Five Things You Didn't Know About Angoulême

Once an important industrial centre, the fortified capital of the Charente region has a fascinating history, vibrant culture and an abundance of things to do.

1. A historical tug-of-war

Due to its strategic position, protected by the natural bend of the Charente River, Angoulême was much fought over by the English and the French during the Hundred Years War of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Later, the city was an important Protestant stronghold during the Wars of Religion in the 16th Century. Thankfully, Angoulême is much more peaceful now – but all of this makes for a city with a rich history!

2. A one-time industrial hub

Looking at the tranquil, picturesque river which flows through the town, you'd scarcely imagine that the Charente River was once an important industrial waterway, leading to the Atlantic near Rockefort. This led to various industries springing up in Angoulême, most notably the paper industry which began in the 16th Century. These days, high-speed trains run between Angoulême and Bordeaux, meaning that the river is largely only used for leisure, but you can still visit the *Musée du Papier d'Angoulême* (Angoulême Paper Museum), a small but fascinating museum housed in an old cigarette-paper factory.

3. It almost gave its name to New York City

Probably born in Florence around 1485, Giovanni da Verrazzano was the first European to explore the North American coast between Florida and New Brunswick. In the early 16th Century, Giovanni was working for King Francis I, a native of Cognac who had been Count of Angoulême for the two decades preceding his coronation, so when he came upon the site which would one day become NYC, he dubbed it *Nouvelle Angoulême:* "New Angoulême".

4. England once had an *Angoumoisine* queen*

While not strictly about Angoulême *per* se, the story of Isabella of Angoulême certainly captures the imagination. Often called the "Helen of the Middle Ages" due to her supposed great beauty, Isabella was the second wife of King John of England. The fact that Isabella was already betrothed to Hugh de Lusignan, Count of La Marche, did little to put off the King's infatuation (neither did the fact that his bride-to-be was just 12 years old when they met). This politically-charged marriage effectively restarted war between France and England, which must have caused some marital complications. After John's death, his youngest daughter Joan was betrothed to Hugh X de Lusignan, the son of her mother's former fiancé. However, upon seeing the still-beautiful Isabella, Hugh decided that he'd rather have her instead. Perhaps not quite the face to launch a thousand ships, but not far off!

5. Comic Strip Capital!

History aside, Angoulême is now most famous as the self-proclaimed "Comic Strip Capital of Europe". *Bande Dessinée* is a big thing in France, and Angoulême's *Musée de la Bande Dessinée* sets out to show you why. With a collection of over four thousand original drawings, from old favourites like Tintin, Peanuts, and Asterix to more serious modern works, this is *the* place to learn the history of this uniquely *French* art-form. Bonus: keep your eyes open for the BD murals which adorn the city's buildings! And if you happen to be in town in January, when 200,000 visitors descend on the city for the International Comics Festival, you're in for a treat.

Whether you're a history hot-shot or a connoisseur of comics, this diverse and fascinating charentais *capital is sure to impress!*

*the French word for a person from Angoulême.