

# PELAGOS SANCTUARY:

## The Best Whale Watching in the Mediterranean Sea

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**Trips:** 4 whale-watching trips (Golfo Paradiso; EUR 43 per trip)

**Dates:** 12 September 2021; 4, 5 and 7 July 2026

**Departure areas:** Genoa, Andora, Imperia, Sanremo (Italy)

**Distance offshore:** up to 30-40 km

**Cetaceans seen:** striped dolphin, Risso's dolphin, Cuvier's beaked whale, sperm whale, fin whale

**Other wildlife:** loggerhead turtle, swordfish, sunfish, probable spinetail devil ray, seabirds

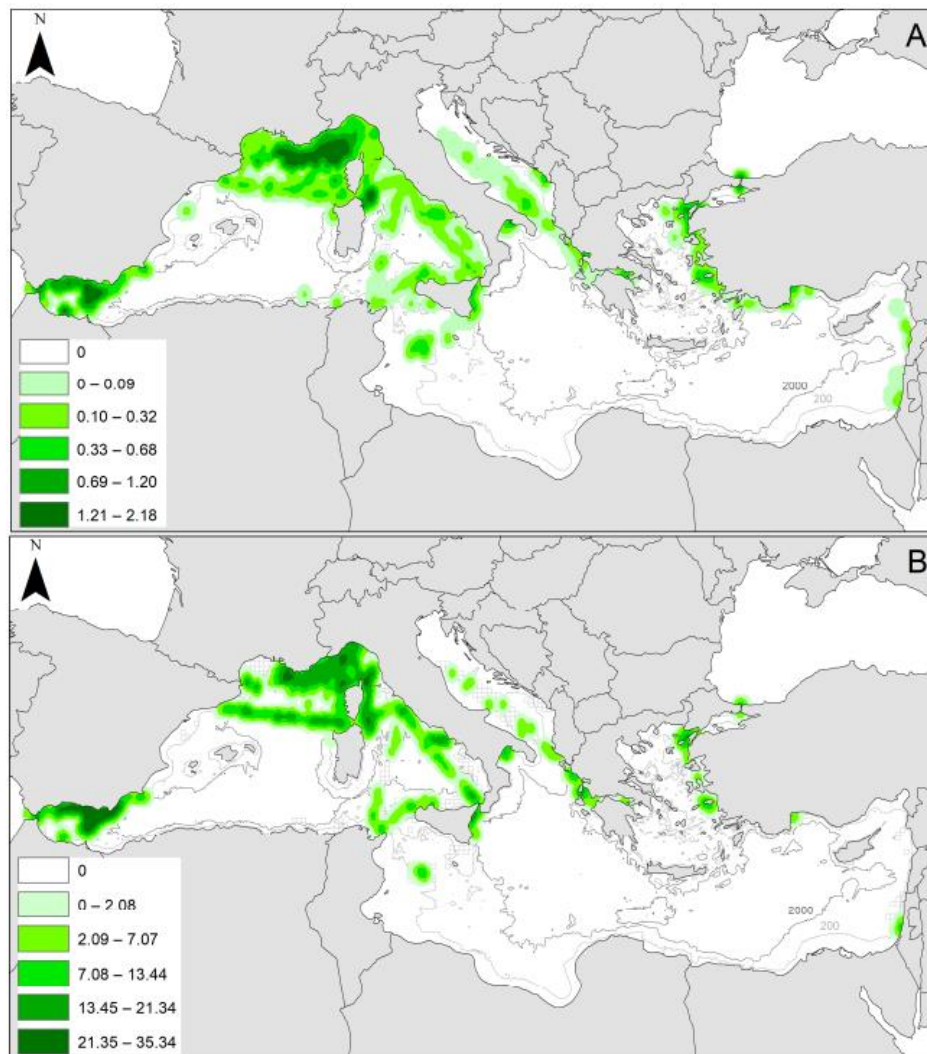
**Main target missed:** long-finned pilot whale

There are nine species of cetaceans considered regular in the Mediterranean Sea: striped dolphins (*Stenella coeruleoalba*), common bottlenose dolphins (*Tursiops truncatus*), common dolphins (*Delphinus delphis*), Risso's dolphins (*Grampus griseus*), long-finned pilot whales (*Globicephala melas*), rough-toothed dolphins (*Steno bredanensis*), Cuvier's beaked whales (*Ziphius cavirostris*), sperm whales (*Physeter macrocephalus*), and fin whales (*Balaenoptera physalus*).



