

Celebrations: 200 Years Ago Brazil Became Seat of Portugal Empire

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The president of Brazil, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, inaugurated Friday, March 8, an exhibition at Rio's Historical Museum, "New World, New Empire," and met visiting Portuguese President Anibal Antonio Cavaco Silva marking the beginning of the country's bicentennial celebrations.

Two hundred years ago a fleet of ships bearing the Portuguese royal family and under protection from the Royal Navy sailed into Rio de Janeiro after an arduous voyage that began when they fled Lisbon from Napoleon's invading French troops.

It was an event that forever changed Brazil, making the colony the seat of Portugal's vast empire and setting it on the road to independence, which would happen, 14 years later, in 1822.

The bicentennial has prompted Brazilians to commemorate the period and its main figures, such as Portuguese prince regent Dom João VI, with debates, exhibitions, official ceremonies and television specials. It was a popular theme in this year's pre-Lenten Carnaval parades.

"The inhabitants in Rio could not believe in what their eyes were witnessing on that sunny, warm afternoon. A squadron with the Royal Family entering Guanabara Bay," wrote Laurentino Gomes in his recently published book "1808."

"And in the ships, hundreds of nobles elbowing each other to see the fantastic scene: a town with small white houses, aligned close to the beach, surrounded by huge granite mountains and a luxurious, dark-green jungle"

Gomes' book has topped the best-sellers list in Brazil for weeks with more than 250,000 copies sold, an impressive number for the local book industry.

Portugal had been caught in a war between its oldest ally, Britain, and Napoleon Bonaparte's France. When French troops advanced on Lisbon through the Portuguese countryside, Dom João VI ordered the court to evacuate the capital.

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