

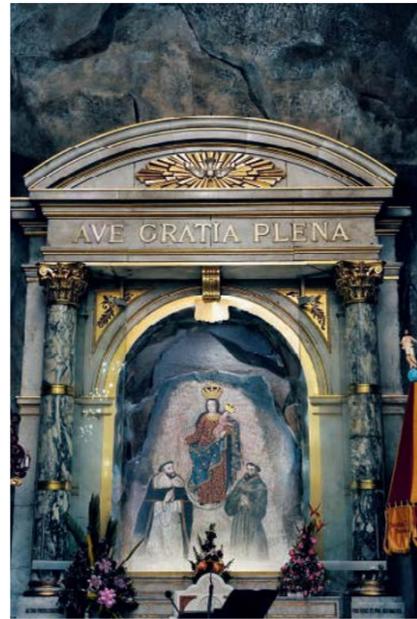
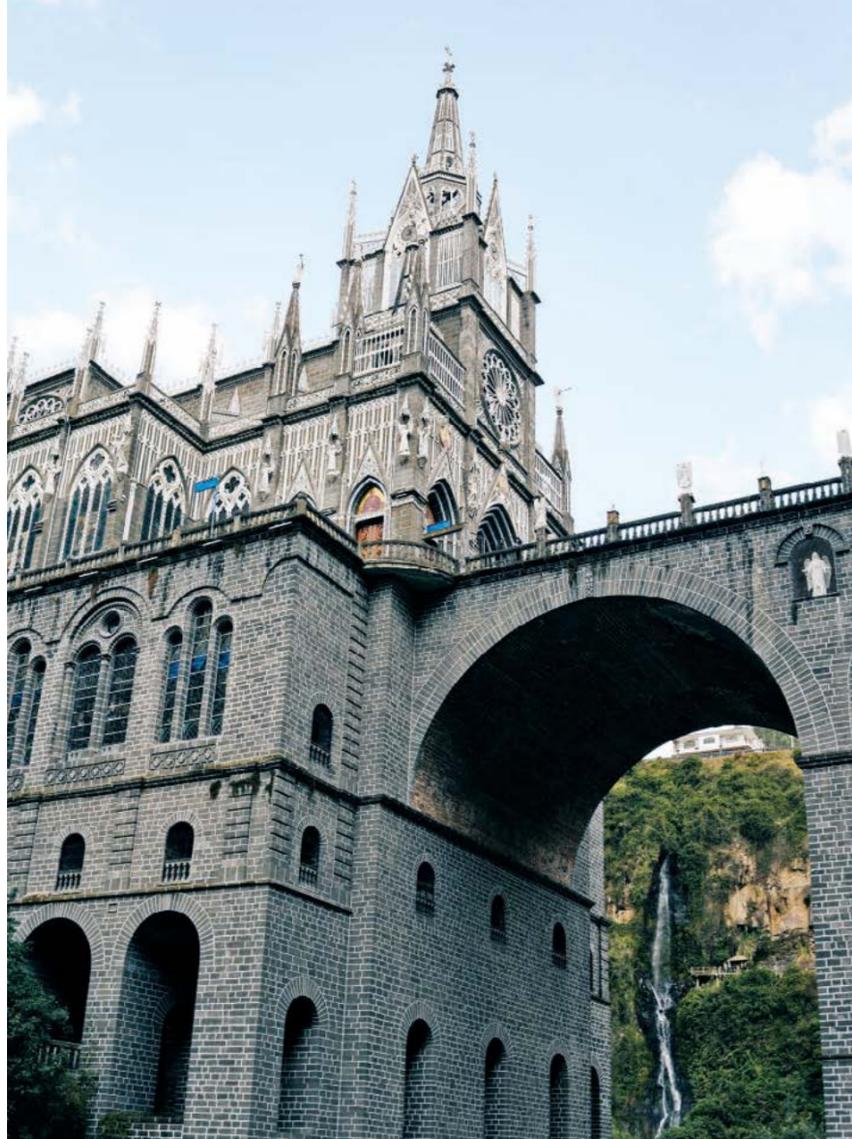


