Antarctica

Antarctica is a continent surrounding the Earth's South Pole. It is not to be confused with the Arctic, which is located on the North Pole. In fact, the name Antarctica is derived from Greek ant-arctic, which means the opposite to the Arctic.

Antarctica was the last continent to be discovered. It remained hidden behind barriers of fog, storm, and sea ice until it was first sighted in the early 19th century. Because of the extreme cold and the lack of natural resources, the continent remained **neglected** for decades after its discovery. **Scientific expeditions** and seal hunters had explored only parts of its coasts by the end of the 19th century, while the interior remained unknown. **Scientific stations** were the first settlements and were established in the early 1940s. From that time on, exploration **flourished**. Scientists continue to research in Antarctica, and in recent years **increasing** numbers of tourists have visited Antarctica for the region's beautiful scenery and wildlife.

With its gigantic icebergs, mountain ranges and the emptiness of the polar plateau, Antarctica is the last vast wilderness on the planet.
It is the continent with the smallest population, the lowest average **humidity**, the highest average **altitude** and the highest windiness, as well as the lowest average temperature. So once again, it is the coldest, highest, driest, most uninhabited and also the windiest continent on Earth.

Antarctica is a **bigger land mass** than Australia. It is about 1.5 times as big as the United States. It's almost entirely covered in ice, except for about two percent of it that peeks through the thick **sheets** of ice. Only a few mountains and rocky areas can be seen above the ice and snow. The continent itself is shaped like a comma with a round body, surrounding the pole and a tail **curving** towards South America. It is **encircled** by the Southern, or Antarctic, Ocean. That is a body of water, made up of the southern parts of the Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian Ocean but sometimes it is considered a separate ocean because of its lower temperature and salt concentration.

Air temperatures of the high **inland** regions fall below –80°C in winter and rise only to –30°C in summer. The warmest coastal regions reach the freezing point in summer but drop well below in winter. The lowest recorded temperatures (without wind **chill**!) have reached -90°C.
The continents average altitude is 2.4 kilometers above sea level, making it 1.5 kilometers higher than the global average land height! Each year the South Pole receives less than an 30 mm of water.....in the form of snow, of course! Winds, reaching 300 kilometers per hour, blow out of the continental interior and make the Antarctic coastal regions rather breezy.
There is no **permanent human population** in Antarctica and only a few plants and animals can live there.
The **geographic** South Pole is on a high windy plateau near the centre of Antarctica.

There are also **several volcanoes** in Antarctica. Many are still active and the most famous of them as well as the first one to be discovered is the 4 km high Mount Erebus. One can see steam rising from it for many days. Not much ice melts though, because there is a relatively small amount of lava compared to the vast quantities of ice.

Antarctica is known as a place, very appropriate for viewing stars. There are several **spots** where the sky is so clear, that they could be a better option than space for **observation**.

But Antarctica wasn't always so cold and **desolate**. That is because it wasn't always located on the South Pole. Continental **drift** has moved this continent, along with the others, around the globe. Antarctica was **on the equator** during the Cambrian period, roughly 500 million years ago, but during the time of the dinosaurs (the Mesozoic Era) when it was attached to Australia, it **drifted** south. During that time, it had no glaciers, and many animals lived there, including some dinosaurs. Many findings of fossilized dinosaurs and other prehistoric creatures in Antarctica **prove** these theories.
Over the **millennia**, Antarctica drifted farther south, it separated completely from Australia, and is now a separate continent on the South Pole.

Antarctica was first seen in 1773 by James Cook. In 1821 the first landing was carried out. Many explorers **became trapped** when their ships got stuck in the ice and they had to **endure** the Antarctic winter. Few of these survived because, in many cases, ice crushed the ship. Soon after the landing, the race **to reach** the South Pole began. The pole was conquered in 1911 by a five man team with Roald Amundsen leading the group. After Amundsen, another explorer, Scott, **set off** with the same purpose , but he didn't know Amundsen had already **succeeded**. When he got to the pole, he found out about Amundsens victory and **on the return** journey he and his men all died. They were only 15 km from supplies. But not only Scott and his men died, there were also many other explorers that **perished while trying** to reach the South Pole. The bitter cold **proved** often too hard to endure.

The territory of Antarctica is claimed by seven nations. **Those are** Argentina, Australia, Britain, Chile, France, New Zealand, and Norway. Since 1961 the continent has been **administered** under the Antarctic **Treaty**. That is an international agreement to preserve the continent for peaceful scientific study.

Antarctica is an important part of Earth's weather system. By acting as a global **heat sink**, **it helps control** our climate and weather. The stability of the Antarctic ice sheets **is of concern** to those living in low-lying areas; the ice sheets contain enough water to **raise global sea level** almost 70 meters. Antarctica holds 70% of the Earth's freshwater, and 90% of Earth's ice! Antarctica also **influences** our oceans. Cold, **dense** and oxygen-rich waters originate in Antarctica and **replenish** the ocean's supply of bottom water. This helps to drive ocean circulation. If Antarctic ice melted, a lot would change.

And as a final thought, I would like to point out that though Antarctica is not a very useful continent **concerning** natural resources, it certainly is a very important one.