

How big is Africa?

They never tell you this at school, but Africa is a huge continent. The largest countries in the world can fit into it quite easily. Take West Africa, for example. The United States fits into West Africa and the Sahel region. It covers Senegal, Cote d'Ivoire, Mali, Nigeria, Ghana, Niger and Chad. China has the largest population in the world and is a big country, but it fits into South and East Africa and the Congo. India fits into the horn of Africa – Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea and Kenya. Eastern Europe fits into Egypt and the Sudan.

The western European countries also fit into North Africa quite easily. France is as big as Algeria. Germany fits into Tunisia, and Spain and Portugal fit into Morocco. Italy fits into Libya. But what about the United Kingdom? It's really quite a small country. In fact, it is smaller than Madagascar! Japan is bigger than the UK and it fits into South Africa.

When you look at a map of the world, why isn't Africa bigger? It's because of Mercator. Mercator? What's that? It's not a thing, it's a man. Gerardus Mercator was a geographer. He lived in Belgium and in 1569 he produced the map of the world we all use now. He produced the map to help ships. His map helped sailors to navigate their ships across the sea to America and Asia. The title of the map is the Mercator Projection and we use it everyday. When I want to find Cabo Verde or Mali, for example, I look at the Mercator Projection.

The problem is the Mercator Projection is wrong. Gerardus didn't know Africa. He didn't know the Equator. He didn't know Australia. But he knew Europe. So he made Europe bigger and he made Africa and the countries on the Equator smaller. That is why Greenland and Iceland are big countries and the Congo or Australia, for example, are not. Of course, today we have other maps. Google Maps and Google Earth are good examples. But when you open a book or a newspaper you often see the Mercator Projection. It is easier to print on a page.

So next time you look at a map, remember, many of the biggest and most important countries in the world, with the biggest and most successful economies, are smaller in size than the African continent.

New words for this article

Huge	Very, very big
To fit into	To be part of
Horn of Africa	The region that includes Ethiopia, Eritrea and Somalia
Really	In reality
In fact	The facts are these
Sailor	A person who travels on the water in a boat

Comprehension Questions

- 1 Which country fits in to Madagascar?
- 2 Which is bigger, Japan or the UK?
- 3 Which country do Senegal and Mali fit into?
- 4 Which country does the Congo fit into?

4 China
 3 the USA
 2 Japan
 1 the UK
Reading comprehension questions -

Answers