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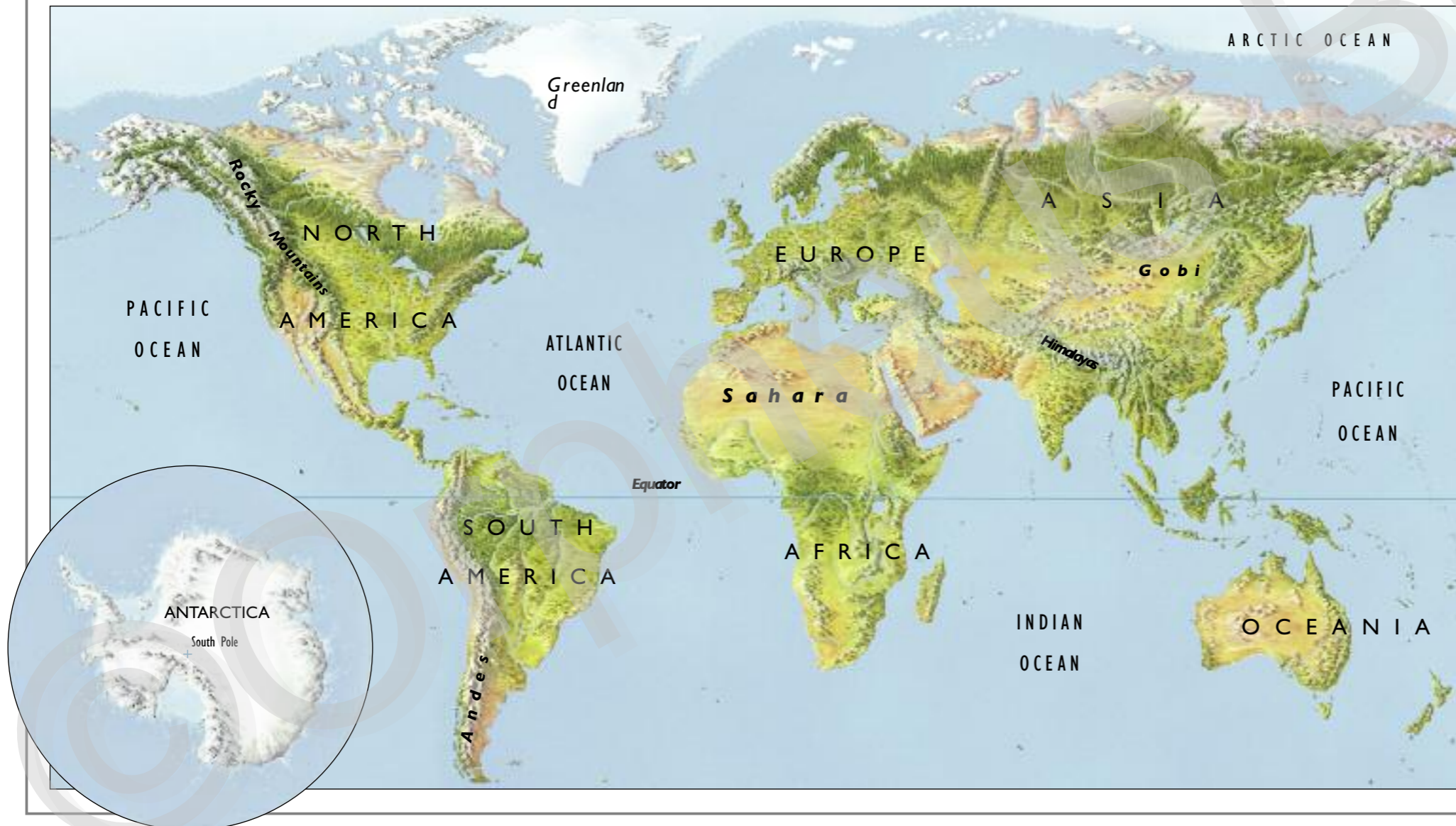
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British towns and villages have houses that date back hundreds of years. Many are still lived in today.



BRITISH ISLES

THE BRITISH ISLES includes the large islands of Great Britain and Ireland, and many smaller islands. England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland make up the United Kingdom. The rest of Ireland became independent in 1922. For many years conflict has divided the Catholic and Protestant people of Northern Ireland.

Mountains dominate the sparsely populated north of Scotland. Northern England and Wales also have large areas of uplands. Central and southern England are a dense mix of farmland, towns and cities. Because of its mild, wet climate, Ireland is famous for its lush green landscape.

The United Kingdom was once dominated by heavy industries such as coal-mining and shipbuilding. Today, light industry such as plastics manufacture and electronics, as well as communications and financial services, have become important.

Once the hub of a worldwide empire, Britain still plays a leading role in international affairs. Its language, English, is spoken as a second language all over the world, and is dominant on the Internet and other areas of international communication.

