



Reading for Understanding

▶ Key Ideas

BEFORE, YOU LEARNED

The United States and Canada share many cultural and geographic similarities.

NOW YOU WILL LEARN

The geography of Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean Islands, south of the United States, contains mountains, highlands, and plains.

▶ Vocabulary

TERMS & NAMES

Latin America the region that includes Mexico, Central America, the Caribbean Islands, and South America

Sierra Madre Occidental mountain range that runs from north to south down the western part of Mexico

Sierra Madre Oriental mountain range that runs from north to south down the eastern part of Mexico

isthmus strip of land that connects two landmasses

highlands mountainous and hilly sections of a country

archipelago a chain of islands

Greater Antilles the northern largest Caribbean islands that include Cuba, Jamaica, Hispaniola (which includes Haiti and the Dominican Republic), and Puerto Rico

Lesser Antilles the smaller Caribbean islands southeast of the Greater Antilles

REVIEW

plateau a broad, flat area of land higher than the surrounding land

tectonic plate a large rigid section of the Earth's crust that is in constant motion

▶ Reading Strategy

Re-create the chart shown at right. As you read and respond to the **KEY QUESTIONS**, use the chart to organize details about the geography of Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean Islands.



See Skillbuilder Handbook, page R7

CATEGORIZE

LANDFORMS	INFLUENCES ON CLIMATE	VEGETATION
1.	1.	1.
2.	2.	2.
3.	3.	3.



GRAPHIC ORGANIZERS

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Physical Geography of Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean

Connecting to Your World

What would you do if the ground started to open up as you were walking? That is what happened to a Mexican farmer in February 1943. The farmer watched in amazement as the ground rumbled and split open while he worked. Within 24 hours, a small smoking cone had appeared. The cone was the beginning of the volcano Parícutín (pah•REE•koo•TEEN).

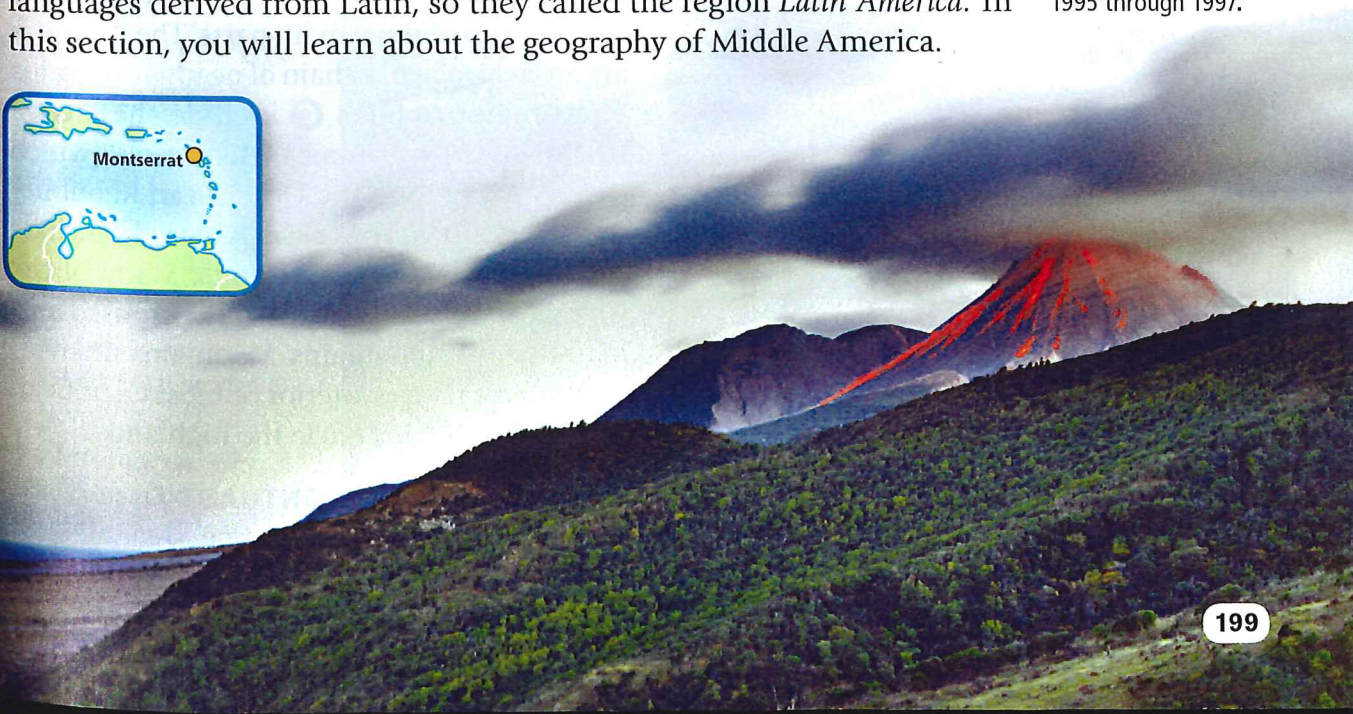
Volcanoes are just one feature of Latin America's geography. Let's take a look at some other geographic features.

