



An astronaut onboard the ISS captured this shot of the Red Sea and East Africa at dusk in December 2014.

Image credit: NASA Johnson

Africa Is Tearing Into Two Continents And A New Ocean Could Eventually Open Up

East Africa could look like a very different place in 5 to 10 million years.

Tom Hale
Senior Journalist

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Africa is slowly but surely splitting in two. Like anything in geology, it's an extremely long process that will take millions upon millions of years, but it will eventually see part of East

Africa chip off from the rest of the continent, likely resulting in a new ocean arising between the two land masses.

The colossal breakup is associated with the East African Rift System (EARS), one of the largest rifts in the world that stretches downward for thousands of kilometers through several countries in Africa, including Ethiopia, Kenya, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Zambia, Tanzania, Malawi, and Mozambique.

This rift system means that the African plate is splitting into two – the smaller Somalian plate and the larger Nubian plate – that are pulling away from each other at a super-sluggish snail's pace of millimeters per year, according to a [2004 study](#).

Back in 2018, news of a crack emerging in Kenya went viral, with many claiming that this was evidence of Africa snapping in two before our eyes. While this startling scene was related to the EARS, it's a bit misleading to present it as live evidence of Africa's great split-up.



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As [IFLScience](#) previously pointed out, this was likely just a highly localized expression of the valley's regular rifting activity. The EARS has been in this current process for around 25 million years and the crack in Kenya was an indirect whisper of what's occurring on the continent.

However, in another 5 million to 10 million years, changes in the EARS could result in a drastically different-looking world. Around this timeframe, we are likely to see a new ocean form between the Somalian plate and the Nubian plate. The great continent of Africa will lose its eastern shoulder and a vast sea will cut off East Africa.

As strange as this may seem, it's worth remembering that Earth's surface is [in a constant state of flux](#); it's just so slow that human experience can't account for it.



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The appearance of the world as we know it is relatively new. The land and sea we see today – of Eurasia, the Americas, [Africa](#), Antarctica, and Oceania – are the product of vast tectonic plates that slot together like a jigsaw puzzle. Very slowly, however, these jigsaw pieces move around on a timescale of millions of years.

Just think of the split-up that the Earth saw [around 138 million years ago](#) when South America and Africa divided. If you look at the west coast of Africa and the east coast of South America, you'll notice they fit together like two jigsaw pieces, beautifully highlighting how these continents were once joined as one.

The departure of East Africa will just be another page in this giant geological storybook. Who

knows whether humanity will be around to see any of these changes, but it doesn't look too hopeful.

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