

## Topic Page: [Southeast Asia](#)

Definition: **Southeast Asia** from *Collins English Dictionary*

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**1** a region including Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam



Image from: [Burma in Philip's Encyclopedia](#)

Summary Article: **Southeast Asia**  
From *The Columbia Encyclopedia*

region of Asia (1990 est. pop. 442,500,000), c.1,740,000 sq mi (4,506,600 sq km), bounded roughly by the Indian subcontinent on the west, China on the north, and the Pacific Ocean on the east. The name "Southeast Asia" came into popular use after World War II and has replaced such phrases as "Further India," "the East Indies," "Indo-China," and "the Malay Peninsula," which formerly designated all or part of the region. Southeast Asia includes the Indochina Peninsula, which juts into the South China Sea, the Malay Peninsula, and the Indonesian and Philippine Archipelagos. The region has 10 independent countries: Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam.

Peninsular Southeast Asia is a rugged region traversed by many mountains and drained by great rivers such as the Thanlwin, Ayeyarwady, Chao Phraya, and Mekong. Insular Southeast Asia is made up of numerous volcanic and coral islands. Southeast Asia has a generally tropical rainy climate, with the exception of the northwestern part, which has a humid subtropical climate. The wet monsoon winds are vital for the economic well-being of the region. Tropical forests cover most of the area. Rice is the chief crop of the region; rubber, tea, spices, and coconuts are also important. The region has a great variety of minerals and produces most of the world's tin.

### People

Population is unevenly distributed, with the highest density in lowland areas. Most of the people live in small agrarian villages; the largest cities are Jakarta, Indonesia; Bangkok, Thailand; Singapore; Manila, Philippines; and Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. There is a great diversity in culture, history, religion, and ethnic composition. Many different languages are spoken, such as those of the Tibeto-Burman, Mon-Khmer, and Malayo-Polynesian families. Religions include Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Roman Catholicism, and Confucianism. Animism is still practiced among many more isolated peoples of the region.

### History

Most of the influences that molded the societies of Southeast Asia predate European colonization, coming from early Chinese and Indian sources. Several great civilizations, including those of the Khmers and Malays, have flourished there. In the late 15th cent., Islamic influences grew strong but were overshadowed by the arrival of Europeans, who established their power throughout Southeast Asia; only Thailand remained free of colonial occupation. Because of Southeast Asia's strategic location between Japan and India, and the importance of shipping routes that traverse it, the region became the scene of battles between Allied and Japanese forces during World War II.

After the war the countries of Southeast Asia have reemerged as independent nations. They have been plagued by political turmoil, weak economies, ethnic strife, and social inequities, although the situation for most Southeast Asian nations improved in the 1980s and 90s. Throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, however, there were open conflicts between Communist and non-Communist factions throughout most of the region, especially in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia (see Vietnam War). In 1967 Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand created the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the objectives of which are to promote regional economic growth, political stability, social progress, and cultural developments. Since then, Brunei (1984), Vietnam (1995), Laos (1997), and Myanmar and Cambodia (1999) have joined ASEAN. In 1997 a monetary collapse in Thailand sparked a general economic crisis in several nations in the region; the results were most severe in Indonesia, which underwent economic, political, and social turmoil in the late 1990s.

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