

# South America: rivers and mountains



Quick summary



South America is home to the largest river basin in the world – the Amazon. It is also home to the Angel Falls waterfall, which is the highest in the world at over 900 m (2,950 ft). This can be found on a tributary to the Orinoco River – the River Chúrún. The topographic map on the left shows the mountainous areas of South America. The western coastline is dominated by the Andes mountain chain. This is also the location of a tectonic plate boundary and the mountains are formed through the process of subduction. There is a great deal of seismic activity in this area as it is part of the Pacific Ring of Fire.



Physical features

A river basin is the portion of land drained by a river and its tributaries. South America has three important river basins: the Amazon, Orinoco and Paraná.

- **The Amazon River basin** has an area of almost 2.7 million square miles (7 million square km), making it the largest river basin in the world. It covers most of northern South America and is fed by tributaries from the glaciers of the Andes. Every second, the Amazon River empties 209,000 cubic metres (7,380,765 cubic feet) of fresh water into the Atlantic Ocean.

- The Orinoco River flows north of the Amazon. It flows in a giant arc for more than 1,700 miles (2,700 km), rising in northern Brazil and discharging into the Atlantic Ocean in Venezuela. **The Orinoco River basin** covers an area of about 366,000 square miles (948,000 square km) and covers approximately 80 per cent of Venezuela and 25 per cent of Colombia.

- **The Paraná River basin** covers almost 1.1 million square miles (2.8 million square km), which is much of south eastern Brazil and Bolivia, Paraguay and northern Argentina. The Paraná River includes Iguazú Falls, a massive series of waterfalls that extend for 1.7 miles (2.7 km). It discharges into the Río de la Plata estuary between Argentina and Uruguay.



Physical features

The Andes name comes from the Quechua word *anti*, meaning high crest. The Andes is a 4,300-mile (6,900-km) long mountain range located in South America that straddles seven countries: Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Bolivia, Peru, Chile and Argentina. The Andes have the second highest peak of any mountain range, the tallest being the Himalayas in Asia. The Amazon River has its source in the Andes. Numerous cities have developed on the plateaus, including Bogotá in Colombia – the world's highest capital city. Machu Picchu is an ancient, abandoned Incan citadel set high in the Andes Mountains in Peru and attracts thousands of tourists each year.



Location

- The Aconcagua in Argentina is the highest peak in the Andes at 6,961 m (22,837ft)
- The highest active volcano in the Andean Mountains is the Ojos del Salado on the Chile–Argentina border. It also has the highest crater lake (one that has formed in a volcanic crater) in the world.



Location

**river basin:** the portion of land drained by a river  
**tributary:** a river that flows into another river  
**discharging:** flowing into



Vocabulary

**topographic:** relating to the physical features of an area  
**subduction:** the movement of one tectonic plate below another  
**seismic:** relating to earthquakes  
**citadel:** in the past – a place for shelter or safety



Location



Physical features



Human features



Diversity



Physical processes



Human processes



Techniques

