spring wetsuit. I recommend that if you do not own these items, you wait until the pre-trip meeting. At the meeting I will be discussing what kinds of snorkeling gear are available and how to tell if they fit you.

XI. What else is expected of the students during the program?

I will provide you with very specific guidelines during our pre-trip meeting. However, you need to remember that, like any other college courses, Biol 125 and 126 will require personal study time besides the lectures, labs and field activities. Of course, you will also have plenty of free time to relax and enjoy nature and the company of your classmates.

As a learning community we also expect everyone to participate in keeping the station clean. At least twice during the trip you will be assigned to a group with the responsibilities of either kitchen or station cleaning crews.

XII. How do we travel to Bahía?

We will be traveling in a comfortable coach bus. The bus has air conditioning and restroom facilities. We will leave very early (4:00 am) from GCC and arrive in Bahía in the afternoon. The same times will apply on the return trip.

XIII. Who are the staff members coming with us?

You may meet some of the other staff members during our pre-trip meeting. Beside myself, there is at least a teaching assistant, a station manager, and a cook (a local from the town).

XIV. What kind of food is served?

A cook from the town of Bahía prepares our meals (breakfast, lunch and dinner). The menu varies, but includes pasta, hamburgers, burritos, fish, pancakes, cereal, salads, etc. If you are a vegetarian, let me know during our pre-trip meeting. Although our choices of menu are limited, we will try our best to accommodate you.

XV. Is there a doctor or nurse in town?

A doctor or two are assigned to the town clinic. She/he can take care of any minor health problems or injuries. In addition, the towns of San Quintín and Guerrero Negro have hospitals and private practice doctors. In case of a major emergency, the town clinic has an ambulance, which can transport patients to larger hospitals. As part of your program fees, you will get an insurance card that provides coverage for evacuation in case of a major medical emergency.

XVI. Are there telephones to call the U.S.? Can I bring my cell phone? Is it possible to receive or send e-mails?

We do not have telephone service at the field station. However, there are several places in town that provide telephone service. It is easy (but expensive) to call the U.S. I suggest that you call your family or friends from Bahía, instead of them calling you (since getting a hold of you once they call you can be a bit tricky). During the pre-trip meeting, I will provide you with the telephone numbers and instructions about how your family can reach you in case of an emergency. Your cell phone will not work in Bahía de los Angeles.

We now have Internet access at our Field Station. We will set up times when students can use the system. E-mail service, for a fee, is also available at several businesses within town.

XVII. How hot does it get in Bahía? What is the average water temperature?

Climatic conditions are hard to predict, but you should be prepared for very hot weather. Non-shaded air temperatures during July and August can average 35°C (95°F) and can reach a maximum of 40°C (104°F). The temperature of the surface water can vary drastically between two different spots on the Bay. We've recorded surface temperatures of about 24°C (75°F) during July, but temperatures as high as 30°C (86°F) have been reported for the month of August. I always insist that my students bring a 1/8" Spring wetsuit. Even if the water is warm, the suit will protect your skin from abrasions against rocks. (And if the water is cold, you will be glad to have the suit with you!)

XVIII. What do I need to do to prepare myself before the mandatory pre-trip meeting?

If you've already had an interview with me and have turned your application to the Baja California Field Studies Program office, the most important thing to do is to make sure that your travel documents are ready. Do not wait until the last minute to take care of this. Usually, preparation of these documents may take several weeks! Here is what you will need:

1) U.S. and Canadian citizens:

- U.S. and Canadian citizens who are 16 and older traveling between the U.S. and Mexico will be required to present a valid passport, passport card, Frequent Traveler card (NEXUS, SENTRI, FAST), Enhanced Driver's License (for residents in states that issue them) or Military ID with travel orders.

2) U.S. Permanent residents:

- Valid Permanent Resident Card (Green Card).
- Lawful Permanent Residents (Green card holder's) do NOT need a passport to enter the United States, however you may need a passport to enter another country. Please contact the Consulado General de Mexico (see next page for telephone number, address and URL) to inquire about the necessity of a tourist visa (Mexico requires visas for citizens of some countries).

3) Non-U.S. residents with special visas/permits:

- Valid passport from your country of citizenship plus a visa to re-enter the U.S.
- Depending on your situation, you may also need a "Permit to Reenter" or "Advance Parole" documents issued by U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. Contact USCIS (see next page for telephone number and URL) to inquire about the necessity of any special paperwork to return to the U.S.
- Contact the Consulado General de Mexico (see next page for telephone number, address and URL) to inquire about the necessity of a tourist visa (Mexico requires visas from some countries).

If you fall under categories 2 or 3 above or have any questions regarding your travel documents, please speak to the staff at the Baja California Field Studies Program office (Santa Anita Building). They can also help you with questions regarding your application and payments. You can contact them at: (818) 240-1000 x 3159 and baja@glendale.edu.

If you are a U.S. citizen, a passport is now needed to enter the US from Mexico. Make sure to apply for one with enough time.

USCIS National Customer Service Center

- Call toll free at 1-800-375-5283 for information and help on matters concerning immigration services and benefits. You can also go to their web site: <http://www.uscis.gov/portal/site/uscis/>
- For specific information regarding travel requirements into the US go to: <http://www.cbp.gov/xp/cgov/travel/vacation/>
- For information about obtaining a US passport go to: http://travel.state.gov/passport/passport_1738.html

Consulado General de Mexico

- Telephone: (213) 351-6800
- Address: 2401 W 6th street (in front of McArthur Park). Los Angeles, CA 90057 (7:00 to 1:00 M-F).
- You can also go to their web site: www.sre.gob.mx/losangeles/

If you have any other questions or concerns regarding the Marine Biology (Biol 125/126) courses between now and the pre-trip meeting feel free to contact me.

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