



Simple connection: Lee Lai Huat wants to break down the perception that booking accommodation online is “complex, very complicated kind of stuff”.

PICTURE: NICOLE EMANUEL

# Using the internet with a view to a room

By **JESSE HOGAN**

LEE Lai Huat says Australians' enthusiasm for discount online hotel bookings is one of the key reasons his company, HolidayCity.com, has grown from a one-man business in 1998 to one that took \$US25 million (\$A32.4 million) in bookings last year.

Although the company only recently opened an office in Sydney, Australians have used

HolidayCity since 1999 and already provide the Malaysia-based company with the most bookings per capita of any country. In overall booking numbers, Australia ranks third, behind only Britain and the US. HolidayCity chief executive Mr Lee said in Melbourne yesterday. He is in Australia to introduce his company.

HolidayCity, like its popular Australian rival Wotif.com, signs

deals with hotels to make the hotels' excess rooms — rooms that would otherwise be left vacant — available online at a discount price.

When Mr Lee started the business, it had 10 hotels on its books. It now has more than 7000 worldwide and expects to sign up 12,000 by the end of the year. In the past year, Australians booked 26,000 nights of accommodation through HolidayCity, 60 per cent

of those at hotels within Australia.

Customers who book accommodation must provide credit card details but only settle the bill when they arrive at the hotel. The company charges hotels a commission for every booking made through its website.

Mr Lee said HolidayCity's performance in Australia was helped by increased broadband penetration and the growing trend towards booking flights online.

“When an Australian traveller needs to book a flight ticket . . . they go to Virgin Blue or Qantas and book their tickets online. It's quite natural for them to proceed to do their accommodation online,” he said.

Mr Lee said a challenge for the online travel bookings industry was to break down the perception that booking accommodation online was “complex, very complicated kind of stuff”.