

# Geography In The News™

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## THE INDIES: WEST VS. EAST

Students often confuse the two world regions of West Indies and East Indies. The West Indies include the islands of the Caribbean and the East Indies are the islands of Southeast Asia. The only similarities between the regions are their names, their numerous islands and their tropical climates. Culturally, they also are worlds apart.

Geographers and historians have long used the concept of “regions” as a convenient, as well as scientific, way to divide the earth into geographically recognizable units for discussion and study. Regions can be defined by some physical or cultural commonality, such as an island group or language group. A region may be any size from a small portion of a country, such as a mountain range, to a group of countries, such as Latin America, based on culture, language and religion.

As a footnote to discussing the West Indies and East Indies, students with little experience using maps also often confuse west and east. Using any map with north at the top, students can remember west and east by applying the word “WE.” In other words, west is to the left and east is to the right. Briefly, the West Indies lie to the left (west) of the Prime Meridian which passes through Greenwich, England, and the East Indies lie to the right (east).

The term “indies” apparently only came into use in Europe in the 1400s. Its precise context is

lost in antiquity. Traders of the time probably grouped all of South and East Asia into a geographical region linked to India. In other words, they referred to the “indies” as the larger region including India and its trading nations to the east and northeast.

European traders knew of the riches of India, Southeast Asia and China and wanted greater access to them other than over existing land routes. Items from the Indies arrived in Europe costing many times their initial value. Those mostly land routes (Silk Road and others) were dangerous and expensive, while potential transportation by ship was much less so.

The Portuguese initially sought water routes around Africa to circumvent the expensive land routes controlled by the Arabs. While the intent of these proposed water routes was to reach the “indies” by traveling first around Africa and then eastward, Columbus proposed reaching the “indies” by traveling westward from Europe.

Columbus, of course, discovered what he initially thought were the “indies” when his ships arrived among the islands of the Caribbean. He and his crews were surely ecstatic until by his second and third voyages he began to realize that these islands were not the “indies” associated with the region east of India.

Once accepted in Europe that Columbus had discovered a new group of islands about the same latitude as the “real indies,” the terms “West Indies” and “East Indies” were used to distinguish the two separate regions. Both were rich in resources and economic potential.

The West Indies consisted of three main island groups including the Bahamas (3,000 tiny islands), the Greater Antilles (four large islands) and the Lesser Antilles (40 small heavily populated islands and hundreds of lesser ones). Other than gold and silver, no resource was more important to the Europeans than the agricultural potential for growing sugarcane and other tropical plants. Today the population of the West Indies is estimated at over 40 million people with ancestry including Spanish, African, East Indian, Dutch, English, and others.

Europeans initially included most of South and East Asia as part of the “indies,” from Pakistan’s Indus River to Japan, including the mainland areas. This “Greater Indies” region was the source of many exotic items desired by Europeans, including spices, ceramics, fabrics (silk, etc.) and precious stones. This region’s treasures drove the period of great European discoveries in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Over time, however, the “indies” region was narrowed to include only islands of the Malay Archipelago extending from Sumatra eastward nearly to New Guinea and northward to the Philippines. This region today is home to more than 370 million inhabitants, nearly 10 times the population of the West Indies.

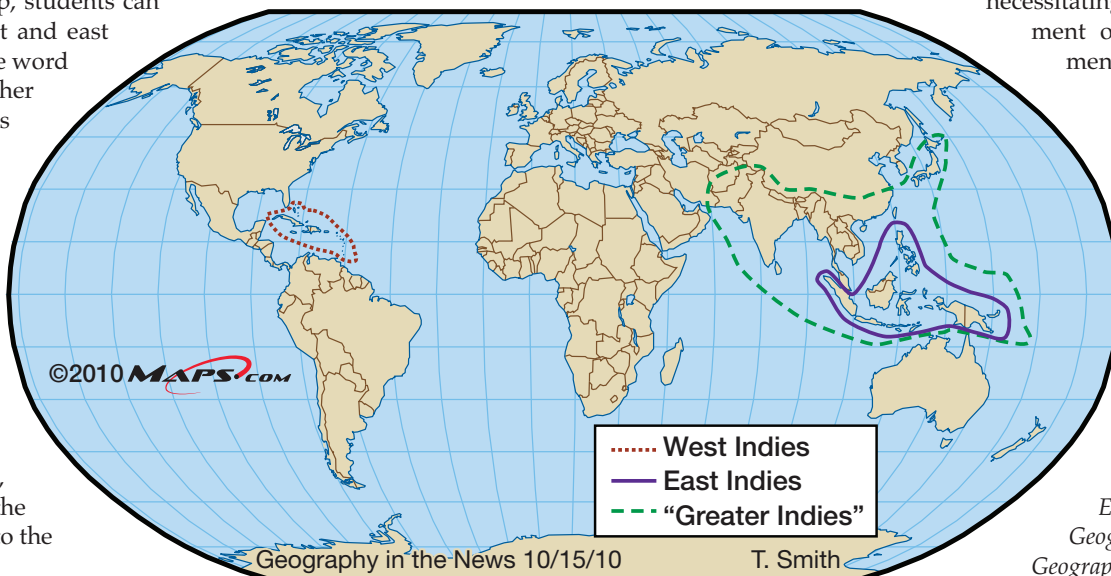
Both the West Indies and the East Indies are melting pots of cultures. Although Roman Catholicism and Protestantism permeate the West Indies, Islam largely dominates in the East Indies, with the major exception of Roman Catholicism in the Philippines. These contrasting regions are fascinating composites of cultures, landscapes and economic activities, necessitating the firm placement of them on our mental maps.

And that is *Geography in the News™*, October 15, 2010. #1063.

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### Where are the Indies?



Sources: authors