

Roman Riviera

The lentil farmers are gone, a guy on the boat tells me. “The land on Ponza is much too valuable to grow lentils anymore.” Sure enough, after two hours, the hydrofoil from Anzio nears the rocky outcroppings that guard this little volcanic island in the Tyrrhenian Sea, and my vision of a *Swept Away* Mediterranean is revealed. Soon, I spot the open-air restaurants along the harbor, the fishing boats out front, the houses up in the hills. This is Italy, but it could also be Greece or Spain.

Although potential lurks around every corner, Ponza, 70 miles southeast of Rome, is not Capri—yet. It’s still the Un-Hamptons. St.-Tropez without the *trop*. Block Island to Capri’s Nantucket. This is a family-friendly place, full of Romans. Romans are chic—it’s in their genes. But *family* ruins everything—loud, messy, and, as interpreted by Italians, far too much fun. “Help! I’m stuck on the telephone and I can’t shut up” is not a stylish statement for a T-shirt to make. The kids, however, do not care.

There are a few decent hotels on Ponza, among them **Santa Domitilla** (011-39-0771-805-93; from \$140), which offers proximity to the town. Pleasant and pretty, the hotel has smallish rooms with tiny balconies. The best are on the top floor and provide a glimpse of the



Life's a beach on Ponza, even without sand.

sea. Aside from the Romans, it’s full of Euro-tightwads who want Lina Wertmüller at half price.

On Ponza, you can relax in one of the seaside bars and watch a pair of mothers chat for hours, pausing every 15 minutes, like a set of Westminster chimes, to sing out “Francesco! Anna!” but never really interrupting the flow of conversation. Francesco has just zapped a tourist in the chest with a water pistol; now Anna wants a turn. Or dine at **Gennarino a Mare** (0771-800-71), which has the best views of the town from its deck over the water at the far end of the harbor. The grilled swordfish and rock lobster are always tasty, and by the third night the waiter will be serving you at the best table.

If you drive across the island to the

piscine naturali, you can swim in a grotto straight out of *The Blue Lagoon*, paddling in crystalline water beneath massive stone arches. Then try to pull yourself out of the sea onto the flattened, ink-stained boulders, slithering up the slippery edges like a whale wishing it were an iguana, and join the Roman legions sunning themselves on the diamond-hard surface. They talk forever on their cellphones, smoke constantly, and set out picnic lunches that have taken all morning to prepare. For hours, they eat. Occasionally, someone risks death by sliding into the water amid gladiator cheers.

But don’t wait until the last lentil field disappears. Get to Ponza before it’s ruined. Two or three decades from now.

—William Sertl