Coronavirus Outbreak: Should You Cancel a Trip to Europe?


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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, is spreading rapidly around the world. Italy is currently Europe's (and the world's) hotspot with Spain's cases falling not far behind. 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.

The Latest

As of March 20, the number of deaths in Italy due to COVID-19 reached 3,405 and has exceeded the number in China.

As of March 19, the U.S. State Department's warning is at "Level 4: Do Not Travel (https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/traveladvisories/ea/travel-advisory-alert-global-level-4-health-advisory-issue.html)," the highest level, regardless of destination in the world. It advises Americans to "arrange for

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 are 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. The French government has warned that travelers from the U.K. may be barred from entering France unless lockdown measures in the U.K. are enhanced. Several countries are extending their lockdowns, for example Austria’s will now be in place until April 13.

As more and more people are obeying orders to stay at home, The Guardian (https://www.theguardian.com/world/live/2020/mar/20/coronavirus-live-updates-outbreak-deaths-italy-uk-us-australia-europe-vaccine-china-global-economy-toll-latest-update-news) reports internet usage is increasing. To ensure access remains, companies like Netflix and YouTube are taking measures to reduce the bandwidth their services use following requests by the EU’s industry commissioner.

**Earlier This Week**


On March 17, France’s lockdown began, similar to Italy’s and Spain’s. Belgium and Austria are among other countries with a lockdown. A full lockdown is not in place in Germany, but only stores carrying essential items and food may remain open and religious services can no longer take place. More countries, including the U.K. and Germany, recommended their citizens avoid all nonessential travel.

Airlines are curtailing 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.

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Last Week

Many countries, including the U.S. and Canada, are advising their citizens not to travel abroad. As of March 13, the Canadian government is recommending Canadians who are traveling make arrangements to return home as soon as possible.

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.

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 and the World Health Organization (WHO) calls it the COVID-19 epicenter. The end of February 2020 brought a rapid spread of the disease across the continent. Italy remains the most affected country but the number of cases in other European countries is climbing rapidly.

Within Europe, actions to combat COVID-19 continue to increase. On March 2, 2020, the President of the EU raised the risk level for coronavirus from moderate to high. Nonessential foreign travel is banned for 30 days. As of March 20, the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) says that 102,649 cases and 4,885 deaths have been reported (https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/cases-2019-ncov-eueea) 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.

More and more countries are advising their citizens to reconsider or avoid nonessential travel. 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.

As of March 17, only EU nationals may enter European Union countries. Several airlines have canceled or curtailed flights to many European locations and more are expected. Mandatory 14-day self-isolation or quarantine is the norm upon arrival into most countries. For those leaving Europe, know that many countries are requiring anyone who has traveled in some parts of Europe to undergo a mandatory 14-day self-isolation or quarantine period upon returning home.
Here's the latest in some of Europe's most popular tourist countries.

**Italy**

Italy is the European country currently most affected by COVID-19, with 41,035 cases (https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/cases-2019-ncov-eueea) and 3,407 deaths as of March 20, 2020. Over 4,400 people have recovered. Italy's first two cases were reported on January 30 and the first death was February 22.

Many in Italy are sick and many more have tested positive. Italy's hospitals are overwhelmed. While mid-March has brought several days where the number of daily deaths in Italy has far surpassed the deadliest days in China, there are signs that the enforced self-isolation is working.

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.

As of March 9, the entire country and its 60 million residents are in lockdown. Everyone in Italy is encouraged to stay home as much as possible and permission is needed to travel not only outside the country but often outside the municipality or region. During the weekend of March 13, police issued fines to 20,000 people for not complying with the lockdown.

All bars and restaurants are closed. Stores that do not sell essential goods are closed. There's a 6 p.m. curfew. People are encouraged to keep a distance of three feet from each other and requested to stop greetings involving handshakes, kisses and hugs. Almost all events, whether they be funerals, weddings or sporting events, are canceled and most sites, including schools, museums, and theaters, are closed. Restrictions are now expected to be extended past April 3.

**France**


Incremental closures were not as effective as needed, and on March 16 the French president announced a lockdown similar to that in Italy and Spain. It was in full effect at noon March 17. It is likely to extend beyond the initial plan of two weeks. 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. France deployed 100,000 officers to enforce the new rules and issue fines if necessary. The French president also announced on March 16 that paying bills (for example, electricity, rent, and taxes) is suspended.

French officials have started requisitioning hotel rooms so that the country’s 250,000 homeless people have a place to self-isolate during the country’s lockdown. At 8 p.m. nightly, Parisians go out on their balconies to applaud health care workers (https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-france-balconies/locked-down-paris-takes-to-balconies-to-applaud-health-workers-idUSKBN2143VN).

Germany

Germany’s coronavirus cases are at 14,138 as of March 20, 2020 and 43 deaths. Germany’s first case was reported on January 28. Al Jazeera (https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/03/europe-closes-borders-curb-coronavirus-spread-live-updates-2003180000201088.html) reports 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. Curfews are under discussion.

Coronavirus information in English is available on the German government’s website (https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/issues/ausbreitung-coronavirus-1726158). Everyone in the country is encouraged to limit contact with others to help slow the spread of the virus. On March 16, the chancellor announced that only essential businesses and services may remain open. Germans may not travel unless it is essential, including within the country. There is intensive screening at land borders with France, Austria, Luxembourg, Denmark, and Switzerland; borders with the Netherlands and Belgium are not yet affected. Only those deemed on essential business are allowed into Germany.

News outlets like The Guardian (https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/mar/15/trump-offers-large-sums-for-exclusive-access-to-coronavirus-vaccine) are reporting that Donald Trump has 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 March 20, the U.K. has 3,277 cases and 144 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 everyone in the U.K. is encouraged to practice social distancing. Events are canceled and sites closed, but restaurants and pubs remain open for now. Travel is discouraged.


Spain

Spain has 17,147 cases and 767 deaths as of March 20, 2020. The number of new cases is rising rapidly. 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 is trying to recruit med students and retired doctors to help. Hotels are being converted into temporary hospitals. The army began disinfecting care homes on March 20.

A 15-day state of emergency was declared March 14 and the country is in lockdown. As of March 17, only Spanish citizens and permanent residents are allowed into the country. The prime minister announced March 14 that, similar to measures in Italy, all non-essential businesses be closed. All bars, restaurants, cafes, hotels, and most stores are shut for at least 15 days. Residents are asked to stay home. Spanish hotels must close by March 24 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.

So, Should You Change Your Travel Plans?

Yes. Many governments are advising 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. Many governments are strongly encouraging their citizens to return home if they are abroad. Given the CDC warning, the U.S.-Europe travel ban, and the ban of entry of non-EU nationals, travel to Europe is significantly affected. Further reductions in flights are expected.

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).