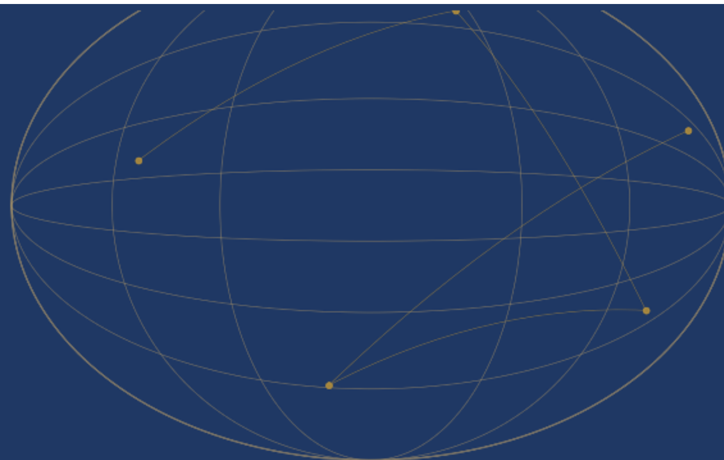


THE COMPLETE GUIDE | 2026-2027

U.S. Mortgages & Real Estate Investing for American Expats

How American expats living abroad can buy, finance, refinance,

and build wealth through U.S. real estate

By Robert Chadwick

CEO, America Mortgages, Inc. • Co-Founder, Global Mortgage Group

The Complete Guide to U.S. Mortgages for American Expats (2026)

An in-depth guide to buying, refinancing, and building wealth through U.S. real estate as an American living abroad, by Robert Chadwick, CEO of America Mortgages, Inc.

guides/complete-guide-us-mortgages-american-expats

About the Author

Robert Chadwick is the CEO of America Mortgages and founder of Global Mortgage Group (GMG), a cross-border mortgage and private credit platform operating across more than 23 jurisdictions. Over the course of his career he has focused specifically on the financing gap facing U.S. expats and foreign nationals seeking to buy, refinance, or build a portfolio of U.S. real estate — the exact borrower profile this guide is written for.

Under his leadership, America Mortgages and GMG have built their underwriting model specifically around foreign income documentation, expat credit histories, and cross-border tax treatment — the areas where generalist lenders most often struggle, and where this guide spends most of its time.

> *“The biggest mistake I see expats make isn't a credit problem or an income problem. It's assuming that the first lender who says no represents the entire U.S. mortgage market. It almost never does.”*
>
> **— Robert Chadwick**

The U.S. Expat Mortgage Problem

If you're an American living overseas and you've tried to get a U.S. mortgage, you've probably run into some version of this:

> **“We can't use your foreign income.”**
>
> “Your employer needs to complete this verification form.”
>
> “We need a U.S. W-2.”
>
> “You need a U.S. address.”
>
> “Your credit history is too thin.”
>
> “We can't approve you because you live overseas.”
>
> “You don't fit our guidelines.”

Here's the part that rarely gets said out loud: none of that necessarily means you don't qualify for a mortgage. You're still an American. You still file U.S. taxes. You may earn an excellent income, hold substantial assets, and have a strong credit history — just not one that a standard domestic underwriting system was built to recognize.

Most of the time, the real issue isn't the borrower. It's that the lender's system was built around a domestic financial profile, and an expat's file doesn't fit inside that box. That distinction — between “you don't qualify” and “this particular lender can't process a file like yours” — is the foundation of this guide.

This guide walks through how U.S. mortgage underwriting actually treats foreign income, foreign tax filings, and overseas credit; the loan programs available to expats and Green Card holders; how to think about DTI, DSCR, cash-out refinancing, and building a portfolio from abroad; and how bridge financing, credit maintenance, and repatriation planning fit into the picture. Illustrative case studies throughout show how these ideas play out in practice — they are composite, hypothetical examples used for educational purposes, not descriptions of actual clients or transactions. Figures and guidelines cited throughout reflect general industry and agency standards current as of publication and are illustrative rather than a quote for any individual transaction.

Contents

1. Why Do Banks and Generalist Lenders Struggle With Expat Files?

Most large U.S. banks and retail lenders are built around standardized lending — a strength when a borrower's financial profile fits neatly inside the box, and a source of friction the moment it doesn't.

