

The border between Mexico and the United States is 3,145 km long. With up to 350 million legal crossings a year, it is the world's most frequently crossed border. Its history has been turbulent and remains politically fraught, thanks not least to current plans to build a wall along its entire length.

Under the Adams-Onís Treaty of 1819, Spain ceded Florida to the US in exchange for settling territorial disputes in Texas: the US relinquished all claims to the parts of Spanish Texas west of the Sabine River and to other Spanish areas. The treaty also established a US border running through the Rocky Mountains all the way to the Pacific Coastline. Part of this border ran along the 100th meridian between the Arkansas River and Red River.

This treaty had only been in effect for 183 days when Spain recognized Mexican independence in 1821. The Adams-Onís Treaty border was subsequently reestablished by Mexico and the US in the 1828 Treaty of Limits. It remained in place until 1836, when settlers in the region declared Texas an independent republic, which was soon recognized and incorporated into the United States in 1845, triggering the Mexican-American War (1846–1848). In 1848, the present boundaries were drawn in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, making the Rio Grande the US's southern border and ceding California, roughly half of New Mexico, Nevada, Utah, most of Arizona, as well as parts of Wyoming and Colorado to the US.

One of the world's most fascinating cartographical oddities ceased to exist on July 31, 2015, when India and Bangladesh signed a treaty to swap border territories—more than 40 years after the first boundary lines were drawn. The Indo-Bangladeshi border included almost 200 small enclaves in the Rangpur Division of Bangladesh and along the eastern edge of India's Cooch Behar District: 102 little bits of India surrounded by Bangladesh and 71 splinters of Bangladesh surrounded by India.

Life was hard for the 50,000 people living in these landlocked archipelagoes as they were denied IDs, civil rights and legal assistance from their own country. Not only that, but the country surrounding them would not grant them access to schools, electricity or health care.

According to folklore, this geographical patchwork dates back to the early 18th century, when the Raja of Cooch Behar and the Nawab of Rangpur challenged each other to a game of either chess or cards: they used small plots of land or villages along the border between them as stakes in the fateful game.

More likely, this cartographical puzzle came about in 1713 owing to vague border definitions in a treaty between the Kingdom of Cooch Behar and the Mughal Empire.

Regardless of its historical origins, the problem only became apparent after the Partition of India in 1947: someone living in an enclave would require a visa to enter the surrounding foreign country, but to obtain such a visa they had to travel to a major city in their own country, which was, of course, impossible without illegally entering the foreign country surrounding the enclave.

The most extreme example of this territorial folly is Dahala Khagrabari, a 0.7-hectare piece of Indian farmland—roughly the size of a football field. Like a Russian doll, Dahala Khagrabari was surrounded by a larger Bangladeshi patch of land called Upanchowki Bhajni, which was lodged within the Indian enclave of Balapara Khagrabari, which, in turn, was situated in Bangladesh. Which made Dahala Khagrabari the world's one and only third-order enclave.

The Boundary Treaty of 1866 established the 24th parallel south, from the Pacific coast to the Andes, as the border between Chile and Bolivia. It was agreed that the two countries would share tax revenues generated by mineral exports from all territories between the 23rd and 25th parallels. To take advantage of the growing demand for minerals extracted in the area, Bolivia then decided to increase taxes on Chilean companies—despite having agreed not to do so for 25 years. The resulting conflict erupted into the War of the Pacific from 1879–1883. Chile’s victory enabled it to enlarge its territory by annexing parts of southern Peru as well as Bolivia’s coastline.

90 years later, under Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet (1915–2006), the country’s relations with Argentina, Bolivia, and Peru tensed up again. Pinochet feared ground invasions from across the Atacama Desert as well as from Patagonia, so he had his army bury 180,000 land mines along the Chilean border. Thousands of mines remain buried to this day and have so far injured or killed over 170 people as well as countless cattle and llamas. The main problem with clearing the landmines is their location in remote and high-altitude areas that are difficult to reach. In 2001, Chile ratified the Ottawa Treaty, agreeing to dig up and destroy all its anti-personnel mines by 2020.

