

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 in 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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