

CONTINENT OF WORLD

A continent is commonly defined as a large land mass separated from other land masses by oceans. But, if you think about it, that definition is a little imprecise. For example, Asia, Europe, and Africa aren't separated by oceans. Neither are North America and South America. In fact, if you combine those set of land masses, you get only four continents. It seems that a continent can be defined in different ways.

❖ Configuration of the continents

The continents are vast stretches of land surrounded by water, and they represent about one-third of the planet's surface. Each one has very different characteristics (area, relief features, inland seas, etc.), and even different boundaries, depending on who is measuring them. Generally, geographers consider only the part of the landmass that is not underwater, while geologists include the coastal margins: the continental shelves that extend under the sea and end with steep slopes beyond which the oceanic basins start.

❖ Geological structure of the continents

Over time, many factors (plate tectonics, volcanism, erosion, sedimentation, etc.) have transformed Earth's relief features and its continents. In spite of their differences, the continents all have older, more stable parts and younger, more active ones. They also all have a similar underlying structure. Each rests on a shield of bedrock dating from the Precambrian Period, around which are sedimentary basins and mountain ranges that are old (rounded peaks, located near the shield) or recent (scarp, near the coasts). The shield, or platform, contains the oldest geologic layers and is generally located in the interior of continents. The sedimentary basins, located in adjoining zones, are depressions in which sediments have accumulated.

The names of the seven continents of the world are: Asia, Africa, Europe, Australia, North America, South America, and Antarctica.

All the continents of the world start and end with the same alphabet if you consider North and South Americas as one continent.

Earth is around 71 per cent water and 29 per cent land. In fact, billions of years ago, the seven continents of the world were joined together as a single massive landmass called Pangaea. But thanks to plate tectonics, they gradually broke apart and separated. Europe and North America are still moving apart at the rate of 7 cm every year, research says.

❖ 7 continents of the world

1. Asia

☞ Size: 44,579,000 sq. km

☞ No. of countries: 48

☞ Population: 4,436,224,000

☞ Asia is the world's largest continent of the seven continents in size and population

☞ Asia covers one-third of earth's surface

- ☞ It has 30 per cent of world land area and 60 per cent of population
- ☞ It contains the world's largest country, Russia, and the world's two most populous countries, China and India
- ☞ Asia houses the highest point on earth – the summit of Mount Everest, which is 29,028 ft. (8,848 m) tall
- ☞ The continent is home to the 10 highest peaks in the world
- ☞ The Great Wall of China is the only man made structure that can be seen from space
- ☞ Asia saw the birth of two great ancient civilisations – Harappan civilisation and Chinese civilisation
- ☞ The religions of Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, Christianity first began in Asia
- ☞ The major animals found in Asia are — reticulated pythons, tiger, panda, yaks, Indian rhinoceroses

2. Africa

- ☞ Size: 30,221,532 sq km
- ☞ No. of countries: 54
- ☞ Population: 1,216,130,000
- ☞ Of the seven continents of the world, Africa is the second largest
- ☞ The continent's terrain was inhabitable and remained unknown for thousands of years, earning it the name of 'Dark Continent'
- ☞ The world's longest river — the Nile — and the world's largest desert — the Sahara — both are home in Africa
- ☞ The world's hottest place — Ethiopia — is in Africa
- ☞ The equator passes through the middle of the Dark Continent and it receives direct sunlight throughout the year
- ☞ As per research evidence, Africa is the place where Homo sapiens originated and then migrated to all the other continents of the world
- ☞ More than 50 per cent of the world's gold and 95 per cent of the world's diamonds come from the mineral rich continent of Africa
- ☞ The world also gets 66 per cent of its chocolate from the Dark Continent
- ☞ The major animals in Africa include — cheetah, African elephant, lion, zebra, Egyptian mongoose, giraffe, addax

3. Australia

- ☞ Size: 8,525,989 sq km
- ☞ No. of countries: 3
- ☞ Population: 39,901,000
- ☞ Australia is the world's smallest continent and is also known as an 'island continent' as it is surrounded by water on all sides
- ☞ The official name of Australia is the Commonwealth of Australia
- ☞ The continent of Australia is often called Sahul, Australinea or Meganesia to differentiate it from the country of Australia

- ☞ Australia lies entirely on the south of the equator and is often called the country “down under”
- ☞ The name Australia comes from the Latin word ‘australis’ meaning ‘southern’
- ☞ Of all the continents in the world, Australia stands at the top of wool production and export. This is because the sheep population in the world’s smallest continent is 14 times that of its human population
- ☞ Australia is home to over 500 varieties of eucalyptus trees
- ☞ Two-thirds of Australia is desert land
- ☞ The world’s largest coral reef — the Great Barrier Reef — is around 2000 kilometres long
- ☞ The unique animals of Australia are — kangaroo, emu, platypus