The Ben Hai River originates in the highlands of Laos, where it is called Rao Thanh. From there it flows east along the 17th parallel and enters the South China Sea at Cua Tung in Vietnam. The river is about 100 km long and 200 m wide at its widest point. During the partition of the country under the Geneva Accords of 1954, it marked the border between North and South Vietnam.

French Indochina was established as a French colony in 1887 and consisted of what is now Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. During World War II, Japanese forces invaded Vietnam. To fight off both the French colonialists and Japanese occupiers, Communist leader Ho Chi Minh (1890–1969) formed the Viet Minh, a national independence coalition and resistance group. Following Japan's 1945 defeat in WWII, it withdrew its forces and left French-educated Emperor Bao Dai (1913–1997) in control. But Bao Dai was soon persuaded to abdicate by Ho Chi Minh, whose Communist forces took over in northern Vietnam. France then tried to regain control over its colony and backed Bao as head (1949–1955) of the newly formed State of Vietnam (South Vietnam). But the Viet Minh defeated French forces in May 1954 in the battle of Dien Bien Phu. That spelled the end of France's colonial aspirations in Indochina and resulted in the partition of Vietnam, a temporary division along the 17th parallel, at the Geneva Conference in 1954.

The activities of pro-Communist rebels in South Vietnam and the widespread belief in the so-called Domino Theory – predicting that every time a country fell to Communism, neighboring countries would follow suit – led to massive US intervention in the mid-1960s and eventually to the Vietnam War. It is estimated that over 3 million people were killed there between 1955 and 1975. Heavy opposition to the war in the US bitterly divided Americans and eventually led President Richard Nixon (1913–1994) to order the withdrawal of US forces in 1973. Communist forces ended the war by taking control of South Vietnam in 1975 and unifying the country as the Socialist Republic of Vietnam the following year.

Hadrian's Wall (Latin: Vallum Aelium) was the northwest frontier of the Roman Empire for nearly 300 years. The construction of this defensive fortification in the Roman province of Britannia dates back to 120–130 CE. As its name suggests, it was built by the Roman army on orders from Emperor Hadrian. The wall ran 117 km from the banks of the river Tyne near the North Sea to the Solway Firth on the Irish Sea. It consisted of both outer and inner banks and ditches, a level berm, a road and a stone wall probably as high as 6.5 m. The whole defensive complex was up to 120 m wide. Today Hadrian's Wall is probably the most thoroughly researched and documented section of the Roman Empire's frontier. Contrary to popular belief, the wall never marked the border between England and Scotland.

In the opinion of modern-day scholars, the walls, towers and forts were never supposed to stop armies from invading, but rather to control immigration and impose duties on goods imported into the empire, a lot like border patrol stations. These defensive fortifications were highly effective for soldiers stopping smugglers or fighting off small groups of bandits. So the physical edge of the empire should probably be thought of less as an impenetrable structure than as a tool for Rome to extend its influence into Barbaricum—the Roman term for what lay outside the empire – through trade and occasional raids.

Hadrian's Wall was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1987, as was the 568 km Limes in Germany in 2005. To facilitate research into the strategy and functioning of the Roman Empire's fortified borders, preservation experts hope that additional sites in 16 different countries will soon be recognized and protected by UNESCO.

Built by various rulers and dynasties from as early as the 7th century BCE up to the mid-17th century, the Great Wall of China is not a single structure, but a network of defensive installations that grew (and sometimes shrank) with the empire. Traditionally, the Great Wall is thought to have stretched 4,000 km westward from Shanhaiguan on the Yellow Sea all the way to Jiayuguan. However, new archeological findings suggest that the barrier extended even further west to Xinjiang, where China's Muslim Uighur people live. Estimates of the total length of various versions of the wall range between 10,000 and 20,000 km.

The oldest surviving sections of the wall, dating back to the fifth century BCE, were built to shield the Chinese kingdoms from the nomadic tribes in the north. Qin Shi Huang, the first emperor of a unified China, began connecting the many northern walls into a single defensive structure in 221 BCE. Over the course of almost two millennia, various dynasties repaired existing walls and built new ones. Most of the famous brick-and-stone wall that meanders across the mountains north of Beijing was built under the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644). The 8,850 km Ming wall is up to 8 m tall and 4 to 6 m wide.

