

Mountain ranges of the world

Most mountains develop in ranges – a cluster of peaks that are formed in a similar way at approximately the same time. Each peak in a range is classed as a separate mountain. Many ranges are grouped together in clusters called mountain chains or systems. A large mountain chain may be known as a belt or cordillera. This poster shows some of the largest mountain ranges in the world.



The Alps

The Alps are the largest mountain range in Western Europe. This mountain system stretches from south-east France through Italy, Switzerland and Austria and into Slovenia, covering a distance of around 1200km. The Alps are approximately 30 million years old. The highest peak in the range is Mont Blanc which is 4807m above sea level. Tourism is an important industry in Alpine regions. More than 100 million visitors travel to the Alps each year and a network of bridges and tunnels has been developed so that people can move around easily. Mass tourism, however, has affected the Alpine environment. Thousands of trees have been cut down to make way for ski resorts. This has caused instability on the mountain slopes and a number of large avalanches have taken place.



The Himalayas

The ten highest peaks in the world are all in the Himalayas. Mount Everest is the tallest at 8848m above sea level. The Himalayan range covers approximately 2400km and stretches through central Asia, across the borders of India, China, Butan and Nepal. Great rivers such as the Ganges, Indus and Brahmaputra feed from the mountain snow. Deciduous trees grow at the bottom of many mountains and precious minerals and gemstones can be found.



The Rockies

One of the largest mountain chains in the world, the Rockies stretch down the western side of North America from Alaska to New Mexico. The complex range is approximately 70 million years old and is home to five million people as well as wildlife such as deer, black bears, American elk and coyote. In northern areas, many people work in the forests around the base of the mountains while the slopes attract skiers and climbers. Some areas are rich in minerals, natural gas and petroleum oil. The highest point in the Rocky Mountains is Mount McKinley which stands at 6194m above sea level.



The Atlas Mountains

Located in North Africa, the Atlas mountains span approximately 2000km, stretching from the Atlantic coast of Morocco to Tunisia. The range consists of several mountain chains and provides a natural divide between the dry expanse of the Sahara Desert and the wetter, cooler areas of the coast. Many Berbers – the original people of North Africa – still live in remote areas of the Atlas mountains. The highest peak is Jebel Toubkal in Morocco which is 4165m above sea level. The mountains contain a wide range of mineral sources including lead, zinc, iron, petroleum and gold and silver.



The Ethiopian Highlands

This mountain range is Ethiopia's main geographical feature and much of it is volcanic. The range peaks are divided into Eastern and Western Highlands by the Great Rift Valley and cover about two thirds of the country. Mount Ras Dashen in the Simen Mountains is the highest peak at 4620m. Approximately 80 per cent of the country's population live in the highlands.



The Andes

At around 7200km long, the Andes are the longest mountain system in the world. The mountain system is positioned on the western side of South America and is the source of the Amazon River. Earthquakes and volcanic eruptions are frequent. Although the range runs through the equator, the mountain peaks are so high they are often covered with snow. The highest mountain peak in the Andes is Aconcagua which is 6960m above sea level. This is the highest mountain outside of Asia.



The Urals

Forming a natural border between European and Asian Russia, the Ural mountains are more than 2000km in length. They were first formed about 300 million years ago, making them extremely old. The range is sometimes referred to as the Stone Belt and has few mountains higher than 1600m. The highest peak in the Ural mountains is Mount Narodnaya which is 1895m above sea level.