Mountains and Islands

KEY QUESTION How is the geography of Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean Islands alike?

The region of **Latin America** includes Mexico, Central America, the Caribbean Islands, which together make up Middle America, and South America. The Spanish and Portuguese colonized much of the region. Their languages derived from Latin, so they called the region *Latin America*. In this section, you will learn about the geography of Middle America.

Montserrat This Caribbean volcano lay dormant for 500 years, then erupted from 1995 through 1997.



Mexico Mexico's landforms include mountains, **plateaus**, and plains. You can see these on the map opposite. Two major mountain ranges are the **Sierra Madre Occidental** **A**, located in western Mexico, and the **Sierra Madre Oriental** **B**, located in eastern Mexico. Mexico sits on three large **tectonic plates**, and the movement of these plates causes earthquakes and volcanic activity.

Between the two mountain ranges lies the vast Mexican Plateau, making up about 40 percent of Mexico's land regions. Most of Mexico's people live in this area. The plateau rises about 4,000 feet above sea level in the northern part to about 8,000 feet in the southern part. Several volcanoes frame the southern edge of the plateau. East and west of the plateau, along the Gulf of Mexico and the Pacific Ocean, lie the coastal plains.

Mexico has few major rivers. Most of the rivers are not deep enough or wide enough for large boats to move through. Mexico's largest river is the Rio Grande, which is the northern border with Texas.

Sea Turtles These hawksbill sea turtles are swimming over reefs in the Caribbean Sea off the coast of the Cayman Islands.



Central America South of Mexico are the countries of Central America. Central America is an **isthmus**, a strip of land that connects two large landmasses. It connects the North and South American continents.

Highlands, the hilly sections of a country, make up most of Central America. Like Mexico, Central America lies at the edge of tectonic plates, so earthquakes occur often. A string of volcanoes, some of which are active, lines the Pacific Coast. Plains lie along both the Pacific and Caribbean coasts.

The Caribbean Islands East of Central America lie the Caribbean Islands. The islands are made up of three main parts. The Bahamas are an **archipelago**, a chain of nearly 700 islands. The **Greater Antilles** **C** include the largest islands of Cuba, Jamaica, Hispaniola (which includes Haiti and the Dominican Republic), and Puerto Rico. The **Lesser Antilles** **D** include the remaining smaller islands. Many of the Caribbean Islands are actually the exposed tops of underwater mountains. Mountains and highlands make up the interior of most Caribbean Islands, and plains circle the highlands.

COMPARE AND CONTRAST Describe how the geography of Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean Islands is alike.

Physical Geography of Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean Islands



CONNECT Geography & Economics

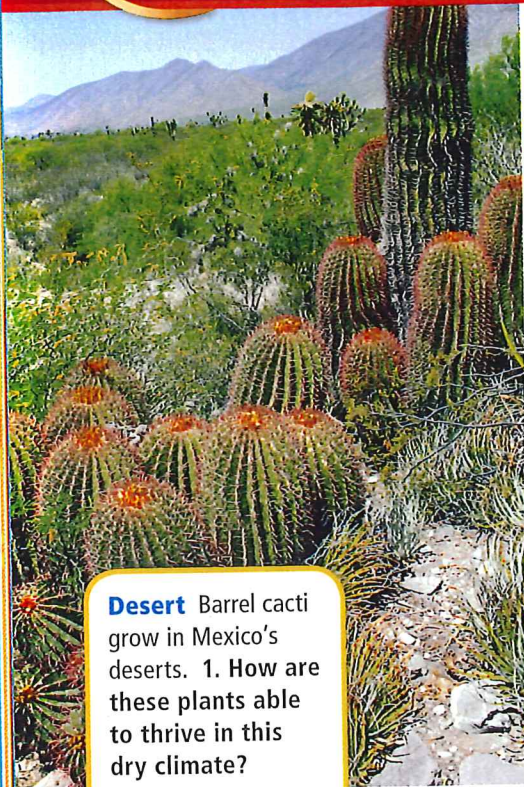
Panama Canal The Panama Canal was built by cutting through the Central American land bridge, which connected the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. Before the canal was opened in 1914, a ship bringing copper from Peru to Florida had to sail south around South America and then north. Using the canal shortened the distance and time.

