A Smoker's Guide to Esse Cigarettes: Korean Craft Meets Australian Tobacco Laws

There is a quiet corner of the cigarette market that doesn't shout for attention. It comes from South Korea, wrapped in a slim white pack, and it goes by the name Esse. For the Australian smoker who has grown tired of the same few domestic options, Esse Cigarettes offer a different experience. I have smoked them on and off for several years, and I keep coming back for the same reason: they are light, smooth, and noticeably different from the local brands that dominate our shelves.

What Makes Esse Cigarettes Stand Out?

Esse is a Korean brand, produced by the KT&G corporation, one of the largest tobacco companies in South Korea. The brand has built a reputation for mildness and a refined draw. Unlike many Australian cigarette brands that lean toward a heavier, more robust smoke, Esse Cigarettes are engineered for a softer experience. The tobacco itself is a blend that often includes a higher proportion of Virginia leaf, and the cigarette filters are designed to reduce harshness without stripping away flavour.

The first time I lit an Esse, I was struck by how easy it was on the throat. There was no raw edge, no immediate urge to cough. For someone transitioning from rolling tobacco or from heavier commercial blends, this is a welcome change. The smoke itself feels almost airy, yet the nicotine content is still present enough to satisfy a regular habit.

The Esse Range: Lights, Menthol, and Beyond

The Esse line includes several variants, each tailored to a different palate. The most common in Australia is Esse Lights, which deliver a very low tar and nicotine profile. These are the go-to for smokers who want the ritual without the weight. Then there is Esse Menthol, which used to be widely available before the menthol ban came into effect across the country. Since the ban on flavoured cigarettes, including menthol, Esse Menthol has become harder to find through legitimate channels. Some online retailers still stock old stock or export versions, but you need to check the legality in your state.

Another popular variant is Esse Blue, which sits between the Lights and the full-flavour options. It offers a slightly more pronounced tobacco taste while keeping the smooth character that defines the brand. For those who find the Lights too mild, Esse Blue is a solid middle ground. The entire range is sold in cigarette cartons, often at a price point that competes well with domestic premium brands, especially when bought through an online retailer that sources directly from overseas.

How Australian Tobacco Laws Affect Esse Availability

Australia has some of the strictest tobacco regulations in the world. Plain packaging laws mean that every pack looks the same, covered in health warnings and a drab olive colour. The branding is reduced to a small font, and any distinctive design elements are stripped away. For Esse Cigarettes, which rely heavily on their sleek Korean packaging to convey quality, this is a real loss. When you buy them locally, they arrive in the same generic wrapper as every other brand.

The menthol ban, which came into full effect in 2020, has also cut off access to flavoured cigarettes. For Esse Menthol fans, this was a serious blow. You can still find them through some overseas online retailers, but you run into import restrictions and tobacco duty issues. Australian customs limits the amount of tobacco you can bring in for personal use, and any quantity over the duty-free threshold attracts a significant tobacco tax. If you order online, you also need to consider the risk of seizure if the shipment is deemed commercial.

Tobacco licensing is another hurdle. In most states, any retailer selling tobacco must hold a valid license. An online retailer that ships to Australia must comply with these rules, or the buyer could face penalties. I have seen cases where a friend's order was held up because the customs officer flagged the quantity as suspicious. The lesson is simple: know the limits, and buy only from reputable sources that understand Australian law.

Practical Tips for Buying Esse Cigarettes in Australia

If you want to try Esse Cigarettes, your best bet is to find an online retailer that specialises in Korean cigarettes. Look for a site that clearly states its shipping policy to Australia, including how it handles tobacco duty and plain packaging requirements. Some retailers will repack the cartons to avoid customs issues, but this is a grey area. I recommend reading the fine print and contacting customer support before you place an order.

1. Check the nicotine content and tar levels. Esse Lights are around 0.5mg nicotine and 5mg tar, which is very low. Make sure that matches your tolerance.
2. Compare prices across multiple online retailers. Cartons can vary by $20 or more, even for the same product.
3. Factor in shipping costs and potential duty. A cheap carton can become expensive if customs adds a tobacco tax on top.
4. Consider ordering a single carton first to test the product before committing to a larger purchase.
5. Be aware that plain packaging will cover the original design. If the look matters to you, this can be disappointing.

How Esse Compares to Other Cigarette Brands

Compared to mainstream Australian cigarette brands like Winfield, Peter Jackson, or Benson & Hedges, Esse Cigarettes are noticeably lighter. They are closer in style to Japanese or European slims than to the full-flavour blends that dominate our market. For someone who currently smokes rolling tobacco, the transition might feel abrupt because the draw is so much easier. But for a pack-a-day smoker looking to cut down on harshness without quitting entirely, Esse offers a viable alternative.

The cigarette filters on Esse are also worth mentioning. They are longer and more porous than standard filters, which contributes to the smoothness. Some smokers find this makes the cigarette burn faster, but I have not found that to be a significant issue. The trade-off is that you get less tobacco per cigarette, but the experience is more pleasant, especially on a long drive or during a conversation.

Final Thoughts on Esse Cigarettes

Korean cigarettes have earned a loyal following in Australia, and Esse is at the forefront of that trend. The combination of low nicotine content, refined taste, and a brand identity that feels modern and clean sets them apart. They are not for everyone. If you prefer a strong, earthy smoke, you will likely find Esse too thin. But if you enjoy a cigarette that is easy to smoke, easy on the throat, and still delivers a satisfying hit, they are worth seeking out.

Just remember that the legal landscape here is complex. Plain packaging, import restrictions, tobacco duty, and the menthol ban all shape what you can buy and how you can buy it. An informed smoker is a smart buyer. Do your research, stick to a reputable online retailer, and you will likely find that Esse Cigarettes live up to their reputation. Whether you choose Esse Lights, Esse Blue, or something else in the range, the quality is consistent and the experience is genuinely different from what most Australian tobacco companies offer.

In the end, the best cigarette is the one that suits your taste and your lifestyle. For me, that has often been an Esse. It might be for you too.