Map of the Pelagos Sanctuary. Source: Coordinates of the sanctuary taken from the "agreement on the creation of a Mediterranean Sanctuary for marine mammals", image created by Pepijn Koster. CC BY-SA 2.5

With the exception of rough-toothed dolphins, which probably represent a relict population in the eastern Mediterranean, all of these species can be found in one cetacean hotspot: the Pelagos Sanctuary.



*The map of the total encounter rate (A) and the map of the cetacean diversity according to the Shannon index (B). Source: “Cetaceans in the Mediterranean Sea: Encounter Rate, Dominant Species, and Diversity Hotspots” by Gnone et al., 2023.*

The Pelagos Sanctuary for Mediterranean Marine Mammals, originally called the International Ligurian Sea Cetacean Sanctuary, is a protected area between the coasts of France, Monaco, and Italy. It was established in 1999 and covers almost 90,000 square kilometres. With eight regular cetacean species, this reserve has the highest cetacean diversity in the Mediterranean, as well as the highest cetacean encounter rate.

From the Italian side, Golfo Paradiso (Web: <https://www.golfoparadiso.it/en/>; Instagram: [https://www.instagram.com/golfoparadiso\\_whalewatching](https://www.instagram.com/golfoparadiso_whalewatching)) offers whale-watching excursions in two sectors of the Italian coast: from Genoa (Genova) and from Imperia. From Genoa, trips run from April to October every Wednesday and Sunday, with additional regular Friday departures from June to September. From Imperia, the season

begins with a few trips in June, continues with daily departures throughout July and August, and ends with a few trips in September. On some days, the boat also picks up passengers in smaller towns along the coast, while on others it may head directly out to sea. The schedule therefore varies from day to day, so it is important to check the reservation system before planning a trip. The whale-watching excursions typically last 4–5 hours from the final departure port. It is also worth mentioning that the company cancels excursions in rough seas (in my experience, even in conditions in which I have done several whale watches elsewhere).



<https://www.golfoparadiso.it/en/the-whale-watching/>

One practical point for non-Italian speakers is that the onboard biologist usually speaks first in Italian before switching to English, so there may be a short delay before you understand what has been found or what is happening. They also do not always clearly announce on which side of the boat the animal is. It therefore helps to “read the boat”: look out for changes in speed or direction, and watch where the crew and other passengers are looking. It is also useful to know the Italian words for left and right (*sinistra* and *destra*) as the side was occasionally announced only in Italian.

## Trip from Genoa

I found out about Golfo Paradiso five years ago and went on one trip departing from Genoa on 12 September 2021. We left Genoa and headed over the nearby underwater canyon. For about an hour, we did not see any cetaceans, although we spotted a single loggerhead sea turtle (*Caretta caretta*) with several pilot fish (*Naucrates ductor*) using the turtle as shelter. After several minutes of slow cruising while we scanned the surrounding water, the boat accelerated to full speed. The onboard biologist announced in Italian what they had found: “Zifio.” I do not speak Italian, but because of the similarity between the Italian name and the scientific name *Ziphius*, I immediately knew: Cuvier’s beaked whales. I was extremely excited, as this was my first beaked whale. I had always wanted to see beaked whales because of their elusive nature. And I was lucky enough to start with the record holder in terms of diving depth (2,992 m) and dive duration (222 min). Although Cuvier’s beaked whales are the most cosmopolitan beaked whale species and the one most often seen on whale-watching trips, they are still not easy to get. However, the Pelagos Sanctuary might be the best place in the world to tick this species, as

encounters here are very regular. Of 415 observations on iNaturalist, 100 are from the relatively tiny Pelagos Sanctuary. For comparison, there are 82 observations from the whole eastern US coastline (mostly far offshore), 36 from the western US coastline, 16 around Taiwan, 11 from Hawaii, 8 around the Canary Islands, 7 around New Zealand, and 5 around the Azores. Within the Pelagos Sanctuary, the Genoa area is the best, far better than Imperia, with 72 observations from this single whale-watching area. So, for those of you who want to add Cuvier's beaked whale, go to Genoa. We saw a group of several individuals and observed them three times, as they resurfaced after 20-minute dives in the same area. They approached the boat and swam underneath it. It was a bizarre experience to observe them so well and so close — too close for my camera! After leaving the beaked whales, we encountered a pod of striped dolphins (the most common dolphin species here), which were very playful and used the waves behind our boat for acrobatic jumps. At the end, I saw some fish breaching out of the water. I thought it was a tuna, as I had seen tuna jumping out of the water like this before. But once I managed to take a few pictures, I quickly realized that it was actually a swordfish (*Xiphias gladius*). A very cool end to our whale-watching tour!



