

Asia is the largest of the world's continents, covering approximately 30 percent of the Earth's land area. It is also the world's most populous continent, with roughly 60 percent of the total population.

Asia makes up the eastern portion of the Eurasian supercontinent; Europe occupies the western portion. The border between the two continents is debated. However, most geographers define Asia's western border as an indirect line that follows the Ural Mountains, the Caucasus Mountains, and the Caspian and Black Seas. Asia is bordered by the Arctic, Pacific, and Indian Oceans.

Asia's physical geography, environment and resources, and human geography can be considered separately.

Asia can be divided into five major physical regions: mountain systems; plateaus; plains, steppes, and deserts; freshwater environments; and saltwater environments.

Mountain Systems

The Himalaya mountains extend for about 2,500 kilometers (1,550 miles), separating the Indian subcontinent from the rest of Asia. The Indian subcontinent, once connected to Africa, collided with the Eurasian continent about 50 million to 55 million years ago, forming the Himalayas. The Indian subcontinent is still crashing northward into Asia, and the Himalayas are growing about 5 centimeters (2 inches) every year.

Name: _____

Date: _____

The Himalayas cover more than 612,000 square kilometers (236,000 square miles), passing through the northern states of India and making up most of the terrain of Nepal and Bhutan. The Himalayas are so vast that they are composed of three different mountain belts. The northernmost belt, known as the Great Himalayas, has the highest average elevation at 6,096 meters (20,000 feet). The belt contains nine of the highest peaks in the world, which all reach more than 7,925 meters (26,000 feet) tall. This belt includes the highest mountain summit in the world, Mount Everest, which stands at 8,850 meters (29,035 feet).

The Tien Shan mountain system stretches for about 2,400 kilometers (1,500 miles), straddling the border between Kyrgyzstan and China. The name Tien Shan means "Celestial Mountains" in Chinese. The two highest peaks in the Tien Shan are Victory Peak, which stands at 7,439 meters (24,406 feet), and Khan Tängiri Peak, which stands at 6,995 meters (22,949 feet). Tien Shan also has more than 10,100 square kilometers (3,900 square miles) of glaciers. The largest glacier is Engil'chek Glacier, which is about 60 kilometers (37 miles) long.

The Ural Mountains run for approximately 2,500 kilometers (1,550 miles) in an indirect north-south line from Russia to Kazakhstan. The Ural Mountains are some of the world's oldest, at 250 million to 300 million years old. Millions of years of erosion have lowered the mountains significantly, and today their average

elevation is between 914 and 1,220 meters (3,000 to 4,000 feet). The highest peak is Mount Narodnaya at 1,895 meters (6,217 feet).

Plateaus

Asia is home to many plateaus, areas of relatively level high ground. The Iranian plateau covers more than 3.6 million square kilometers (1.4 million square miles), encompassing most of Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. The plateau is not uniformly flat, but contains some high mountains and low river basins. The highest mountain peak is Damavand, at 5,610 meters (18,410 feet). The plateau also has two large deserts, the Dasht-e Kavir and Dasht-e Lut.

The Deccan Plateau makes up most of the southern part of India. The plateau's average elevation is about 600 meters (2,000 feet). It is bordered by three mountain ranges: the Satpura Range in the north, and the Eastern and Western Ghats on either side. The plateau and its main waterways—the Godavari and Krishna rivers—gently slope toward the Eastern Ghats and the Bay of Bengal.

The Tibetan Plateau is usually considered the largest and highest area ever to exist in the history of Earth. Known as the “Rooftop of the World,” the plateau covers an area about half the size of the contiguous United States and averages more than 5,000 meters (16,400 feet) above sea level. The Tibetan Plateau is extremely important to the world's water cycle because of its tremendous number of glaciers. These glaciers contain the largest

volume of ice outside the poles. The ice and snow from these glaciers feed Asia's largest rivers. Approximately 2 billion people depend on the rivers fed by the plateau's glaciers.

Plains, Steppes, and Deserts

The West Siberian Plain, located in central Russia, is considered one of the world's largest areas of continuous flatland. It extends from north to south about 2,400 kilometers (1,500 miles) and from west to east about 1,900 kilometers (1,200 miles). With more than 50 percent of its area at less than 100 meters (330 feet) above sea level, the plain contains some of the world's largest swamps and flood plains.

Central Asia is dominated by a steppe landscape, a large area of flat, unforested grassland. Mongolia can be divided into different steppe zones: the mountain forest steppe, the arid steppe, and the desert steppe. These zones transition from the country's mountainous region in the north to the Gobi Desert on the southern border with China.

The Rub' al Khali desert, considered the world's largest sand sea, covers an area larger than France across Saudi Arabia, Oman, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen. It holds roughly half as much sand as Africa's Sahara desert, even though it is 15 times smaller in size. The desert is known as the Empty Quarter because it is virtually inhospitable to humans except for Bedouin tribes that live on its edges.