



European ferry traffic holds; performance varies

Passengers • private cars • freight
Baltic • North Sea/UK • Mediterranean

State of the industry

**Philippe Holthof | Ferry Shipping Summit
Athens | 8 October 2026**

Based on operator disclosures and market statistics available to 22 September 2026

Executive summary

2025 • FULL-YEAR VS 2024

- **Passengers were broadly stable**

Published Baltic passenger figures were near flat. Spain, Greece, and Corsica recorded growth, while the UK and Italy declined.

- **Private-car trends differed by market**

Reported Baltic car traffic edged up in the comparable sample, while UK car traffic declined. Spanish passenger vehicles increased, as did Greece's combined car-and-truck category.

- **Freight performance was mixed**

Baltic published freight units declined 3.2%; UK ferry freight units were broadly stable, while Mediterranean indicators varied by measure.

2026 • LATEST AVAILABLE

- **Passenger trends differed**

Baltic passenger figures were near flat; UK, Greek Q1 and Spanish port passengers declined. Corsica was flat.

- **Car traffic was lower**

Reported Baltic car figures, the UK's wider car category and Spanish passenger vehicles all declined.

- **Freight results varied**

UK freight units edged down; reported Baltic figures varied by route and measure, while Corsican tonnage rose.

2025: traffic differed by region

BALTIC

FULL-YEAR 2025 VS 2024

Passengers

c. 36.0m
-0.9% to +2.2%*

Private cars

5.31m | +0.5%

***Core operator changes; Finnlines passengers +9%. Car change uses a comparable subset.**

WIDER NORTH SEA / UK

FULL-YEAR 2025 VS 2024

Passengers

31.95m | -1.6%

Cars and related vehicles*

8.25m | -1.3%

***IRN cars include motorcycles, trailers, and minibuses. Annual UK totals include an estimate for UK-Spain. Includes UK domestic.**

MEDITERRANEAN / SPAIN

FULL-YEAR 2025 VS 2024

Passengers

Spain* 28.4m +1.0%
Greece 20.03m +2.4%
Italy 18.94m -1.9%

Vehicles

Spain* 7.44m +2.9%
Greece 4.00m +1.2%

***Spain covers all state ports, including Atlantic and Canary ports. The Spanish figure covers pax vehicles; Greece combines cars and trucks.**

These sources cover different routes and measures; their totals cannot be added together.

2025: freight performance was mixed

BALTIC

FULL-YEAR 2025 VS 2024

1.43m | -3.2%

freight units*

*Includes standard 12m trailer equivalents. DFDS and Gotland report lanemetres separately.

WIDER NORTH SEA / UK

FULL-YEAR 2025 VS 2024

3.97m | -0.4%

broadly stable

Aggregate UK ferry freight units; Eurotunnel is excluded.

MEDITERRANEAN / SPAIN

FULL-YEAR 2025 VS 2024

DFDS Med 5.319m Im -2.7%
Italy 6.16m units +0.6%
Corsica 3.08m t +1.4%
Spain* 3.20m intermodal units +2.7%

mixed by measure

DFDS lanemetres; Italy/Spain units; Corsica tonnes. These figures are not additive.

Im = lanemetres. Spain counts intermodal transport units.

2026 so far: cars lower; freight mixed

LATEST AVAILABLE DATA:

BALTIC	
Passengers	-1.8% to +1.3%
Private cars	-3.5%
Freight	-4.4% to +7.8%
Freight varies by route; passenger changes are small and cars declined.	

WIDER NORTH SEA / UK	
Passengers	-3%
Cars and related vehicles	-3%
Freight	-1%
UK: 22.185m ferry passengers; 5.678m cars and related vehicles; 2.587m freight units (Jan-Aug).	

MEDITERRANEAN / SPAIN	
Passengers	-2.6% to 0.0%
Passenger vehicles	-1.3%
Freight	-3.3% to +4.7%
Spain: 19.89m pax and 5.16m vehicles (Jan-Aug). Corsica: 3.08m pax and 2.15m tonnes (Jan-Aug).	

Baltic: 2026 traffic remains mixed

HOW TO READ THE COVERAGE

Pax	Broadest published operator coverage
Cars	Narrower comparable reporting base

Freight units and lanemetres remain separate. Port totals are not added to operator figures.

WHAT 2026 DATA SAY

Passengers	little changed	-1.8% to +1.3% reported changes remain close to the previous year
Private cars	lower	-3.5% the comparable published car figures declined
Freight	mixed	-4.4% to +7.8% results vary by route and by published measure

Passengers are near flat, cars are lower and freight varies by route.

UK ferry traffic declined in all three segments

UK JAN-AUG 2026

22.185m	Passengers	-3%
---------	------------	-----

5.678m	Cars and related vehicles*	-3%
--------	----------------------------	-----

2.587m	Freight units	-1%
--------	---------------	-----

WHAT THE SOURCES SUPPORT

Traffic data

IRN Ferry confirms the decline, but does not attribute a cause.

Reporting scope

Monthly UK-Spain traffic is excluded because Brittany Ferries no longer supplies the data.

EES

Official and industry sources identify delay and terminal capacity risks; no published series isolates its effect on demand.

Company reports

Capacity, route mix, and pricing effects differ between operators and routes.

Conclusion: the decline is clear; its causes cannot be quantified from the available statistics.

Scope: UK ferries; no Thames, Eurotunnel or UK-Spain. *IRN cars include motorcycles, trailers, and minibuses.

