

AN OVERVIEW

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 the 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 inte-

rior 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 Calcutta. 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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