STORY *Rainbow Nelson* | PHOTOGRAPHS *Pia Riverola*

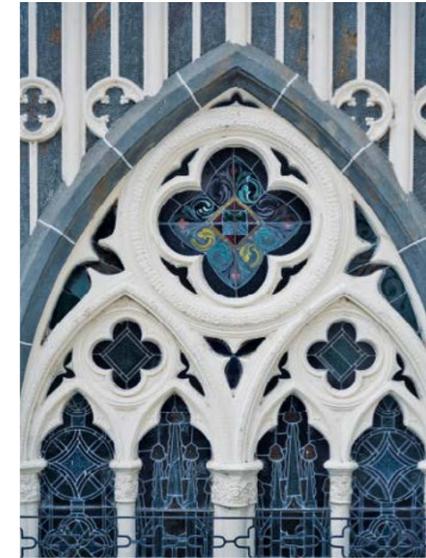
# Faith and fortitude

Few churches are as spectacular as the Sanctuary of Las Lajas, an awe-inspiring shrine that bridges a strategic ravine in the far south of Colombia. Rebuilt and extended many times, the structure draws thousands of pilgrims each year, who are attracted by its remote location and the miraculous treasure within





Previous pages: a large plaza in front of the entrance to Las Lajas is actually the top of the bridge that spans the ravine, as can be seen from afar on page 59 and from below on this page (left). The vaulted substructure supports the church, of course, but also contains the chapel and a museum. Above: the church has been built directly into the mountainside, so its front wall is the craggy rockface where the miraculous image of the Virgin Mary holding baby Jesus appeared. The image is now surrounded by a splendid niche and the altar stands in front of it. Opposite, left: mosaic portraits of past priests of the church are seen above the entrance doors on the ornate white and dark gray granite facade



White ornamentation (near left) surrounds the stained glass windows, an example of which (above) shows a hen on her nest. Below: plaques left by the grateful recipients of miracles cover the walls of the steps



The first sight of Las Lajas, in the lush hills of southwestern Colombia, is so astonishing that you can't help but ask: how – and why – did anyone dare to build it? This spectacular shrine sits within the deep gorge of the Guaitara river and straddles it as a bridge, high above the fast-flowing waters that rush from the snow-capped Andes to the Amazon basin.

The Santuario de Nuestra Señora del Rosario de Las Lajas, to give this extraordinary church its full name, traces its origin back to a miracle that is said to have occurred in the eighteenth century on the same site. There are several versions of the story, but the one most frequently told is that on a dark night in September 1754, an Amerindian woman called María Mueses de Quiñones and her deaf-mute daughter, Rosita, were caught in a storm as they were crossing a ravine. They sought shelter on an

overhang beneath two large rocks (or lajas). Suddenly Rosita spoke for the first time in her life, crying “Mummy, the lady is calling me!” As she pointed upward, a flash of lightning revealed an image, apparently painted onto the rock, of the Virgin Mary holding the infant Jesus in her arms.

Five years after the Virgin Mary first revealed herself to Rosita, a small shrine was erected to protect the image, and the first pilgrims were welcomed to the site. The simple thatch-roofed construction was commissioned by Fray Gabriel de Villafuerte, a clergyman from the nearby town of Ipiales, who sought to capitalize on the miracle to advance his mission among local people. This first temple survived until 1796 and then was replaced by a small domed basilica built from stone, which was completed in 1803. The military cartographer Manuel María Paz painted it in 1853.

As the miracles and healings multiplied and the offerings flowed in, a larger church was designed by the Ecuadorian architects Mariano Aulestia and Simón Atapuma. Completed in 1862, that temple became known as the “Oropéndola” because of its supposed resemblance to the hanging nests of oropendola birds, and it housed the shrine to the Virgin Mary until the current neo-Gothic structure was built around it.

By the end of the nineteenth century, thanks to a boom in the mining of gold and other precious minerals this region of Colombia had become one of the wealthiest in the country. Its newfound riches encouraged the diocesan bishop Fray Ezequiel Moreno to launch one of the largest construction projects that, until that time, the Catholic church had ever undertaken in the Americas. With thousands of pilgrims visiting the shrine every year and no easy

way of increasing the size of the church itself, Moreno started to explore plans to extend the shrine from one side of the ravine to the other. Sadly, he died before his scheme could be adopted, so it was his successor, Leónidas Medina, who engaged the Ecuadorian architect J. Gualberto Pérez to undertake the work.

