



Image from: [Earth's second smallest continent is, strictly... in Philip's Encyclopedia](#)

Summary Article: **Europe**
From *Philip's Encyclopedia*

Earth's second smallest continent, comprising the western fifth of the Eurasian landmass. It is separated from Asia by the Urals (E), Caspian Sea and the Caucasus (SE), Black Sea and Dardanelles (S), and from Africa by the Mediterranean Sea. **Land** Europe is dominated by the Alpine mountain chain, the main links of which are the Pyrenees, Alps, Carpathian Mountains, Balkan Mountains, and the Caucasus. Between the Scandinavian peninsula and the Alps is the great European plain, which extends from the Atlantic coast in France to the Urals. Much of the plain is fertile farmland. Major islands include the British Isles, Sicily, Sardinia, Corsica and Iceland. **Structure and Geology** Much of N Europe consists of large sedimentary plains overlying an ancient Precambrian shield, outcrops of which remain in N Scandinavia, Scotland and the Urals. There are also worn-down Palaeozoic highlands. Many upland areas N of the Alps were formed during the Carboniferous period, including Ireland, the moorlands of Devon and Cornwall and the Pennines, England. Southern Europe is geologically younger. Alpine folding began in the Oligocene period. Europe's longest river is the Volga; other major rivers are (from W to E) the Tagus, Loire, Rhône, Rhine, Elbe, and Danube. The Caspian Sea is the world's largest lake. **Climate and Vegetation** Europe's climate varies from subtropical to polar. The Mediterranean climate of the S is dry and warm. Much of the land is scrub (*maquis*), with some hardwood forests. Further N, the climate is mild and quite humid, moderated by prevailing westerly winds and the Gulf Stream. The natural vegetation is mixed forest, but this has been greatly depleted. Mixed forest merges into boreal forests of conifers. In SE European Russia, wooded and grass steppe merge into semidesert to the N of the Caspian Sea. In the far N, lies the tundra. **History** The Mediterranean region was the cradle of the ancient Greek and Roman civilizations. The collapse of the Western Roman Empire and the Barbarian invasions brought chaos to much of Europe. During the Middle Ages, Christianity was the unifying force throughout the continent. The post-medieval period witnessed the schism in the Catholic Church and the emergence of the nation-state. European powers began to found vast empires in other parts of the globe (see colonialism; imperialism), and the French Revolution ushered in an era of momentous political changes. During the 20th century, a period overshadowed by two World Wars and the rise of communism, Europe began to lose some of its pre-eminence in world affairs. After World War 2, the countries of Europe divided into two ideological blocs: Eastern Europe, dominated by the Soviet Union; and Western Europe, closely aligned with the USA (see Cold War) The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) was established to act as a deterrent to the spread of communism; the Warsaw Pact was its E European counterpart. Several economic organizations, in particular the European Community (EC), worked towards closer intra-national cooperation. The collapse of Soviet communism in 1991 added to the momentum for a kind of supranational union in the form of a European Union (EU). **Economy** Almost half of European land is unproductive because of climate, relief, soil or urbanization. A quarter of land is forested; the lumber industry is particularly important in Scandinavia and the mountains of E Europe. Fishing is a major industry in countries with Atlantic or North Sea coastlines. Two-thirds of cultivated land is arable. Cereals are the principal crop: wheat is the most important, with oats in the N, and maize in the S. Sheep graze on many upland areas, but dairy farming is by far the most important form of animal husbandry. Many fruits, early vegetables and grapes (mainly used for wine) grow in

Mediterranean areas. Europe produces more than one-third of the world's coal. Germany, Poland, Czech Republic and Russia are the leading producers. Other minerals include bauxite, mercury, lead, zinc, oil and potash. Europe is highly industrialized. The largest industrial areas are in N and NE France, the Ruhr, and around the North Sea ports of Antwerp, Amsterdam, Rotterdam, and Hamburg. Area c.10.36 millionsq km (4 millionsq mi) *Highest mountain* Mount Elbrus (Russia) 5633m (18,481ft) *Longest river* Volga 3750km (2330mi) *Population* (2000 est.) 728,887,000 *Largest cities* Moscow (8,296,000); London (7,172,036); St Petersburg (4,661,000); Berlin (3,388,434) See also individual countries

Europe



Earth's second smallest continent is, strictly speaking, a peninsula of the vast Eurasian land mass. Traditionally, it is separated from Asia by the Urals (E), the Caucasus and the Caspian Sea (se), and the Black Sea (S). Europe is home to more than 500 million people. The ancient civilizations of Greece and Rome were the cradle of democracy. European languages, culture and religion were disseminated by migration, imperialism and colonialism. Throughout human history, Europe has witnessed many destructive wars. In the 19th century, vast European empires crumbled with the rise of nationalism. The antagonism of these new nation-states led to both World Wars. Europe lay at the heart of the Cold War between capitalism and communism. The collapse of Soviet communism saw the emergence of new nations. The European Union (EU) was formed to promote pan-European co-operation and development.

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