Coronavirus Outbreak: Should You Cancel a Trip to Europe?

Johanna Read | April 10, 2020

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From Iceland to Bulgaria, here's how COVID-19 is impacting European countries.

[Editor's note: This is an updated version of an earlier article that originally ran on March 4.]

The new coronavirus disease, COVID-19 (https://blogs.webmd.com/public-health/20200319/coronavirus-in-context-how-to-practice-social-distancing), is spreading rapidly around the world. Italy is no longer the world's hotspot, with the United States now having the highest number of cases at 475,237 as of April 10. Spain now has the highest number of cases in Europe, followed by Italy. Not far behind are other European countries like Germany and France. Other European countries with high case numbers are the U.K, Turkey, Belgium, Switzerland, and the Netherlands. Read up on the coronavirus situation generally, including how to prevent the further spread of COVID-19, at The Latest: Should You Change Your Travel Plans Due to the Coronavirus? (https://www.fodors.com/news/news/should-you-change-your-travel-plans-because-of-the-coronavirus) (Short answer: yes, we should all be avoiding travel right now). Here's what you need to know specifically about Europe.

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Experts believe that the peak of COVID-19 cases and deaths may have passed in both Italy and Spain. Lockdowns are tight across the continent for the Easter long weekend, and lockdown measures in France, Portugal, and Italy have been extended. Restrictions in Italy could be eased as early as the end of April. In Spain, some nonessential workers in manufacturing and construction are allowed to return to work next week but most other lockdown measures will remain in place. Other European countries announcing the potential relaxation of restrictions are Austria, the Czech Republic, Denmark, and Norway.

The Guardian describes projections that say the European country that will be hardest hit by the pandemic will be the U.K., with 40% of Europe's predicted COVID-19 deaths. The study also predicts that Germany will have enough hospital and ICU beds, but France will not have enough ICU beds and the U.K. will lack both.

Two separate studies show that COVID cases in the United States originated not from travelers from China but from Europe, and that it began in January before the White House's January 31 China travel ban and before the March 11 Europe travel ban. The studies traced the genome of the virus to reach their conclusions. The first COVID-19 case in the U.S. was reported January 13.

The head of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) calls the economic crisis brought on by COVID-19 the worst the world has seen since the Great Depression in the 1930s. EU finance ministers, after extensive debate, reached agreement on April 9 for a financial rescue package worth 500 billion euro. It will include increased lending capacity by the European Investment Bank, unemployment insurance measures, and business loans in an attempt to ease the severe recession which has already started and to try to prevent a depression. Issuing long-term financing, called "coronabonds," is still on the table, as reported by The Guardian, showing the rift between southern countries and northern ones like the Netherlands, Austria, Finland, and Germany.
Earlier This Spring

Italy and Spain each crossed the 100,000 case mark. On April 2, Spain passed more than 10,000 deaths and recorded close to 1,000 deaths for several days. Spain and Italy have the highest numbers of COVID deaths at 15,843 and 18,279 respectively as of April 10. In Italy, there are signs that new infection is starting to slow, though the numbers are still high (4,204 new cases and 610 new deaths reported on April 9). On April 1 alone, the number of deaths in the U.K. rose by 24% and the country reports about 800 deaths daily.

Several European countries extended their emergency measures at the end of March. For example, Portugal extended their state of emergency another 15 days, Italy extended its lockdown to at least April 13, and Russia extended its restrictions to the end of April. Hospitals are overwhelmed across the continent, but Al Jazeera (https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/04/grim-day-virus-death-toll-spain-uk-live-updates-200401235244466.html) reported that doctors in Romania will now receive a 500 euros per month bonus.

On March 26, the number of COVID-19 cases worldwide hit 500,000. The count surpassed 1,000,000 on April 2 and is expected to cross the two million mark over the Easter long weekend. The number of deaths in Italy, Spain, and France (and the U.S.) have all surpassed those in China. Lockdowns are in place in several countries including Italy, Spain, France, the U.K., Romania, and Belgium. Significant restrictions are in place in the Netherlands, Germany, Austria, Portugal, and other countries. Deutsche Welle (https://www.dw.com/en/coronavirus-what-are-the-lockdown-measures-across-europe/a-52905137) outlines those details.

