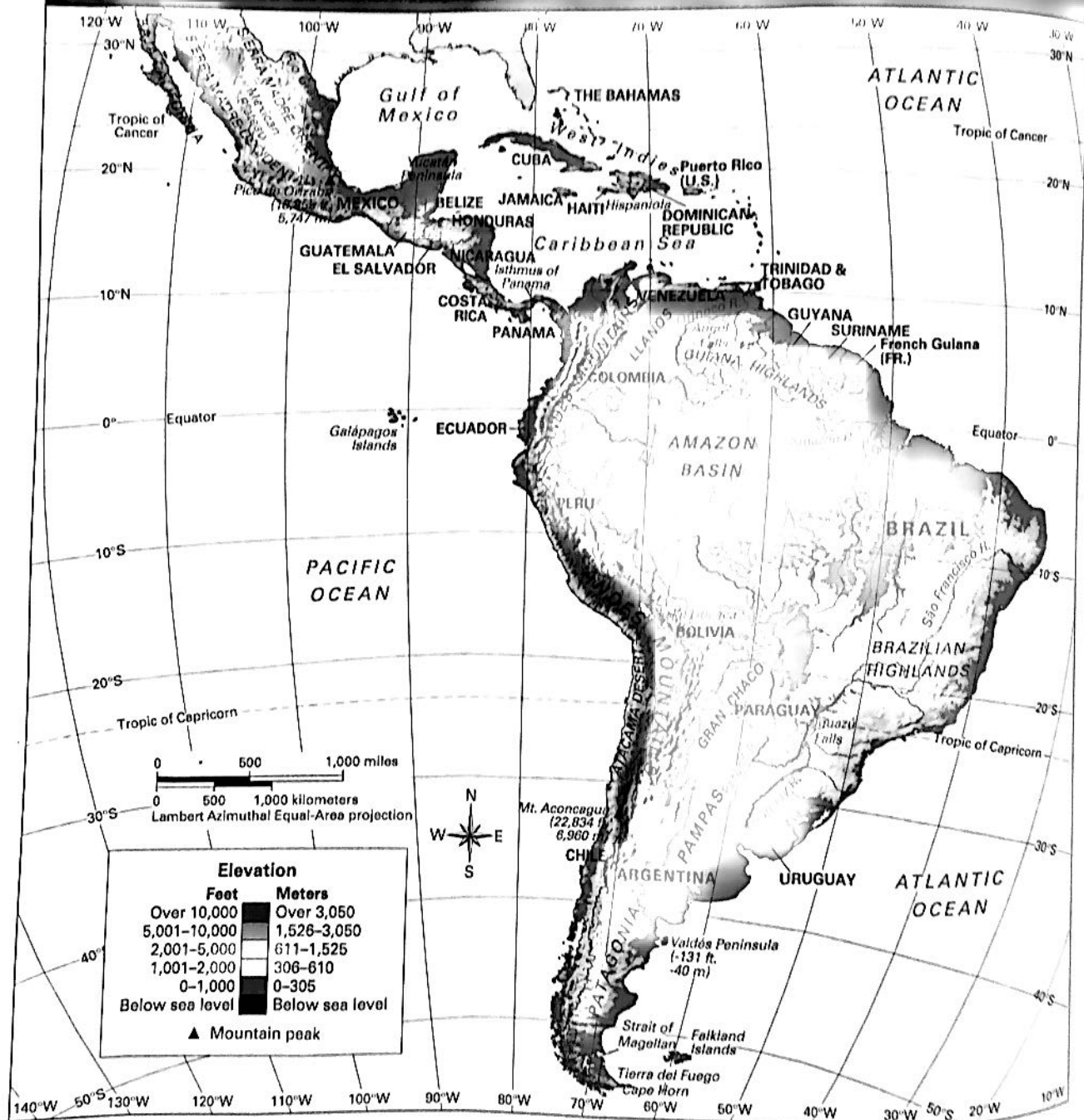


**L**atin America includes all the countries in the Western Hemisphere, except the United States and Canada. It has three sub-regions: Mexico and Central America, the Caribbean islands, and South America.

To the north lies Mexico, which shares a border with the United States. Mexico is

connected to South America by a 1,200-mile-long land bridge. This land bridge is known as Central America. East of Central America lie the many islands of the Caribbean Sea. South America is a long continent. Its hot northern lands span the equator. Its cool southern tip reaches toward the Antarctic Circle.

## Physical Features of Latin America



## Physical Features

Smoking **volcanoes**, dripping **rainforests**, and bone-dry **deserts**—Latin America has them all. Almost every physical feature on Earth is found in this vast **region**. But one feature runs from the north of Mexico to the tip of South America: mountains. For centuries, these mountains have kept the peoples of Latin America isolated from one another.