However impressive in size and regardless of the many lives it cost to build it, the Great Wall sometimes failed Chinese dynasties: first in 200 BCE, when the Xiongnu invaded and pillaged the Middle Kingdom, and again in 1211, when the Mongols under Genghis Khan breached the wall and subjugated the Jin dynasty in the north and, eventually, all the other Chinese dynasties. Not even the massive Ming wall was able to prevent the Manchu invasion in 1644, which toppled the Ming dynasty. The last time armies clashed at the Great Wall was in 1933, when Japan captured the Inner Mongolian province of Rehe.

The Boundary Ranges along the border between Canada and Alaska are the northernmost subrange of the Coast Mountains. Part of this 2,475 km border between the US and Canada was once the line of demarcation between two countries, namely Russia and the British Empire. The first Russian settlers there, mostly merchants and fur trappers from Siberia, arrived in 1733.

Russian America was not formally incorporated into the Russian Empire, however, until 1799, when Tsar Paul I granted the Russian-American Company a monopoly on the fur trade in return for a pledge to establish new settlements there. But by the 1850s, they'd nearly driven the sea otters in the region to extinction, so the fur trade was no longer profitable.

After its defeat at the hands of the British in the Crimean War, Russia was badly in need of funds. Emperor Alexander II (1818–1881), well aware that he could not defend Russia's American colony in any future war, sold the territory to the US in 1867, a transaction that came to be known as the Alaska Purchase.

After British Columbia joined the Canadian Confederation in 1871, Canada demanded a survey of the Alaskan border. The US refused on grounds that it was too costly an endeavor for a remote and sparsely settled border area of no economic interest. It was not until decades later, in the 1890s, that the Gold Rush and the attendant population increase in the Klondike led to renewed boundary negotiations. In 1903, the United States and the British Empire, which retained control over Canada's foreign relations, ended the Alaska boundary dispute, favoring the American position and refusing to grant Canada an all-Canadian access route from the Yukon River gold fields to the sea.

In 1494, the Portuguese Empire and the Crown of Castile (Spain) agreed to divide all newly discovered lands outside Europe between them. The Treaty of Tordesillas set the meridian 370 leagues (1907 km) west of Cape Verde as the line of demarcation: all lands discovered to the east of that longitude would belong to Portugal, and lands to the west of the line to Castile. But the treaty did not specify the exact coordinates of the border. Different interpretations put it anywhere between the meridians $42^{\circ}30'$ W and 50° W, a difference of roughly 1,500 km when measured along the southern coast of Brazil. At the time, however, neither party was even aware that the line crossed the tip of Brazil.

The land now called Brazil was claimed by the Portuguese Empire in 1500, and São Vicente, founded in 1532, was its first permanent settlement. São Vicente is on an island on the Atlantic coast located roughly 60 km southeast of São Paulo and today has a population of about 350,000. It is chiefly a commuter town for people who work in the larger and wealthier port city of Santos on the other side of the island.

Ilha Porchat is an islet just south of São Vicente Island. It's named after the Porchat family, who once had several holiday homes, a casino and nightclubs there. Due to its strategic location, it is a landmark both for São Vicente and for vessels entering the bay from the ocean.

Switzerland is a landlocked country surrounded by five countries: France, Italy, Austria, Liechtenstein and Germany. Its longest border is with Italy, measuring 782 km and running mostly across the Alps, ranging in altitude from 4,600 m above sea level (east of Dufourspitze) to under 200 m (Lago Maggiore), the highest and lowest points in Switzerland respectively.

Long stretches (totaling 578 km) of the border in this mountain region run along watersheds between the two countries, including 40 km across glaciers. Due to global warming, the glaciers have shrunk considerably over the past few years, shifting those watershed boundaries. The melting of the massive Theodul Glacier below the Klein Matterhorn has displaced the corresponding watershed 150 m to the southwest, resulting in a small territorial gain for Switzerland, which was ratified peacefully by both the Italian and Swiss governments in 2009. So the top station of the ski lift to Furggsattel Glacier, Zermatt, which used to lie in Italy, is now in Switzerland—and the Swiss operators of the ski resort don't have to pay rent to the Italians anymore.