FRANCE

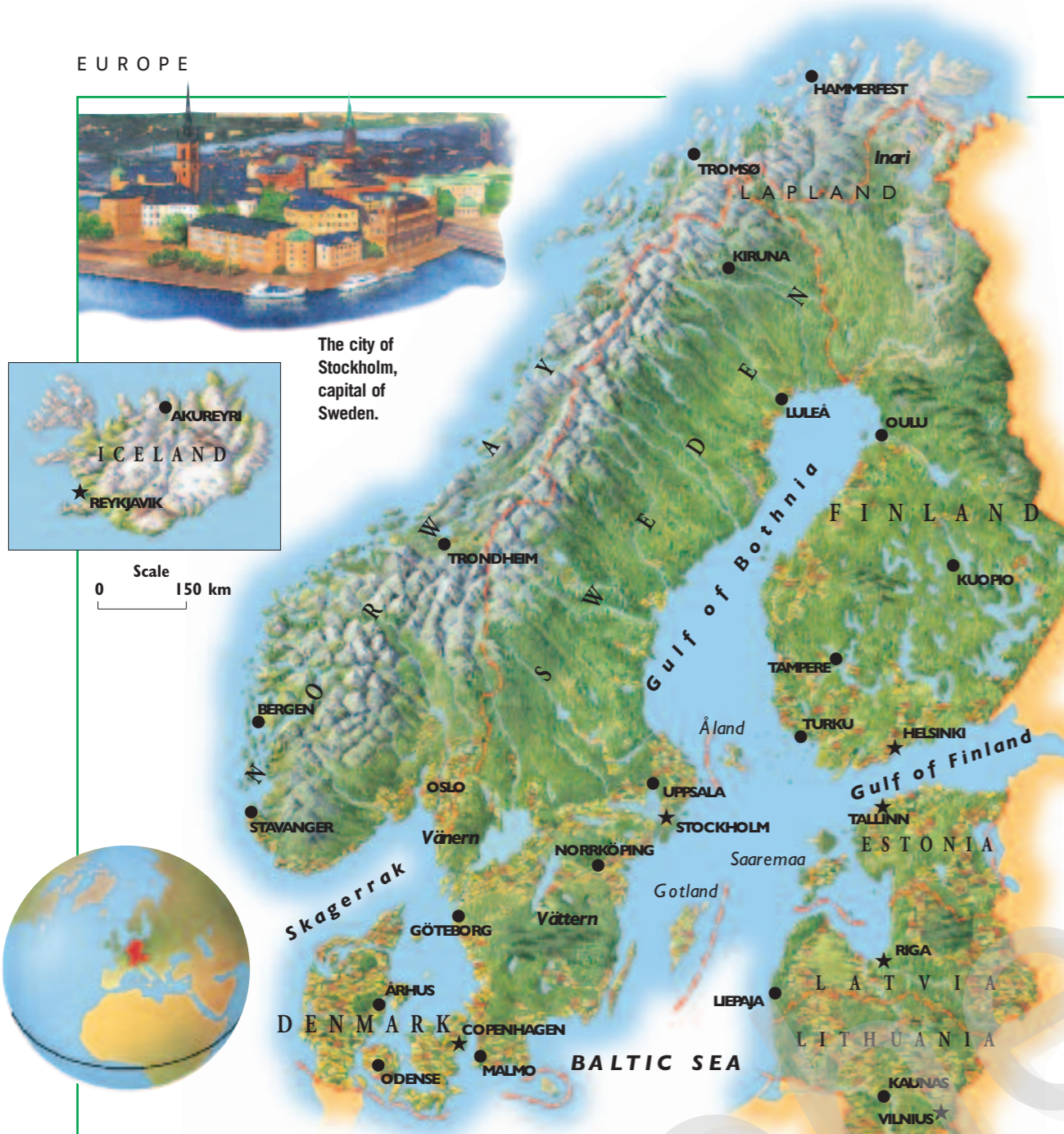
FRANCE shares borders with several other countries on its eastern side, but the north and west look on to the sea. In the south, the Pyrenees mountains separate France from Spain, while the Alps form a border with Italy in the east. The Mediterranean Sea gives the south coast its warm climate and makes it a popular destination for tourists.

Much of France, especially in the north, is strongly agricultural. Many large rivers wind across fertile, undulating plains. France exports large quantities of food and wine, famous for its quality. It also has modern manufacturing and chemical industries. Nuclear power provides much of the country's electricity supplies.

Most people in France are descended from ancient peoples including the Gauls, a Central European tribe, and the Franks, after whom the country is named. More recently, people from France's former colonies in North Africa have made their homes in France.

Mont-Saint-Michel and its medieval abbey stand just off the coast of Normandy, in northern France. At high tide, the sea covers the road leading to it.





The city of Stockholm, capital of Sweden.

NORTHERN EUROPE

NORWAY, Sweden and Denmark are together known as Scandinavia. Along with Finland and the volcanic island of Iceland, they form the Nordic countries. Some parts of Norway, Sweden and Finland lie within the Arctic Circle, where the sun never sets in high summer, but never rises in the depths of the long, cold winter.

Norway and Sweden are mountainous countries, while Finland and Denmark are low-lying. Finland is covered with dense coniferous forests and many lakes. In the

past, glaciers have carved out the many inlets, or fjords, in Norway's coastline.

The Nordic countries are prosperous and have low populations. They are important producers of timber, and are also world leaders in manufacturing. Denmark is also a farming country, with many dairy and pig farms.

The Baltic countries of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania used to be part of the former Soviet Union. Timber, fishing and farming are their most important industries.

GERMANY AND THE LOW COUNTRIES

AT THE CENTRE of Europe lies Germany, with its neighbours Austria and Switzerland, and the "low countries" of Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg.

Germany is flat and fertile in the north and heavily forested in the hills of the central and southern areas. It is a wealthy country, and an industrial leader, producing cars, electrical goods and chemicals for export all over the world.

The Alps rise in the south of Germany. Much of the area of Austria and Switzerland is taken up by Alpine peaks and valleys. These picturesque, prosperous countries also have modern industries.



The Brandenburg Gate in Berlin.

The Netherlands is famous for its dairy goods and fields of flowers. Belgium is a land of two regions: the north, Dutch-speaking Flanders, is mostly level farmland, while the south, French-speaking Wallonia is hilly, wooded country.



Skinny Bridge crosses a canal in Amsterdam, Netherlands