

## BEWARE of USA visa waiver ESTA scams: Many websites looking to rip you off

I've been scammed and I'm livid. Fraudsters have fleeced me of \$100 to enter the US and I'm as angry as Hillary at a Trump inauguration rally. For someone who travels for a living, I should have known better. But I've fallen for the oldest trick in the digital scammers book – getting sucked in by a dodgy third-party website and paying six times the official fee for an ESTA visa waiver.

Australia is among 38 countries whose residents are required to obtain an ESTA (Electronic System for Travel Authorization) before travelling to the States under the country's Visa Waiver Program. ESTA applications are made through the US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) website.

I paid \$US88 ,say \$120AUD..My travel Agent would have charged only \$33 to \$55AUD through correct channels and I would not have been ripped off with my data now floating around the world.

Don't be fooled by imitations. This is what the correct ESTA application website looks like.

Disclaimer: I was preparing for two back-to-back international trips and, in my haste, deferred to my (non)friend Google. I clicked on an official-looking site for Australian travellers (aren't we special; that's how they suck you in) and completed the form. At the checkout page there was no price in the payment instructions, and it wasn't until I received an email confirmation that I realised I'd been stung US\$88 (AU\$125). In Australian money I'd been ripped off about 100 bucks.

"The scam is long-running," an ACCC spokesperson says. "These sites charge the victim a fee to 'facilitate' the visa waiver request, so a valid ESTA authorisation will be granted if the application succeeds, at an exorbitant cost." Some sites call themselves "travel concierges" and use words like "official ESTA application". Many hide their "review and processing" fees in the fine print, and some make no mention of them at all.

I made an amateur mistake courtesy of the Google gremlins. No pity for the stupid, I hear you. But these shonky ESTA sites are convincing, and it's an easy mistake to make for the travel uninitiated or the time-poor erring on careless. Type ESTA into Google and the page is filled with links to disreputable sites; the first four hits are all paid ads with "esta" somewhere in the title, and the legitimate site is buried halfway down the page.

**Some unsuspecting travellers are conned outright and receive nothing. Or worse, they have their personal data and credit card information stolen and are at risk of identity theft and credit card fraud. In most cases, though, the sites are opportunistic money-making schemes that prey on consumer ignorance, rather than phishing fiends.**

"These websites vary in how they operate and while some websites are lawful third-party providers charging significant 'service fees', other websites fraudulently impersonate the US government and charge customers exorbitant amounts without ever providing the visa waiver," Queensland Police warned .

"Providing your personal information to these websites could be putting your personal information at risk."

**Get your Travel Agent to handle your data to apply for your visa. Some professional Agents have bonafide links to do so, plus they also assume responsibility and accountability! WHY RISK IT! “**