There is rising concern about authoritarianism and the severity of measures in some countries, particularly when measures are in place without time limits. Hungary instituted a new law on March 30 allowing the government to rule by decree for an unlimited time; it’s now the first EU country classified as “partly free” by Freedom House (https://freedomhouse.org/country/hungary). The BBC (https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-52135402) also reports concerns raised by journalists about censorship in Serbia, where a journalist was arrested for reporting on hospital conditions. Albania extended it’s already strict measures which include a weekday 16-hour curfew and a weekend 40-hour lockdown. Slovenia’s information commissioner warned the prime minister that if proposed initiatives were implemented, the country “would become a ‘police state.’”

On April 2, 13 EU states released a statement outlining concerns about threats to democracy and human rights. The Guardian (https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/01/coronavirus-could-be-final-straw-for-european-experts-warn) analyzes the situation, explaining how COVID in Europe initially brought a “me-first response” but is now gradually evolving to countries donating medical supplies to each other and treating other nations’ citizens. While a joint health response is slowly coming together, countries are still divided about how to respond to the economic crisis. Trust is diminishing and buried concerns and stereotypes are re-emerging. The EU president called for the next EU budget to be a “Marshall Plan,” the post-WWII aid program for Western Europe implemented by the U.S.

On March 11, Donald Trump announced a new travel ban against Europe’s 26 Schengen countries (https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/borders-and-visas/visa-policy/schengen_visa_en) and on March 14, the U.K. and Ireland were added. The ban means that, as of March 14, foreign nationals who have been in any of those countries within the last 14 days are barred from entering the U.S. for the next 30 days. It does not apply to U.S. citizens, permanent residents, and their immediate families. They are able to return home but may be required to self-isolate or be quarantined for 14 days.


On March 19, Italy and France reported that many of the COVID-19 patients admitted to ICUs are neither elderly nor do they have underlying health conditions. Officials in many countries were stunned at the number of people defying advice to stay in their homes and maintain physical distance. Restrictions are expected to tighten further unless citizens comply. Several countries extended their lockdowns.

The Italian prime minister warned that Europe will face a “hard, severe” recession and that “extraordinary and exceptional measures” are needed to minimize it. The Guardian (https://www.theguardian.com/world/live/2020/mar/26/coronavirus-live-news-update-world-lockdown-global-deaths-india-uk-us-australia-china-latest-updates) reported that the Kosovo government lost a non-confidence vote on March 25 and now faces a constitutional crisis in addition to a COVID crisis. The head of the EU criticized EU leaders on March 26 for not taking a whole-of-continent approach to battling COVID, saying that borders closures and bans on exporting medical equipment are making the situation worse.
G7 foreign ministers met March 25 but were unable to issue their planned joint statement because the U.S. insisted on calling COVID-19 the “Wuhan virus” and the other G7 ministers refused, as reported by the CBC (https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/g7-covid-19-coronavirus-wuhan-pompeo-trump-1.5510329). G20 leaders met March 26 to improve the world's coordinated approach to both the health and economic aspects of COVID-19. Discussions included addressing the airline industry.

Airlines continue to curtail flights in response to border closures and reduced demand. Travelers in Europe, as well as in the rest of the world, report showing up at the airport to have their flight canceled and needing to try to reschedule.

Europe Overall

COVID-19 was reported in Europe almost a month after the first cases were confirmed in China. Europe is currently the most affected continent but the United States is now the COVID-19 epicenter.

On March 2, 2020, the President of the EU raised the risk level for coronavirus from moderate to high. Nonessential foreign travel was banned for at least 30 days.

As of April 10, the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) (https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/cases-2019-ncov-eueea) reported 697,732 cases and 64,010 deaths in the EU/EEA, the U.K., Monaco, San Marino, and Switzerland. All EU/EEA countries and the U.K. are affected.

The ECDC posts regular COVID-19 updates (https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/novel-coronavirus-china) on the situation in the European Union, the European Economic Area (https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Glossary:European_Economic_Area_(EEA)) (EEA) and the United Kingdom. They cover the countries commonly considered as “Europe,” between Iceland and the U.K. in the west and Estonia, Poland, Romania, and Bulgaria in the east. Technically, this means the ECDC does include Andorra, Cyprus, Malta, Monaco, San Marino, and Switzerland, but does not include countries like Albania, North Macedonia, Kosovo, Serbia, and Russia. Some, but not all, of the ECDC's reporting does include these latter countries. A listing of COVID-19 cases by country is on the ECDC's Situation Update (https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/cases-2019-ncov-eueea) page.

