

The National Shrine Basilica of Our Lady of Las Lajas, is a basilica church located in the southern Colombian Department of Nariño, in the municipality of Ipiales, and is built inside the canyon of the Guaitara River and is located less than seven miles from the Ecuadorian border. The Spanish Franciscan Juan de Santa Gertrudis mentions the sanctuary in Book III, Part 2, of his four-volume chronicle of his 1756–62 journey in the south portion of the Kingdom of New Granada (titled "Wonders of Nature"). This is possibly the oldest reference to its existence. The present church was built in a Gothic style between 1916 and 1949, taking up a total time frame of 33 years to build. The name *Laja* (slab) comes from the name of a type of flat sedimentary rock similar to shale and slate. The Las Lajas Sanctuary has made a name for its stunning architecture and a series of legends involving the appearance of the Holy Virgin and a mysterious mural of which nobody knows the origins. According to popular belief, the Virgin Mary appeared to a woman and her deaf-mute daughter in 1754 at exactly the same place where the church is now standing. The woman, Maria Meneses de Quiñones, and her daughter, Rosa, were passing by the Guaitara river when they found themselves hiding from a storm. At that moment, Rosa shouted "Mum, the Virgin is calling me!" and pointed to the appearing virgin. The woman kept quiet about the miracle until something even more incredible happened. When Rosa died, Mueces returned to the place where they had seen Virgin Mary to pray for her daughter's soul. The virgin then miraculously revived Rosa, and mother and daughter could no longer keep the miracle a secret. The first shrine in the honor of Jesus's mother was built a few years after the alleged appearance, according to the journal of a friar who was traveling the region between 1756 and 1764. Half a century later, in 1802, a bigger shrine was built and worshipers erected the first version of the bridge that now allows access to the church. The miraculous appearing of the virgin is only the first of a number of legends and mysteries linked to the Las Lajas Sanctuary. For example, nobody knows who made the image of the Virgin Mary that is at the end of the church, behind the altar. According to some, the image was seen first when Mueces wanted to show a priest and other locals where her daughter had been revived. On arrival, the worshipers saw the image of the Virgin Mary and Jesus carved in a stone wall. The image attracts thousands of pilgrims every year.

The venerated Marian image of the shrine received a decree of canonical coronation from the Pope on September 15, 1952 and was elevated to a minor basilica in 1994. This apparition of the Virgin Mary instigated popular pilgrimage to the site and occasional reports of cases of miraculous healing. An image appeared in the stone that is several feet inside of it. The image in the stone is still visible today. The current church was built between January 1, 1916, and August 20, 1949, with donations from local churchgoers. It rises 330 feet high from the bottom of the canyon and is connected to the opposite side of the canyon by a 160 foot tall bridge.

**The interior and ceiling of the Las Lajas Sanctuary.**

