

The Southwest Region



Home to the giant saguaro cactus, the Southwest region stretches west from the Gulf of Mexico off the coast of Texas to the Colorado River in Arizona. Mexico borders the region on the south.

Land and Water

The Sonoran Desert and the Chihuahuan Desert make up a large part of land in the Southwest region. The Sonoran Desert covers most of the southern half of Arizona and New Mexico. The Sonoran Desert has large sandy plains and bare mountains. Branches of the Colorado River run through it, so many trees, cacti, and shrubs find enough water to grow there. Beautiful flowering cacti and yucca make the desert seem more like a garden than the open sandy place one might imagine. The

Chihuahuan Desert is the largest desert in North

America. It is approximately 800 miles long and 250 miles wide. Most of the Chihuahuan Desert is in Mexico. In the United States, the desert extends into parts of New Mexico, Texas and southeastern Arizona.

The Southwest has vast plains, spectacular canyons, and colorful plateaus. The eastern part of the Southwest region is made up of plains, which are areas of flat land. The Central Plains are the lowest lands in the Southwest region. The fertile



Even though the Southwest region covers a large amount of land, it has the smallest number of states. There are only four states in the Southwest region, but they are very large states.



soil of the Central Plains spreads from the coast of Texas along the Gulf of Mexico, and into central Oklahoma. The Central Plains are home to many farms and ranches. Farther west, the land rises to form the Colorado Plateau. A plateau is a high, flat landform that rises steeply from the land around it. The Colorado Plateau covers much of northern New Mexico and Arizona. Most of the Colorado Plateau is fairly level, but it is crisscrossed by hundreds of deep canyons. A canyon is a deep, narrow valley with steep sides. The largest and most famous of these canyons is the Grand Canyon.



There are many farms and ranches on the fertile soil of the Central Plains.

The Colorado River travels south and west down through some of the driest parts of the country. Then it crosses into Mexico and ends in the Gulf of California. The Colorado River is 1,470 miles long. Many smaller rivers flow into the Colorado. Rivers that join other rivers are called tributaries. Each tributary adds water and soil, called silt, to the Colorado. This silt gives the river its reddish-brown color.

The Hoover Dam is one of America's greatest manufactured structures. Hoover Dam was built to control flooding on the Colorado River, and to store water. An area where water is stored is called a reservoir. The Hoover Dam was built more than 60 years ago. Lake Mead, the lake behind the Hoover Dam, provides water for many of the people in the Southwest region.



Lake Mead, behind the Hoover Dam, stores water for the people of the Southwest region.

The Rio Grande River also brings much needed water to the area. The Rio Grande is 1,885 miles long. The Rio Grande begins in the mountains of Colorado, and then flows south through the middle of New Mexico. Then it turns southeast, making a big bend along the border of Texas, until it empties into the Gulf of Mexico. The Rio Grande forms part of the border between the US and Mexico. In Mexico, the Rio Grande is known as Rio Bravo del Norte.

Climate

Much of the Southwest is desert, so it has a hot, dry climate with very little rain. Many places in the Southwest have 300 days of sunshine a year! The climate of the Southwest region is mild. That means there are not many changes in the weather. Because it is sunny and warm most of the time, people like to visit the region.



The eastern parts of Oklahoma and Texas get enough rain to grow crops, but water must still be used carefully. When it doesn't rain for a long time, a drought can occur. A drought is a period of little or no rain. Droughts cause serious problems because they can hurt crops.

Much of the land in the Southwest region is bare. Not enough rain falls for forests to grow. Over time, plants, animals, and people have all adapted to living in this dry land. To adapt means to change in order to survive. The Navajo, for example, learned how to grow corn and raise sheep with little rainfall.

Desert animals such as the Mexican gray wolf, the great horned owl, the golden eagle, and the rattlesnake have adapted to the environment. During the day, the animals find hideouts where the sun cannot get to them. The bighorn sheep has adapted to the desert because it has big feet, which are good for walking on the rough terrain. The bighorn sheep only needs to drink every few days. The pocket mouse doesn't need to drink at all because it gets all the water it needs from the food it eats. Most desert animals are nocturnal, which means they hunt at night when it is cooler.



Phoenix, Arizona is America's hottest large city. During the summer, temperatures can soar to 115 degrees Fahrenheit. A hundred years ago, Phoenix was a small town. Not many people wanted to move to Arizona because it was too hot, too dry, and too lonely. Two things made it possible to live in the desert—air conditioners and automobiles. Air conditioning lets people live in comfort no matter how hot the day is. Automobiles made travel through the desert safer. Travelers who got stuck in the desert could die of thirst.

Because cars and good roads made travel easier and safer, people began to move to Phoenix. Some liked the hot, dry weather so much they decided to live there. With a population of more than one million people, Phoenix is now the sixth-largest city in the United States.

Products and Natural Resources

Deserts are full of valuable minerals. Gold, iron, and copper are found in the Colorado River basin. New Mexico is known for its silver mines. Arizona produces about two-thirds of the copper mined in the United States. People have been digging in Arizona for precious metals for a long time. Native Americans used gold, silver, and copper for tools and weapons as well as for jewelry and paint for pottery. Copper ore is still mined in the state for many different uses. Copper is used in mostly in wire or coins, such as a penny.

