The Geography of North America

North America is the third largest of the seven continents. It is almost completely surrounded by ocean except for its narrow southern tip which joins the continent of South America. The Arctic Ocean lies to the north; the Atlantic Ocean and its subdivisions, the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean Sea, lie to the east; and the Pacific Ocean lies to the west.

Receding glaciers at the end of the last ice age carved out basins for eight major lakes in the northern half of North America. These are the five Great Lakes that form part of the border between the United States and Canada (Lake Superior, Lake Michigan, Lake Ontario, Lake Erie, and Lake Huron) plus three lakes in Canada (Great Bear Lake, Great Slave Lake, and Lake Winnipeg). There are many large rivers including two of the longest rivers in the world, the Mississippi River in the United States and the Mackenzie River in Canada.

North America is home to some awesome mountain ranges. Only the continent of Asia with the highest mountains in the world has more mountains and mountain ranges. The western one-third of North America is dominated by mountain ranges in a vast area called the Cordilleran Region which was affected by the Cordilleran Ice Sheet in the last ice age. Spectacular mountains begin in the north near the Arctic Ocean with the Brooks Range which runs east and west. Mount McKinley, also called Denali, is the tallest mountain in North America. It is part of the Alaska Range which also runs east and west.

The Alaska Range is part of the upper reaches of the Rocky Mountains that extend for 3,000 miles north and south through Canada and the United States to the Mexican border. The Rocky Mountains are known for their scenic beauty and are home to unique North American plants and animals. Mountainous regions continue southward all the way into Central America. The Appalachian Mountains extend for about 2,500 miles on the east side of North America.

North America is home to major desert areas, especially in southwestern states of the United States and northern Mexico. There are four major deserts: Great Basin Desert, Mojave Desert, Chihuahuan Desert, and Sonoran Desert.