Most European countries are advising their citizens to avoid nonessential travel and few are allowing the entry of non-EU nationals. If you cannot avoid traveling, check the latest with the World Health Organization (WHO) (https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019), with the ECDC (https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/novel-coronavirus-china), and with the public health agency of the destination you plan to visit. There you’ll find the latest case numbers, the restrictions and quarantine requirements in place, and how overwhelmed the country's health care system is.

Here's the latest in some of Europe's most popular tourist countries.
Italy

Italy is no longer the European country most affected by COVID-19, with Spain now Europe's hot spot. Italy has 143,626 cases (https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/cases-2019-ncov-eueea) and 18,279 deaths as of April 10. More than 28,470 people have recovered. Italy’s first two cases were reported on January 30 and the first death was February 22. On March 20, the number of COVID-19 deaths in Italy reached 3,405, exceeding the number then reported in China.

There are many factors that are likely contributing to Italy's high numbers and why the significant outbreak began there, as described in this Wired (https://www.wired.com/story/why-the-coronavirus-hit-italy-so-hard/) story. For example, Italy has been testing a large proportion of citizens and the younger generation visits often with Italy's seniors, a prime way for COVID-19 to spread. As Pharmaceutical Technology (https://www.pharmaceutical-technology.com/features/covid-19-italy-coronavirus-deaths-measures-airports-tourism/) reports, of all countries in Europe, Italy has the highest number of flights to China (where the first cases of COVID-19 were seen), with the number recently tripling. Italy also has the oldest population not only in Europe but in the world, which means more people susceptible to getting sick and at greater risk of complications and death.

The country-wide lockdown for Italy's 60 million residents began on March 9 and was planned until at least April 13. Italy is reportedly planning an extension of at least two weeks though there are discussions of lifting some of the restrictions at the end of April. Only stores selling essential foods are open, and all events, including funerals, are canceled. Italians may leave their homes only with a certificate stating a valid reason (to buy groceries, visit the doctor, or do solitary exercise near their homes). Fines up to 3,000 euros or three months of jail time are consequences of non-compliance. Restrictions are expected until July. The Guardian describes the situation with Coronavirus: Italy stops singing as fear and social unrest mount. (https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/01/singing-stops-italy-fear-social-unrest-mount-coronavirus-lockdown)

France


Incremental closures were not as effective as needed, and the French president implemented a lockdown similar to that in Italy and Spain on March 17. People are to stay home and go out only for essential purchases. If anyone leaves their home, they must carry a document explaining the reason. One hour per day of outdoor exercise is allowed; it must be done alone and within one kilometer of home. Families may take walks together
but again only within one kilometer of home. France deployed 100,000 officers to enforce the new rules and issue fines if necessary. Six months in prison is the consequence of multiple infractions. French officials are requisitioning hotel rooms so that the country’s 250,000 homeless people have a place to self-isolate during the country’s lockdown. The French president also announced on March 16 that paying bills (for example, electricity, rent, and taxes) is suspended.

**Germany**

Germany’s coronavirus cases are at 118,235 as of April 10, with 2,607 deaths. Germany’s first case was reported on January 28. Coronavirus information in English is available on the German government’s website [here](https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/issues/ausbreitung-coronavirus-1726158).

Al Jazeera [reported](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/03/europe-closes-borders-curb-coronavirus-spread-live-updates-20031800201088.html) on March 18 that the head of Germany’s health agency said that if citizens don't follow the new measures put in place, Germany could have 10 million COVID cases within the next few months. Some states, such as Bavaria and Saarland, are in lockdown, but the entire country is not. A shutdown and physical distancing measures are in place as of March 22 until at least April 19. Public gatherings of more than two people (unless they live in the same household) are not allowed. Only essential businesses are open. Only essential travel is allowed, including within the country. Intensive screening at land borders allows only those on essential business into Germany. Curfews are under discussion.

In early April, German officials accused the United States of “modern piracy” and “Wild West” tactics [as all countries scramble to provide personal protective equipment to their health care workers and the U.S. was blocking shipments designated for other countries and instigating price wars. The German foreign minister criticized the “America First” model as helping no one](https://thehill.com/policy/international/trade/491050-german-official-accuses-us-of-wild-west-tactics-after-shipment-of) as all countries scramble to provide personal protective equipment to their health care workers and the U.S. was blocking shipments designated for other countries and instigating price wars. The German foreign minister criticized the “America First” model as helping no one, and told Der Spiegel that he hoped the U.S. would rethink its approach to international relationships going forward. In March, news outlets like The Guardian [reported](https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/mar/15/trump-offers-large-sums-for-exclusive-access-to-coronavirus-vaccine) that Donald Trump offered the German pharmaceutical company, CureVac, “large sums of money” to provide a vaccine “for the U.S. only.” Germany’s health minister has said that if CureVac is able to develop a vaccine, it would be available “for the whole world” and “not for individual countries.”
United Kingdom