### Mexico and Central America

On a map, Mexico and Central America look like a kite with a long tail. Baja California dangles off the top of the kite. The Yucatán Peninsula juts out from the bottom into the Gulf of Mexico.

Two great mountain ranges run north and south through Mexico. The Sierra Madre Occidental lines the west coast. The Sierra Madre Oriental lines the east coast. A high plain called the Mexican Plateau lies between the two ranges.

Mountains also run through Central America. Many of these mountains are active volcanoes. From Panama's highest peak, you can look down on two different oceans.

The Isthmus of Panama connects Central America to South America. An **isthmus** is a narrow strip of land that links two larger **landmasses**. The Panama Canal was built across this isthmus in the early 1900s. It allows ships to travel between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans without going around all of South America.

### The Caribbean Islands

The Caribbean islands curve in an arc from the tip of Florida to the north coast of South America. There are at least 7,000 dots of land in this island group. A few of these islands support large populations. Others are too small to put on most maps.

Many of these islands are the tops of submerged mountains. **Volcanic islands** rise steeply from warm beaches to rugged peaks. Tiny sea creatures known as coral formed other islands. Coral islands are flat and sandy.

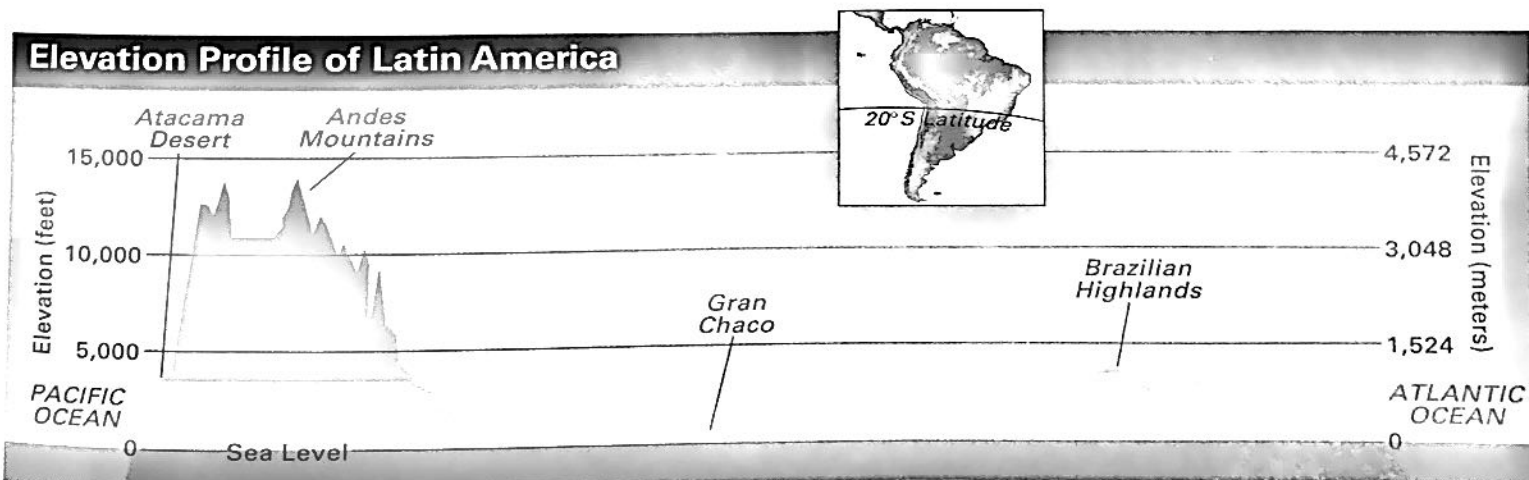
### South America

South America is shaped like giant triangle. The Andes Mountains line the western side of the triangle. Plains and **plateaus** cover the rest. The vast Amazon **basin** covers much of the center of the continent. Further south lie grassy plains called the *Pampas*.

South America has many amazing physical features. They include these:

- the Amazon River—the world's second longest river. The Amazon carries more water than any other river in the world.
- Lake Titicaca—the highest lake in the world that can be used for boat travel. This large lake has more than 40 islands.
- the Atacama Desert—one of the driest places on Earth. Average rainfall in the Atacama is only half an inch a year.
- Angel Falls—the world's highest waterfall. The water drops down a rocky cliff for nearly two thirds of a mile.

### Elevation Profile of Latin America



## Climate

Latin America is a region of many **climates**. One reason is that it spans a huge range of latitudes. As you read in Chapter 2, climate generally varies with latitude. Low latitudes, close to the equator, have a tropical year-round climate. High latitudes, near the poles, have short summers and long, cold winters. Between those two extremes lie the middle latitudes, which have more **temperate**, or mild, climates.