4. Antarctica

- ☞ Size: 14,000,000 sq km
- ☞ No. of countries: 0
- ☞ Population: 1,106
- ☞ Facts about the seven continents of the world: Antarctica (Image source; Tourism Antarctica)
- ☞ Antarctica is not only the coldest place on Earth but also the highest, driest, windiest and emptiest
- ☞ 75 per cent of the world’s ice and 70 per cent of the Earth’s fresh water is located in Antarctica
- ☞ It is also called the White Continent or the Frozen Continent
- ☞ Before 1840, Antarctic was called ‘Terra Australis Incognita’ which meant ‘the unknown southern land’
- ☞ Antarctica sees half a year of light and half a year of complete darkness – summer months of December to February give 24 hours of light, while the winter months of late March to late September are pitch dark the whole day
- ☞ Summer temperatures in the Frozen Continent are around -35 degree C in the interior and 2 degree C at the coasts. In the winters, it is -70 degree C in the interior and 2 degree C at the coasts
- ☞ Antarctica saw the coldest natural temperature ever recorded on Earth was -89 degree C
- ☞ Because of this sort of extreme temperature fluctuations, Antarctica is larger in winters by around 14.2 million square kilometers than in summers due to the ice formation around the periphery
- ☞ Nothing can rot in the icy waters of Antarctica
- ☞ There are no time zones on this continent
- ☞ The largest land animal in Antarctica is a 1.3 cm long insect known as Belgica Antarctica
- ☞ The only permanent settlements in Antarctica are the research bases where scientists from different countries come to do their work
- ☞ Penguins are home in Antarctica and Adelie penguins are the most common kind found here

5. Europe

- ☞ Size: 10,180,000 sq km
- ☞ No. of countries: 50
- ☞ Population: 738,849,000

- ☞ Europe and Asia are parts of the same major landmass — Europe is separated from Asia by the Ural mountains and the Caspian Sea
- ☞ The highest mountain in this continent is Mt. Elbrus
- ☞ The Balkan ranges, Pyrenees, Apennines, Cantabrian, and the Dinaric Alps are some of the major mountains in Europe
- ☞ Europe is surrounded by water on three sides — Mediterranean Sea in the south, Atlantic Ocean in the west, and Arctic Ocean in the north
- ☞ The world's smallest country, the Vatican City, is in Europe
- ☞ Some of the major rivers of Europe include Danube, Elbe, Loire, Oder, Dnieper and Don
- ☞ Finland, in Europe, is called the 'Land of Lakes' because melting ice sheets have created a lot of lakes here
- ☞ The longest rail route in the world is the Trans-Siberian Rail Route located in Europe which connects St Petersburg in the west and Vladivostok in the east.
- ☞ Norway, Sweden, Iceland and Denmark together form the Scandinavian countries
- ☞ Yugoslavia, Greece, Romania and Albania are together called the Balkan states
- ☞ Spain and Portugal form Iberia together
- ☞ The Baltic states comprise Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia
- ☞ Great Britain and Ireland form the two main island groups of Europe
- ☞ Ukraine's Steppe region is called the 'Granary of the world' or 'Bread Basket of the world'
- ☞ Moscow is called the 'Port of Five Seas' as through its rivers and canals, it connects to five seas
- ☞ Maize, barley, rice and oilseeds are the major foodcrops of the continent
- ☞ Three-fourth of the world's potatoes grow in Europe
- ☞ The Volga is the longest river in Europe
- ☞ The second longest river of Europe, the Danube, passes through five capital cities of the
- ☞ The major animals of Europe are – hedgehog, roe deer, wild boards, blue tit, the European tree frog

6. North America

- ☞ Size: 24,709,000 sq km
- ☞ No. of countries: 23
- ☞ Population: 579,024,000
- ☞ North America has five time zones and is the only continent with every type of climate
- ☞ North America was named after the explorer Amerigo Vespucci and is also known as the "New World"
- ☞ Of the seven continents of the world, North America's population density at 22.9 per square kilometre is the highest
- ☞ The largest fresh water lake in the world — Lake Superior – is located in this continent
- ☞ The world's third longest river – the Mississippi (3778 km) – is located in North America
- ☞ When compared with the other continents, North America has the highest average per-person income
- ☞ The average food intake of individuals is the highest on this continent
- ☞ The world's largest economy, the USA, is a part of North America
- ☞ The world's largest producer of maize, what and soyabean is North America

- ☞ The world's largest sugar exporter among the seven continents – Cuba – also called the 'sugar bowl of the world' is located in North America
- ☞ The world's smallest owl – the Elf – is found on this continent
- ☞ The moose and the elk, found in North America, are the first and second tallest animals on the continent
- ☞ The other major animals of North America are –brown bears, hummingbirds, bald eagles, brown bears, bullfrogs

7. South America

- ☞ Size: 17,840,000 sq km
- ☞ No. of countries: 12
- ☞ Population: 422,535,000
- ☞ The world's largest river as per water volume and the second longest (6440 km) — the Amazon — is in South America
- ☞ This continent houses the world's highest waterfalls — the Angel Falls
- ☞ The world's largest snake and the second longest — the green anaconda — also resides in South America
- ☞ The highest volcanoes of the world — Mt. Cotopaxi and Mt. Chimborazo — are found on this continent
- ☞ Brazil, the country which is the largest coffee producer in the world, is in South America
- ☞ The major languages spoken on this continent are Portuguese and Spanish
- ☞ The largest salt lake in the world — Salar de Uyuni (Uyuni salt flats) — is in South America
- ☞ The world's highest lake (3800 m) and South America's largest is Lake Titicaca
- ☞ After the Himalayas, the Andes form the second highest mountain range in the world. These young-fold mountains are located in South America. Mt. Aconcagua (7,021 m) is the highest peak in the Andes.