Covadonga is a small village in the Picos de Europa, a mountain range in the Province of Asturias in northern Spain. Its permanent population was 58 people in 2008. The village is known as the site of the Battle of Covadonga, during which the Umayyad army was defeated by the Christians for the first time, thus marking the beginning of the 770-year Reconquista. In 711, an army of Arabs and Berbers, united by their faith in Islam, set sail from North Africa across the Strait of Gibraltar. They defeated the Visigothic army led by King Roderick (ruled 710–711/2), who died in battle. Within a seven-year campaign, Portugal and most of Spain were conquered and became part of the Umayyad Empire. The Moorish-controlled territory on the Iberian Peninsula was called Al-Andalus and, at its greatest extent, reached across the Pyrenees into southern France. Muslim rule in the region reached its apogee under the Umayyad Caliphate of Cordoba in the 10th century and lasted for more than 700 years, until the Christian conquest of Granada in 1492.

In Spanish historiography, the Reconquista denotes a series of military campaigns led by Christian local kings to end Muslim rule on the Iberian Peninsula, beginning with the Battle of Covadonga (718 or 722). The concept of Reconquista only emerged at the end of the 10th century and feeds into the same narrative as the Christian crusades into Muslim-ruled territories in the Levant, many accounts of which are embroidered with elements of legend and the supernatural.

It is believed that Pelayo (685–737), the first Christian king of Asturias, and his men formed a defensive position in the gorge of Covadonga and defeated the invading Muslim army.

According to Christian chronicles, the divine intervention of the Virgin Mary was decisive in the victory. A shrine devoted to Our Lady of Covadonga was erected in the cave where she is said to have appeared to Pelayo.

The many conflicts notwithstanding, alliances between Muslim and Christian leaders were not uncommon in the first centuries of Al-Andalus history, and their cultural centers drew scholars and artists from outside the Iberian Peninsula as well.

Before the first Europeans arrived in the area between the Orange and Vaal rivers in what is now South Africa, it was home to the semi-nomadic Bantu peoples. In the 19th century, itinerant farmers of Dutch descent, called Boers, undertook what is known as the Great Trek: heading north from the British Cape Colony, they crossed the Orange River and settled the area. The British annexed the land between the two rivers in 1848. However, after failing to build an orderly administration and after continual skirmishes with the Basotho (a Bantu ethnic group), they eventually withdrew from the area and relinquished sovereignty. The Bloemfontein Convention of 1854 recognized the independence of the local Boer settlers and their Orange Free State.

The discovery of diamonds and gold brought new tension into the region as the Boers and the British vied for control over the very lucrative mining business. Britain's desire to incorporate the two independent Boer states Transvaal and the Orange Free State into her realm, as well as the Boers' fear of becoming a minority in their own land due to the massive influx of British workers to the mines, eventually led to the so-called Second Boer War (1899–1902).

The Boers' initial attacks were successful and they soon besieged the mining city of Kimberley. British forces tried to relieve the siege of Kimberley on December 11, 1899, but their attempt was foiled at Magersfontein owing to brilliant tactics by the Boers and bad reconnaissance by the British. The Boers, entrenched at the foot of the hills along the border between the Cape Colony and the Orange Free State, survived bombardment by the British artillery and managed to inflict heavy losses on the British army. The British were forced to fall back and wait for reinforcements. Two months later, the siege of Kimberley was lifted and, in late 1900, they invaded the two Boer republics. The Orange Free State ceased to exist after its defeat and surrender to the British Empire at the end of the Boer War in 1902.

The Cherokee originally controlled roughly 100,000 sq km of the Appalachian Mountains in parts of present-day Georgia, East Tennessee and the western parts of North and South Carolina. With more than 300,000 tribal members today, the Cherokee Nation is the largest of the 567 federally recognized indigenous tribes in the country.

