Europe is one of the world's seven continents. Comprising the westernmost peninsula of Eurasia, Europe is generally divided from Asia by the watershed divides of the Ural and Caucasus Mountains, the Ural River, the Caspian and Black Seas, and the waterways connecting the Black and Aegean Seas.

Europe is bordered by the Arctic Ocean to the north, the Atlantic Ocean to the west, the Mediterranean Sea to the south, and the Black Sea and connected waterways to the southeast. Yet the borders of Europe—a concept dating back to classical antiquity—are somewhat arbitrary, as the primarily physiographic term "continent" can incorporate cultural and political elements.

Europe is the world's second-smallest continent by surface area, covering about 10,180,000 square kilometres (3,930,000 sq mi) or 2% of the Earth's surface and about 6.8% of its land area. Of Europe's approximately 50 countries, Russia is by far the largest by both area and population, taking up 40% of the continent (although the country has territory in both Europe and Asia), while Vatican City is the smallest. Europe is the third-most populous continent after Asia and Africa, with a population of 733 million or about 11% of the world's population.

Europe, in particular Ancient Greece, is the birthplace of Western culture. It played a predominant role in global affairs from the 15th century onwards, especially after the beginning of colonialism. Between the 16th and 20th centuries, European nations controlled at various times the Americas, most of Africa, Oceania, and large portions of Asia. The Industrial Revolution, which began in Great Britain around the end of the 18th century, gave rise to radical economic, cultural, and social change in Western Europe, and eventually the wider world. Demographic growth meant that, by 1900, Europe's share of the world's population was 25%.

Both World Wars were largely focused upon Europe, greatly contributing to a decline in Western European dominance in world affairs by the mid-20th century as the United States and Soviet Union took prominence. During the Cold War, Europe was divided along the Iron Curtain between NATO in the west and the Warsaw Pact in the east. European integration led to the formation of the Council of Europe and the European Union in Western Europe, both of which have been expanding eastward since the revolutions of 1989 and the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991.

The use of the term "Europe" has developed gradually throughout history. In antiquity, the Greek historian Herodotus mentioned that the world had been divided by unknown persons into three parts, Europe, Asia, and Libya (Africa), with the Nile and the River Phasis forming their boundaries—though he also states that some considered the River Don, rather than the Phasis, as the boundary between Europe and Asia. Europe's eastern frontier was defined in the 1st century by geographer Strabo at the River Don. The *Book of Jubilees* described the continents as the lands given by Noah to his three sons; Europe was defined as stretching from the Pillars of Hercules at the Strait of Gibraltar, separating it from North Africa, to the Don, separating it from Asia.

A cultural definition of Europe as the lands of Latin Christendom coalesced in the 8th century, signifying the new cultural condominium created through the confluence of Germanic traditions and Christian-Latin culture, defined partly in contrast with Byzantium and Islam, and limited to northern Iberia, the British Isles, France, Christianized western Germany, the Alpine regions and northern and central Italy. The concept is one of the lasting legacies of the Carolingian Renaissance: "Europa" often figures in the letters of Charlemagne's court scholar, Alcuin. This division—as much cultural as geographical—was used until the Late Middle Ages, when it was challenged by the Age of Discovery. The problem of redefining Europe was finally resolved in 1730 when, instead of waterways, the Swedish geographer and cartographer von Strahlenberg proposed the Ural Mountains as the most significant eastern boundary, a suggestion that found favour in Russia and throughout Europe.

Europe is now generally defined by geographers as the westernmost peninsula of Eurasia, with its boundaries marked by large bodies of water to the north, west and south; Europe's limits to the far east are usually taken to be the Urals, the Ural River, and the Caspian Sea; to the southeast, including the Caucasus Mountains, the Black Sea and the waterways connecting the Black Sea to the Mediterranean Sea. Because of sociopolitical and cultural differences, there are various descriptions of Europe's boundary. For example, Cyprus is approximate to Anatolia (or Asia Minor), but is usually considered part of Europe both culturally and politically and currently is a member state of the EU. In addition, Malta was considered an island of North Africa for centuries, while Iceland, though nearer to Greenland (North America), is also generally included in Europe.

Sometimes, the word 'Europe' is used in a geopolitically limiting way to refer only to the European Union or, even more exclusively, a culturally defined core. On the other hand, the Council of Europe has 47 member countries, and only 28 member states are in the EU. In addition, people living in areas such as Ireland, the United Kingdom, the North Atlantic and Mediterranean islands and also in Scandinavia may routinely refer to "continental" or "mainland" Europe simply as Europe or "the Continent".