Pérez drew up the ambitious plans for extending the temple 260 feet across the ravine with the construction of a 66-foot-wide plaza that would also serve as a bridge, 130 feet above the water rapids far below. The designs were approved in 1914 and allocated a budget of 100,000 gold pesos – a fortune at the time. With the bishop's blessing and under the close vigilance of the local chaplain, José María Cabrera, the first stone of the new sanctuary was laid on January 1, 1916. Over the next decade, thousands of workers hauled granite blocks

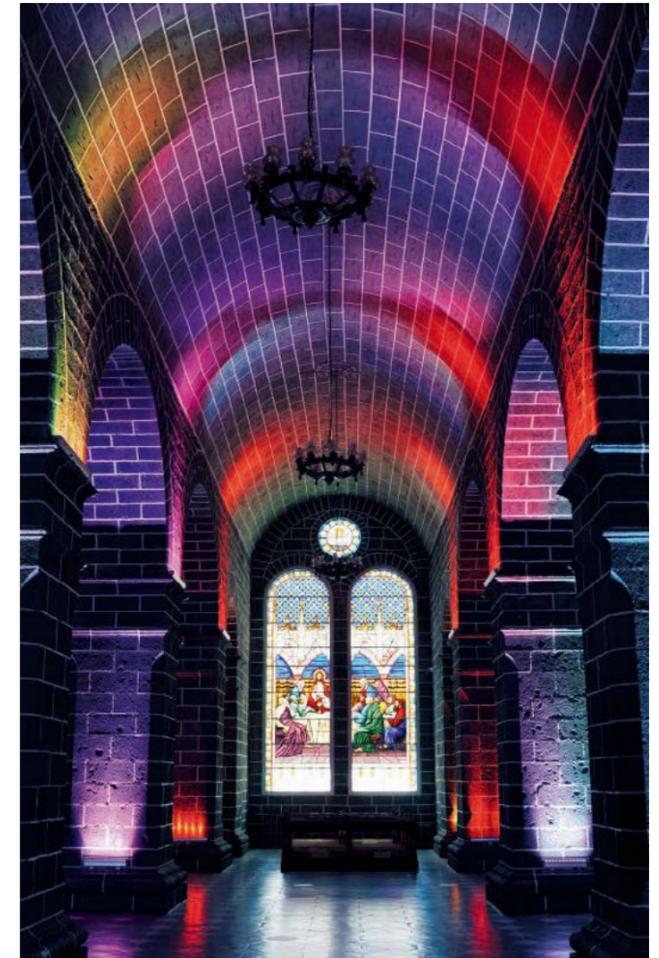
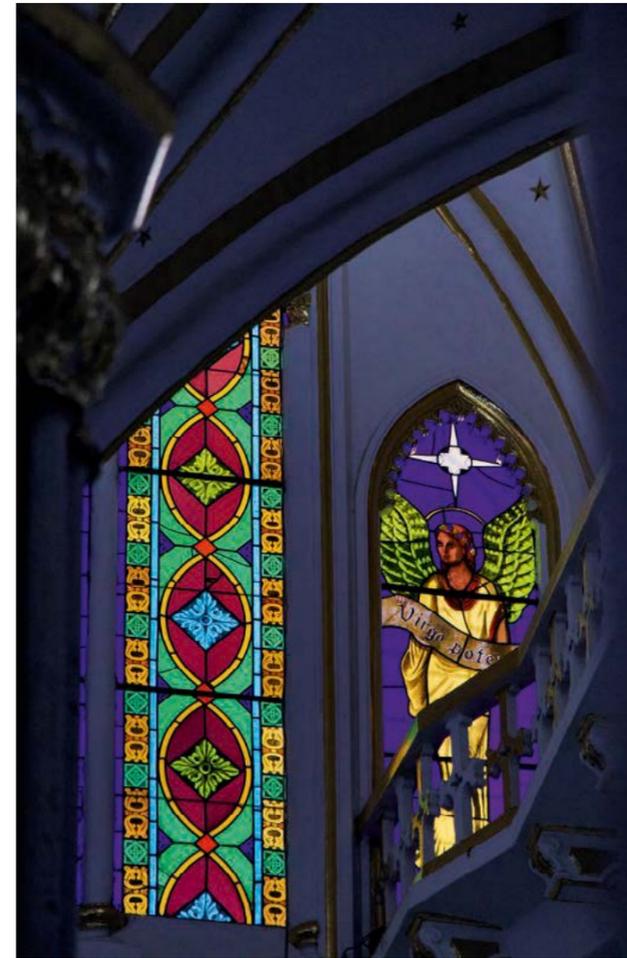
## *A flash of lightning revealed an image of the Virgin Mary holding the infant Jesus*

