

Introduction

Because learning about other countries and cultures makes a difference—to you, your community, and the world at large—we have created CultureGrams. Our reports give you a framework for understanding and appreciating how other people live and think. In a small way, they let you stand in someone else's shoes, an experience which becomes the basis for tolerance, respect, mutual understanding, and communication. CultureGrams helps you take each culture on its own terms and appreciate it for the gifts it brings to the world table: its religions and world-views, arts and traditions, peoples and languages.

What Is a Culture?

Broadly, a culture can be said to be those beliefs, traditions, and institutions that create and mediate individual, community, and national identity. History and geography are defining elements, but they are not the only elements. Ethnicity, economics, religion, and other factors all shape, and are shaped by, a culture. This is why each CultureGram has 25 different categories: we want you to see each culture's many facets and draw connections between them.

Why Are CultureGrams Unique?

The CultureGrams World Edition is a concise reference tool created by natives and long-time residents to give you an insider's perspective. Its information ranges from mile-high views of a nation, its society, and institutions to close-up views of communities, families, and individuals. Each report seeks a balance between generality and breadth, on one hand, and detail and depth on the other. This tension lets us create multidimensional and realistic portraits of a place and

its peoples. Moreover, CultureGrams are updated annually and reviewed by natives and experts periodically to ensure that the reports reflect changes in the culture.

For the Teacher

If you teach history, geography, a foreign language, ESL, or current events—among other subjects—you can use CultureGrams as the basis for in-class discussions, debates, presentations, research papers, reports, and reading and writing exercises. Use CultureGrams to help students make connections and form hypotheses about how various aspects of a culture are related. Compare and contrast the cultures of countries as diverse as Niue and Ghana. For example, you could compare family structure, look at the correlation between economy and religion, or see how the language of instruction affects education. Make your own UN or national parliament and debate social, political, and economic issues. Or have a culture fair and ask students to act as citizens of the countries they have been assigned. No matter how you use CultureGrams, you will find that your students learn more about themselves and the world than you ever thought possible.

THE WORLD



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The World

General Introduction

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NORTH AMERICA



North America

AN OVERVIEW

North America, the world's third largest continent, extends from the Arctic Ocean to South America and includes just more than 17 million square miles (44 million square kilometers) of land. Major political divisions include Canada in the north, the United States of America in the central portion of the continent, Central America in the south, and the islands of the Caribbean, located between the Atlantic Ocean to the north and the Caribbean Sea to the south. The Caribbean Islands are characterized by a number of small island countries. Greenland and Iceland are part of North America geographically, but belong to Europe politically.

North America is surrounded by the Pacific, Atlantic, and Arctic Oceans to the west, east, and north, respectively. The Gulf of Mexico and Caribbean Sea, functional parts of the Atlantic Ocean, are located to the east of Central America and to the southeast of the United States of America. Major water bodies in the interior of North America include Hudson Bay in northeastern Canada and the Great Lakes, which border the United States and Canada.

The physical geography of North America includes coastal plains, hills and high mountains, and vast plains in the central portion, particularly in the United States. To the west, the Rocky Mountains extend north from Central America to Canada, making them the longest mountain range in the world. Land cover varies from tropical forests in Central America, to subtropical, temperate, desert, and montane environments in the central portion of the

continent. Boreal forests, tundra, and permanent ice are found farther north. Elevation extremes range from -282 feet (-86 meters) in Death Valley, California, to 20,320 feet (6,194 meters) at the top of Mount McKinley in Alaska.

Demographically, some 500 million people populate the North American continent. These individuals belong to a rich variety of ethnic groups that are predominantly white, Hispanic, or African American. Hundreds of Amerindian groups also exist. The primary religions are Roman Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish. Official languages include English, Spanish, and French, but immigration into Canada and the United States has brought great linguistic diversity. Most people live along major coastlines and tend to gravitate toward large urban centers. The United States of America and Canada boast some of the highest qualities of living and the strongest economies in the world. No other continent produces more consumer goods or consumes more resources than North America. The United States of America has the highest agricultural production in the world. In addition to abundant renewable and non-renewable natural resources, this region is home to most high-technology firms and is a major influence in worldwide technological innovation.

