

Topic Page: [West Indies](#)

Definition: **West Indies** from *Collins English Dictionary*

n (functioning as singular or plural)

1 an archipelago off Central America, extending over 2400 km (1500 miles) in an arc from the peninsula of Florida to Venezuela, separating the Caribbean Sea from the Atlantic Ocean: consists of the Greater Antilles, the Lesser Antilles, and the Bahamas; largest island is Cuba. Area: over 235 000 sq km (91 000 sq miles) Also called: **the Caribbean**



Image from:

[Stretching for 3200km \(2000mi\), the island chain... in Philip's Encyclopedia](#)

Summary Article: **West Indies**

From *The Columbia Encyclopedia*

archipelago, between North and South America, curving c.2,500 mi (4,020 km) from Florida to the coast of Venezuela and separating the Caribbean Sea and the Gulf of Mexico from the Atlantic Ocean. The archipelago, sometimes called the Antilles, is divided into three groups: the Bahamas; the Greater Antilles (Cuba, Jamaica, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico); and the Lesser Antilles (Leeward Islands, Windward Islands, Trinidad and Tobago, Barbados) and the islands off the northern coast of Venezuela.

The British dependent territories are the Cayman Islands, the Turks and Caicos Islands, Anguilla, Montserrat, and the British Virgin Islands. The Dutch territories are Aruba, Curaçao, Bonaire, Saint Eustatius, Saba, and part of Saint Martin. The French territories are Guadeloupe and its dependencies, part of Saint Martin, and Martinique. Puerto Rico is a self-governing commonwealth associated with the United States, and the Virgin Islands of the United States is a U.S. territory. Margarita belongs to Venezuela.

Many of the islands are mountainous, and some have partly active volcanoes. Hurricanes occur frequently, but the warm climate (tempered by northeast trade winds) and the clear tropical seas have made the West Indies a very popular resort area. Some 34 million people live on the islands, and the majority of inhabitants are of black African descent.

History

Before European settlement on the islands of the West Indies, they were inhabited by three different peoples: the Arawaks, the Caribs, and the Ciboney. These indigenous tribes were effectively wiped out by European colonists. Christopher Columbus was the first European to visit several of the islands (in 1492). In 1496 the first permanent European settlement was made by the Spanish on Hispaniola. By the middle 1600s the English, French, and Dutch had established settlements in the area, and in the following century there was constant warfare among the European colonial powers for control of the islands. Some islands flourished as trade centers and became targets for pirates. Large numbers of Africans were imported to provide slave labor for the sugarcane plantations that developed there in the 1600s.

Until the early 20th cent., the islands remained pawns of the imperialistic powers of Europe, mainly Spain, Great Britain, France, and the Netherlands. The United States entered the scene in the late 19th

cent. and is the region's dominate economic influence. Spain lost its last possession in the West Indies after the Spanish-American War (1898), and most of the former British possessions gained independence in the 1960s and 70s (see West Indies Federation).

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