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Africa

The land



Map
Terrain of
Africa

Africa is an enormous plateau, most of which is covered by deserts, forests, and grasslands.

Land regions. Africa can be divided into two major land regions: (1) Low Africa and (2) High Africa.

Low Africa consists of northern, western, and central Africa. Except for a few coastal plains and mountain ranges, most of the region lies from 500 to 2,000 feet (150 to 610 meters) above sea level. Low Africa can be subdivided into six smaller land regions. They are (1) the Coastal Lowlands, (2) the Northern Highlands, (3) the Saharan Plateau, (4) the Western Plateau, (5) the Nile Basin, and (6) the Congo Basin.

The Coastal Lowlands form a narrow border along most of northern Africa and the bulge of western Africa. The area has fertile farmland, forests, sandy beaches, deserts, and swamps.

The Northern Highlands are a mountainous region that stretches across parts of Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia. The Atlas Mountains in this region have deposits of phosphate rock, iron ore, and manganese.

The Saharan Plateau covers most of northern Africa. The Sahara, in turn, occupies most of the plateau. Isolated clusters of mountains rise from the plateau in places. Valuable deposits of petroleum and other minerals lie beneath the Sahara. The desert merges with a dry grassland called the Sahel at the southern boundary of the Saharan Plateau.



Picture
Oasis village
in the Sahara

The Western Plateau lies south of the Saharan Plateau. It consists of forests and grasslands. The Niger and other rivers flow through the region.

The Nile Basin is a flat region that borders the Nile River and its tributaries in northeastern Africa. In addition to fertile farmland along the Nile, the region has deserts in the north and a huge swamp called the Sudd in the south.

The Congo Basin, in west-central Africa, includes the land drained by the Congo River and its tributaries. Tropical rain forests cover much of the Congo Basin.

High Africa consists of eastern and southern Africa. Most of the region is more than 3,000 feet (910 meters) above sea level. High Africa can be subdivided into five smaller land regions. They are (1) the Rift System, (2) the Eastern Highlands, (3) the Southern Plateau, (4) the Coastal Lowlands, and (5) Madagascar.

The Rift System extends from Eritrea to Mozambique. The region consists of the Great Rift Valley, which is a series of parallel cracks in the earth that form deep, steep-sided valleys. The three main lakes in this valley, Lake Victoria, Lake Tanganyika, and Lake Malawi, have many unique species of fish and add to the region's beauty. The region also has some of Africa's best farmland because of its rich volcanic soil.

The Eastern Highlands are grassy plains that provide grazing for livestock and many kinds of wild animals. The Rift System cuts through the Eastern Highlands.

The Southern Plateau covers most of southern Africa. Much of it is flat or rolling grassland used for crops and pasture. The region also has deserts, swamps, and forests. Rugged mountains and cliffs rim the plateau in the south and west. Deposits of diamonds and gold lie in the Southern Plateau.

The Coastal Lowlands border the high plateaus of eastern and southern Africa. The lowlands include productive farmland, sandy beaches, and swamplands.

Madagascar, the world's fourth largest island, lies about 240 miles (390 kilometers) southeast of the mainland in the Indian Ocean. The island can be divided into two chief land regions. The Coastal Lowlands form a narrow band along the east coast and broaden to a wide fertile plain on the west. The Central Highlands, which run almost the full length of the island, have some peaks over 9,000 feet (2,700 meters) above sea level.

Deserts, grasslands, and forests. Deserts cover about two-fifths of Africa. The Sahara, the world's largest desert, stretches across northern Africa from the Atlantic Ocean to the Red Sea. It covers about 3¹/₂ million square miles (9 million square kilometers). The Sahara is a region of bare rock, boulders, gravel, and sand dunes, broken only by a few oases and the fertile Nile Valley. The Namib Desert borders the Atlantic coast of southwestern Africa. The Kalahari Desert lies inland from the Namib.

Grasslands called *savannas* occupy more than two-fifths of Africa. They form a broad curve that extends from the Atlantic coast just south of the Sahara, across eastern Africa, and back westward to the Atlantic south of the Congo Basin. Tall grasses, thorny bushes, and scattered trees grow in this area. Thicker woodlands cover areas with more rainfall. But closer to the deserts, there are fewer trees and shorter grasses.

Forests cover less than a fifth of Africa. Most of the forests are tropical rain forests. These forests, with many kinds of broadleaf evergreen trees, grow in the Congo Basin and in parts of western Africa and Madagascar. Other forests grow in the highlands of eastern Africa, the mountains of the northwest, and parts of the south.

Woodlands border the rain forests within the tropical region. Most of these woodlands contain patches of grassland. Dense pockets of tangled mangrove swamp, where the spreading roots of mangrove trees catch and hold soil, fringe some coastal areas. These swamps provide important breeding sites for fish, protect the coast from damaging waves, and clean the water by filtering sediment.

Rivers, waterfalls, and deltas. The Nile River, the world's longest river, flows 4,160 miles (6,695 kilometers) northward from east-central Africa to the Mediterranean Sea. Most of Africa's other major rivers, including the Congo and the Niger, empty into the Atlantic. Rivers that flow into the Indian Ocean include the Limpopo and the Zambezi. All of these rivers flow through several countries and serve as major sources of hydroelectric power. They also provide flood control and water for irrigation or industry. The rivers are also major centers of wildlife *biodiversity*—that is, a variety of plant and animal species—and important sources of fish.



Picture
Victoria Falls

Rapids and waterfalls make navigation difficult on many African rivers. Hydroelectric power projects have been built on a number of rivers. Scientists estimate that the Congo River has the potential to generate enough hydropower for all of Africa's energy needs. Several waterfalls, including spectacular Victoria Falls on the Zambezi, are popular tourist attractions.

Large deltas where the major rivers enter the ocean along the coasts of Africa are important sites for fishing and shrimp farming, as well as critical centers of biodiversity. Major river deltas include the Congo, Niger, Nile, and Zambezi deltas. The Niger Delta in Nigeria is also an important region for its oil deposits.

Lakes. Most of Africa's large lakes lie in the east, where chains of long, deep lakes have formed in the bottoms of the rift valleys. One of these lakes, Tanganyika, is the longest freshwater lake in the world. It is 420 miles (680 kilometers) long and more than 4,700 feet (1,430 meters) deep. Other large rift lakes include Albert, Malawi, and Turkana. Africa's largest lake, Victoria, lies in a shallow basin between two chains of rift valleys. It covers 26,828 square miles (69,484 square kilometers) and is second in size only to Lake Superior in North America among the world's freshwater lakes. The rift valley lakes are centers of biodiversity and support many unique fish species.



Picture
Lake
Turkana

Mountains. Volcanic activity created most of Africa's highest mountains. The two tallest peaks—19,340-foot (5,895-meter) Kilimanjaro and 17,058-foot (5,199-meter) Mount Kenya—were formed in this way. Although they rise near the equator in eastern Africa, both mountains have glaciers and are covered with snow much of the year. Volcanic activity also produced the Ethiopian Highlands; the isolated Tibesti Mountains in the Sahara; and Mount Cameroon, the highest peak in western Africa. Volcanic rock covers the Drakensberg, a mountainous region where the plateau of southeastern Africa drops sharply to the sea.

Two major nonvolcanic mountain ranges of Africa are the Ruwenzori Range and the Atlas Mountains. The Ruwenzori Range rises on the border of Uganda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The Atlas Mountains extend from Morocco to Tunisia and form Africa's longest mountain chain. The Atlas Mountains are part of the same mountain system as the European Alps.

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