

Andean region map

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The Andes Mountains are a series of extremely high plateaus surmounted by even higher peaks that form an unbroken rampart over a distance of some 5,500 miles (8,900 kilometres)--from the southern tip of South America to the continent's northernmost coast on the Caribbean.

Some historians believe that the "Andes" in Andes Mountains comes from the Quechuan word *anti* ("east"). Others suggest it is derived from the Quechuan *anta* ("copper"). It perhaps is more reasonable to ascribe it to the *anta* of the older Aymara language, which connotes copper color generally.

About 250 million years ago, the crustal plates constituting Earth's landmass were joined together into the supercontinent Pangaea. The breakup of Pangaea dispersed these plates outward, and the collision of two of these plates--the continental South American Plate and the oceanic Nazca Plate--gave rise to the mountain-building activity that produced the Andes Mountains.

The highest point in the Andes Mountains is Mount Aconcagua, located in the Southern Andes Mountains. Although its peak is in Argentina, its western flanks build up from the coastal lowlands of Chile, just north of Santiago. Mount Aconcagua is the highest point in the Western Hemisphere at 22,831 feet (6,959 metres).

The highest altitude in the Andes Mountains at which people have resided permanently is 17,100 feet (5,212 metres; they were shepherds in southern Peru) and as temporary workers 18,500 to 19,000 feet (5,639 to 5,791 metres; at the Carrasco Mine in the Atacama Desert in Chile). The shortage of oxygen at high altitude, especially above 12,000 feet (3,658 metres), imposes deep adaptative changes even within the cells of the body.

The climate and vegetation of the region vary considerably according to altitude, but as a general rule the land can be divided into the *tierra caliente* (hot land) of river valleys and basins below 1,000 m; the more temperate conditions of the *tierra templada* (temperate land, approximately 1,000 m to 2,000 m) and *tierra fría* (cold land, 2,000 m to 3,200 m), which include the most productive land and most of the population; and the alpine conditions of the *zona forestada* (forested zone, 3,200 m to 3,900 m), *paramos* (3,900 m to 4,600 m) and *tierra helada* (frozen land, 4,600 m and above).

West Andes from south to north: Munchique, Farallones de Cali, Tatamá, Las Orquideas, Paramillo

Also referred to as "Cordillera de los Andes" in Spanish, the Andes Mountains is the world's longest mountain range that stretches for more than 6,999km along the western margin of the South American continent. The Andes Mountains have an average height of 4,000m and a maximum width of 200 to 700km, and are

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considered as the highest mountain range that is situated outside the continent of Asia. This long mountain range extends from the north to south direction straddling the seven South American nations of Argentina, Bolivia, Colombia, Chile, Ecuador, Peru, and Venezuela. The Andes Mountains also form a part of the American Cordillera, which is a continuous series of mountain ranges that stretches across a major part of North, Central and South Americas.

Throughout their length, the Andes Mountains are divided into many ranges by intervening depressions. Numerous high plateaus are located in the Andes Mountain Range and some of these plateaus host important South American cities such as Arequipa, Bucaramanga, Bogota, Cali, Merida, Sucre, La Paz, Quito, etc. The Andes Mountains are further divided into three parts: the Northern Andes, the Central Andes, and the Southern Andes. Located in the Central Andes is the 3,750m high Altiplano Plateau, which is considered as the world's second-highest plateau after the 4,500m high Tibetan Plateau.

The climate in the Andes Mountains varies greatly depending upon a host of conditions including its geographical location, proximity to the sea, and altitudinal variations. The Andes Mountain Range also forms a massive climatic barrier between the Pacific Ocean and the South American continent and therefore has a major impact on the climate of the entire region. The northern part of the Andes has a warm and wet climate, while the southern part experiences a comparatively cooler but wet climate. The western side of the Central Andes is very dry and includes the Atacama Desert, while the eastern plains of Argentina, which is located in the mountain's rain-shadow area also have extremely drier weather.

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