

Topic Page: [Oceania](#)

Definition: **Oceania** from *The Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia with Atlas and Weather Guide*

The groups of islands in the southern and central Pacific Ocean, comprising all those intervening between the southeastern shores of Asia and the western shores of America. See Australasia and Oceania.



Image from: [Peoples of Australasia and Oceania in Geography of the World](#)

Summary Article: **Australasia and Oceania**

From *Geography of the World*

This vast island region is spread over a huge area of the Pacific Ocean, to the south of Southeast Asia. Australasia is made up of Australia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea and several nearby islands. Australia is the only country which is also a continent in its own right, the smallest of the seven. Australasia is often linked with three groups of Pacific islands – Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia – which form an even wider region, called Oceania. The climate and geography of Australasia and Oceania are as diverse as the region itself,

ranging from the rainforests of northern Australia, and the glaciers of southern New Zealand, to the coral atolls and volcanoes which form many of the Pacific islands.

Papua New Guinea

Papua New Guinea is the eastern end of the island of New Guinea. The western end is Irian Jaya, part of Indonesia. Papua is a country of high mountains and thick forests. The highest peak, Mount Wilhelm, reaches 4,300 m (14,107 ft) and is often snow-capped, despite lying close to the Equator. Lower down, the climate is hot and humid, ideal for the growth of the rich, tropical rainforests which cover two-thirds of the island.

The Australian outback

Australia has four major deserts – the Simpson, Gibson, Great Sandy, and Great Victoria. Together, they cover most of the heart of the continent in a vast, barren area, known as the outback. Very few people live in the outback, though the dry conditions are good for raising sheep and cattle.



Things to look for

Area: 8,508,238 sq km (3,285,048 sq miles)

Highest point: Mt. Wilhelm, Papua New Guinea, 4,300 m (14,107 ft)

Longest river: Murray-Darling, Australia, 3,824 km (2,376 miles)

Largest lake: L. Eyre, Australia, maximum size 9,690 sq km (3,742 sq miles)

Largest island: New Guinea, 787,878 sq km (304,200 sq miles)

Hawaiian Island chain

Some Pacific islands are steep-sided volcanoes, rising out of the sea. The Hawaiian Islands are a chain of 132 islands that were formed by “hot spot” volcanoes. Most volcanoes occur along the edges of the plates which make up the Earth’s crust. But hot spot volcanoes are found over isolated plumes of magma (red-hot liquid rock) rising up through the sea floor. As the plates of crust move across a hot spot, a new volcano is born. At present, the hot spot lies under the island of Hawaii itself.

Geysers

New Zealand’s North Island is part of the Pacific “Ring of Fire” and has hundreds of active volcanoes, which are erupting all the time. The hot, volcanic rocks heat underground water, which bubbles up through cracks to form boiling hot springs. Sometimes the water gets so hot it turns to steam. This forces the water above it upwards, until it bursts into the air in a tall, spectacular spout, called a geyser.



Pohutu geyser at Rotorua erupts three or four times a day, occasionally reaching a height of 30 m (98 ft).

The Great Barrier Reef

The world’s largest coral reef lies off the northeast coast of Australia. The Great Barrier Reef is in fact a chain of more than 2,500 smaller reefs. Most of the reef was formed in the last 2 million years, but parts are 25 million years old. There are now fears that human activities, such as tourism and mining, are damaging the fragile balance of the reef and its wildlife.



The Great Barrier Reef was formed by tiny creatures, called corals.

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