

Octopus – an essential friend

HONG Kong may well be famous for its abundant sea food, but if upon arrival someone asks if you would like an Octopus, welcome the opportunity with open arms.

Hong Kong's public transport system is truly excellent and a good example to the rest of the world of how transportation should work when properly planned.

Some 30 years ago, the MTR – Mass Transit Railway – was born and now includes nine lines (10 if you include the Airport Express), plus a network of modern tram lines operated by the MTR in the North West New Territories, that cover virtually every major district and leading tourist attraction, except for the very south of Hong Kong Island itself. All signs are bilingual in Chinese and English and all announcements are made in Cantonese, Mandarin and English so tourists should not have a problem using the rail system.

The Octopus payment card has been in use since September 1997. It is a contactless smart card which stores money. In

addition to being used for virtually all forms of public transport, Octopus can also be used in convenience stores, fast food chains such as McDonald's, many vending machines, all roadside parking and some car parks.

When travelling by MTR and some bus routes, payment by Octopus card often works out much cheaper than cash. The card's balance is displayed as the user exits the gates after each ride, or after each transaction. The balance can also be checked using a small machine near regular ticket machines in MTR stations.

On Hong Kong Island itself, the narrow double-decker city trams running along

the north coast have been an icon in their own right for over a century. Their routes cover the full 30 kilometres of the island, and although they are considerably slower than they are the cheapest sightseeing tour around.

There are three types of bus available in Hong Kong, and while they are easy to use (especially with your Octopus), signage in English can be sparse and finding your bus stop can get difficult; but they are pretty much your only option for travelling around the south side of the island and around Lantau. ■



Part of Hong Kong's transport system