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Water begins to fill the rice-paddies in May, also known as the "swamp month"

JR to release IC cards

by Noriko Ehara

In April, JR West (West Japan Railway Company) introduced automatic ticket gates (自動改札 Jido- Kaisatsu) to Okayama Station as part of a plan to equip 135 stations in Okayama and Hiroshima prefectures with the high tech gates by Autumn 2007

In summer, this automatic ticket gate system will also accept IC cards, using a system called "ICOCA" (meaning "Let's go, shall we?" in Kansai dialect.) ICOCA has been in use in the Kansai area for some time, and now stations in Okayama and Hiroshima prefectures are joining.

JR West's ICOCA and JR East's Suica cards are prepaid rail pass cards with built-in IC chips. Users can pay their train fares by touching the ticket gates with the cards, and the cards can even be read whilst still inside a ticket wallet. Both ICOCA and Suica cards can be used in east and west Japan. SMART ICOCA cards can also be used as electronic money to buy goods at specified shops, usually in or near the station.

Last October, trams and buses in Okayama City introduced a new IC card system called "PiTaPa". This card also functions as electronic money even in the Kansai and Tokai areas. Advanced IC cards are not only convenient but also offer you great advantages by giving you "points" which you can save

and exchange for electronic money and other goods. Soon SMART ICOCA and PiTaPa cards will be used daily by train, tram and bus passengers.

If you want to use a SMART ICOCA system for shopping, you will need to have a J-West Credit Card. There are two

types of credit cards, the Basic and the Express cards, and you can use SMART ICOCA with either credit card plan to earn points and get discounts on Shinkansen tickets. You will also be able to watch any movie at Okayama Merpa Cinema for only 1000 yen, any day. (Even now Merpa charges only 1000 yen on Saturdays, Sundays and Public Holidays to holders of JR monthly train passes.)

If you have an Express card, you can make Shinkansen seat reservations with your mobile phone. The annual fees for an Express card is 1000 yen but the Basic card is free on a condition that you use the card for shopping at least once a year. Having a PiTaPa card is also free if you use the card at least once every 6 months.

The two IC card systems may sound complicated, but if you can figure out which one is suitable for you, it can save your time and money.

