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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.
The Latest

The latest Europe news is the travel ban announced by Donald Trump on March 11. As of midnight March 13, foreign nationals who have been in Europe’s 26 Schengen countries (https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/borders-and-visas/visa-policy/schengen_visa_en) within the last 14 days are barred from entering the U.S. for the next 30 days.

There was initial confusion on exactly what the announcement meant. Basically, goods can still be traded and U.S. citizens, permanent residents and their immediate families are able to return home, but may be required to self-isolate or be quarantined for 14 days.

On March 12, the CDC issued a level-3 warning to avoid non-essential travel in Europe (https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/notices/warning/coronavirus-europe) and listed the countries this applies to. It currently excludes the United Kingdom and Ireland.

At the same time, the CDC (https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/notices/alert/coronavirus-global) announced a global outbreak with a level 2 alert recommending Americans “practice enhanced precautions.” At the same time the U.S. State Department (https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/traveladvisories/ea/covid-19-information.html) raised their travel advisory to level three, recommending “reconsider all travel”.

As of March 12, three Canadians provinces are advising that their citizens avoid all nonessential travel, including to Europe. On March 13, this recommendation is expected to be extended to all Canadians.

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.

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 noting “in other words, the virus continues to spread.” As of March 13, the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) says that 28,292 cases and 1,191 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.

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.

More and more countries are advising their citizens to reconsider or avoid nonessential travel. 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. It’s wise to 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, whether there are any travel restrictions or quarantine requirements in place, and whether the country’s health care system is overwhelmed—all important factors to consider in travel decisions.

Getting to and from Europe is getting increasingly difficult as several airlines have canceled or curtailed flights not just to Italy but to several European locations, and more are expected with the U.S.’s latest ban. For arrival into Europe, know that several countries are instituting mandatory 14-day quarantines depending on where the traveler is coming from, including, in many cases, for travelers from the United States. When leaving Europe, know that many countries are requiring anyone who has traveled in
some parts of Europe to undergo a mandatory quarantine period upon returning home, 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 15,113 cases ([https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/cases-2019-ncov-eueea](https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/cases-2019-ncov-eueea)) and 1,016 deaths as of March 13, 2020. Over 1,200 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/](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 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 often outside the municipality or region.

All bars and restaurants are closed. Stores that do not sell essential goods are also 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 expected to be in place until April 3.

France


On March 12, France's president announced (https://www.ft.com/content/00d2866c-6471-11ea-b3f3-fe4680ea68b5) the closure of all schools and businesses as of March 16 and requested that businesses allow employees to work from home if possible. He specifically said that borders will remain open because “COVID-19 does not carry a passport.” Elections slated for March 15 and 22 will be going ahead because of the importance of ensuring “the continuity of our democratic life and our institutions”. He declared that public transportation would remain open.

The Louvre (https://www.louvre.fr/en) was closed for a few days in early March, but then reopened March 4. Only tickets purchased online are currently valid and
visitors requested to maintain social distancing. Other sites like the Eiffel Tower (https://www.toureiffel.paris/en) remain open, but visitors will want to check the status of any of their must-see sites daily.

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 later changed this to events of 1,000 people. Many sporting events are canceled or taking place without spectators. The health minister also advised that social distancing be increased and 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 2,369 as of March 13, 2020. Five deaths in Germany have been attributed to COVID-19. Germany's first case was reported on January 28. Angela Merkel said March 11 that, as epidemiologists have been predicting, roughly a third of Germany's population is expected to contract the virus. She stressed the importance of slowing down the spread to allow the health care system to care for seriously ill patients.

Coronavirus information in English is available on the German government's website (https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/issues/ausbreitung-coronavirus-1726158).
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. Most German states are prohibiting events of more than 1,000 people. Businesses are encouraging staff to work from home. 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. Major sites and the transportation system remain open.

**United Kingdom**

The U.K.’s latest coronavirus information and advice is updated daily at 2 p.m. London time. As of March 13, the U.K. has 590 cases and 10 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 on January 30, 2020, and is now at high. 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. The U.K. is currently exempt from the U.S.’s new ban on travelers from Europe.

Social distancing is being encouraged, as is self-isolation for anyone traveling from an affected area or exhibiting respiratory disease symptoms. Reducing or
canceling large-scale gatherings started on March 4 with the announcement that the March 10-12 London Book Fair is canceled. On March 13, the English Premier League suspended games until April 3. The London Marathon (https://www.virginmoneylondonmarathon.com/en-gb/) is still planned for April 26. 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.”

New laws to manage COVID-19 are expected for the week of March 16, including, as the BBC reports (https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-51839106), “measures to keep public services running, help businesses, and ensure the adult social care sector is ready.” 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.

Spain

Spain has 3,004 cases and 84 deaths as of March 13, 2020, with a large increase in cases in the past two days. The country’s first COVID-19 case was on February 1 and the first death was reported on March 3.

Spain’s king and queen and leading government officials are being tested for COVID-19. Some sporting events in Spain are canceled and others are going ahead but without spectators, although Real Madrid’s basketball and football (soccer) teams are in quarantine. The prime minister called for all schools to be closed (as of March 11, just schools near Madrid and Vitoria were closed). Some large events are being
canceled or postponed and museums, theaters and galleries closed. In response to a rapid rise in case numbers, some towns near Barcelona were locked down on March 13, echoing the response begun in Italy.

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

Many governments are advising their citizens to reconsider or even 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. Given the new CDC warning and the U.S.-Europe travel ban announced March 11, travel between the two regions will be significantly affected. It’s currently unclear as to how airlines will respond to the temporary ban and whether or not flights will be canceled.

No matter where you 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 (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. 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).