

# The West Region



*Our country's largest region goes from the cold, frozen tundra of Alaska to the warm, sunny beaches of Hawaii and California. In between, you'll find mountains, valleys, deserts, and even volcanoes and a rain forest!*

## Land and Water

Several mountain ranges cover much of the West. The largest mountain range is the Rocky Mountains, which forms the eastern edge of the region. The Rockies begin far to the north, in Canada. From there, the Rockies stretch south

all the way to Mexico, across Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, and Colorado. The Rocky Mountain Range is nearly 3,000 miles long, and hundreds of miles wide.



**The West is the largest region in the United States. It is made of eleven states. Alaska and Hawaii are separated from the other states by land and water.**



**The Coast Ranges, the Sierra Nevada, the Cascade Range, and the Rocky Mountains are all found in the West region.**

Along the Pacific coast, more mountain ranges form a giant H on the map. The Coast Ranges make up the first long line of the H. The low mountains of the Coast Ranges seem to rise right out of the Pacific Ocean. They form cliffs in many places along the coast all the way up to Alaska. The highest mountain in the United States, Mount Denali, is part of the Coast Range. Mount Denali in Alaska is 20,320 feet



**The high, jagged peaks of the Sierra Nevada Mountains surround the fertile soil of the Central Valley.**

high. The Sierra Nevada Mountains in the south and the Cascade Mountains in the north form the second long line of the H. These mountains are covered with forests.

The rocks of the Sierra Nevada Mountains are the remains of ancient magma chambers that fed volcanoes and then eroded away. Those volcanoes are extinct, but some volcanoes are still active. Volcanic eruptions happen, but not often. A famous eruption happened in 1980, when Mount Saint Helens erupted explosively. This eruption destroyed 215 square miles of forest, melted ice and snow on the mountain, and caused landslides and floods. Animals were killed and some people lost their lives.

Several valleys lie in between the Coast Ranges, the Sierra Nevada Mountains, and the Cascade Mountains. Two of the valleys, Central Valley and Willamette Valley, are covered with deep, rich soil. Many rivers travel

through these two valleys.

The Great Basin lies in the middle of the West region. A basin is a low, bowl-shaped landform that is lower than the land around it. The broad, flat valley of the Great Basin is mostly covered by the Great Basin Desert and the Mojave Desert. The Great Basin Desert is the largest desert in the United States. Death Valley, a part of the Mojave Desert, is the hottest, driest, and lowest place in the United States. Death Valley is 282 feet below sea level. The highest temperature ever recorded in Death Valley was 134 degrees.

Believe it or not, the West region also has a rain forest. The rain forest that runs along the Pacific Coast from California all the way to Alaska is the largest temperate rainforest in the world. Temperate rain forests are very wet, ancient forests that rarely freeze or get very hot. Temperate rain forests are also close to the ocean. Some of the large, old trees such as the giant redwoods, Sitka spruce and western hemlock reach over 300 feet tall and live over 500 years.



**These giant redwood trees are part of the temperate rainforest in the West region.**

The Great Salt Lake is one of the largest lakes in the US. The Great Salt Lake is about 75 miles long and 35 miles wide, but it is very shallow. Most of the lake is only three feet deep. Unlike most lakes, the Great Salt Lake is full of very salty water--even saltier than the ocean--because several rivers flow into the lake, but no water flows out. When the water evaporates, salt is left behind. The Great Salt Lake is too salty for fish. The only animals that live in the lake are tiny brine shrimp. Although they are small, brine shrimp are an important food source for the millions of birds that live around the lake. Dry and flat areas called salt flats surround the Great Salt Lake. The salt flats were left behind when Lake Bonneville, a big prehistoric lake, dried up thousands of years ago.



**Alaska is the largest state in the US, but it has the fewest number of people of any state.**

Alaska and Hawaii, being apart from the other states, are very different from the rest of the states in this region. The northern part of Alaska is tundra, a cold, flat, treeless land. Hawaii is made up of eight main islands. Its islands were made long ago by volcanoes that grew up out of the Pacific Ocean, two of which are still active.

## Climate

Just as the West has many different landforms, the West has many different climates, too. You could travel from cold and rainy climates to extremely hot and dry climates all in this region. The western part of the region along the Pacific Coast receives a lot of rain. The coastal areas have mild, wet winters and cool, foggy, or cloudy summers. As you travel east across the region through the Great Basin, the rainfall amounts decrease and the temperature gets warmer. In the Rocky Mountains, there is heavy snow in the winter. The snow remains on the ground for months at a time. Once the snow melts, the water goes into the Colorado, Rio Grande, and other rivers.

Alaska has a unique climate. It is cold and wet for much of the year. Many places in

Alaska receive as much as 100 inches of precipitation a year. Because Alaska is farther from the equator than any other state, it is the coldest state. Alaska has short summers and long winters. Its winters are so cold that houseflies can't survive there. Lakes and rivers are frozen for most of the year.

Hawaii lies closer to the equator than any other U.S. state. Its climate is sunny and warm all year round, but not too hot due to cool ocean winds. There is a lot of rainfall all year. This helps palm trees and other tropical plants to grow year round. The island of Kauai has the wettest place on earth, receiving almost 40 feet of rain a year.

The Pacific Coast lies over many fault lines, which increases the danger of earthquakes. The most famous is California's San Andreas Fault, which is more than 600 miles long.

# Products and Natural Resources

The most important natural resource in the West is the Pacific Ocean. Fishing is an important industry up and down the coast. There are many important ports along the Pacific Ocean. A port is a place for receiving ships and transferring cargo. Here, goods are traded with Japan and Asia.



