

Like so many of the Hebridean islands, Scarba had a reputation for healthy living and longevity - Martin Martin reported in the 17th century that an old woman had just died on Scarba aged 140, still having possession of all her faculties, - but it also has its share of myths. The ghosts of evil sailors walk Scarba's cliffs as a penance. Others are chased by the Grey Dog which was drowned between Scarba and Lunga and which had belonged to Prince Breacan of Lochlann To escape the dog's drooling fangs the phantoms must confess their crimes and these cries can be heard after dark on moonless nights.

There is a small cottage above the anchorage in **Bàgh Gleann a' Mhaoil** (Gaelic for bay in the cleft of the mull) which was used for a time by an adventure school for children. The bay has a beach of large, multi-coloured pebbles. There is an interesting trudge up the ridge beside the bothy, then the next ridge and the next again. The going is rough: tufts of ankle-twisting grass, heather, and bracken with boggy patches between. Behind the ridges there is a small loch - **Loch Airigh a' Chruidh** (G. - loch in the horseshoe-shaped pasture) beside a vestigial path. Only a narrow earth barrier stops this loch emptying itself nearly 300m down the mountain-side. Following the path round the contours until it disappears brings you to the head of a steep gully which falls dramatically down to Camas nam Bàirneach (G. - limpet creek) and a deep-set cave. Beyond the creek is the main Corryvreckan whirlpool - a thrilling viewpoint! Deer spy on you from every rocky height.

The footpath, which encircles part of the mountain, starts from the sheep fank above Kilmory Lodge. The easiest climb to the peak, **Cruach Scarba** (G. *cruach* - stack or heap), and the low spine of rock at the top is from this path where it traverses the east side of the mountain. From the sheep fank it is also possible to reach the rough vehicle track which leads to Bàgh Gleann a' Mhaoil.

The tides run though the **Corryvreckan** (G. *coire bhreacain* - the speckled cauldron), west on the flood and east on the ebb, at speeds of up to ten knots. Beneath this channel is the rock-strewn record of some great primaeval cataclysm. There is a ridge running out from Camas nan Bàirneach on Scarba with a solitary rock stack on the end of it which rears up 44m and comes within 29m of the surface of the sea. When a westerly blows against the flood during a spring tide the noise of the violent overfalls can be heard many miles away. Local fishermen used to call the whirlpool which forms at these times over this submarine rock pinnacle, the Cailleach, (G. - the old woman). According to legend a hag controls the maelstrom and decides which ships will sink and which survive. There are also enormous breakers and violent eddies elsewhere. Another submerged rock stack is in the centre of the Gulf and beside it a great narrow pit like a gateway to hell which descends 100m below the surrounding seabed to an overall depth of 219m.

The early writers' descriptions are interesting. Martin Martin declared: 'The sea begins to boil and ferment with the tide of flood, and resembles the boiling of a pot; and then increases gradually, until it appears in many whirlpools which form themselves in sort of pyramids and immediately after spout up as high as the mast of a little vessel and at the same time make a loud report.' And John MacCulloch said: 'Impossible to be engaged in this place without anxiety...danger is always impending. The error of a few minutes might have been the price of as many lives...'

There is a short period at slack water when it is safe to sail through the Corryvreckan but the timing has to be accurate. Even then, the turgid eddies, sudden movements and whorls sucking at the surface as the water spills over the irregular rock formations deep below create a palpable sense of menace.