

The Midwest Region



Corn. Wheat. Cows. Bison. Wide prairies. Great Lakes. The Mighty Mississippi. The "Heart of America" is perfect for farming and ranching, but watch out for tornados!

Land and Water

The land of the Midwest is very different from the land in the regions to its east. Almost all the Midwest is flat, gently rolling land with very few trees, called the Central Plains. Prairie grasses cover much of the land. The prairie grasses help make the soil extremely fertile. The Central Plains are low, but rise slowly west of the Mississippi River.

The Great Plains lie to the west of the Central Plains. The soil isn't as fertile, and there is less rainfall. The land is higher, drier, and rockier. The Great Plains are mostly dry grassland with few trees. The Black Hills in South Dakota are the hilliest part of the Great Plains. The Black Hills have very high peaks made of granite.



There are areas of the Great Plains that are very dry. These areas are called the Badlands because the land is useless for farming and many other human purposes. In the Badlands, there are steep slopes made of clay and soft rock. When it rains, the clay and rock erode, creating canyons and many strange shapes in the soft rock.



There are twelve states in the Midwest region. The Midwest lies in the middle of the United States.

Water in the Midwest is very important. Most major cities in the Midwest formed near these waterways. Before railroads, travel on waterways was faster and less expensive than traveling on land. The Mississippi River and the Missouri River combine to make an important waterway. The Mississippi River runs 2,300 miles through the Central Plains all the way to the Gulf of Mexico. Many tributaries join the Mississippi River, including the Missouri River and the Arkansas River from the west, and by the Ohio River from the east. The Missouri River is the longest river in North America, flowing just a few hundred feet farther than the Mississippi. The rivers are a busy water highway for boats and barges. The riverbanks are lined with levees, raised areas that stop the river from overflowing.

Four of the five Great Lakes touch the Midwest region. These lakes are so large they hold one-fourth of all the fresh water in the world—over 6 quadrillion gallons! Rivers and canals connect the Great Lakes to the Atlantic Ocean and the Gulf of Mexico.

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Climate

The Midwest can have severe weather. It has no ocean nearby to warm the land in winter and cool it in the summer, so the winters are very cold and the summers are very hot. The winters are long and harsh. In the winter, storms called blizzards bring heavy snow and freezing winds. In the winter months, the Soo Locks are closed because of ice on the Great Lakes. Spring brings hailstorms that drop hailstones, or lumps of ice, instead of rain.

In the spring and summer, there are tornadoes with strong, whirling winds. Part of the Midwest region is called Tornado Alley because it has a very high number of very destructive tornadoes. People who live in Tornado Alley are aware that tornadoes pose a potential danger for them. Buildings in this area have strong roofs and a foundations that are tethered to the structure. Many people have storm cellars, underground shelters that protect people from a tornado. Neighborhood tornado sirens warn people when tornadoes are about to happen.

Plants and animals also adapt to the climate. Prairie grass has deep roots to find water. Some birds migrate to warmer places in the winter. Prairie dogs live underground. Bison have thick fur to help them survive the cold winters. Millions of bison once lived on the Great Plains. Hunters killed most of them for their skins. Then people started protecting bison. Now there are about 150,000 bison in the United States.



Products and Natural Resources

Soil is the most important resource in the Midwest region. The Central Plains are covered with some of the best soil on Earth. There are many farms in the Midwest region. Iowa has so much fertile soil that farms cover almost every inch of the state. The Midwest region has three main areas, or belts. These belts contain certain types of crops. The areas are the Corn Belt, the Wheat Belt, and the Dairy Belt.



You will find the Corn Belt in the Central Plains. Once the corn is harvested, it is used for different products. Corn syrup is used in ice cream. Glue, soap, and paint also use corn. The most important use for corn is food. We eat corn that is frozen and in cans. Corn on the cob is a favorite summertime food.



The Wheat Belt in the Great Plains produces most of the wheat in the US. Wheat is ground into flour. The flour is turned into products like pasta, cakes, cereal, and bread, giving the region the nickname "America's Breadbasket." Battle Creek, Michigan produces most of the breakfast cereal in the country.



Grass grows quickly in the Dairy Belt. The northern grasslands in Wisconsin, Michigan, and Minnesota are ideal for raising dairy cows. The tall grass is cut and dried into hay. The hay is used to feed cattle. Dairy cows in the Midwest produce much of our milk, butter, and cheese. Wisconsin produces more cheese than anywhere in the US.

Other farms in the Midwest raise livestock. Livestock are animals raised on farms, such as cattle, hogs, and chickens. The livestock is raised for meat. Meat packing plants are an important industry in the Midwest. These plants prepare the meat so that it can be sold in supermarkets.

The Midwest has large deposits of iron ore. Steel mills change the iron ore into steel. Much of the steel produced in the Midwest region is used to make cars and trucks. Detroit, Michigan is called the "Motor City," or "Motown" for short, because it is a center for the automobile industry. Ford, Chrysler, and General Motors all made cars in Detroit.