Mediterranean and Spanish indicators: 2025

2025 REGIONAL BASELINE

Greece	20.03m passengers +2.4%
	4.00m cars + trucks +1.2%
XRTC / ELSTAT: no car-truck split	
Italy	18.94m ferry passengers -1.9%
	6.16m ro-ro units +0.6%
Spain	28.4m passengers +1.0%
	7.44m passenger vehicles +2.9%
	3.20m intermodal units +2.7%
Corsica	4.08m passengers +2.0%
	3.08m freight tonnes +1.4%

REPORTING SCOPE

Spain includes Atlantic and Canary ports. The Greek vehicle figure combines cars and trucks.

Port and operator totals overlap; the country figures cannot be added together.

Freight measures also differ: tonnes in Corsica, ro-ro units in Italy, and intermodal units in Spain.

Different national statistics cannot be combined into one Mediterranean total.

Mediterranean and Spanish indicators: 2026

LATEST OFFICIAL TRAFFIC

SPAIN • JAN-AUG 2026

19.888m passengers -2.6%

5.155m passenger vehicles -1.3%

2.161m intermodal units -0.5%

GREECE • FIRST QUARTER 2026

Greece 4.906m passengers -1.0%

Q1 does not cover the summer peak.

Corsica* 3.08m passengers 0.0%
2.15m freight tonnes +4.7%

SPAIN • JAN-AUG, ALL STATE PORTS

Includes Atlantic and Canary ports; these are not Mediterranean-only totals.

Greece: Q1 port passengers only; no comparable private-car total is shown.

DFDS August freight: Mediterranean volumes were just below 2025; Gibraltar volumes were well above.

*CORSICA • JAN-AUG 2026

Passenger volume was flat, while regular-route freight tonnage rose 4.7%.

OPE 2026: slightly lower traffic

The seasonal movement of Europe's Maghrebi diaspora runs 15 June-15 September.

SOUTHBOUND • 15 JUN-15 AUG

1,667,517 passengers **-3.1%**

424,487 vehicles **-2.1%**

NORTHBOUND • 15 JUL-15 SEP

1,699,487 passengers **-3.9%**

413,462 vehicles **-2.5%**

FULL OPE 2026: 3,367,004 passengers -3.5% • 837,949 vehicles -2.3% • 10,036 sailings -4.7%

Official OPE totals cover all participating routes. Northbound Tarifa-Tanger Ville grew, while Algeciras-Ceuta declined sharply; DFDS traffic is already included.

What is influencing ferry traffic in 2026?

- **Travel spending:** UK surveys link delayed holiday bookings to living costs and uncertainty; Baltic operators also describe cautious consumers and weak confidence.
- **Border friction:** EES implementation has raised concerns about queues, but biometric registration for car passengers at Dover was still deferred. Its effect on UK ferry volumes has not been measured.
- **Holiday choices:** Swedish tourism grew in July, but southern Europe still leads travel intentions. Available figures do not establish whether warmer summers or UK staycations changed ferry traffic.
- **Freight:** road trade between major EU economies softened in Q2 as fuel costs rose. Ferry operators describe weak business confidence and price competition, with outcomes differing by route.

Conclusion: household spending, border processing and destination choices affect travel; trade and operating costs affect freight. The published data do not isolate each factor's contribution.

Challenges and opportunities

- **EU ETS and FuelEU Maritime**

EU ETS requires shipping companies to surrender allowances for covered GHG emissions. FuelEU Maritime sets progressively tighter limits on the GHG intensity of energy used on board.

- **Ageing fleet and rising prices**

Maintenance pressure is increasing, while higher shipbuilding and financing costs make fleet replacement decisions more difficult. Only the financially strongest operators can absorb these costs.

- **Borders and vehicle rules**

Entry/Exit System (EES) processing and differing rules for electric or alternative-fuel vehicles add operational complexity.

- **Fleet renewal and retrofit demand**

Ageing fleets and tighter regulation are increasing demand for newbuildings, conversions, batteries, and efficiency upgrades.

- **Ports and energy infrastructure**

Shore power, charging, grid connections, and alternative fuel systems create investment opportunities for ports, utilities, and technology suppliers.

- **Shipbuilding and major conversions**

Chinese yards remain cost-competitive for newbuildings and major conversions, as demonstrated by recent Stena Line and GNV projects.

Consolidation: is there still room?

WHAT HAS CHANGED

Fewer independent operators

Acquisitions, mergers, and the sale of individual routes have brought more ferry services under larger operators.

Three pan-European leaders

DFDS, Grimaldi Group, and Stena Line combine several regional ferry networks.

THE NEXT TIER

Growing scale

Baleària has grown into a major ferry operator, although its network remains centred on Spain.

Broader business models

CLdN has become a leading force in wider North Sea ro-ro freight through organic growth and acquisitions, and has added lo-lo services to its mix.

ROOM FOR MORE?

Reasons to combine

Fleet renewal, regulatory costs, ownership changes, and network gaps may encourage further deals.

Reasons for caution

Competition scrutiny, contractual restrictions and differing business models can constrain further consolidation.

Further route or business acquisitions, minority stakes, partnerships and mergers remain possible.

FOUR TAKEAWAYS

The market is resilient, but growth remains selective.

01

Freight is mixed

Freight results vary by region, route and published measure.

02

Car traffic is lower

Reported Baltic private cars, UK cars and related vehicles, and Spanish passenger vehicles all declined.

03

Regions differ

Market direction varies by route, capacity, and reporting scope.

04

Scale is changing

Consolidation has strengthened the three pan-European operators, while several major regional players have also grown.

Overall: resilient traffic, varied regional trends, and a more demanding operating environment.