

If

you don't know RAM from ROM or a PC from a PowerPC, but are ready to take the plunge into the world of computing, then the next two pages of RADAR are for you.

Computers have come a long way since the monsters of the 1940's that filled entire rooms. We can now carry 2-3kg portable machines that are as powerful as the ones used by NASA in the 1960's. Innovations are introduced at a dizzying rate, and developers constantly roll out flashier models and lower prices (sometimes a few weeks after your purchase!).

Before you start shopping, ask yourself honestly why you need a computer. Don't be captured by the lure of technology alone. Without a real and defined need, your computer may quickly become an expensive desk ornament.

PC, Mac, what the...?

We're assuming you're planning to use a machine with an English operating system (OS), which basically means the computer will interact with you in English. That limits your choice to IBM (PC's) and Apple. PC's are in parenthesis because IBM allows other manufacturers (Compaq, Dell, Gateway, etc.) to use its technology to produce machines called clones. PC prices have remained extremely low because of this competition. Apple's machines are more expensive because they have always carefully protected their OS, thinking the uniqueness and intuitiveness of the Macintosh was something consumers would pay a premium price for.

Advantages to buying a PC? They're cheap. They're fast. There are tons of hardware and software for them. They're the most popular computers in the world. Be aware, however, that a PC bought in Japan may not be compatible with some English software (no worries with the Mac!). Research this thoroughly if you're thinking of buying a PC here. The advantages of a Macintosh? It does its work smoothly and transparently. Its graceful and intuitive interface makes it an outstanding machine for the beginner. With the PowerPC, Macintosh finally has a computer to equal the speed of a PC, and their once outrageous prices have become competitive. And they're a blast to use. Most foreigners in Fukuoka use Macs and are evangelists for the cause (you rarely hear PC users speak in the same way about their machines). We're all Mac-heads at RADAR, and we overwhelmingly recommend them to you.

Portable or Desktop?

Portables are extremely convenient if you need to hit the road, or don't want to be chained to one computing location. What you miss is a full-sized keyboard and large monitor (although you CAN hook these up to many portables). They are somewhat slower than desktops and their prices are comparatively high. Desktop packages have become extremely attractive, as manufacturers now usually load them with goodies. Basically it's simple, if you need to move your machine around, get a portable. If not, get a desktop.

To import or not to import?

If you buy a machine in Fukuoka, you'll get a Japanese OS and any software that comes with it will be in Japanese. Your keyboard will have both English and Japanese script on it. To install an English OS, you'll have to buy the software for it. If anything goes wrong with your machine, your service center will be right in town. If you buy in America, you'll have an English OS, and any software and keyboard that come included will be in English. Apple offers a one-year international warranty that allows your machine to be fixed at any authorized location around the world. PC's

have no such policy, so you may find yourself paying to ship a broken machine under warranty back to the States!

Prices have become more competitive in Japan recently, but you can still get significant better deals on most models by using mail order outlets in the States. You'll have to judge what's more important, saving yen and getting everything in English, or buying from a shop in town that can take care of your machine with no hassles if something goes wrong. Mailing a broken monitor or all-in-one computer overseas can be a major headache, but so can paying inflated prices in Japan.

The Internet

The Internet is a vast, confusing, undisciplined network of information that ranges from the essential to the inane. It often requires a knowledge of arcane computer commands (UNIX) and incomprehensible site addresses. A system has recently introduced, however, that offers hope to the UNIX-impaired. Using the World-Wide Web tandem with a "browsing" software like Mosaic, Macintosh and Windows users can now travel the Internet with a familiar interface. If that's confusing for you already, here are a few Internet texts to clear the cobwebs:

Internet Starter Kit (includes software): Adam Osborne
The Internet Complete Reference and The Internet Yellow Pages: Harley Hahn and Rick Stout.

Navigating the Internet/Deluxe Edition: Rick Smith and Mark Gibbs

For an exhaustive listing of Internet references and tons of other info, hook yourself up to the Fukuoka BBS (Bulletin Board Service) Bamboo Net (see Jan 1). Bamboo Net is a member of OneNet, a network of BBS's using a common, easy-to-use graphical interface. There are currently more than 400 such BBS's and they exchange information (Internet info) on a daily basis. If you have an interest or hobby, it's possible to become a moderator of a local file like "Sumo" or "Nazi Death Metal Bands That Start With Z."

Perhaps the biggest draw is the ability to connect to a pool of info about Fukuoka and Japan, so you'll get much less of inside a big online service. E-mail will be offered within six months and Internet access should follow soon after. To use your communications software and modems, dial 523-4424. Login by typing in "guest" (in the quotes) in both the "User I.D." and "Password" sections. You can then download the free software and info for Windows and Mac that you'll need to use the system. Membership will run you either ¥3,000 or ¥5,000 for a year. For more info, call 523-2315 (between 10:00-17:00) and leave a message. The administrator will then get back in touch with you.

Getting Online

With a modem, you can use an ordinary telephone line to hook your computer to the world. Late-breaking news and sports, magazines, home shopping, airplane reservations, worldwide electronic mail, etc., the list of what you can find and do online is growing exponentially. The problem for users in Fukuoka has been a definite lack of affordable online options. CompuServe has a local access number (via NiftyServe), but their service can be very pricey (call 0120-22-1200 in Eng. or Jpn. for more info). Software for CompuServe is readily available. Apple's new e-World will officially be in Fukuoka any day now, so try ClubMac Hakata (see Things You Should Read box) for a copy of e-World software. America Online will have a Fukuoka access number very soon as well. If you use their Tokyo number (you'll need the software first), things can get really expensive. Remember, you're not only paying for the online service, you're also paying for telephone time! Check out the Bamboo Net (BBS) (see Internet box) for good advice regarding going online from Fukuoka. Look for modems that can handle at least 14,400K bps (bits per second). Global Village's TelePort and PowerPort modems, manuals and technical support are all great, and the Mercury is the screamer in their collection.

Solving the Digital Dilemma

