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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 around the world with Italy currently Europe's hot spot. Read up on the coronavirus situation generally, including how to stay healthy 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) Here's what you need to know specifically about Europe.

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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 after Asia. The end of February 2020 brought a rapid spread of the disease across the continent. Italy remains the most affected country.

On March 2, 2020, the President of the EU raised the risk level for coronavirus from moderate to high noting "in other words, the virus continues to spread." As of March 10, the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) says that 14,890 cases and 532 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.

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 ECDC country is on theu page.

As in the rest of the world, some coronavirus decisions in Europe are being made based on sensible precautions and science, and some are being made more because of fear and political pressure to be seen to be doing something.

Al Jazeera (https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/03/european-populists-coronavirus-political-tool-200303201349031.html) reports how many of Europe's right-wing populist politicians are calling for sealing borders, particularly from migrants and refugees, and are using the opportunity to criticize the EU and push for their own power. Some have called for the Schengen agreement—which allows passport-free travel between the 26 members of the EU—to be suspended.

In helping you decide whether to travel, keep our general coronavirus advice (https://www.fodors.com/news/news/should-you-change-your-travel-plans-because-of-the-coronavirus) in mind. While COVID-19 should not be taken lightly, experts like Paul Hunter (https://www.independent.co.uk/travel/news-and-advice/coronavirus-travel-flights-planes-risk-china-wuhan-symptoms-a9327901.html), a professor of health protection and World Health Organization advisor, estimate that the effects of COVID-19 will be similar to a bad flu year. Several airlines have canceled or curtailed flights not just to Italy but to several European locations, and unprecedented change fee waivers are often available. Know that several countries are requiring anyone who has traveled in some parts of Europe to undergo a mandatory quarantine period while others are encouraging self-isolation if the traveler experiences any symptoms.

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 10,149 cases (https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/) and 631 deaths as of March 10, 2020. At least 1,000 people have recovered. Italy's first two cases were reported on January 30 and the first death was February 22.

Italy, like South Korea, is doing more testing than most other countries so these statistics don't necessarily mean there are more cases of COVID-19 in Italy and South Korea than in other places. Other factors that may be contributing to the high numbers. 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, with the number recently tripling. Italy also has the oldest population in Europe, which means more people susceptible to getting sick and at greater risk of complications and death.

Italy initially locked down a dozen northern cities, then expanded the lockdown to 15 central and northern regions, and, as of March 9, to the entire country and its 60 million residents. Everyone in Italy is encouraged to stay home as much as possible and permission is needed to travel not only outside the country but sometimes outside the municipality or region.

Most stores and restaurants remain open, however, there is 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 expected to be in place until April 3.

On February 29, 2020, the CDC (https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/travelers/index.html) increased its warning for Italy (https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/notices/warning/coronavirus-italy) to level 3 from level 2, recommending that Americans avoid nonessential travel. Many countries are requiring people traveling from Italy to undergo a two-week quarantine, even if they are not showing symptoms. Others are asking visitors from Italy to self-quarantine. Several airlines have curtailed flights to Italy or canceled them outright.

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 10, France has 1,606 cases of COVID-19 and 30 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 regular coronavirus updates in French. France's Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs provides advice for visitors to France (https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/coming-to-france/coronavirus-advice-for-visitors-to-france/).

In France, workers have the right to stop work for health reasons and on March 1, workers at the Louvre (https://www.louvre.fr/en) exercised that right. The museum was closed Sunday and Monday, in addition to its regular closed day, Tuesday. The Louvre was open again Wednesday, March 4. Other sites like the Eiffel Tower (https://www.toureiffel.paris/en) remain open. Visitors will want to check the status of any of their must-see sites daily. Public transportation in France has not (yet) been affected.

On February 29, France announced that events of more than 5,000 people in confined spaces are canceled (https://www.toureiffel.paris/en) until further notice and closed schools in areas most affected by COVID-19. Many sporting events are canceled or taking place without spectators. The health minister also advised that handshakes and la bise, the traditional French greeting of a kiss on both cheeks, be curtailed.

To ensure face masks are available for those that actually need them (i.e. COVID-19 patients and the people caring for them), on March 3, President Macron announced that the government will requisition production and current stocks of masks (https://www.france24.com/en/20200303-coronavirus-france-to-requisition-face-masks-for-use-by-health-professionals-those-infected). In response to price gouging, the Finance Minister has brought in regulations to cap prices on items like hand sanitizer.

