

# 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 458 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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