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Canton of Puntarenas celebrating its 150th birthday

From the laid back cafes in Montezuma to the crowded beaches near the central city; Puntarenas is a canton close to the hearts of Costa Ricans and foreigners alike. Although today Puntarenas is known more for its modern tourist attractions and cruise ships, the canton has a deep history and culture.

This month Puntarenas is celebrating 150 years as a canton and will have activities all month. Today President Oscar Arias Sánchez will visit the city of Puntarenas and inaugurate the Nuevo Centro de Atención Integral de Islita and officiate at a consejo de gobierno or cabinet meeting.

Wednesday the city of Puntarenas held a parade, welcomed the national philharmonic orchestra, which made it's first performance outside of San José, and even had a giant birthday cake that was 2.5 meters long, said Sandra Cordero, a spokeswoman for the national tourism institute.

Representatives from the Asamblea Legislativa also celebrated the event Wednesday although most stayed in San José. The organizer of the celebration, legislator Xinia Nicolas, said she was proud of the cultural, economic and social contributions of the province.

Francisco Antonio Pacheco, president of the Asamblea Legislativa, said Puntarenas is close to the hearts of Costa Rica. "It forms a part of our lives, our biography and the history of our country," said Pacheco, according to a release.

The cantón central de Puntarenas takes up about 3.6 percent of the country's area and includes the districts of Puntarenas, Pitahaya, Chomes, Manzanillo, Guacimal, Barranca, Monte Verde, Chacarita, Chira, Acapulco, El Roble, Arancibia on the mainland, Lepanto, Paquera, Cóbano on the southern Nicoya Peninsula, and even the distant Isla del Coco.

Puntarenas became a city on Sept. 17, 1858. The decision was issued by then-president Juan Rafael Mora Porras, due to an increase in population, commercial development and port services and in order to submit a spontaneous campaign against filibusters from the southern United States, according to the Universidad de Costa Rica. Puntarenas was a key city in the trip north into Guanacaste via the Río Tempisque, thus an important part of the campaign.

Puntarenas became well frequented as it was a port city and later was connected to San José by the Caldera train.

Cultural events will be held in the canton until the end of the month.