

World Geography



Lesson 1 Borders and Boundaries

Chapter 1

Section 1

Lessons 1-5

Borders and Boundaries of North America



Sprawling across the globe's northwest corner and comprising 16.5% of the world's landmass, North America is the third-largest continent and the larger of the two Americas. It includes the countries of Canada and the United States, which are respectively the second- and third-largest nations in the world; and generally Mexico, the Danish island of Greenland, and to a lesser extent, the Caribbean islands. According to some sources, Central America, which encompasses the connecting strip of land between Mexico and Colombia, is North American; culturally, however, these countries share far more similarities with South America, and they are excluded in this text. While the continent's two anchor nations



VOCABULARY

archipelago: group of islands

estuary: broad mouth of a river into which the tide flows

pack ice: crust of ice formed when seawater freezes, typically seasonally

colonies: region politically controlled by a distant country; a dependency

states: political subdivision of a nation

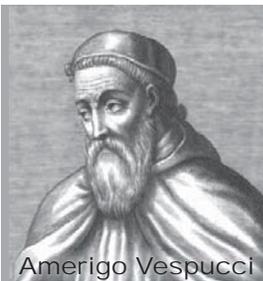
provinces: administrative district or division of a country

account for 80% of North American land area and are far more developed than their southern neighbors,

other nations are important both locally and internationally. Mexico City, for instance, is the third-most populous metropolitan area in the world, and Cuba is one of only five communist nations worldwide. The continent wields far-reaching influence politically, economically, socially, and spiritually, a fact owed in part to its vast territorial holdings, free enterprise economics, and Judeo-Christian heritage.

As with many place names, the origins of the term "America" are questionable, in part because different people



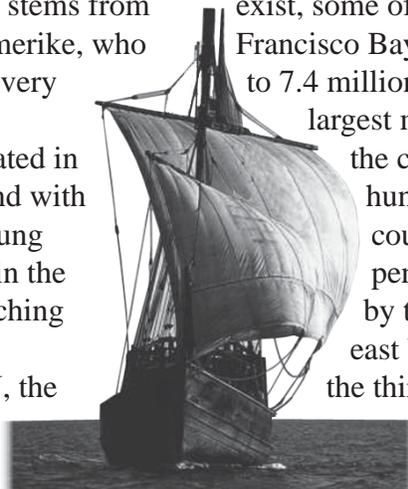


groups throughout the continent have tended to elevate their own role in its naming. It is generally accepted that both North and South America were named after Italian explorer Amerigo Vespucci, who ventured west several years after Christopher Columbus and proposed that America was not the India that European sailors hoped to reach, but was an unknown and uncharted landmass. In his travels, Vespucci actually reached only South America, but his name was pinned to North America, as well, when it was mapped in the 16th century. Nonetheless, other accounts point different directions. Some postulate that the term derives from a Native American tongue, while one theory suggests it stems from Welsh merchant Richard Amerike, who financed John Cabot's discovery of Newfoundland in 1477.

North America is located in the Northern Hemisphere and with the exception of some far-flung Aleutian Islands is entirely in the Western Hemisphere. Stretching from approximately 165° to 15°W and from 15° to 83°N, the continent begins in the state of Alaska, which carves an irregular path through the Arctic Ocean en route to its juncture with Canada. At 71°23'N, Point Barrow, Alaska is the northernmost point in the United States, and the nearby town of Barrow is the northernmost inhabited place on the North American mainland. In the state's southwest, the Aleutian Islands jut out 1,200 miles into the North Pacific Ocean, collectively inhabited by less than

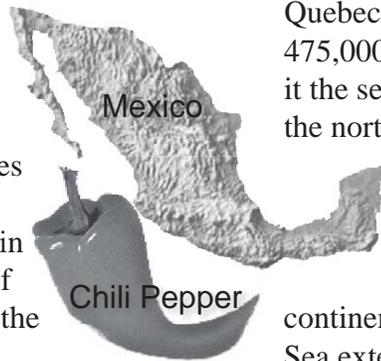
10,000 people. The easternmost island in the *archipelago*, Semisopochnoi Island, is located at 179°37'E and is therefore the only part of North America in the Eastern Hemisphere. From the Aleutians, the coastline is a thin strip of southeast running land that shields Canada from the Pacific for several hundred miles. Where Alaska ends and Canada's British Columbia picks up, the southeast trajectory continues down to the U.S. border, where the coast turns more directly south (see Map C).

From the northwestern states of Washington through Oregon and California, the coast turns slightly southwest, bulging in Northern California and gradually curving southeast again toward the south. While the California coast is not as rugged or irregular as the Alaskan or Canadian coastlines, several bays, inlets, and natural harbors exist, some of which are populous. The San Francisco Bay area, for instance, is home to 7.4 million people and is the U.S.'s fifth largest metropolitan area. In Mexico, the coastline continues for several hundred miles on the same course along the Baja California peninsula, bordered on the west by the Pacific Ocean and on the east by the Gulf of California, the third-largest inland sea on the continent. The Mexican mainland roughly parallels the peninsula and continues past it, gradually scooping east and curving northeast around 95°W (see Map B). In the southeast, the Central American countries of Guatemala and Belize attach to the Yucatán Peninsula, which divides the northern Gulf of Mexico from the southern Caribbean Sea; Mexico hooks around the peninsula and backtracks north and northwest. The shape of the country generally resembles that of a



Ship Similar to Vespucci's

chili pepper. As Mexico reconnects with the U.S., the coastline along the Gulf of Mexico takes an easterly course, at times giving way to small bays and harbors, particularly in Louisiana, where much of the population lives near the water.



