Relief Map of United States

Mountains appear as ripples on relief maps. Brown colors represent areas high above sea level.

Plateaus are mostly level and are near mountain ranges. They often stand high above sea level.

Plains show little relief on the map. Dark green represents areas at sea level. Lighter greens represent areas up to or above sea level.

Land Features on Maps

When scientists or travelers want to know about the landscape of an area, they often use a relief map. A relief map, such as the one above, shows how high or low each feature is on Earth. A mapmaker uses photographs or satellite images to build a three-dimensional view of Earth’s surface. A relief map shows three main types of land features: mountains, plains, and plateaus.

Mountains stand higher than the land around them. A mountain’s base may cover several square kilometers. A group of mountains is called a mountain range. Mountain ranges connected in a long chain form a mountain belt. The Rocky Mountains in the United States are part of a huge mountain belt. It includes the Canadian Rockies and the Andes Mountains in South America.

Plateaus have fairly level surfaces but stand high above sea level. Plateaus are often found near large mountain ranges. In the United States, the Colorado Plateau is about 3350 meters (11,000 ft) above sea level. This plateau includes parts of Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico, and Utah.

Plains are gently rolling or flat features. The United States has two types of plains. Coastal plains lie near the eastern and southeastern shores, and interior plains lie in the center of the nation. The interior Great Plains cover the middle third of the United States.

How is a plateau different from either a mountain or a plain?