

## SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

Home to 10% of the world's population, sub-Saharan Africa is one of the planet's most diverse regions. Currently divided into 42 countries on the mainland and six island nations, sub-Saharan Africa has hundreds of languages and regions, as well as myriad ecological zones and landforms. The world's most impoverished region, sub-Saharan Africa is home to some 750 million people, who face economic and environmental problems despite the area's vast natural resources and relatively pleasant climatic zones. Sub-Saharan Africa is therefore a land of both diversity and struggle.

### Landforms

Ecologically separated from North Africa by the sweeping and sparsely populated Sahara Desert, the sub-Saharan mainland consists of four vast and distinct regions: Central Africa, East Africa, West Africa, and Southern Africa. Together, they constitute an area of 9.4 million square miles. With the notable exceptions of the East African Rift System and the Drakensberg Range along the southern coast, much of sub-Saharan Africa is made up of flat geological surfaces composed of massive rocks that form the enormous sloping plateaus of southeastern and Central Africa. These plateaus gradually descend northward into the characteristic plains of the continent's interior and finally into the basin regions of the Congo, Niger, and Nile rivers.

In stark contrast to the rain forest areas found in the western and central territories of the continent—and the nearly uniform flatness of much of the landscape—stands the magnificent Great Rift Valley. Although Africa as a whole has fewer high mountains than any other continent, the Great Rift Valley is among the geographical wonders of the world. It extends 4,000 miles from East Africa and downward into the easternmost part of Central Africa, where the continent reaches its peak at Mount Kilimanjaro, majestically rising 19,340 feet above sea level. In addition to the diversity of its mainland, a number of islands exist off the coast of sub-Saharan Africa, including Madagascar—the fourth largest island on Earth.

### Climate



Contrary to the popular depiction of Africa as a dry and ravaged landmass, most of the sub-Saharan portion of the continent—that is, the great majority of Africa—enjoys hospitable yet impressively distinctive seasonal climates. With the exception of Southern Africa, virtually the entirety of the sub-Saharan region lies in the tropics and, as such, generally tends to exhibit the characteristics of tropical and subtropical climatic zones. However, diverse local environmental factors, including high altitudes and an uninterrupted expanse of plains and plateau, contribute to the continent's varying weather conditions.

Tucked between the foreboding Sahara Desert and the lush rain forests of West Africa, the Sahel and savanna regions display typical desert temperatures and conditions but experience some rainfall during the monsoon season. Steady rainfall emanating from the Atlantic and Indian oceans provide the rain forest regions of Central and West Africa with an average of 70 inches of rain per year. South of the equator, the heaviest rainfall in Africa occurs in the lands of the southeastern coast of southern Africa. Here, humid tropical conditions are more pronounced, particularly during the summer months.



Southern Africa lies outside of the tropical zone and boasts varying climates, ranging from desert to subtropical. The coastal regions display the typical facets of a Mediterranean-type climate, with rainfall occurring only in winter. These pleasantly warm conditions extend inland, but due to the area's relatively high altitude, winter temperatures are slightly colder than in other regions of the world that exist in similar climatic zones.



## Vegetation and Animal Life

Southern Africa features four distinct vegetation zones—from desert landscapes to humid tropical coastal environments. Hearty scrubs, drought-resistant trees, and tough grasses survive in the unyieldingly sparse climate of the Sahel, which gradually gives way to the striking expanse of grassland that is the Savanna. In contrast, the rich soil of the Ethiopian Highlands supports coffee and grain production. Along the

Rift Valley, East and Central Africa host a diverse Great Lakes region that consists of 15 deep bodies of water, most notably Lake Victoria—the world's second-largest freshwater lake. It is therefore unsurprising that the ecologically rich area surrounding Lake Victoria is one of the most densely populated areas on the African continent. The Great Lakes region is a magnificent example of biodiversity; here the vegetation ranges from savanna grasses to rain forest-like environments that echo the sizable tropical forests found in West Africa.



The animal life of sub-Saharan Africa is as wide-ranging as the landscape. Nomadic elephants and giraffes, along with the durable desert cattle known as the zebu, are the largest mammals found in the harsh Sahel region, but they are outnumbered by the resourceful Senegal gerbil. Further to the south, the dense rain forests support nearly half of the continent's animals; in this complex and still largely unexplored ecosystem, many species of monkeys and gorillas coexist alongside innumerable exotic parrots, frogs, and lizards.

On the eastern reaches of the continent, the Ethiopian Highlands host a breathtaking assortment of bird species and the fearsome Ethiopian wolf. As the Great Rift Valley descends southward, lions, hippopotamuses, crocodiles, and myriad species of large and small fish are to be found in the Great Lakes region. Finally, the arid windswept plains of southern Africa are home to the world's most magnificent menagerie of large roaming mammals, such as swift impalas, antelope, and zebras. These majestic creatures exist symbiotically with grazing giraffes, elephants, and white rhinoceroses. Large birds, particularly the ostrich and the kori bustard, are also found here in abundance.



## People

Sub-Saharan Africa is home to one of the most diverse collections of humanity on the planet. With 15 major language families comprising 1,298 known languages, sub-Saharan Africa is a linguistic cornucopia. Added to such an indigenous language diversity, the colonialist tongues of Afrikaans, English, French, Portuguese, and Arabic can also be heard as mother languages in different regions. Historically, the ancient Bantu migration was responsible for spreading thousands of various tribal peoples throughout the area, and in modern times, sub-Saharan Africans have maintained their tribal identities despite the horrors of European colonialism, nationalist warfare, and the modern trials of famine and AIDS.

Sub-Saharan Africa is also a diverse land of religions in which Christianity, Islam, and animist beliefs mingle with small but important communities of Jews (most famously in Ethiopia). In modern times, religion has provided important emotional support for many of the millions in sub-Saharan Africa who struggle to survive in a region where poverty, infant-mortality, and death-by-disease rates are the world's highest. Despite the overwhelming poverty statistics, however, there is vast wealth as well, a fact that highlights tremendous discrepancies between the rich and poor in this highly populated region.



## Natural Resources and Agriculture

The sub-Saharan African region is a veritable treasure chest of abundant mineral deposits, and mining has long been a significant aspect of national economies. Approximately half of the world's diamond and gold supplies originate in Africa, as does nearly one-third of the world's uranium output. Additionally, the output of copper, iron ore, platinum, and bauxite—as well as increasing petroleum production—are of vital importance. However,

the indigenous African people have traditionally benefited little or not at all from the exploitation of the continent's natural wealth. Sub-Saharan Africa houses approximately 10% of the world's population, yet it remains the poorest region on earth.

Indeed, pervasive poverty accounts for the inadequacy of currently deployed agricultural methods. Commercial farming hardly exists in the sub-Saharan region, and rural peoples generally live by subsistence farming—which cannot feed an ever-expanding urban population. Increasing deforestation and other man-made environmental problems have compounded the already disastrous agricultural situation, and the result is often widespread famine in rural areas.

Sub-Saharan Africa's population has the world's highest growth rate, and current projections indicate that the region's population will double within the next 20 years. It is now absolutely imperative that modern and efficient agricultural methods are introduced, as well as a fair and equitable distribution of the continent's natural wealth among its long-suffering people.



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