

# Holidays in hell: dollars v danger

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WITH the global economy collapsing and neighbouring countries mired in political crises, Australian holiday-makers are well placed to pick up a bargain — if you don't mind the possibility of airport sieges, curfews and violent street protests.

Travel operators in Fiji and Thailand report that with tourist numbers down substantially, hotels have slashed prices and are happy to throw in extras such as free meals. Fiji devalued its dollar by 20 per cent this week, making it an even cheaper holiday destination.

Larry Cunningham, the Australian honorary consul for Phuket, and owner of the



Chava Resort, says that last week's protests and December's airport siege took their toll on tourist numbers, resulting in sweeping price cuts.

"All the hotels (here) are offering substantial discounts or including breakfasts, transfers from the airport and massage; little things you normally have to pay extra for," he said.

A hotel room for a week at Phuket's Sunset Beach Resort now costs about \$500, more than \$1000 less than at standard rates last year.

Anna Robinson, who runs Take Us To Thailand, a wedding, honeymoon and party holiday specialist, says she has been able to offer her clients better deals since she opened her business 1½ years ago.

"You can get a really nice place with a beach front, large swimming pool, at a boutique atmosphere resort for \$160 a night per couple including a gourmet breakfast, when it had previously been \$230," she said.

Undaunted by the recent constitutional crisis, Tourism Fiji chief Josefa Tuamato said that "there's never been a better time to visit Fiji" thanks

to this week's devaluation. Floods in January were responsible for hammering the island's tourism, triggering low-price holiday packages.

Farid Hacene, of Fijian Specialist Holidays, says many hotels are giving 50 per cent off their regular rates, including cheap meal deals.

A four-night package deal at the four-star Radisson Resort, which includes air fares from Melbourne and airport transfers, is selling for \$1295 including taxes.

"It's probably the cheapest it's ever been to go to Fiji," Mr Hacene said.

A spokesman for Tourism Fiji said the Australian Government's travel advisory urging caution when visiting the nation should not deter travellers from Fiji.