The U.K.’s latest coronavirus information and advice (https://www.gov.uk/guidance/coronavirus-covid-19-information-for-the-public#risk-level) is updated daily at 2 p.m. London time. As of April 10, the U.K. has 65,077 cases, doubling since April 2, and 7,978 COVID-19 deaths. The U.K.’s first cases were in England and reported on January 31. February 28 saw the first cases in Northern Ireland and Wales. Scotland’s first case was on March 2.

The U.K.’s risk level (https://www.gov.uk/guidance/coronavirus-covid-19-information-for-the-public) was raised from low to moderate on January 30, 2020, and is now at high. Though initially excluded from the U.S.-Europe travel ban, both the U.K. and Ireland are included as of March 14. New restrictions were announced by the prime minister on March 16 and he implemented a lockdown (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/full-guidance-on-staying-at-home-and-away-from-others) on March 23. It is in place until at least April 13 and includes bans of public gatherings of more than two people, unless they live together. Leaving the house is allowed for essential purposes including solitary exercise and travel to work in some cases.


Spain

In early April, Spain became Europe’s most coronavirus-affected country. As of April 10, Spain has 153,222 cases and 15,447 deaths. The country’s first COVID-19 case was on February 1 and the first death was reported on March 3. On March 19, The Guardian (https://www.theguardian.com/world/live/2020/mar/19/coronavirus-update-live-news-who-covid19-cases-outbreak-us-states-uk-school-closures-australia-europe-eu-africa-asia-latest-updates) reported that the rate of COVID-19 spread in Spain is “faster than almost anywhere else in the world.” Health care officials are facing a shortage of supplies like masks and gloves and hospitals are overwhelmed. The government recruited med students and retired doctors to help. Hotels are being converted into temporary hospitals. The army began disinfecting care homes on March 20. The Guardian (https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/25/how-spain-sat-on-its-hands-as-coronavirus-took-hold) explains how the disease escalated in Spain.

A state of emergency was declared March 14 and the country was in lockdown initially until after Easter, but on April 9, parliamentarians granted an extension to April 26. However, some workers, such as those in manufacturing and construction, will be allowed to return to work starting April 13. People are permitted to leave their homes only for essential supplies like groceries and pharmaceuticals, and only a few people are allowed into stores at a time. Outdoor exercise other than walking a dog is not allowed. As of March 17, only
Spanish citizens and permanent residents are allowed into the country. Non-essential businesses are closed, including hotels so that they can be used as hospitals. Spain has also requisitioned private health care facilities for fighting COVID-19 and has done the same for supplies like face masks.

As in France, Spaniards applaud health care workers nightly at 8 p.m. from their balconies. The stay-at-home hashtag is #QuedateEnCasa and online activities to help parents and kids are available online.

**So, Should You Change Your Travel Plans?**

Yes. Most governments have advised their citizens to reconsider and cancel nonessential travel to Europe and the rest of the world in an effort to slow the spread of disease and cushion health care systems. Governments are strongly encouraging their citizens to return home if they are abroad. Given the CDC and State Department warnings, the U.S.-Europe travel ban, and the ban of entry of non-EU nationals, flights to Europe are significantly affected and further reductions are likely.

If you must travel, follow the advice of health authorities like the [World Health Organization](https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/travel-advice) and the [Centers for Disease Control](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html), both in terms of where to limit travel and how to protect yourself from getting infected and infecting others. When in doubt, double-check other governments’ advice, like Canada’s [latest travel health advice](https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/2019-novel-coronavirus-infection/latest-travel-health-advice.html). It’s wise to also check the website of the public health authority of the country you plan on visiting.

Be prepared for self-isolation or quarantine when you return home. Seniors and those with underlying health conditions will want to take extra precautions, as will anyone who has close contacts in those categories. We all need to do whatever we can to prevent vulnerable populations from becoming ill and to slow the spread of COVID-19 so our health care systems are able to respond, as outlined in our [general coronavirus advice](https://www.fodors.com/news/news/should-you-change-your-travel-plans-because-of-the-coronavirus).