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SOUTH AMERICA



South America

AN OVERVIEW

South America, the world's fourth largest continent, encompasses an area of 6,880,700 square miles (17,820,000 square kilometers). The equator passes through the region's north, while the region's southernmost tip extends to the Antarctic. The continent's two most prominent geographic features are the Amazon River Basin and the Andes mountain range. The Amazon River is 4,080 miles (6,566 kilometers) long and has more than one thousand tributaries; its basin occupies the entire northern half of Brazil. Within the basin is found a large variety of plant and animal life, including more than one thousand bird species. The Andes, the second highest mountain range in the world, extend down the entire western part of the continent. Dry deserts, temperate pampas (grassland plains), tropical rain forests, high plateaus, and active volcanoes are other geographical features of the region.

South America's climates range from temperate to tropical. Elevation rather than location is often the determining factor in average temperature. The climate of the tropics is characterized by heavy rainfall, high humidity, and unchanging warm temperatures. Areas outside of the tropics are more arid and temperate. The variety of climates makes the region rich in natural resources. Agricultural products grown in tropical regions include sugar, nuts, cacao, tropical fruits, rubber, tobacco, and coffee. Livestock—sold for beef, meat, and leather—flourish in the pampas of the south. Many countries are also rich in minerals such as oil, copper, silver, and gold.

The combination of European, Asian, African, and indigenous cultures has created a diverse South American population. More than 80 percent of South Americans are Roman Catholic. However, Protestant and non-Christian religions have been growing significantly. While Spanish is the national language of the majority of countries, Portuguese is the continent's most spoken language due to the population size of Brazil, whose official language is Portuguese. Other official languages include English, French, and Dutch. Indigenous languages, such as Aymara, Guaraní, and Quechua, are primarily spoken among the populations of the western Andean mountain regions. Throughout the region, indigenous and other rural inhabitants are leaving their small rural villages for urban life. Of the 50 most populous cities in the world, 7 are found in South America. Large differences in standards of living are part of the social makeup of the region. South Americans are generally positive about life and express themselves creatively through music and dance. The literary talent of the region is an important influence worldwide and has resulted in several Nobel Prizes for literature being awarded to South American writers. The natural and human variety of the region make South America rich in culture and beauty.

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EUROPE



Europe

AN OVERVIEW

Europe is generally considered to be the westernmost portion of the Eurasian continent, the region to the west of the Ural and Caucasus mountain ranges and to the north of the Mediterranean and Black seas. It is the second smallest continent, after Australia, covering 3,998,000 square miles (10,355,000 square kilometers). The varied landscape of Europe includes mountains, plains, islands, peninsulas, steppe, and tundra. Europe was once heavily forested, but over the centuries, humans cleared much of the land for habitation and agriculture. This process resulted in the reduction and even extinction of many indigenous animals. Mount El'brus in southwestern Russia is the highest point, at 18,510 feet (5,642 meters), and the lowest point is on the northern shore of the Caspian Sea, at 92 feet (28 meters) below sea level. Europe's climate ranges from the hot, dry regions of the Mediterranean to the wetter and cooler areas of northern Europe and Scandinavia. Because of its close proximity to relatively warm seas, Europe generally enjoys a temperate climate with few extremes. Flooding and earthquakes are the two most prevalent natural threats to the region. Environmental pollution also poses a significant threat, particularly in areas of eastern Europe.

Europe is the third most populous continent and second most densely populated region in the world. It is highly urbanized. Europe's average annual birthrate is the lowest in the world, while its life expectancy is one of the longest. This has led to an aging population and to an increased need for immigrant workers to staff

industry and other sectors of the economy. Europe is home to many diverse cultures and languages. The chief language groups are Germanic, Romance, Slavic, and Finno-Ugric. Many Europeans speak a second language, often English, French, or German. Historically, Christianity has been one of the defining elements of European identity, though significant diversity exists between Roman Catholics, Protestants, and Orthodox Christians. Europe has also been home to a significant Jewish minority, which was decimated during World War II, and scattered Muslim populations in southeastern Europe. The Muslim population is growing, driven by immigration from former European colonies, including North Africa, Indonesia, and the Middle East.

Historically, the great cultural diversity in the narrow confines of the continent has been a source of much discord and conflict, including World War I and World War II. Since 1945, however, Europeans have been trying to deal with their historical and cultural differences through the European Union, which aims for greater political and economic cooperation and integration among the diverse states of Europe.

