

Understand St Petersburg

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Ambitious to be a world city but politically frustrated, will St Petersburg be able to find its place in the modern world?

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In case you've ever confused your *Brothers Karamazov* with your *Yevgeny Onegin*, here's the lowdown on all the great writers and novels this city has produced.

St Petersburg Today

Not since the paint first dried on Rastrelli's buildings in the late 18th century has St Petersburg looked so good. Twenty years of massive investment after 70 years of neglect under the Soviets has certainly paid off, and its facades are bursts of beautifully painted pastels and primes once again. But glimpse inside the buildings and you'll see there's a lot of work yet to be done: overall the city remains poor, despite a burgeoning middle class, and many challenges – economic and political – lie ahead.

Best on Film

Brother (1997) Sergei Bodrov Jr fights the mafia on the mean streets of St Petersburg.

Russian Ark (2002) Alexander Sukorov's one-shot meditation on Russian history filmed inside the Hermitage.

Irony of Fate (1975) Perhaps the best loved Leningrad comedy of all time.

The Stroll (2003) A delightfully playful film in which three friends wander from situation to situation on the streets of St Petersburg.

Onegin (1999) Pushkin's epic tale of lost love and regret is beautifully retold by Martha Fiennes.

Best in Print

Crime and Punishment (Fyodor Dostoevsky, 1866) The quintessential St Petersburg novel explores the mind of the deluded Rodion Raskolnikov.

Speak, Memory (Vladimir Nabokov, 1951) A wonderfully bittersweet literary memoir of Nabokov's own St Petersburg childhood.

The Nose (Nikolai Gogol, 1836) Follow Major Kovalyov around the city in pursuit of his errant nose.

Ten Days That Shook the World (John Reed, 1919) A remarkable first-hand account of the Russian revolution.

Change at City Hall

In 2011 city governor and long-serving Vladimir Putin lieutenant, Valentina Matvienko, was unceremoniously moved sideways out of the city by the Kremlin, having become a liability for the ruling United Russia Party gearing up for presidential elections in 2012. In her place, former KGB officer and dyed-in-the-wool Putin loyalist Georgy Poltavchenko was appointed acting governor, though most local observers agree that his permanence in the post is almost certainly assured, as Russian governors are appointed by the president rather than elected by the populace. Relatively little is known about Poltavchenko, a former federal-level politician and keen tweeter, but few expect many surprises from a man whose background is so closely involved with Putin's St Petersburg network.

Goodbye, Valentina

Matvienko will not be missed by most. Her apparent indifference to the city's architectural heritage and inability to have snow and icicles cleared – no laughing matter in a city with extreme weather patterns, where falling icicles kill and injure many people each year – led to low opinion-poll ratings and unusual amounts of public anger. While she was certainly a formidable force representing the city and could be both wily and charming, her authoritarian style and inability to brook criticism united a disparate opposition. Public demonstrations against her policies became the norm in the last years of her rule.

For the opposition, Matvienko's most obvious failing was her support for the Okhta Centre (p201), an unpopular and, many argue, entirely unnecessary skyscraper development that was to be built in the city centre. The former governor's unwavering support for the scheme caused her to lose a lot of political capital – and all for nothing, when she finally bowed to a large local protest