President Andrew Jackson signed the Indian Removal Act in 1830, authorizing the government to extinguish Native American claims to lands in the Southeast. The forceful relocation of the Cherokee, Muscogee (Creek), Seminole, Chickasaw, Choctaw and Ponca nations to Indian Territory in present-day Oklahoma is known as the Trail of Tears. Estimates based on tribal and military records suggest that approximately 100,000 indigenous people were forced from their homelands at the time and that some 15,000 died during the long and strenuous march west.

During the Cherokee removal in 1838, 9,000 Cherokee and 300 Creek were rounded up and imprisoned in stockades a few km east of Blythe Ferry in preparation for their forced journey west—a 1,600 km march—across the Tennessee River. It is believed that nearly two thirds of the Cherokees who'd been driven from their homes stood on their ancestral lands for the last time at Blythe Ferry and that some 4,000 died in the internment camps, on the trail itself or later on due to disease.

Jerusalem is a city with a population of nearly one million, located in the Judean mountains between the Mediterranean and the Dead Sea. The city, especially its eastern part, is a core issue of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The Ottoman Empire ruled Jerusalem for 600 years until the British army seized control of the city in December 1917. The League of Nations in 1920 granted Britain a Mandate for Palestine: to control its territories (modern-day Israel, Palestine and Jordan), to administer the region's Arab nations 'until such time as they are able to stand alone' and to create a Jewish national homeland. After WWII, the United Nations approved the partition plan for a two-state solution in 1947, creating one Arab and one Jewish state, with Jerusalem separate and under international control. The Arab countries rejected this plan and attacked Israel the day after the Jewish state declared its independence in 1948. The Arab countries were defeated and Jerusalem was divided. The western half became part of newly founded Israel, and the eastern half, including the holy sites, was occupied by Jordan.

The Six-Day War of 1967 was an Israeli preemptive strike on Egypt, Syria and Jordan through which Israel gained control of the Golan Heights, the Sinai Peninsula, the West Bank and all of Jerusalem. Within weeks after the war, the Israeli parliament announced the annexation of East Jerusalem, which the UN pronounced illegal.

The independent State of Palestine was declared in 1988 and since been recognized by 138 UN members, though not including Israel, the US and most EU countries.

Today both Israel and Palestine claim Jerusalem as their capital. Those claims are, at least for the time being, generally rejected by the international community, with the prominent exception of the United States, which in December 2017 recognized Jerusalem as the capital of Israel.

On February 27, 2014, in the aftermath of the Euromaidan protests and the 2014 Ukrainian revolution, Russian troops took over the Crimean Parliament and captured other strategic sites across the Crimean Peninsula. Within two weeks of the takeover, Russia held a controversial referendum in Crimea: the local population could vote either to join Russia or to restore the 1992 Crimean constitution, thereby making Crimea significantly more autonomous from Ukraine. Preserving the Ukrainian constitutional status quo was not on the ballot. After the annexation—one of the biggest land grabs in Europe since WWII—the UN General Assembly passed a non-binding resolution declaring the Crimea referendum invalid. Sanctions were imposed on Russia, which was suspended from the inter-governmental political forum G8 as well.

But that wasn't the first hostile takeover of the peninsula, not even by the Russians. With its strategically important location on the Black Sea, Crimea has been fought over time and again down through history. The ancient Greeks (ruins of the Greek city Myrmekion are visible in the photograph) and Romans both incorporated Taurica, as it was then called, into their empires. Ottoman rule over the peninsula, established in the mid-1400s, was brought to an end in 1783 by Russian annexation under Catherine the Great.

After occupation by Nazi Germany during WWII, it became a Russian oblast. Then, after Stalin's death, Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev transferred Crimea to Ukraine in 1954. When the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991, Crimea voted for independence from Russia and to remain part of Ukraine. In 1997, Russia and Ukraine signed a Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation and Partnership, allowing Russia to keep its Black Sea Fleet in Sevastopol and confirming both parties' inviolable borders—a pledge the Russians obviously reneged on in February 2014.

Shenzhen is one of the largest cities in Guangdong Province, southeastern China. It lies within the Pearl River Delta and borders Hong Kong to the north. Before 1979, Shenzhen was a small market town composed of a few fishing villages. The name Shenzhen means ‘deep drains’, after the drains created for rice paddies around the town. With a population of roughly 30,000 people, Shenzhen served as a customs stop on the way into mainland China from Hong Kong (which was a British colony for 156 years until 1997).