In Florida, the coast turns sharply south before curving back north several hundred miles later; the tip of the state spawns a chain of islands similar to the Aleutians known as the Florida Keys. In the eastern United States, the Atlantic Ocean washes upon a meandering coastline that travels first northeast and then northwest past North Carolina, whose scenic shores bump out far into the ocean. Further north, the land becomes more irregular, as larger bays and inlets proliferate in Maryland, Pennsylvania, and New York. The Chesapeake Bay in Maryland divides the western part from the eastern and is the U.S.'s largest *estuary*. New York's Long Island and Massachusetts's Cape Cod peninsula carve into the Atlantic and are developed and affluent, and off the coast of Maine are numerous islands, the most notable of which is Canada's Prince Edward Island.

Located across the Gulf of St. Lawrence is the island of Newfoundland, the world's 15th largest island. It is separated from the Canadian mainland by just nine miles, and from there the coast extends northwest. For more than 1,000 miles the North Atlantic ocean broadens to the west, forming the Labrador Sea. Rounding the tip of

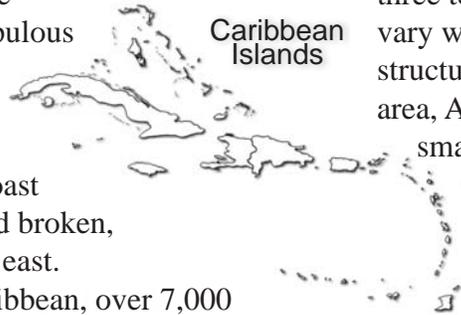


Quebec, the Hudson Bay stretches across 475,000 square miles of wilderness, making it the second-largest bay in the world. To the north, Canada begins to fragment more dramatically. Nunavut Territory in the far north traces a somewhat westerly path through bays, straits, channels, and small seas. In the continent's extreme northwest, the Beaufort Sea extends the reach of the frigid Arctic Ocean (see Map C).

The 36,563 islands that comprise the Canadian Arctic Archipelago are one of the world's most fascinating geographical phenomena. This region, which is considered to mean the islands north of the Canadian mainland between the Arctic and Atlantic Oceans, is sparsely populated, its cold climate rendering it largely inhospitable to settlement. Three of the world's ten largest islands are here, including fifth-place Baffin Island. The sheer number of isles and their irregular coasts dramatically extend Canada's total length of coastline to 125,566 miles, the world's longest. The Northwest Passages, a modestly used sea trade route that connects the North Atlantic Ocean to the North Pacific, carve through the region and convey shipping traffic during summer months when *pack ice* is less widespread.

Several islands and outlying territories round out the North American continent. Greenland is technically owned by Denmark but functions largely as a sovereign nation. With the exception of Alaska, whose Aleutian Islands cross the International Date Line into the eastern hemisphere, Greenland is the easternmost place in North America and the world's largest island. At 836,109 square miles, it covers an area over three times the

size of Texas, and with less than 60,000 residents, it is the world's least populous island. Over half of its bulk is in the Arctic Circle, and its coast is also varied and broken, especially in the east.



In the Caribbean, over 7,000 islands dot the tropical waters, where pleasant climate and pristine beaches attract a thriving tourist industry. Most were *colonies* of Europe, beginning in the 16th century, and many retain their own character in religion, language, customs, and governance. Some of these are independent nations, others merely territories; in the south, many of these island nations identify more with Latin America than with North America. Cuba is the largest Caribbean nation at 42,803 square miles; other large islands include Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Jamaica, Puerto Rico, and the string of small isles known as the Bahamas. Spanish and French are among the strongest influences here, while close proximity to and an influx of tourists from the United States have also shaped island culture and customs. 2,500 miles southwest of California, the island state of Hawaii is another bastion of tourism, boasting spectacular scenery and a booming agricultural industry.

The United States, Canada, and Mexico are subdivided into territories whose names vary by country. The United States and Mexico term their divisions



states, while Canada has ten *provinces* and three territories. In the United States, states vary widely by area, population, political structure, and other aspects: the largest by area, Alaska, is 429 times larger than the smallest, Rhode Island. In Mexico and Canada, states and provinces are considerably closer in area, though population figures diverge widely (see Map B). These three nations are home to all of North America's largest metropolitan areas, some of which are among the most populous in the world. The population of the Mexico City metropolitan area is over 24 million, placing it in close competition with Seoul, South Korea for the second-largest worldwide, and others such as New York (22 million metro), Los Angeles (14-18 million metro), and Chicago (10 million metro) serve as political and economic capitals within their respective regions. North America's total population hovers around 490 million, or about seven percent of the world. The United States accounts for around 310 million, Mexico for 115 million, and Canada for 34 million; the remaining population are scattered chiefly throughout the Caribbean.

LIFE PRINCIPLE

Balance, peace, and joy are the fruits of a successful life. It starts with recognizing your talents and finding ways to serve others by using them.

- Thomas Kinkade