Landmarks

Chicago, Illinois is the biggest city in the Midwest. Willis Tower, the country's tallest building, is in Chicago. Chicago is an important center for business, manufacturing, and transportation because of its location near waterways. Chicago has always been a transportation hub, or a center for moving goods and people. Railroads, highways, airports, rivers, and lakes move more people and goods into and out of Chicago than any other city. Chicago's O'Hare International Airport is one of the United State's busiest airports. About 200,000 people pass through O'Hare each day. That adds up to 73 million airplane passengers a year. O'Hare International Airport employs 50,000 workers.



Minnesota's Mall of America is the largest indoor shopping mall in the United States. The Mall of America has more than 520 stores. If you spent just ten minutes in each store, it would take you four days and three nights to visit all of them. The Mall of America also has 50 restaurants, 14 movie theaters, and an amusement park.



Saint Louis, Missouri is called the "Gateway to the West." Pioneers started their journey by heading west from Saint Louis. The Gateway Arch in Saint Louis was built to honor those pioneers. Made of gleaming stainless steel, the arch rises about 630 feet above the Mississippi River. Visitors can ride a tram to the top.



Two huge monuments are carved into the Black Hills of South Dakota. The first is Mount Rushmore National Monument. It shows the faces of four American presidents: George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Theodore Roosevelt, and Abraham Lincoln. Each head is 60 feet tall.



The second monument honors a Lakota Indian chief named Crazy Horse. Crazy Horse was a Native American leader of the Lakota tribe. The face is 87 feet tall. It is still being carved into the Black Hills. When it is finished, Crazy Horse Memorial will be the world's largest statue, 563 feet tall.

Culture

Food

The food of the Midwest is often simple, but filling, without many spices. Because the Midwest produces most of America's grain, beef, and dairy products, these ingredients are used in many of the foods from this region. Pancakes, cornbread, caramel popcorn, chicken pot pie, and pot roast are all foods that came from the Midwest region.



The Midwest has a large population of German and Swedish immigrants, so foods from those countries became part of Midwesterner's diets. Germans introduced foods such as sausage, brats, and sauerkraut. Swedish people brought lutefisk (a type of dried codfish soaked in lye), leftse (potato bread), and meatballs.



Midwesterners like to eat Chicago-style pizza, a deep-dish pizza with a crust up to three inches tall at the edge, with large amounts of cheese, chunky tomato sauce, and other toppings. Another favorite food is a Coney dog. A Coney dog is a hot dog on a bun, topped with meat chili, onions, and yellow mustard.

Because Kansas City was a center for the cattle trade, it developed its own particular kind of barbecue sauce that is sweeter than what other parts of the country use. Kansas City has more barbecue restaurants than any other city in the US, but St. Louis is also famous for its barbecue.

Fun

Outdoor sports are popular in the Midwest. They go snow skiing, skating, snowmobiling, and ice fishing in the winter. Ice fishing is fishing on a frozen lake or stream through a hole in the ice. The fishermen drill large holes completely through the ice to the open water. Because of the cold weather, most fishermen use an ice shanty, a small shelter which can help keep them out of the wind and blowing snow as they fish. Sometimes shanties can be left on the lake most of the winter and people group together in a "shanty town."



People enjoy horseback riding, fishing, and hunting during warmer weather. Water skiing was invented in 1922 in Minnesota. Ralph Samuelson decided that if you could ski on snow, you could ski on water. Every year, more than 400,000 people gather at Brickyard Motor Speedway to watch the Indianapolis 500 race.



Music

Two kinds of music came from the Midwest region. Rock and roll music was invented in Cleveland in the early 1950s. "Rock Around the Clock" by Billy Haley and the Comets was the song that introduced rock and roll to America. His next record, "Shake, Rattle and Roll" was the first rock and roll record to sell a million copies. Rock and roll, with its pulsating drums, fast tempos, and loud guitars, provided teens of the 1950s the perfect excuse to dance crazy new dances, and wear wild new hairstyles. Rock and roll continued on to become one of the world's most popular and recognizable music forms. The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame is located in Cleveland, Ohio.

Another style of music, called the Motown sound, started in the 1960s with music from Motown Records in Detroit, Michigan. Motown music quickly became popular around the country. Motown Records was the first record company to be owned by an African-American and to feature African-American musicians.



Motown Records became the largest and most successful record company in the United States. Many well known bands and artists started at Motown Records. These artists included The Supremes, The Miracles, Stevie Wonder, Marvin Gaye, The Four Tops, and Diana Ross.



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Although the Midwest has flat land, the Great Lakes are not all at the same level. Locks are needed to lift and lower ships from one lake to the next. Locks are parts of waterways that are closed off by gates. Barges wait on the lock while the water is pumped in or out. Once the level is high or low enough, big doors swing open to send barge traffic on its way. Michigan's Soo Locks lift ships from Lake Huron up 21 feet to Lake Superior. The Soo Locks are the busiest locks in the world, with over 12,000 ships passing through each year.