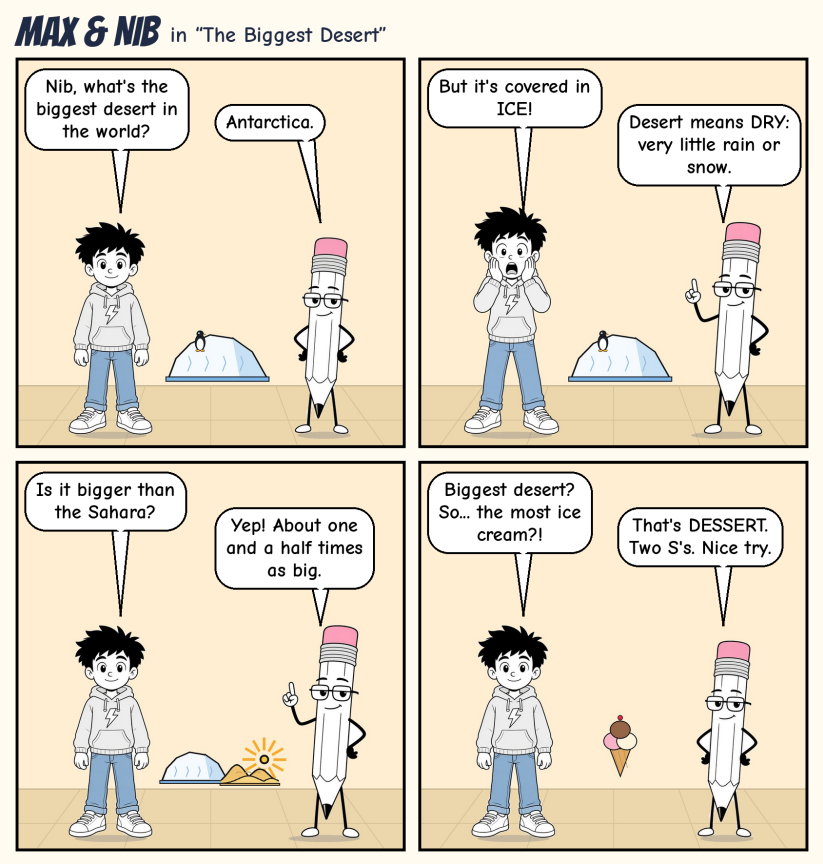


Name: _____ Date: _____

What's the Biggest Desert in the World?

Earth Science · Grades 3–6 · About 15 minutes · Max & Nib

Cool facts

When you hear the word desert, you might picture hot sand. But a desert is really any place that gets very little rain or snow, usually less than about 10 inches a year. That means a desert can be cold! The biggest desert on Earth is Antarctica, the icy continent around the South Pole. Very little snow falls there. In much of the middle of Antarctica, all the snow from a whole year would melt into less than about 2 inches of water. So why is it covered in ice? It is so cold that the snow almost never melts, so it has piled up for a very, very long time. Antarctica covers about 5.5 million square miles. The Sahara in Africa is the biggest hot desert. It covers about 3.6 million square miles (some sources say a bit less, because its edges change over time). So Antarctica is about one and a half times as big as the Sahara!

Questions

1. What makes a place a desert?

2. What is the biggest desert on Earth?

3. About how many square miles does Antarctica cover? How about the Sahara?

4. Look at the comic. What word did Max mix up with desert?

Write about it

Would you rather explore Antarctica or the Sahara? Tell what you would pack and why.

What's the Biggest Desert in the World? — Answer Key

Grades 3–6 · For teacher or parent use

Answers

1. What makes a place a desert?

   It gets very little rain or snow (usually less than about 10 inches a year). It does not have to be hot or sandy.

2. What is the biggest desert on Earth?

   Antarctica.

3. About how many square miles does Antarctica cover? How about the Sahara?

   Antarctica: about 5.5 million square miles. Sahara: about 3.6 million square miles (also accept about 3.3 to 3.6 million).

4. Look at the comic. What word did Max mix up with desert?

   Dessert (like ice cream). Dessert has two S's.

Writing prompt: Would you rather explore Antarctica or the Sahara? Tell what you would pack and why.
Accept any reasoned answer for the writing prompt. Background for adults: deserts are defined by low precipitation (USGS: arid land gets less than about 250 mm, or 10 inches, a year). Much of Antarctica's interior gets less than about 50 mm (2 inches) of water-equivalent snow a year (British Antarctic Survey); the continent-wide average is about 150 mm. Antarctica is about 14.2 million km² (5.5 million sq mi); the Sahara is about 9.4 million km² (3.6 million sq mi) per National Geographic, though Britannica gives about 8.6 million km² (3.3 million sq mi). 5.5 ÷ 3.6 ≈ 1.5. The Sahara is the largest HOT desert; some lists also count the Arctic as a huge polar desert, which would put the Sahara third.

Sources

- National Geographic Education: Not All Deserts Are Sandy — https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/deserts/
- British Antarctic Survey: Antarctic Factsheet (archived Jan 2024) — https://web.archive.org/web/20240115190903/https://www.bas.ac.uk/science/science-and-society/education/antarctic-factsheet-geographical-statistics/
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- USGS: Deserts, What Is a Desert? — https://pubs.usgs.gov/gip/deserts/what/