

New European Travel System Raises Significant Privacy Concerns

October 23, 2023 - A new system called the European Travel Information and Authorization System (ETIAS) is being rolled out by the EU and will be fully implemented by 2025. ETIAS is designed to apply to travelers from more than 60 countries, including Americans, who are currently exempt from visa requirements when visiting the EU.

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ETIAS is raising some significant privacy concerns. Under ETIAS, travelers from impacted countries won't need a visa to enter the EU, but they will need to apply for permission in advance to visit any EU countries for short-term stays. This process for travel applications will be handled online and it does involve supplying biometric data. In this case, that includes providing both facial scans and fingerprints; all of which will be permanently stored in a massive EU-owned database.

According to information supplied by the EU, most travelers will be able to get their approval in a matter of minutes, but some may be singled out for further screening which could take up to 30 days. Travelers will also be required to pay an application fee of about \$8.

Once a traveler is approved, their travel authorization will be valid for three years, or until their passport expires. Authorizations allow the average traveler to spend up to 90 days in the EU in any 180-day period.

While the EU doesn't plan on sharing the data it collects, and EU privacy laws are significantly stronger than similar US laws, the establishment of any large database of consumer information provides an inviting target for hackers and criminals. It's also a tempting target for governments — specifically law enforcement and intelligence agencies — trying to gain information on specific individuals.

In the United States, government run databases have been repeatedly hacked by both criminals and other non-friendly governments. And the US governments record for protecting the data in those databases has been abysmal at best. There is absolutely no reason to believe that the European Union will do any better.

Furthermore, there is really no telling what value biometric data will be to criminals in the future, but there is reason to believe that its value is increasing. That's because its use in both commercial and government applications is increasing.

Given these issues, there is reason for travelers to be concerned, but there really isn't much that can be done by individuals at this point. It looks like if you want to travel to Europe after 2025, you will have to take on some new risks to your privacy.

by Jim Malmberg

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