



Serious reservations at online Holiday City

Founder started out with a restaurant guide that turned into an accommodation success

Graeme Kennedy

Young Malay-Chinese software programmer Lee Lai Huat was only two years out of university when he began building his global travel-booking system Holiday City.

Mr Lee worked in the bedroom of his Singapore apartment to develop the internet-based tool, first as an online Singapore restaurant guide in 1997 before he expanded it into the accommodation sector and created a business that last year handled reservations for 190,000 room-nights worth \$US25 million.

In Auckland to launch Holiday City in New Zealand, Mr Lee said the dining venture gained a lot of interest but little advertising or revenue.

"I was desperate," he said, "so I approached resorts and hotels hoping they would advertise on my site but at first Friday, 09 June 2006, p. 46



LEE LAI HUAT: Determined not to add airlines

they offered me only room vouchers as payment.

"But it became quite successful and although there were still no ads they paid me commissions and Holiday

City grew.

"It began with 10 hotels in the Asia region and the next year I moved from my bedroom into a real office and by 2005 I had 7000 properties in

the UK, the US, Europe, Australasia and Asia.

"They had by then heard of Holiday City and wanted to be part of it."

Mr Lee studied in Malacca, Singapore and the Queensland University of Technology and worked as a software engineer and programmer for two major Singapore firms before starting Holiday City.

He said about 40 New Zealand properties were now listed with 10,000 room-nights sold last year.

Mr Lee plans to increase global hotel listings to 12,000 and start a car rental booking service this year.

"But I will not get into airline bookings," he said. "They are huge competition as they want direct online bookings as well as using global distribution systems – people who fly also want accommodation and that's when they can look at Holiday City."