On the woody vales of the Niger [River]
And the meandering plains of the Volta [River],
On the shoulders of Kilimanjaro,
Carpeted with the icy sheen of snow,
There breathes the vast elusive Africa,
That Africa of long ago.

Michael Dei-Anang, Ghanian poet

Vale – valley
Meandering – following a winding course
Sheen – slick coating
Elusive – hard to pin down or understand

Africa is the second-largest continent (after Asia). It is the continent that has the greatest number of countries – 55 - and about 888 million people. It covers 11,608,000 square miles — 20% of the Earth’s surface.

Africa is about 3 times the size of the United States (almost 4 times larger if you exclude Alaska).

It has 19,000 miles of coastline. Lake Victoria, in eastern/central Africa, is slightly larger than Lake Michigan. The Nile River is over 4,000 miles long. Its highest point is the 19,000-foot Mount Kilimanjaro in modern-day Kenya. The lowest elevation is about 500 feet below sea level. To the north of Africa is Europe, separated by the Mediterranean Sea. Its west coast touches the Atlantic Ocean.

1. In the northeast is the Sinai Peninsula, which is a land bridge to Asia
2. In the east, the Red Sea is narrow and fairly easy to cross, and separates Africa from the Arabian Peninsula.
3. The Indian Ocean touches Africa’s east coast. While it is a vast body of water, it is possible to travel to southern Asia rapidly because of the monsoon winds.
4. The west coast of Africa is bounded by the Atlantic Ocean. The large “curve” in Africa is known as the Bight of Benin, and was the center of the trans-Atlantic slave trade from the 1400s to the 1800s.

There are narrow fertile strips on the northern and southern coasts of Africa. However, over 50% of Africa has inadequate precipitation, [rainfall] and 92% of the continent exhibits climatic contrasts: a shortage of water where it is needed, and an oversupply in places where it cannot be fully used.
About 8% of Africa is tropical rainforest, with 10-12 months of rainfall (over 50 inches a year). These areas, in central Africa, contain a wide range of plant and animal species and are at risk for deforestation.

The Sahara Desert — the largest in the world (about the size of the United States) — dominates northern Africa. It occupies about 25% of Africa’s surface. In the south, the Namib Desert and the Kalahari Desert form much of the southwest and southern territory.

About 40% of the land in Africa is savanna: plains with tall grasses and scattered trees and water bodies. The savanna can support agriculture and herding. There are actually sub-categories of savanna, which different types of vegetation, growing seasons, and annual rainfall (from about 20 to more than 35 inches per year).

It is hard to measure the precise boundaries of the savannah. In general, the savannah covers about 40% of Africa’s surface (the savannah takes up about 60% of the land in subtropical Africa).

To the south of the Sahara is a region known as the Sahel. This term means ‘coastline’ in Arabic, as the Sahara seemed like a sea to early peoples.

The Sahara grows larger each year due to desertification, reducing the supply of arable land.

Africa is enormous. It is larger than the U.S., Europe, Spain, Japan, India, Mexico, and China combined.
**Vegetation**

- Desert
- Semi-Desert & Desert Steppe
- Tropical Woodland & Grassland Savanna
- Tropical Broadleaf Woodland Savanna
- Oasis Vegetation
- Tropical Rainforest
- Mountain Vegetation & Temperate Grassland
- Mediterranean Forest & Scrub
- The Sahel

**Climates**

- Tropical Rainforest
- Humid Subtropical
- Mediterranean
- Savanna
- Steppe
- Desert
- Highland
- Marine

- Over 50% of Africa has inadequate precipitation
- 92% of the continent of Africa experiences climatic contrasts; shortage of water where it is needed most and oversupply of water where it cannot be fully used
- About 8% of Africa has a tropical climate with 10 to 12 months of rainfall
- Africa has about one-third of all the arid lands in the world

*Climate definitions are based on the Köppen System. Click on Köppen Symbol for further explanation*