River Merse, South of Siena: (approx.. 1hr drive)

You don’t go to Tuscany to swim. You go for art, architecture and heavenly countryside, the best of which is well ­inland.

However, you’re on holiday, and it’s baking hot, and the ­children must have a beach at least once, so you drive the twisty and nauseous 90 minutes to the coast, which turns out to be ­rubbish, as most Italian beaches are, and the kids are sick on the way back, and everyone’s miserable. Unless, that is, you’ve heard of a wondrous little river called the Merse.

First, though, you have to find it, and that isn’t easy. From Siena, head south on the E78. ­After eight miles, there’s a little right turn with a mess of blue signs — the bottom one reads “Orgia”. Take it, then take the second left and follow the road around through the ­nondescript hamlet of Brenna. It appears to be petering out, but persist: just when you’re sure you’re irretrievably lost, turn a corner and there it is, silvery and rippling under the arches of a low, utilitarian bridge. Drive over, park up and take the track to the right. Walk two minutes. Welcome to the Garden of Eden.

During the working week, it’s likely to be ­deserted, apart from the occasional bronzed pensioner The Merse here twists under thickly wooded slopes, sometimes ­braiding itself around pebbly shoals, sometimes slowing to form deep pools shaded by over­hanging oaks. It’s lazy and slow-flowing, perhaps 30ft across at the widest. The water is sparkling clear in the shallows, shading to a milky turquoise where the bottom drops away. Outcrops of limestone rear up in midstream, natural diving platforms and sunbathing spots; at the bank, thickets are interspersed with beaches of powdery sand.

There are no signs leading to this spot, and it doesn’t appear on maps or in guides. The local comune decided to preserve the area for swimming, but is in no hurry to advertise the fact to ­outsiders: if there is anyone else about, they won’t be ­speaking English.

On weekends, a few local families roll up for a lazy day’s picnicking. During the working week, it’s likely to be ­deserted, apart from the occasional bronzed pensioner.

It has no “facilities” — no cafe, no shop, no visitor centre — but you’ve wisely brought crusty bread, sausage and wine. Now all you need do is find your favourite spot. Mine’s about 200yd along, on a tiny beach by a deep, calm pool. Above the steep opposite bank, a benign previous visitor has tied a swinging rope to an oak branch. The children climb up a babbling side stream, grab the line and launch, kamikaze style, into the water. Then they’re off to the shallows to build dams, make rafts, splash raucously and organise an all-out war against the orcs who, clearly, are lurking behind every rock.