Another reason Latin America has such diverse climates is its wide range of altitudes. Altitude has much the same effect on climate as latitude. The higher the altitude, the colder the climate. At lower elevations, mountain climates may be tropical. At higher elevations, the climate can be very cold.

### Mexico and Central America

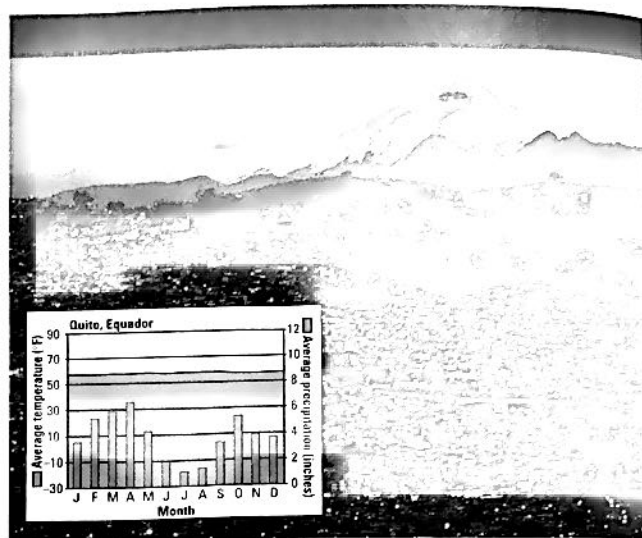
Mexico's climate ranges from **arid** in the north to tropical in the south. The Mexican Plateau is more temperate, with a **semiarid** climate. Closer to the coast, the climate becomes **tropical wet and dry**. Mexicans call this tropical area the "Tierra Caliente," or hot land.

The climate of Central America is tropical near the coast. The air becomes cooler in the mountains. The mountains of Costa Rica are home to a rare **ecosystem** known as a **cloud forest**. Low clouds hang over this forest all year round. Mist from the clouds collects on leaves and drips off the trees like rain. The result is a high-elevation rainforest.

### The Caribbean Islands

Most of the Caribbean islands also have a tropical wet and dry climate. People from North America and Europe enjoy winter vacations on these tropical islands.

Huge storms called **hurricanes** are common during summer months. These huge swirling storms form over warm seas near the equator. Then they move toward the poles in a wide, destructive path. Hurricane winds can reach more than 150 miles per hour. At that speed, they can easily knock over trees and tear the roofs off houses.



Quito, Ecuador, lies high in the Andes Mountains. Based on the climograph, what would be the best month for a Quito family to go on a mountain hike?

### South America

In South America, climate varies with both latitude and altitude. The northern half of the continent nearest the equator is mostly **tropical wet**. Further south, the climate becomes subtropical and even arid. The Andes Mountains have a **highlands** climate. This means that the climate varies by elevation, getting colder the higher one goes.





## Vegetation

With so many climates, it is no surprise that Latin America is home to an incredible variety of plants. The most widespread type of vegetation is **broadleaf evergreen forest**. It occurs in both tropical wet and tropical wet and dry climate zones.

In a broadleaf evergreen forest, most or all of the trees have leaves rather than needles. But unlike broadleaf trees in cooler climates, these trees do not lose their leaves in winter. Instead they are green all year round. Rainforests and jungles are examples of broadleaf evergreen forests. So are the cloud forests of Central America.

### Mexico and Central America

In Mexico, what plants grow where depends mainly on rainfall. **Desert scrub** covers the arid north. Cactus plants survive here with little water. Forest once covered the Mexican Plateau. Over time, most of the trees were cleared to make way for farms.

Southern Mexico and Central America are covered with broadleaf evergreen forest. Pine and oak trees are found in the high cloud forests. Along the coasts, palms, figs, vines, and Spanish moss create a dense rainforest.



Huge cactus plants grow with little rain in the deserts of northern Mexico.

### The Caribbean Islands

The Caribbean islands have a mix of **tropical grasslands** and broadleaf evergreen forests. Black and red mangrove trees and coconut palms are typical trees. Underwater coral reefs circle many of the islands. These reefs are home to broad-leafed turtle grass, feathery green algae, and red algae that can make the coral look rusty.

### South America

The largest **vegetation zone** in South America is the Amazon rainforest. This broadleaf evergreen forest is home to more kinds of plants than any other place on Earth. There are hardwood trees, such as mahogany and rosewood, which people use to make furniture. There are also Brazil nut and rubber trees. The **forest floor** is a tangle of plants, vines, and colorful orchids.

Tropical grasslands and **temperate grasslands** cover most of the rest of South America. Cacti and flowering plants bloom in desert scrub regions. The Atacama Desert is so dry that almost no plants survive there.

A unique ecosystem known as a cloud forest is found in the mountains of Central America.