from quarries in nearby Potosi to construct the titanic foundations of the new church.

The works were dogged by near disasters, not least when the first bridge collapsed and when the arches in the enormous substructure of the church turned out to be misaligned. That might have been the end of things, but in 1924 a new architect was brought in who was able to correct the errors and get the project back on track. His name was Lucindo Espinosa, a self-taught architect from the city of Pasto, some 50 miles to the north. Despite his humble origins, Espinosa's talent had come to the attention of the city's bishop, Antonio María

Pueyo del Val, who had taken over as the project's paymaster. The two men shared a passion for religious architecture as well as a fervent commitment to the Virgin Mary, and they would both devote the rest of their lives to Las Lajas.

The bishop considered the Romanesque design drawn up by J. Gualberto Pérez too plain and uninspiring, so Espinosa set to work designing an altogether more decorative, neo-Gothic church. Dismissing his predecessor's concerns that local builders were incapable of intricate workmanship, he looked to steel and cement to create a more sculptural style for his final design,



which was approved by the Vatican in 1936. To add to the extraordinary complexity of the building, the shell of the new temple was constructed around the existing old church, which it eventually completely enclosed. Espinosa died in 1945, so it was left to his son Julian to complete the construction and to oversee the job of demolishing the earlier church inside the new one. This delicate task was successfully completed in 1946, with just one hitch: the miraculous painting of the Virgin Mary enclosed by the previous building turned out to be slightly off-center in the new one.

The finished church is a remarkable structure; though in some way reminiscent of (and presumably partly inspired by) the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Lourdes, France, its spectacular location adds to the impact of its appearance. The massive solidity of its base contrasts with the filigree decoration,

spires, and pinnacles of the upper church. The icing on the cake, so to speak, was provided by the German artist Walter Wasserhauen, whose stained glass windows depict other miraculous Madonnas and Virgin Marys from Mexico, France, Italy, and Colombia. Outside, the sculptor Marceliano Vallejo Montenegro decorated the bridge with 32 marble archangels, cherubs, and musical angels between 1939 and 1949 (the shrine's final completion).

Duly accorded some of the highest honors of the Catholic church, Las Lajas has since cemented its position in the collective

Opposite: looking into the south aisle from the nave. The light-filled white and gold interior of the church features neo-Gothic arches, which frame stained glass windows that tell the stories

of other miracles of the Virgin Mary. This page: the Romanesque crypt, of ashlar stone construction, contains the museum and a chapel dedicated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus

imagination of Colombia's largely Catholic population, inspiring ever more pilgrims to visit. Each year, believers add to the thousands of marble plaques that cover the walls of the steps to the sanctuary, giving their thanks for myriad miracles. Among those commemorating grateful referees, soldiers, police, barefoot pilgrims, presidents, and politicians, there is one that stands out as much for the simplicity of its message as for its privileged position on the church's eastern facade. "If you're searching for the monument, look around you," it says, echoing the epitaph to Sir Christopher Wren in St Paul's Cathedral, London. It's a humble nod from Lucindo Espinosa, the master craftsman responsible for Las Lajas' stunning design, toward the most spectacular component of his structure – the jaw-dropping natural setting in which he dared to imagine his masterpiece. ❖