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 currently Europe's (and the world's) hotspot with the United States' and 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.

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The Latest

The number of COVID-19 cases worldwide will surpass 500,000 on March 26. European countries are the hardest hit, and the number of deaths in both Italy and Spain exceed the number in China. The number of deaths in Italy are more than double those in China. Health care systems are being overwhelmed and medical
workers are starting to contract COVID-19. However, The Guardian reports that the rate of COVID deaths in both Spain and Italy is starting to slow. Lockdowns are in place in Italy, Spain, France, the U.K., Romania, and Belgium. Significant restrictions are in place in the Netherlands, Germany, Austria, Portugal, and other countries. Duetsche Welle outlines those details.

The Italian prime minister warns that Europe will face a “hard, severe” recession and that “extraordinary and exceptional measures” are needed to minimize it. The Guardian reports 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, reports the CBC. 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.

**Earlier in March**

As of March 19, the U.S. State Department’s warning is at “Level 4: Do Not Travel,” the highest level, regardless of destination in the world. It advises Americans to “arrange for immediate return to the United States unless they are prepared to remain abroad for an indefinite period.” The CDC’s level-3 warning to avoid non-essential travel in Europe and the separate level 3 warning for the U.K. and Ireland remain, as does the CDC’s level-2 global outbreak alert recommending Americans “practice enhanced precautions.” The CDC list list advisories by country on their website.

On March 11, Donald Trump announced a new travel ban against Europe’s 26 Schengen countries 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.

As more and more people are obeying orders to stay at home, The Guardian 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.

On March 17, EU leaders announced what The Guardian calls “the strictest travel ban in its history.” This means a 30-day suspension of all travel by non-EU citizens for all 26 member countries. There are a few exemptions including permanent residents, U.K. citizens, and medical workers.

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 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 26, the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) says that 232,470 cases and 13,692 deaths have been reported 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 on the situation in the European Union, the European Economic Area (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 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.

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 74,386 cases (https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/cases-2019-ncov-eueea) and 7,503 deaths as of March 26, 2020. More than 9,300 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 and the rate of deaths is slowing.

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. 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 3000 euro or three months of jail time are consequences of non-compliance. Restrictions are now expected to be extended until July.

**France**

The first COVID-19 cases in Europe were reported in France, on January 24, 2020, and the first death was February 15. It was Europe’s first COVID-19-related death. As of March 26, France has 25,233 cases of COVID-19 and 1,331 deaths. France’s public health agency, Santé Publique (https://www.santepubliquefrance.fr/maladies-et-traumatismes/maladies-et-infections-respiratoires/infection-a-coronavirus/articles/infection-au-nouveau-coronavirus-sars-cov-2-covid-19-france-et-monde), provides

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. It is in place until April 1, but likely will be extended. 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 from home. Families may take walks together but again only within one kilometer. 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 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. 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 40,585 as of March 26, 2020 with 229 deaths. Germany’s first case was reported on January 28. Coronavirus information in English is available on the German government’s website (https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/issues/ausbreitung-coronavirus-1726158).

Al Jazeera (https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/03/europe-closes-borders-curb-coronavirus-spread-live-updates-200318000201088.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. The states of Bavaria and Saarland are in lockdown, but the entire country is not. Physical distancing measures are in place as of March 22 until at least April 6. 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.

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 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 26, the U.K. has 9,529 cases and 465 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 (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/full-guidance-on-staying-at-home-and-away-from-others) 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


A state of emergency was declared March 14 and the country is in lockdown until at least April 11. 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. 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).