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.]


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 6, the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) says that 5,5544 cases and 159 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 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 ECDC country is on the ECDC's Situation Update 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 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 in mind. While COVID-19 should not be taken lightly, experts like Paul Hunter, 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 4,636 cases and 197 deaths as of March 6, 2020. At least 523 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.

The Italian government recommends people stay three feet apart from each other and to stop shaking hands, kissing, and hugging. On March 4, Italy announced the closing of all schools and universities until mid-March.
Al Jazeera reports that Italy is contemplating expanding its quarantine zone, but as of March 6, only eleven towns are affected, all in the northern regions of Lombardy and Veneto (the lockdown began February 20, 2020). The new area which may be quarantined is northeast of Milan around the city of Bergamo with a population of 120,000. For those visiting Italy, know that many public events and attractions have been canceled and closed. Some tourist sites, normally very crowded, are empty. Some bars and restaurants in Venice are even offering free drinks. Milan's Duomo (https://www.museumflorence.com/) cathedral reopened on March 2 and other Italian museums are starting to reopen with limits on large group gatherings. Performances at Milan's La Scala (http://www.teatroallascala.org/en/index.html) opera house remain closed until at least March 12. The Vinitaly wine fair has been postponed from April to June. Sports events have been canceled or are being played in stadiums without spectators. The Pope was rumored to be ill, but the Vatican reports he just has a cold and has tested negative for COVID-19.

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. Canada (https://travel.gc.ca/destinations/italy), on the other hand, issued an advisory not for the whole of Italy, but to avoid non-essential travel to eight regions in the north that include the popular tourist cities of Milan, Genoa, Turin, and Venice. These remain in effect as of March 6, 2020.

Many countries, such as the Czech Republic, are requiring people traveling from Italy to undergo a two-week quarantine, even if they are not showing symptoms and were not in the affected northern areas. Others, like the U.K., are asking visitors from any part of Italy to self-quarantine.

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 6, France has 653 cases of COVID-19 and nine 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.

In France, workers have the right to stop work for health reasons and on March 1, 2020, 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. 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, 2020, 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](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 670 as of March 6, 2020. No 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](https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/issues/ausbreitung-coronavirus-1726158). As of March 6, the risk of COVID-19 in Germany remains reported as low to medium. The German health minister has specifically ruled out adopting travel restrictions within the EU.

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](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 6, the U.K. has 163 cases and two 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.


On March 3, the U.K.’s health secretary warned that widespread transmission of COVID-19 in the UK is likely. 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/](https://www.virginmoneylondonmarathon.com/en-gb/) is still planned for April 26, 2020.


Travelers returning from China’s Hubei province, Iran, and specific parts of northern Italy and South Korea are asked to self-isolate even if they do not have symptoms. Similar advice is given for travelers with any symptoms, even if mild, who have been in other affected areas including Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, and several Southeast Asian countries.
Spain

Spain has 387 cases as of March 6, 2020. The country's first COVID-19 case was on February 1. The first death was reported on March 3 and, as of March 6, a total of five COVID-related deaths have been reported. Cases are concentrated around Madrid.

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. About 400 guests remain as of March 6.

Several sporting events in Spain are going ahead but without spectators. 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 and the Centers for Disease Control, 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 and the U.K.’s. Right now, northern Italy should be considered off-limits.

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-industry)). 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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