The Columbia River is very important to the West region. Dams on the river help make a lot of electricity. Many businesses use this electric power. Farmers use water from the river to irrigate crops. Columbia River waters irrigate more than 8 million acres of land. Both farmers and businesspeople use the river for transportation. Many goods travel on the Columbia to ports along the Pacific Ocean.

Soil is another important resource. In the Central Valley and the Willamette Valley, there are many fruit and vegetable farms. The Central Valley is called "America's Fruit and Salad Bowl."



More than 150 fruits and vegetables are grown there. Crops grown in the area include apricots, almonds, strawberries, cabbage, lettuce, tomatoes, grapes, avocados, asparagus, oranges, cotton, and corn. Potatoes, green beans, onions, and broccoli are also grown in the valley. Washington is known for its apples. Washington produces more apples than any other state. Central Valley supplies a lot of the food for the United States and for the rest of the world.



*The West region is a center of the wood products industry. Wood products include lumber, plywood, cardboard, and paper. Much of the wood used in the United States comes from the West. Wood is used to build houses, furniture, musical instruments, and much more.*



*Idaho is home to vast potato farms, and the Idaho potato is sold by almost every supermarket in the United States. About three-fourths of Idaho's potato crop is now processed and sold as frozen french fries, instant mashed potatoes, or similar products. The rest are sold as baking potatoes.*



*Hawaii is famous for its pineapples. You can also find sugarcane in Hawaii. The plant is grown on plantations. Once it is harvested, it is sent to sugar mills. This is where the table sugar we use is produced. Bananas, rice, coffee, and macadamia nuts are also grown in Hawaii.*



*Salt is one of the most important things that people get from the Great Salt Lake. In fact, over 4 million pounds of salt gets taken from it every year. They get the salt by pumping water into giant, shallow ponds. When the water evaporates, the salt is left behind. It can take up to three years for all of the water in the pond to evaporate.*

Another valuable resource in the West Region is oil. Oil was discovered in Alaska in the 1960s in the North Slope. The North Slope is near the Arctic Ocean. The oil was found in Prudhoe Bay. Once it was found, it needed to be transported to other areas. The Trans-Alaska Pipeline was built to carry oil from the North Slope. From the North Slope, it travels to Prince William Sound in Valdez, Alaska. The oil is pumped into supertankers. These supertankers carry the oil to other parts of the U.S. and the world. One stop is in San Francisco, California. San Francisco has oil refineries. The refineries prepare the oil so it can be used in homes and businesses.



The Rocky Mountains are a source of many minerals. Deposits of copper, gold, and silver have been found within the mountains. Gold was found in California in 1848. During the Gold Rush when people were moving west in search of riches, a small town in Colorado called Leadville was a popular mining spot for gold. The miners found some gold, but it was hard to separate the gold from the local sand. The miners found that the heavy brown sand they were digging in was actually full of silver and lead. Then, instead of a Gold Rush, there was a Silver Boom. More and more people moved to the area in search of silver. Leadville became one of the world's largest silver camps. Soon, the Silver Boom ended, but Leadville was lucky. Other valuable minerals were found in this area. One is molybdenum. Molybdenum is used in the production of high-strength steel.

The steel produced in the West is used to manufacture other products. Aircraft are made in southern California. The state's warm climate makes it perfect for testing airplanes. Aircraft are also made in Seattle, Washington. You will also find ship-building industries on the Pacific Coast. Fishing boats, tankers, and battleships are made in Washington and Hawaii.

During the last twenty years, technology industries have started in the West in an area known as Silicon Valley. Silicon is a valuable mineral that is used to make



computer parts. There are about three thousand software companies and many other technology businesses in the area. There are many research centers in the West. These research centers are owned by our government. They test missiles, aircraft, and weapons. In the Great Basin, there is valuable open space. Missiles and military weapons are tested there.

# Landmarks

The West region's natural features have been popular with travelers. Some of the most beautiful national parks are located in this region. The United States Congress established Yellowstone National Park in 1872 as the world's first National Park. Yellowstone National Park covers 3,472 square miles. That's bigger than the states of Delaware and Rhode Island combined. There is an active volcano in the park. There are about 2,000 earthquakes there every year. The park also has more than 300 geysers. A geyser is a type of hot spring that shoots boiling hot water and steam into the air. Old Faithful is one of the most well known geysers. The name Old Faithful was chosen because the geyser is predictable. It erupts about every 91 minutes. Each eruption lasts from 1½ to 5 minutes. Today, up to 4 million people come to visit Yellowstone each year.



*Rising 1,267 feet above the surrounding ground, Devils Tower was designated America's first national monument in 1906. The site is considered sacred to the Lakota and other tribes in the area. Devils Tower is the core of a volcano, exposed by erosion. The magma cooled and crystallized into hexagonal columns separated by vertical cracks. The parallel cracks make it a popular place for rock climbers.*



*When the Golden Gate Bridge was completed in 1937, it was the longest suspension bridge in the world. The bridge is almost 9,000 feet long and has two beautiful towers that are 820 feet tall.*

*While most bridges are painted steel gray to protect them from corrosion, the Golden Gate bridge is painted International Orange to help it blend in with the red-orange tones of the rocks and hills around San Francisco Bay.*



*Tourists visit Alaska and Hawaii each year. People travel to Alaska to see its beautiful glaciers. Cruise ships sail through the waterways of Alaska to allow people to see the glaciers up close.*

*Visitors to Hawaii go for its tropical weather and landscape. The warm weather year round makes its beaches the place to visit. People also visit the volcanoes of Hawaii.*