

Understand St Petersburg

ST PETERSBURG TODAY..... 186

As development and conservation continue to clash, will St Petersburg be able to find its place in the modern world?

HISTORY 188

How did Peter the Great's whimsical creation become Europe's fourth-largest city and Russia's great cultural treasure trove?

ARCHITECTURE 206

Making sense of the jumble of building styles that makes St Petersburg an architecture lover's dream destination.

ARTS.....213

From the Mariinsky to modernism and Kino to Kuryokhin, there's something for everyone in St Petersburg's exciting cultural life.

LITERATURE 220

In case you've ever confused your *Brothers Karamazov* with your *Crime and Punishment*, here's the low-down on all the great writers and poets 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. The 20 years of massive investment after 70 years of neglect under the Soviets has certainly paid off, and the city's 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

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

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

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

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.

Reconstructing Piter

The past decade has been marked by considerable and much-needed investment in St Petersburg's infrastructure. Neglected and sidelined under the Soviets and then forced for the first two decades after the end of communism to concentrate on urgent conservation rather than development, St Petersburg has finally completed several huge engineering projects in the past few years. These include the construction of a new ring road around the city, a flood barrier, the new M5 metro line, the Bolshoy Obukhovsky Bridge (the only bridge over the Neva big enough not to have to rise at night) and the Marine Facade cruise port on Vasilyevsky Island. All are significant, and herald the city's determination to enter the modern world and be taken seriously as a business and tourism destination.

Another important prestige project for the city was the opening of the Mariinsky II in 2013, a superb state-of-the-art theatre worthy of one of the world's leading ballet and opera troupes. Likewise the Hermitage is in the process of undergoing enormous changes as the museum's modern art collection is being moved from the Winter Palace to the General Staff Building on the other side of Palace Sq. This heralds a transformation for Russia's most famous museum into an institution for the 21st century.

Steps Backwards

Yet while undeniable infrastructural progress has been made in recent years, St Petersburg has also been the origin of a far less progressive wave of homophobia that has spread out in waves across Russia since 2011. Local arch-conservative and pro-Putin deputy Vitaly Milonov, long considered something of a comical character by many Petersburgers, rose to national prominence in Russia when he introduced a law to St Petersburg's