CRITICAL THINKING

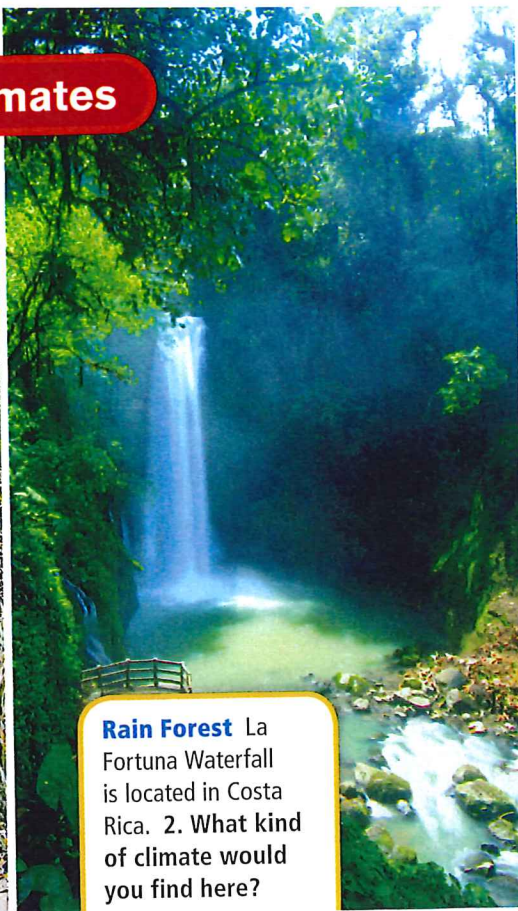
- 1. Movement** By how many miles did the canal shorten a ship's journey?
- 2. Make Inferences** Why was Panama a good choice for building a canal?



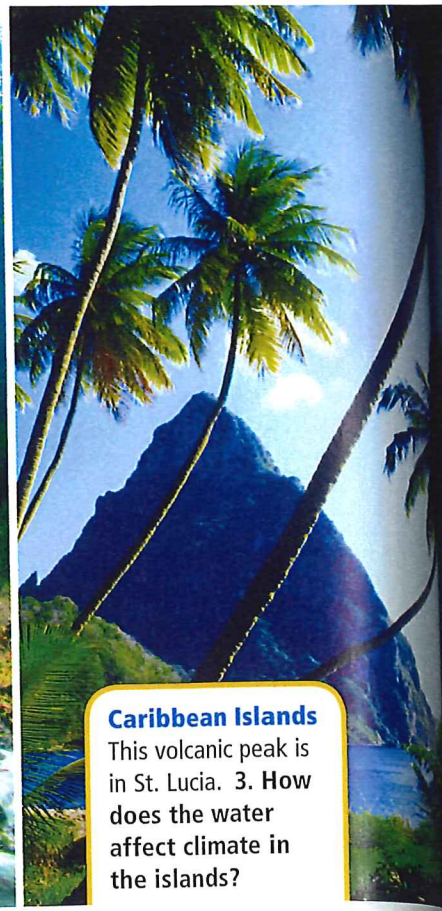
COMPARING Climates



Desert Barrel cacti grow in Mexico's deserts. 1. How are these plants able to thrive in this dry climate?



Rain Forest La Fortuna Waterfall is located in Costa Rica. 2. What kind of climate would you find here?



Caribbean Islands This volcanic peak is in St. Lucia. 3. How does the water affect climate in the islands?

Climate and Vegetation

KEY QUESTION What is a major influence on the climate of the Caribbean Islands?

Latin America stretches across more than one-half of the Western Hemisphere. It has a wide variety of climates and vegetation.