When China opened up to capitalism and foreign investment in 1979 under Communist Party leader Deng Xiaoping (1904–1997), Shenzhen was singled out to be the first of five so-called ‘special economic zones’. The influx of foreign and domestic capital precipitated rapid growth. Officially, close to 13 million people live in the city today, though the actual figure is much higher owing to temporary residents, commuters and illegal immigrants. In only forty years, Shenzhen has been transformed from a small town into one of the world’s biggest cities, and its economy has surpassed that of Hong Kong.

Jammed between those two cities is a remnant of the Cold War era: a green zone of originally 26 sq km that is home to a few isolated villages, fishponds and flocks of migratory birds. This ‘Frontier Closed Area’ was established in 1951 as a buffer zone to keep migrants from China out of the British colony. Developable land is scarce and very valuable in Hong Kong, so measures to ease restrictions on access to and use of the zone as well as to scale it down to a mere 8 sq km were introduced in 2006. Subsequent development now jeopardizes the wetland ecosystem, which is used by ten species of globally endangered birds.

Due to its strategic location at the confluence of the Danube and Sava rivers and at the intersection of the Pannonian Basin and the more mountainous Balkan Peninsula, Belgrade has been invaded and occupied by foreign powers time and again down through its history. Three crusades (in 1096, 1147 and 1189) passed through Belgrade and the city has been fought over in 115 wars and destroyed 44 times. The last time bombs were dropped on Belgrade was in 1999, when NATO air strikes forced Serbia to withdraw its troops from Kosovo.

The history of Belgrade dates back to at least 7,000 BCE. One of the most important prehistoric cultures of Europe, the Vinca culture, evolved in the region around 6,000 BCE. In 279 BCE, Celts seized the city and named it Singidùn. The city was later conquered by the Romans during the reign of Augustus in the second century CE and was settled by the Slavs in the 520s. It changed hands several times between the Byzantine, Frankish and Bulgarian Empires as well as the Kingdom of Hungary before it became the capital of the Serbian Kingdom in the 13th century. Belgrade was conquered by the Ottoman Empire in 1521 and frequently passed from Ottoman to Habsburg rule. Most of the city was destroyed during the Austro-Ottoman wars. Belgrade again became the capital of Serbia in 1841, but northern Belgrade (present-day municipality of Zemun) remained the southernmost Habsburg outpost until 1918. The city served as the capital of Yugoslavia, under its various forms of government, from 1918 until the country's dissolution in 2006.

The Inca first appeared in the Andean region during the 12th century. In its prime (c. 1525), the Inca Empire spanned 5,500 km from northern Ecuador to central Chile. It was the largest empire in pre-Columbian America and possibly the largest empire in the world at that time. At one point the Inca state, known as Tawantinsuyu, ruled over as many as 12 million conquered people from roughly 100 different ethnic groups. The administrative and religious center of the empire was located in Cuzco (a city in modern-day Peru) and had a population of up to 150,000. The empire expanded at a staggering rate. The Incas built a 40,000 km network of roads, without wheels or iron tools.

The Incas' reign in Chile was comparably brief, from the 1470s to the 1530s, when the Inca Empire collapsed. The main settlements of their empire in Chile lay along the Aconcagua, Mapocho and Maipo rivers. Many modern scholars believe the southern border was situated between Santiago and Cajón del Maipo, maybe even as far south as the river Maule.

The Inca Empire was formed and ruled with brutal force and the rulers were often loathed by their conquered peoples. Rebellions, especially in the northern territories, and a war of succession amongst the Incas weakened the empire in the 15th century. The Spanish conquistadores, led by Francisco Pizarro (1478–1541), took full advantage of this situation. The Spanish brought not only weapons, but also diseases such as smallpox, typhus and measles, which decimated more of the population than any armed conflicts. The Spanish conquered the last Inca stronghold, Vilcabamba, in 1572 and captured and executed their last ruler, Túpac Am-aru (1545–1572).