*Cuvier's beaked whales, Genoa, 12 September 2021.*

## Trips from Imperia

After the success with beaked whales and striped dolphins, only one species remained on my Mediterranean bucket list: the long-finned pilot whale. They are common in the Strait of Gibraltar (where, incidentally, a small population of killer whales also lives and sometimes interacts with boats — this is by far the most common cetacean species that

I keep missing everywhere I go; usually they disappear the day before I arrive and reappear the day after). Long-finned pilot whales are also found off the Mediterranean coast of France, and their range extends into the Italian part of the Pelagos Sanctuary, overlapping with the Imperia whale-watching area, while they are already uncommon in the Genoa area. Since Italy is much closer for me than Gibraltar, and also closer than France, I decided to try three trips from Imperia to test my luck with this species.

I booked trips for Saturday (4 July 2026), Sunday, and Monday, but the Monday trip was cancelled due to “operational reasons”, so I changed it to Tuesday instead. I wanted to spend as much time offshore as possible and not lose time going from port to port to pick up more tourists, so I booked the last port each day: Andora on Saturday, Imperia on Sunday, and Sanremo on Tuesday. On each of these trips, we travelled 80–100 km in total, reaching 30–40 km offshore.

On the first trip from Andora, it did not take long before we found a pod of striped dolphins. They bow-rode for a while and then moved to the back of our boat, where they surfed in the waves and jumped out of the water. Soon after that, the onboard biologist announced Risso’s dolphins. I immediately saw a very small animal surface, with a tiny dorsal fin. “What the hell is that? That ain’t no Risso’s dolphin,” I thought. After a few seconds, I understood what was going on. Another, much larger fin surfaced — Risso’s indeed. We had found two mother-calf pairs of Risso’s dolphins. Because they were with calves, they kept their distance from the boat, but it was a great experience to observe such small babies next to their large mothers. We were still watching the Risso’s dolphins when the boat changed direction and announced another species for the trip: two Cuvier’s beaked whales. My second trip (and this time from the less favorable location), and my second encounter with beaked whales! My three-year-old son also added this species to “his list”. So, we closed the day with three cetacean species (and three loggerhead turtles), but no pilot whales.

On the trip from Imperia, we started with two groups of striped dolphins. After that, the boat rushed offshore. I could see a distant blow. It was a sperm whale, but it dived before we could reach it. We stopped and began waiting for it to come back up. After five minutes, however, we started moving in another direction. Had it resurfaced this quickly? No, it was a fin whale that had appeared approximately one hundred meters away. It was a very relaxed individual and surfaced several times very close to the boat. I had seen fin whales in Croatia and off Massachusetts before, but they had always been fast-moving whales, so this was my best view so far because this individual was very cooperative. After 20 minutes with the fin whale, we left for the resurfacing sperm whale. We observed it logging for a few minutes and departed after it dived again, saying goodbye with its fluke. So, we ended this trip with three cetacean species again (and three loggerhead turtles again), bringing the total to five cetacean species. But again, no pilot whales.

The last trip from Sanremo started with two fins appearing and disappearing about 30 metres from the boat, although the crew probably did not notice them, as we did not stop. I think it was a spintail devil ray (*Mobula mobular*), which is often seen here swimming just under the surface and sticking the tips of its fins above the water. I also saw eight common terns and one Scopoli's shearwater. These were the only birds during the four whale-watching trips, except for some yellow-legged gulls close to the ports and almost none at sea. I was really baffled by how a sea full of cetaceans, turtles, rays, and sharks could be so birdless. After reaching 40 km offshore, we found a fin whale. It was again very cooperative and came very close to the boat. After it dived, we headed towards a distant research vessel, which was observing three fin whales in one group. Again, I was surprised by how cooperative they were and how close they surfaced to the boat. We could even see them underwater, with the pale right jaw shining through the surface. A beautiful encounter. Meanwhile, I saw something repeatedly breaching out of the water. From the photo, I was able to identify it as a sunfish (*Mola mola*). It is quite counterintuitive that such a fish can jump out of the water. On the way back, we found a small group of striped dolphins, but this time they were heading somewhere and did not waste time with our boat.



*Striped dolphins, Imperia, 5 July 2026.*



*Fin whale, Imperia, 5 July 2026.*



*Sperm whale, Imperia, 5 July 2026.*



*Risso's dolphin with a calf, Andora, 4 July 2026.*

Pilot whales remain unfinished business, but four trips in the Pelagos Sanctuary produced five cetacean species, several excellent encounters with fin whales, sperm whale, Risso's dolphins and striped dolphins, and two encounters with Cuvier's beaked whales, a species that is still a dream animal for many cetacean watchers. I certainly cannot complain.