

Module: Latin America and the Caribbean
Topic Content: Physical Regions of Latin America and the Caribbean

Physical Regions of Latin America and the Caribbean



**PHYSICAL
REGIONS**
of Latin America and
the Caribbean

whro
EDUCATION

Click *NEXT* to Begin

Click next to begin.

Module: Latin America and the Caribbean

Topic Content: Physical Regions of Latin America and the Caribbean

Introduction



The physical geography of Latin America and the Caribbean is remarkably diverse. Because of this, geographers often divide the region into smaller sub-regions. These include Mexico and Central America, the Caribbean, and South America. By examining these sub-regions separately, it is easier to understand the wide variety of physical and environmental features found throughout Latin America and the Caribbean.

Module: Latin America and the Caribbean

Topic Content: Physical Regions of Latin America and the Caribbean

Mexico and Central America



Mexico and Central America are located on the southern part of the North American continent. The region serves as a land bridge between North and South America, connecting the two continents at the Isthmus of Panama. The Isthmus of Panama is a narrow strip of land located between the Caribbean Sea and the Pacific Ocean.

The physical geography of Mexico and Central America is dominated by mountain ranges known as the Sierra Madres. The Sierra Madres consist of three different ranges. This includes the Sierra Madre Occidental, which forms the western part of the system. It also includes the Sierra Madre Oriental, which forms the eastern part of the system. Finally, the Sierra Madre del Sur forms the southern part of the system.

The Sierra Madres are part of the Great Continental Divide. They connect the Rocky Mountains of North America with the Andes Mountains of South America. They also enclose the Central Mexican Plateau, which is a flat, elevated region that covers a large part of Mexico.

Module: Latin America and the Caribbean
Topic Content: Physical Regions of Latin America and the Caribbean

Mexico and Central America (continued)



The Sierra Madres are surrounded by lowland coastal plains on both sides. The eastern coastal plains, which border the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean Sea, are much wider than the western coastal plains, which border the Pacific Ocean. The largest area of coastal plain is on the Yucatán Peninsula, which is the flattest region of Mexico.

It is important to note that this region is located at the intersection of several tectonic plates. Because of this, earthquakes and volcanic eruptions are common.

Module: Latin America and the Caribbean
Topic Content: Physical Regions of Latin America and the Caribbean

The Caribbean



The Caribbean is a region that encompasses the Caribbean Sea and its many islands. There are more than 7,000 individual islands in the Caribbean. These are grouped into three archipelagos: The Greater Antilles, the Lesser Antilles, and the Lucayan Archipelago.

The Greater Antilles are in the northwestern part of the Caribbean, near the United States and the Gulf of Mexico. These islands include the large islands of Cuba, Hispaniola, Jamaica, and Puerto Rico. The Lesser Antilles includes the smaller islands located in the southeastern part of the Caribbean, near South America. The Lucayan Archipelago, also called the Bahama Archipelago, contains the Bahamas and the islands of Turks and Caicos.

Multiple plate boundaries are located in this region. The mountainous islands were largely formed by volcanic eruptions. In fact, the eastern boundary of the Caribbean Plate is roughly aligned with the Lesser Antilles. The movement of these tectonic plates can also cause earthquakes in the region.

Module: Latin America and the Caribbean
Topic Content: Physical Regions of Latin America and the Caribbean

South America



Most of South America is located south of the equator, in the Southern Hemisphere. Because of this, seasons in most of South America are the opposite of seasons in the Northern Hemisphere. This means when it is winter in the United States, it is summer in Argentina.

Module: Latin America and the Caribbean
Topic Content: Physical Regions of Latin America and the Caribbean

South America: Andes Mountains



The Andes Mountains span the western coast of the continent, near the Pacific Ocean. These mountains are the world's longest above-water mountain range. They are also part of the Great Continental Divide of the Americas.

The highest peak, Mount Aconcagua, is the highest point in the Americas. It reaches nearly 23,000 feet above sea level. Located along a major plate boundary, this massive mountain range was formed through tectonic activity. This also causes regular earthquakes and volcanic eruptions in the region.

Module: Latin America and the Caribbean
Topic Content: Physical Regions of Latin America and the Caribbean

South America: Altiplano and Atacama



At the widest point of the Andes lies a flat area of land called the Altiplano. Also known as the Andean Plateau or the Bolivian Plateau, the Altiplano is the second-largest highland plateau in the world, after Tibet. It is also home to Lake Titicaca, which is South America's largest lake.

The Atacama Desert lies southwest of the Altiplano, along the Pacific coast. This coastal desert is actually the driest region in the world. This is because the Atacama is located in a large rain shadow, which, with a few rare exceptions, receives no precipitation.

Module: Latin America and the Caribbean
Topic Content: Physical Regions of Latin America and the Caribbean

South America: Highlands



There are two additional highland regions located on the South American continent. This includes the Brazilian Highlands and the Guiana Highlands. These regions have much lower elevations than the Andes Mountains. The highest peaks reach approximately 9,000 feet. Both regions are geographically similar. They have terrain composed of elevated plateaus, low mountains, and rolling hills. The world's highest waterfall, Angel Falls, is in the Guiana Highlands.

Module: Latin America and the Caribbean
Topic Content: Physical Regions of Latin America and the Caribbean

South America: Amazon River Basin



The Amazon River lies south of the Guiana Highlands and north of the Brazilian Highlands. This vast river carries more water by volume than any other river in the world. It is fed by more than 1,100 tributaries that drain water from all three of the continent's highland regions. The entire system is called the Amazon River Basin. It covers approximately 40% of South America. The Amazon River Basin has a tropical wet climate, and contains the largest tropical rain forest in the world.

Module: Latin America and the Caribbean
Topic Content: Physical Regions of Latin America and the Caribbean

South America: Other Major Rivers



There are two other major river systems located on the continent. The first of these systems includes the Paraná River, which is the second-longest river in South America after the Amazon. The Paraná River begins in the Brazilian Highlands and flows south, where it first unites with the Paraguay River. It then merges with the Uruguay River.

These rivers form an estuary at the Atlantic coast called the Rio de la Plata. An estuary is a partially enclosed coastal body of water fed by one or more rivers. The name Rio de la Plata is also used to describe this entire river basin.

The third major river system includes the Orinoco River, which is the third-largest river in South America. The Orinoco River is located on the northern part of the continent, near the Guiana Highlands. Although the Orinoco is shorter than the Paraná River, it carries nearly twice as much water annually. This is due to heavy precipitation in the region.

Module: Latin America and the Caribbean
Topic Content: Physical Regions of Latin America and the Caribbean

South America: Grasslands



There are two major grassland regions in South America. One is in the north, near the Orinoco River. The other is in the south, near the Rio de la Plata river system.

The northern grassland is called Los Llanos, which means ‘the plains’ in Spanish. Los Llanos has a tropical wet and dry climate, which causes the grasslands to flood during the wet season. The southern grassland is called the Pampas. Its climate is mostly humid subtropical. These large grassland regions have plenty of fertile soil and fresh water, making them ideal areas for agriculture.

Module: Latin America and the Caribbean
Topic Content: Physical Regions of Latin America and the Caribbean

South America: Patagonia



Patagonia is the southernmost portion of South America. This region is largely made up of barren plateaus that shift between semiarid steppe and arid desert. Glaciers can be found in this region as well, since the southern part of Patagonia is relatively close to the Antarctic Circle.