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AFRICA



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Africa

Regional Introduction

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Africa is a vast continent of some 11,700,000 square miles (30,300,000 square kilometers), divided into 53 independent nations, and ranks second only to Asia in size. The African continent represents about 20 percent of the earth's total landmass, yet its population hovers around 10 percent of the world's total population. Though the growth rate continues to be high—despite the widespread AIDS epidemic—Africa ranks only third in the world, behind Asia and Europe (including western Russia), in continental population.

Most of the African landmass is high in elevation with comparatively few mountain ranges. The highest point, Mount Kilimanjaro, rises to an elevation of 19,340 feet (5,895 meters) above the East African plains in Tanzania. The Nile is the longest river in the world and flows more than 4,000 miles (6,400 kilometers) from its origin at Lake Victoria to the Mediterranean Sea. Other major rivers include the Congo, the Niger, and the Zambezi. There are a number of islands off the coast of Africa, the largest of which is Madagascar, the world's fourth largest island (229,000 square miles, or 593,000 square kilometers). Divided into almost equal halves by the equator, Africa has warm temperatures most of the year, though these are moderated somewhat in high elevations and by ocean currents along the coast.

Africa divides geographically and culturally in two. The Sahara Desert, nearly the size of the United States, dominates the landscape of northern Africa. Culturally and historically, North Africa is predominantly Mediterranean, Arabic, and Muslim. South of the Sahara is Black Africa. Though many West African countries are Muslim, and there are Swahili pockets (of Arab influence) in East Africa, Africa south of the Sahara has an incredible diversity of peoples, cultures, and languages. More than one thousand languages and dialects are spoken, and economies vary from mostly developed (South Africa) to pastoral, horticultural/agricultural to hunting and gathering. Most of the current political boundaries of African countries were drawn up by European colonial powers in the mid- to late 19th century; thus, many peoples found themselves divided into two or three different geographical sections, each belonging to a different colony. Since independence from Europe, beginning in the 1960s and finally ending with Namibian independence in 1990, African nations have had to struggle with a colonial legacy as well as increasing populations, heavy urbanization, low economic growth, civil war, ethnic violence, educational franchise, limited healthcare delivery, and disease. They have done so with widely varying degrees of success and failure. While the continent as a whole is rich in natural and human resources, and while there is great social and economic potential for Africans, the future of Africa is simply impossible to predict.

