

In the Spotlight: Leonardo DiCaprio

By [Anna Malpas](#)

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This week, Hollywood star Leonardo DiCaprio came to St. Petersburg for a conference on saving endangered Amur tigers and met Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, who called him a “real man.”

In a speech, Putin said DiCaprio “broke his way through to us as if he were crossing a front line.” The actor arrived late for the forum because his plane from New York had to turn back after an engine burst into flames. Then his second private plane was diverted to Finland in a snow storm.

“I am sorry for the mauvais ton, but in our country we call people like that ‘a real man,’” Putin said admiringly.

Putin was also photographed drinking tea with DiCaprio, in an A-list encounter to outshine Medvedev’s hobnobbing with U2 frontman Bono this summer. “Leo and Putin get on *grrreat*,” the British Sun wrote.

While in St. Petersburg, DiCaprio visited the Hermitage museum with British model Naomi

Campbell and her Russian boyfriend Vladislav Doronin and spent a long time gazing at the Picasso paintings, Lifenews.ru reported.

This visit is apparently the first time DiCaprio has crossed the front line into Russia, although he told Putin of his Russian origins, with his grandmother originally having the surname Smirnova. Russian media commented on his strong resemblance to Lenin in his youth, before he lost his hair and grew a beard.

DiCaprio had been due to visit Russia several times before pulling out. He was announced as coming to promote pop singer Justin Timberlake's clothing range in 2009. He was also invited to a charity gala that Campbell held in Moscow in May this year but did not turn up.

The actor, a serial dater of leggy models, was once linked to a blond Russian-born underwear model called Anne Vyalitsyna. He seems to have close ties with Campbell and property developer Doronin, and in August, he was photographed vacationing on Doronin's yacht.

At the tiger forum, Campbell got her moment of glory as she shook hands with Putin. The handshake features in Hello! magazine and will boost Campbell's profile in Russia. It was also an excuse to bring up Campbell's "black panther" nickname.

Campbell apparently admires Putin's macho antics. Oddly enough, she once interviewed ultra-leftwing Venezuelan leader Hugo Chavez for Britain's GQ magazine and asked him whether he would go topless like Putin, to which the chunky leader replied, "Touch my muscles."

DiCaprio is a board member at the WWF animal charity and gave a personal donation of \$1 million to save the tigers. Russian papers were more skeptical about the cause. "Personally I would rather have preserved some rare butterfly," Andrei Kolesnikov wrote flippantly in Kommersant. "I couldn't understand why everyone picked on the poor Ussurian tiger."

Putin is a friend of tigers. The Amur tigers are elusive and number only in the hundreds, but when Putin visited a reserve in the Russian Far East in 2008, one obligingly turned up in a trap set up by naturalists. The female tiger unexpectedly freed herself and bounded out, only to be floored by Putin firing a tranquilizer dart, as Russian media slavishly reported. Putin then gave her a kiss on the cheek before she was tagged up.

She has since been tracked on a map on his web site. Last year, Putin proudly announced that she had gotten pregnant and given birth, launching jokes about his manly prowess.

Also in 2008, he showed journalists a tiger cub in a basket at his country residence, although with typical reticence he refused to say who gave it to him. He enthusiastically stroked the blue-eyed kitten, although journalists kept their distance.

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