Germany

Germany's coronavirus cases are at 1,307 as of March 10, 2020. Two deaths in Germany have been attributed to COVID-19. 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). As of March 10, the risk of COVID-19 in Germany remains reported as low to medium. Germans are encouraged to limit contact with others to help slow the spread of the virus. The German health minister has specifically ruled out adopting travel restrictions within the EU but is encouraging large events of more than 1,000 people be canceled. The German government is discussing aid measures to protect German workers and businesses.

Travelers arriving in Germany are being asked to provide more information on where they will stay within the country so they can be more easily tracked down and monitored when COVID-19 cases are reported. Some major events, such as the Leipzig Book Fair and the travel fair ITB Berlin, have been postponed. Some workplaces, including BMW, are being closed when an employee is diagnosed with COVID-19. Major sites and the transportation system remain open.

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 10, the U.K. has 373 cases and six 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 was raised from low to moderate (https://www.gov.uk/guidance/coronavirus-covid-19-information-for-the-public) on January 30, 2020, and remains at that level as of March 10. On March 3, the U.K.'s health secretary warned that widespread transmission of COVID-19 in the UK is likely and officials are predicting that the end of March will bring a surge in COVID-19 cases.

Reducing or canceling large-scale gatherings started on March 4 with the announcement that the March 10-12 London Book Fair is canceled. The London Marathon (https://www.virginmoneylondonmarathon.com/en-gb/) is still planned for April 26, 2020. The BBC (https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-51812326) reports a UK doctor who says that science doesn't necessarily support canceling outdoor events, saying "The virus does not survive very long outside. Many outdoor events, particularly, are relatively safe."

The U.K. published a Coronavirus Action Plan (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-action-plan) on March 3, 2020. The National Health Service has declared a "national major incident" and is reviewing plans for a possible surge of COVID-19 patients, how to enforce isolation of sick people, and how to deal with high levels of absenteeism from workplaces. The U.K. is proposing emergency legislation in case it is needed.

Travelers returning from China's Hubei province, Iran, Italy, and specific parts of South Korea are asked to self-isolate even if they do not have symptoms. Similar advice is given for anyone with symptoms, even if mild, especially those who have traveled through other affected areas including Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, and several Southeast Asian countries.

Spain

Spain has 1,650 cases and 35 deaths as of March 10, 2020. The country's first COVID-19 case was on February 1 and the first death was reported on March 3. On February 25, some guests at the Costa Adeje Palace hotel on the island of Tenerife were asked to remain in their rooms after an Italian tourist tested positive for COVID-19. However, guests who didn't show symptoms weren't all quarantined and, as of March 4, seven people have been diagnosed with COVID-19. Guests who tested negative (https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-51713552) were allowed to leave as of March 1 and are being asked to self-isolate for 14 days after returning home. The quarantine of those who remained was lifted March 10.

Several sporting events in Spain are going ahead but without spectators. Schools near Madrid and Vitoria are closed for two weeks as of March 11. Some large conferences are being canceled or postponed, but Spain did not cancel large events such as the March 1 fireworks show which kickstarts Valencia's La Fallas (https://www.visitvalencia.com/en/events-valencia/fallas-program-2020) festival.

So, Should You Change Your Travel Plans?

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 (https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/2019-novel-coronavirus-infection/latest-travel-health-advice.html)'s and the U.K (https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/advice-for-travellers/).'s. For travel to Europe, Italy is closed to all but essential travel, and many airlines are canceling flights to the country.

Seniors and those with underlying health conditions will want to take extra precautions, as will anyone who has close contacts in those categories. If you have travel plans or unbreakable commitments following your Europe trip, know that some countries are requiring a mandatory two-week quarantine and some are even refusing entry to non-citizens who have recently been in some European countries. Check the ever-changing rules for your planned destination and be prepared to self-isolate at home if you have any COVID-19 symptoms.

Everyone else? Even if your heart was set on going to an attraction that has closed, you're sure to find plenty of other sites of interest at your destination. Don't forget how much the whole travel industry is hurting right now (see this NPR report (https://www.npr.org/2020/03/04/812026357/coronavirus-fears-lead-to-canceled-flights-and-concerns-within-the-travel-indust)). Patronizing businesses, especially the small ones, will help ensure destinations are able to survive this downturn and be ready to welcome people again when the COVID crisis is over. And don't forget that there are great sales to many destinations right now, and many airlines are making it extra easy to change your plans should you need to.

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