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ASIA



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Asia

Regional Introduction

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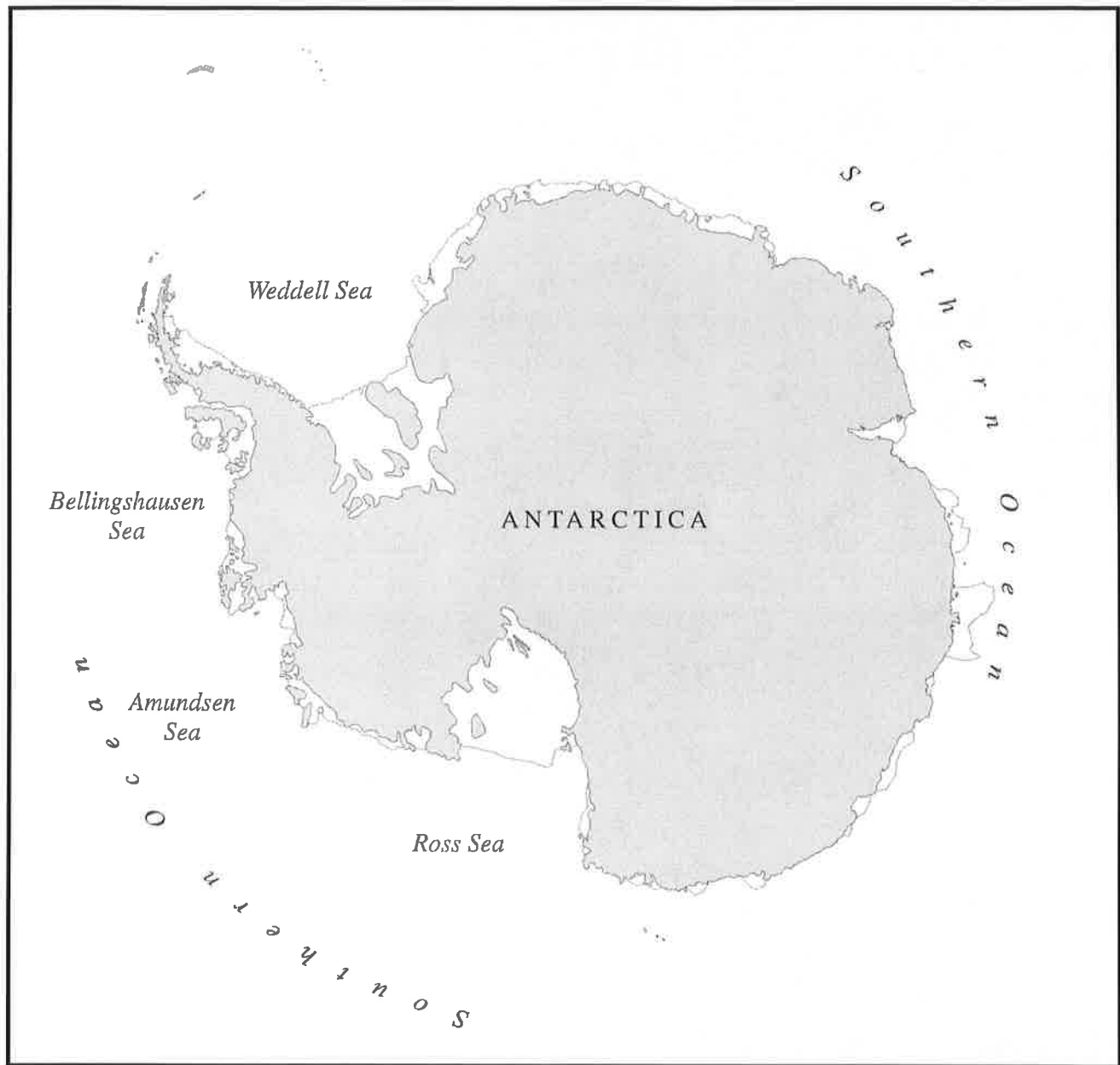
Asia, the world’s largest continent, encompasses an area of 17,300,000 square miles (44,810,000 square kilometers). It has the world’s highest elevation, lowest elevation, and greatest known ocean depth. Important landforms include rugged mountain ranges, vast deserts, high plateaus, and fertile river valleys. East Asia is part of the Pacific Rim of Fire, which is famous for active volcanoes, violent earthquakes, and destructive typhoons. Some of the world’s longest rivers are found in Asia: the Tigris, Euphrates, Indus, Ganges, Mekong, Yangtze, and Yellow Rivers, which provide fresh water and transportation routes for millions. The region’s size allows for climatic diversity, ranging from the vast arctic regions of Siberia to the arid wastelands and steppes of southwestern and central Asia to the tropical climates of Southeast Asia. Asia has an abundance of natural resources (e.g., forests, agricultural land, minerals, and petroleum), although they are unevenly distributed across the region.

The 48 independent countries in Asia are home to two-thirds of the world’s population. However, the population is unevenly distributed. China and India each have more than one billion residents. In contrast, smaller countries such as Bahrain, Brunei, and the Maldives each have fewer than one million people. Singapore and Bangladesh are two of the most densely populated countries on earth, yet Mongolia has fewer than 5 people per square mile (1.7 people per square kilometer). Most Asians live in coastal areas and on the flood plains of major rivers. The interior of the continent has relatively few people due to rugged topography, harsh climates, high elevations, and a lack of fresh water.

The continent also exhibits great ethnic and cultural diversity. Major language groups include the Semitic tongues of the Middle East, the Sino-Tibetan languages of East Asia, the Slavic speakers of Russia, and the Indo-Aryan and Dravidian languages of South Asia. Many of the world’s major religions originated in Asia. Christianity, Judaism, and Islam developed in the Middle East, while Hinduism and Buddhism originated in India. Islam’s sphere of influence stretches from the Arabian Peninsula, through central Asia, across the subcontinent of India, and into the islands of Southeast Asia. Buddhism is the dominant religion in East and Southeast Asia, Hinduism in India, and Christianity in Russia and the Philippines. Most Asians lead a rural, agrarian lifestyle. However, some of the world’s largest cities are in Asia: Tokyo, Shanghai, Bangkok, Seoul, Manila, and Kolkata. The majority of Asians are not wealthy people and many suffer in poverty. However, countries such as Japan, Israel, Singapore, and South Korea enjoy relatively high standards of living.

