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Greater convenience is the aim of many technical innovations, so it's no surprise that our Japanese correspondent, Martyn Williams, has been making life easier for himself with the latest time-, labour- and even money-saving devices available in the Far East

April 29 will go down in history, for me at any rate, as the day my mobile first made itself truly useful. There had been several false starts. The day I first bought a mobile was pretty momentous, as was the first time I started delving into the wireless internet service and found the travel navigator. This is a useful function that saves me time and shoes by showing me the fastest route between any two stations on Tokyo's extensive rail network.

On 29 April my mobile did something for me it has never, ever done before... it actually saved me money

The area guide is also pretty handy for quickly locating the perfect restaurant to satisfy whatever craving I have at any time, and I will never forget watching history unfold on 11 September thanks to the constant news updates that came by email to my phone, the first arriving moments after the hijacked aircraft hit the World Trade Centre.

But on 29 April my mobile did something for me it has never, ever done before... it saved me money.

In the mood for dancing

Out with a friend that evening, I was looking for a club to visit and scrolling through websites on the mobile when the magic words 'free entry' caught my eye. Clicking the link brought up a digital coupon – show it at the door and you get in free.

You had to be a subscriber of the service to get the coupon, but getting a ¥3,500 (£20) admission fee waived for two people in return for a ¥105 monthly website subscription made it a no-brainer. Quite a change from its usual roll of costing me money every

month. I'm going to be going dancing with my mobile a lot more in future.

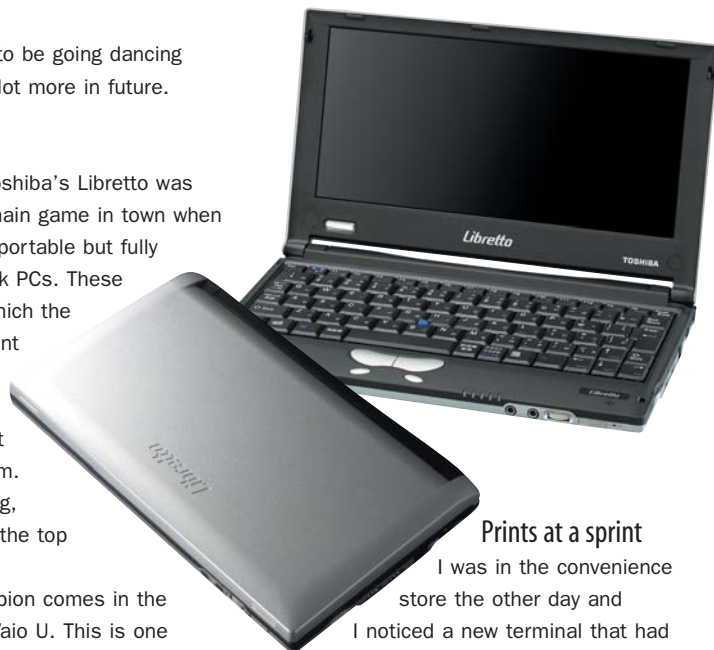
Small wonder

Until early May, Toshiba's Libretto was pretty much the main game in town when it came to small, portable but fully equipped notebook PCs. These little machines, which the company is hesitant about selling overseas, amaze everybody the first time they see them. But, like everything, Toshiba's time at the top could not last.

The new champion comes in the shape of Sony's Vaio U. This is one cool notebook and is easily the smallest Windows XP machine on the Japanese market to date. It has a 6.4in TFT (thin-film transistor) LCD (liquid crystal display) that offers XGA resolution (1,024x768 pixels) – making some things on the desktop almost too small to see – and is based around a Transmeta TM5800 Crusoe processor. The rest of the specifications is fairly standard, but where things become interesting is in the thumb control.

Because this machine is small and light it can easily be held in two hands. The most natural place to put your hands is underneath the machine towards the back with your thumbs on top of the computer just below the hinge, which is just where Sony has added controls for the mouse. One thumb controls the pointer while the other takes care of the clicking. A neat design with a neat price – ¥150,000 (around £825).

Toshiba responded with a new version of the Libretto a few days later but, despite some improvements, the machine is still just that little bit larger than the Vaio U.



Prints at a sprint

I was in the convenience store the other day and I noticed a new terminal that had been installed. It has a range of useful functions, from booking tickets to ordering goods but the one that grabbed my attention was the photo printing service. Slip a Memory Stick in the front of the machine and, for a very small fee per photo, it will print out your pictures on high-quality paper. It's not as high quality as getting them done at a photo lab, but if you're in a hurry or just want a couple of prints of fun shots to share with friends it hits the spot.

Taking the idea one step further, Casio has just taken the wraps off its Let's Photo machine. The device, which looks like a small vending machine, accepts SmartMedia, CompactFlash, Memory Stick, PC Card and floppy disk and will deliver 24 prints in just three minutes. ■

