

EUROPEAN CAPITALS FACE AIR POLLUTION PROBLEMS - PART I



Main European capitals are experiencing different levels of air pollution. Many of them implement different measures to limit the road traffic in their streets in an effort to secure clean air for the locals as well as tourists. However, these initiatives aren't enough for all cities.

Brussels decided recently to take this case to the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) denouncing six Member States for violating the EU legislation on air pollution. The European emission standards define the limits imposed by the European legislation on every new vehicle sold in the EU. It began in 1993, with the directive for the Euro 1 stage, and in 2014, the Euro 6 came into effect, which restricts commercialization and use of diesel and petrol engines for tourism, with emissions of 80 or 60 milligrams of NO₂ per kilometer, respectively, besides other regulations on heavy duty vehicles.

Berlin

Berlin's authorities describe the level of nitrogen dioxide in the city as a "very serious problem". The levels of air pollution are almost double the European emission standards. It is estimated that 10,000 people die every year because of air pollution in the German capital. Asthmatics and people with cardiovascular diseases are the most affected ones.

To fight the pollution, Berlin is enforcing a speed limit of 30 kilometers per hour on major streets of the city. Since 2008, a dedicated environmental area of 88 square kilometers has been opened only for cars with a green badge, received by vehicles whose emission standards are within the Euro 4 or higher. A couple of months ago, the city approved a new series of eco-friendly initiatives to fight against pollution, which includes an incentive of 2,500 euros for the purchase of a hybrid taxi. The city has also implemented the acquisition of electric buses for public transport.

The main measure studied by the federal government is the introduction of a new sticker, the so-called blue badge, which only cars with emission standards of Euro 6 would receive. Thanks to a ruling by a German high court, cities may also restrict access of diesel cars with the Euro 5 standard. About 10 million vehicles could be affected by this new regulation. More than 70 German cities reported in 2017 nitrogen dioxide indexes above the average threshold of 40 micrograms per cubic meter ruled by the EU. Berlin is one of them.

Brussels

European authorities report about 12,000 deaths in Belgium every year as a result of the poor air quality. And Brussels is the most affected of the three regions of the country.

The Brussels region has scheduled a series of restrictions on the use of the most polluting vehicles. In the case of diesel engines, at the beginning of this year vehicles with Euro 1 standard were banned, and every year, new measures will be implemented with the objective of banning all vehicles that do not meet at least the Euro 6 standards by 2025, allowing only newer ones with the lowest nitrogen dioxide emissions. For petrol engines, the schedule is somewhat less ambitious: in 2025, only vehicles below the Euro 3 standard will be prohibited.

London

Since 2010, air pollution in London has been well above the legal limits set by the EU. In 2018, as in every year of the present decade, the legal maximum for the entire year was exceeded before the end of January. More than 9,000 Londoners die every year as a result of the toxic air particles. 50% of the air pollution emissions are produced by the traffic of motor vehicles, especially those with diesel engines.

London set a “congestion charge” back in 2003 to discourage the use of private vehicles, which represents about 11,5 pounds (or 13 euros) for every private car that operates within the city’s “congestion charge zone.” In addition to this measure, London introduced last year a new “toxicity charge” (known as “T-charge”) of 10 pounds (about 11 euros), an extra for older polluting vehicles. These are vehicles that do not meet Euro 4 standards, generally those registered before 2006.

The City Council is studying the possibility of “car-free days”. It would ban road traffic in certain areas of the capital on different days of the year. The plan aims to extend the environmentally-friendly initiative to more days and throughout the city by 2019.

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Date: 2018-05-28

Article link: <https://www.tourism-review.com/air-pollution-threatens-tourism-news10605>