The Geography of Australia

Australia is the world’s smallest continent; it is roughly the size of the continental United States. Australia and Antarctica are the two continents that are islands. Australia is bordered to the west and south by the Indian Ocean and to the north and east by the Pacific Ocean. More specifically the Coral Sea, a subdivision of the Pacific Ocean, lies to the northeast of Australia. The nearby large islands of Tasmania and New Guinea, as well as some smaller islands, are all considered to be part of the Australian continent. The Great Barrier Reef is the largest reef system in the world with nearly 3,000 reefs and 900 islands. It is located in the Coral Sea off the northeast coast of Australia.

Culturally, most the non-native people of Australia are related to British or Irish ancestors. Yet Australia lies close to southern Asia and people have close economic ties to the Asian continent and Oceania. Oceania is the name given to the combination of Australia, New Zealand, and the island groups in the Pacific Ocean called Micronesia, Melanesia and Polynesia. Micronesia includes the Caroline, Gilbert, Mariana and Marshall island groups plus Wake Island, together having about 2,250 small islands. Melanesia is a grouping of Pacific islands that includes New Caledonia and the Bismarck, Solomon, New Hebrides, and Fiji island groups. Polynesia contains the Hawaiian Islands, Tonga, Samoa and other nearby islands.

The Australian Alps are a mountain range located in southeastern Australia. The highest mountain in the chain and the highest point in Australia is Mount Kosciusko, just 7,316 feet in height. The Hamersley Range is located in Western Australia and contains some of the oldest portions of the earth’s crust. More famous to travelers are the snow-capped Southern Alps of New Zealand. New Zealand is a country of two large islands and other small islands southeast of Australia. This mountain chain contains Mount Cook, the highest point on the island of New Zealand at 12,316 feet. There are many mountains about this height in the Southern Alps.

Except for a few mountainous areas, the continent of Australia is mostly flat. The western half of the continent is arid and one-fifth of Australia is desert.