The Southwest region is also rich in the fuels that supply energy. Uranium, coal, natural gas, and oil are all found in the Southwest region. The most important natural resource in the Southwest is oil. Oil is so valuable that it has been nicknamed "black gold." The oil that bubbles up from the ground is called crude oil, and is not very useful. A refinery is a kind of factory that separates crude oil into parts like gasoline and heating oil. Some parts of the crude oil are used to produce goods like plastic, crayons, and medicines. A refinery runs 24 hours a day, 365 days a year and requires a large number of employees to run it. A refinery can occupy as much land as several hundred football fields. Workers often ride bicycles to move from place to place inside the complex.



One of the biggest problems of the Southwest region is a limited water supply. Aqueducts are used in the Southwest to move water from lakes and rivers to farms and cities. Aqueducts are large pipes or canals that move water over a long distance. The people of the Southwest rely on the Colorado River for many things. The Colorado River provides drinking water for 25 million people. It supplies water for more than three million acres of farmland. Water rushing through machines called turbines cause huge machines to spin. These spinning turbines produce much of the electricity used in the Southwest.

There are many cattle and sheep ranches in the Southwest region. The Southwest region leads all other states in the raising of beef cattle as well as sheep. The cattle provide beef to all parts of the United States. Some beef is sold to other nations, like Japan.





Landmarks

The Grand Canyon is the most famous landmark in the Southwest. The Grand Canyon is 217 miles long. Parts of the canyon are a mile deep and 18 miles wide. It is so deep that the top and the bottom have different weather. At the bottom of the canyon is the Colorado River. This river has been flowing through the Grand Canyon for millions of years. The force of the water has caused the walls of the canyon to erode, or wear away over time. Many people today visit Grand Canyon National Park. The tourists enjoy hiking, riding mules on trails, rafting on the Colorado River, or simply looking at the beautiful landforms.



When you go into the Petrified Forest, it's not like walking into a normal forest. It is more like walking into the desert. Petrified wood is the fossilized remains of prehistoric trees. Millions of years ago, the trees died and were covered with mud and volcanic ash. Minerals in the mud replaced the tree's living matter and eventually hardened into stone. Most of the Petrified Forest is still buried under the sand, and only some small parts have been revealed to the surface by erosion. Petrified wood found in the region is made up of almost solid quartz. Each brightly colored piece is like a giant crystal, sparkling in the sunlight as if covered by glitter.

Johnson Space Center is in charge of NASA's human spaceflight program. All of NASA's astronauts live and train at JSC. JSC also trains foreign astronauts bound for the International Space Station. The Space Vehicle Mockup Facility allows astronauts to practice operating the 430-ton space station with a full-scale models. Astronauts practice spacewalks at the Neutral Buoyancy Lab, an enormous pool that holds 6.2 million gallons of water. JSC's Mission Control Center plans, supports, and operates every NASA human spaceflight mission. Teams of engineers at Mission Control are on duty around the clock every day, keeping watch over the astronauts on the space station.



Carlsbad Caverns National Park is another popular tourist destination. According to legend, a cowboy named Jim White saw what looked like a plume of smoke rising into the sky. That smoke was actually a cloud of bats flying out of the cave entrance. Hundreds of thousands of bats sleep in the caverns during the day. At night, they leave in a giant whirring cloud to hunt for food. Huge rock formations called stalagmites and stalactites decorate the rooms of the more than 80 caves in the park. The Hall of Giants is as big as 14 football fields. The Green Lake Room has a very deep, green pool in one corner. The King's Palace has a large formation that looks like a castle in the center.



Culture

Food

Tortillas are important ingredients in traditional Southwestern cooking. The tortilla acts as a wrapper or as bread. Wedges of tortillas are fried to make tortilla chips. Nachos, tacos, enchiladas, quesadillas, and burritos are also made with tortillas.

Because many kinds of hot chili peppers are grown in the Southwest, many of the foods served there are spicy. Green chili peppers are made into salsa. Red chili peppers are used in slow-cooked dishes. The most popular slow-cooked dish is chili con carne, often known simply as chili. Chili con carne (chili with meat) is made with meat simmered in a sauce of dried red chili peppers, tomatoes, and a variety of spices. Contests are held throughout the Southwest to choose the best chili.

Tamales are made from masa (a dough of corn), with a filling of shredded beef that has been stewed with red chilies and spices. They are wrapped in cornhusks and steamed. The cornhusks are removed at the table before the tamales are eaten. While tamales are served throughout the year in restaurants in the Southwest, tamales are a traditional Christmas food. Families and friends gather to assemble dozens of tamales.

Southwestern desserts are fairly simple, serving as a soothing finish to a spicy meal. Sopapillas, a kind of deep fried doughnuts, are served as a dessert with honey. Another favorite dessert is flan, a baked custard.



People

Parts of the Southwest once belonged to Spain and Mexico. Spain sent priests to the Southwest in the early 1700s. The priests built churches and missions where they taught the Native Americans about the Christian religion. In 1845, Texas decided to split off from Mexico and join the United States. This caused a war between Mexico and the United States over who owned the land. The United States won. Mexico had to give the land to the United States, but parts of Spanish and Mexican culture are still seen in the region. Many people in the Southwest speak Spanish. Many foods and festivals in the region come from Spain or Mexico. Many buildings are made in Spanish, Mexican, and Native American styles.

The Southwest has many Spanish-American and Native-American people. More Native-Americans live in the Southwest than in any other region of the United States. The Navajo Reservation is the home of the biggest American Indian tribe. Many of the Navajo who live there still follow their Native American traditions, while others have a more modern lifestyle. Some people live in modern homes, while others live in traditional homes, called hogans. Other tribes in the Southwest include the Hopi, Zuni and Apache.