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ANTARCTICA



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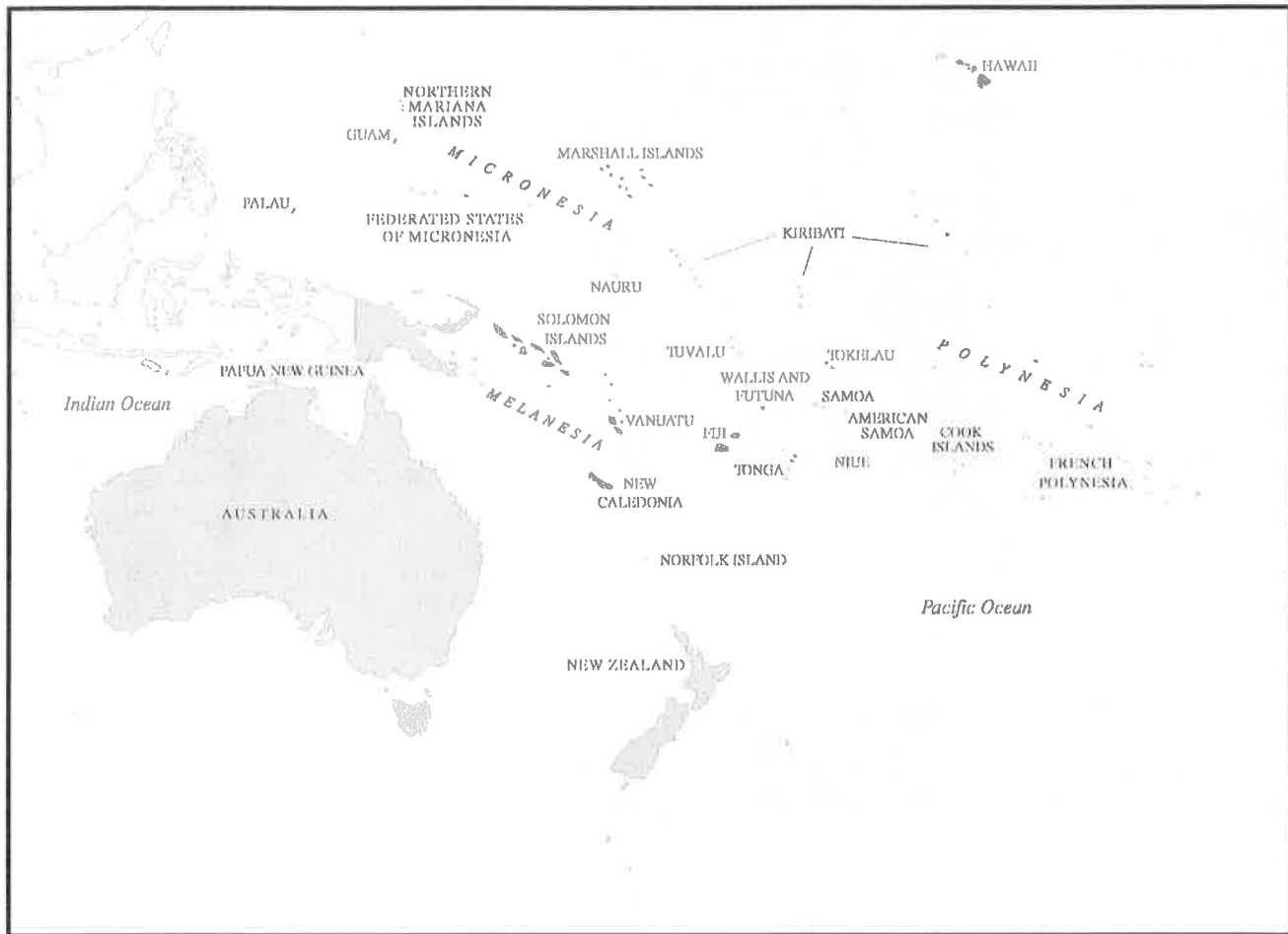
Antarctica, the world's fifth-largest and southernmost continent, encompasses an area of about 5.3 million square miles (13.8 million square kilometers). It is encircled by the Southern Ocean and surrounds the geographic South Pole, the southern surface point on Earth's axis of rotation. Antarctica's major landform is the Transantarctic Mountains, a system of mountain ranges that extends some 2,200 miles (3,500 kilometers) from the Weddell Sea to a region next to the Ross Sea. This mountain system divides the continent into two areas: East Antarctica and West Antarctica, which is much smaller though it includes the Antarctic Peninsula. The continent's highest point is Vinson Massif (16,077 feet, or 4,900 meters), a mountain near the base of the Antarctic Peninsula.