Mexico About half of Mexico lies south of the tropic of Cancer. The temperatures in this part of Mexico are generally warm and constant year-round, with abundant rainfall. Tropical rain forests thrive here.

A greater variation in temperatures exists in places located north of the tropic of Cancer. The driest areas are in the deserts of northwestern Mexico, as well as in the northern part of the Mexican Plateau. Desert shrubs grow in this climate. In Mexico's mountains and highlands, average temperatures vary with increases in elevation. The vegetation here consists mostly of coniferous and deciduous forests.

Central America All of Central America is located in the tropical zone, so temperatures are generally warm year-round. The plains along the Caribbean coast receive the greatest amount of precipitation. The climate is perfect for the lush rain forests that grow there.

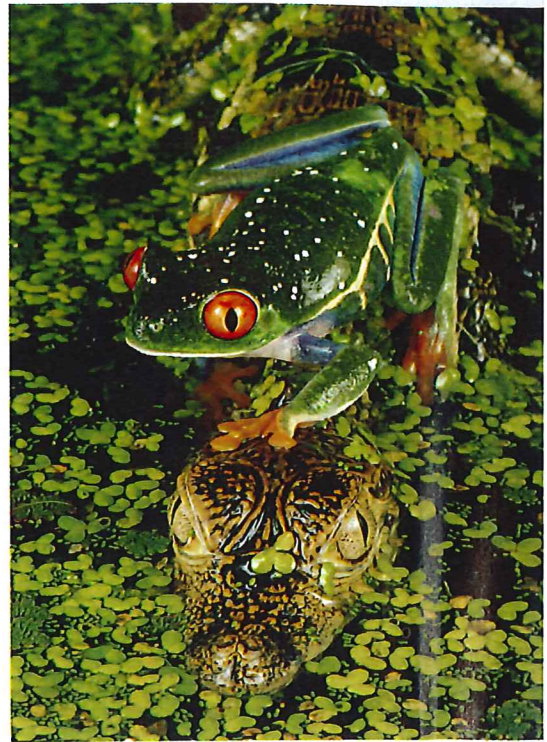
As in Mexico, places at higher elevations in Central America experience cooler average temperatures than those at lower elevations. Winds that blow inland from the warm Caribbean Sea bring heavy

rains on the eastern side of the mountains. Places on the westward side and in the interior highlands receive the least amount of precipitation. Forests of oak and pine grow at higher elevations, while desert shrubs grow in the drier areas on the Pacific side.

The Caribbean Islands Winds play a big role in the climate of the Caribbean Islands. The waters in the Caribbean Sea stay warm most of the year and heat the air over them. Warm winds blow across the islands, keeping the temperatures warm and constant year-round. The Lesser Antilles are divided into islands that face the wind and those that are protected from the wind. Those protected from the wind receive less rain than those facing the wind.

As in Mexico and Central America, elevation influences climate in the islands' mountains. The islands' climates allow diverse vegetation, including rain forests, deciduous forests, and desert shrubs, to grow there.

SUMMARIZE Describe the major influence on the climate of the Caribbean Islands.



Tree Frog A red-eyed tree frog, a unique animal found in Costa Rica's rain forest, hops a ride on a caiman, an alligator-like reptile.

Section 1 Assessment

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TERMS & NAMES

1. Explain the importance of

- isthmus
- archipelago
- Greater Antilles
- Lesser Antilles

USE YOUR READING NOTES

2. Categorize

 Use your completed chart to answer the following question:

How does climate influence the location of rain forests in Central America?

LANDFORMS	INFLUENCES ON CLIMATE	VEGETATION
1.	1.	1.
2.	2.	2.
3.	3.	3.

KEY IDEAS

3. How did Latin America get its name?
4. Where do most people in Mexico live?
5. What affects climate in the mountains and highlands of Mexico and Central America?

CRITICAL THINKING

6. **Analyze Causes and Effects** How did the Panama Canal help trade in Latin America?
7. **Make Generalizations** What generalization can you make about climate in Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean Islands?
8. **CONNECT to Today** In 1999, the United States gave control of the Panama Canal to Panama. How do you think the country of Panama will benefit from the canal?
9. **WRITING Create a Poster** Choose a country in Central America or one of the Caribbean Islands and prepare a captioned poster for a geography fair. Include information about the country's land, climate, and vegetation.