

Antarctica

You will never guess where ninety percent of the Earth's fresh water is. It's frozen in the massive ice sheet covering the continent of Antarctica! In some places, the ice is three miles thick. It's so heavy that it has forced the land down below sea level. Still, Antarctica has the highest elevation of any continent because the ice is piled up so high.

The South Pole is in Antarctica, but the continent covers a huge area. It is the fifth-largest continent. Its size changes constantly because the ice melts and grows. The Southern Ocean surrounds Antarctica. In winter about half of the ocean freezes under about three feet of ice.

The temperatures on land often reach one hundred degrees below zero. The coldest temperature ever recorded on Earth was -128.2 degrees in Vostok, an Antarctic research station. Sometimes the wind blows at two hundred miles per hour. However, Antarctica gets almost no snow. Its air is very dry.

Even though the land is covered by ice, it has many of the same features that other continents do. The Transantarctic Mountains stretch across the continent. They divide Antarctica into East and West regions.

Since ancient times, people have guessed that a southern continent existed. The first person to sail all the way around it was Captain James Cook. This British explorer made the dangerous trip by ship in the 1770s.

After Cook reported what he had found, other people traveled Antarctica. Companies sent ships to hunt seals and whales. Those animals were valuable because their blubber was used as fuel. Whalebones were also used to making dresses, and seal skins were turned into coats.

In the early 1900s, scientists began visiting Antarctica. They set up stations where they could collect data about ice, climate, animals, and plants. Today, there are still research stations all over Antarctica. The McMurdo Research Station is so large that a thousand people can stay there. Most scientists visit in the summer, but a few take the risk of staying during winter months.

Besides whales and seals, Antarctica is famous for its penguins. There are many species of penguins and other sea birds. All the animals that live in the Antarctic can survive very cold temperatures.

Not many plants can withstand the Antarctic climate. Only three types of flowering plants grow there. They bloom for a few weeks in the summer, and only in one area. However, there are hundreds of species of fungi and moss on the continent.

There are no native people from Antarctica. Primitive peoples would not have survived. Humans who go there have to use special equipment so they don't freeze.