The coldest continent, Antarctica is almost entirely covered by an ice sheet, which holds about 90 percent of the fresh water on the Earth's surface. Antarctica's annual mean temperature is between -4°F and 14°F (-20°C and -10°C) on the coast and between -76°F and -58°F (-60°C and -50°C) in the continent's interior. The planet's lowest temperature ever recorded was -128.6°F (-89.2°C) on 21 July 1983 at Russia's Vostok Station in East Antarctica. The interior is so devoid of precipitation that it is considered the world's driest desert, and Antarctica is regularly pounded by hurricane-force winds with speeds of up to 200 miles (320 kilometers) per hour. Because this harsh environment inhibits the development of plant and animal life, Antarctica has no vertebrate land animals and only two species of indigenous vascular plants. The most prominent wildlife on land consists of the seals, penguins, and other birds that breed on Antarctica. Whales and orcas are among the many species that inhabit the Southern Ocean.

There have never been any indigenous human inhabitants of Antarctica; no person set eyes on the continent until the 19th century. Permanent occupation began in 1943, when the first scientific base was established. Today, two dozen countries run more than 40 permanent research stations, and several more countries operate summer-only stations. All residents of Antarctica are temporary. These researchers and other station crew members total no more than about 6,000 during the summer (November to March) and fewer than 1,300 in winter, when travel to Antarctica is extremely difficult due to the cold and darkness and when the ocean freezes for hundreds of miles around most of the continent.

Antarctica has no government and is considered international territory under the Antarctic Treaty, an agreement signed in 1959 by the first 12 countries operating in Antarctica and acceded to by more than 30 other countries during the five decades since. Applicable to the area south of 60°S latitude, the Treaty has set aside nations' disagreements about sovereignty over Antarctic territory. It reserves the continent for peaceful purposes, prohibits military activity and nuclear weapons, and promotes an atmosphere of international scientific cooperation.

OCEANIA



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Oceania

Regional Introduction

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Oceania encompasses Australia, the world's smallest continent, and the Pacific Islands, consisting of some 25,000 islands in more than 20 nations and territories. Australia alone has an area of 2,967,892 square miles (7,686,850 square kilometers), while the Pacific Islands have a combined land area of just 312,551 square miles (809,504 square kilometers) scattered across millions of square miles of ocean.

The Pacific Islands typically are divided into three areas. In the southeast lies Polynesia ("many islands"), sometimes referred to as the Polynesia Triangle, with Hawaii in the north, New Zealand in the southwest, and Easter Island in the southeast. Island groups inside this triangle include French Polynesia, the Cook Islands, Samoa, and Tonga. Melanesia ("black islands") extends east from Papua New Guinea through the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, New Caledonia, and Fiji. Micronesia ("tiny islands") includes the smaller islands to the north: the Caroline Islands (Palau and the Federated States of Micronesia), the Marshall Islands, Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands, Nauru, and Kiribati.

While some of the Pacific Islands have rugged, volcanic terrain with high elevations, other islands and atolls rise just above sea level. The Pacific Islands generally have a tropical climate with little seasonal variation in temperature. Periodically, the region is subject to destructive hurricanes, and some argue that global warming and rising ocean levels threaten low-lying islands. The landscape of Australia varies from temperate coastal forests to a vast, inhospitable interior desert.

Evidence suggests that Pacific Islanders are descended from Austronesian peoples in Southeast Asia who arrived thousands of years ago. The population is mostly rural; many people still depend on subsistence agriculture and fishing. By contrast, Australia, New Zealand, and Hawaii are more industrialized and have larger urban populations than the rest of Oceania. Australia's Aborigines and New Zealand's Maoris are the indigenous inhabitants of these two nations but have become minorities due to European colonization and migration. Native Hawaiians have also become a minority population due to Euro-American colonization and the migration of Asians. Pacific Islanders speak more than 1,200 languages, although English and French are the official languages of many nations, a legacy of their colonial past. Because of efforts by early missionaries, most Pacific Islanders are now Christians, but indigenous religions remain important. Modern Oceania faces a number of daunting challenges, including limited resources, difficult postcolonial transitions, lack of economic opportunities, and ethnic conflict. Some inhabitants of the region see an increasingly interconnected world as a solution to these problems, while others view it as a threat to their local traditions and lifestyles.

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