A typical domestic borrower's file looks like this: a U.S. employer, a U.S. W-2, U.S. payslips, U.S. bank accounts, a U.S. address, an active U.S. credit history, and standard U.S. tax returns. An expat's file often looks different — not weaker, just different:

Typical Domestic Borrower	Typical U.S. Expat Borrower
U.S. employer, U.S. W-2	Foreign employer, foreign payslip
U.S. bank accounts	Foreign bank accounts, foreign currency
U.S. residential address	Foreign residential address
Continuously active U.S. credit	U.S. credit history, possibly dormant
Standard U.S. tax return	U.S. tax return with foreign income, possibly FEIE

The borrower on the right may well be financially stronger than the borrower on the left — higher income, larger reserves, a longer track record. But the documentation is unfamiliar, and unfamiliar documentation is exactly where inexperienced underwriting says no by default.

An important distinction

A mortgage can be eligible in principle under agency guidelines but difficult for a particular lender to execute in practice. A bank may have its own internal overlays — stricter than the underlying agency rule — covering foreign income, foreign addresses, specific countries, or specific employment structures. So when a lender says “we don't do expat loans,” that usually means “you don't fit our particular lending box,” not “no lender can finance you.”

> ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLE
>
> **David Whitfield — Munich, Germany**
>
> David, an American software engineer, had lived and worked in Munich for six years and wanted to buy a rental property in Austin. His hometown bank declined within a week, citing his foreign address and lack of a U.S. W-2.
>
> The income itself wasn't the problem — David earned a strong, stable salary from a well-known German employer. The bank's system simply wasn't built to process a foreign address or a foreign payslip. A lender built around this exact borrower profile was able to document the same income through his employer letter, payslips, and tax returns, and the loan closed within the program's normal timeline.

2. Fannie Mae Guidelines and the Reality of Expat Financing

One of the most persistent misconceptions about expat mortgages is that there's a single, separate set of “Fannie Mae expat rules.” There isn't. Fannie Mae sets eligibility and underwriting standards for loans that lenders may sell into the agency system, covering borrower eligibility, income, employment, credit, assets, property, occupancy, debt, rental income, refinancing, and multiple financed properties. It's then up to the individual lender to determine whether a specific borrower and transaction satisfy those requirements — and that's exactly where outcomes diverge so sharply between lenders.

Foreign income is not automatically prohibited

Fannie Mae's guidelines define foreign income as income earned by a borrower employed by a foreign corporation or foreign government and paid in a foreign currency. For a borrower using foreign income to qualify, the guidelines require signed federal tax returns for the most recent two years reflecting the foreign employment income, with foreign-language documents translated and income converted to U.S. dollars.

That is very different from “Fannie Mae doesn't allow expats.” It does. The real question is whether the borrower's income, documentation, and the specific property satisfy the applicable requirements — and whether the lender in front of you actually knows how to evaluate that, rather than declining on reflex.

3. Why Foreign-Earned Income Creates Documentation Challenges

Picture an American living in Singapore, earning SGD 400,000 a year from a Singaporean company, paid into a Singaporean bank account, filing U.S. tax returns every year. Her employer doesn't issue a U.S. W-2 — there's no reason it would.

A conventional lender built around W-2 verification may hit a wall immediately. That doesn't mean the income isn't real or stable — it means the lender needs a different way to establish where the income comes from, how long it's been earned, whether it's likely to continue, how it's reported on the U.S. return, how the currency converts to U.S. dollars, and whether the employer can be independently verified.

What happens when the foreign employer won't respond?

This is one of the most common points of friction. A multinational employer may simply not complete a U.S. lender's verification form, HR may decline because the request doesn't fit their internal process, or the company may have no U.S. payroll department at all to route the request through. A conventional lender often treats that as a dead end. A lender built around this exact borrower profile has alternative documentation paths — employer letters, payslips, tax returns, bank statements — precisely because foreign employment doesn't look like U.S. employment, and was never going to.

ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLE

Maria Alvarez — Dubai, U.A.E.

Maria, a marketing director for a Dubai-based multinational, wanted to refinance a Florida condo. Her employer's HR department declined to complete her lender's verification form — it simply wasn't part of their process for a foreign subsidiary.

Rather than treating that as a dead end, her lender substituted an employer letter, six months of payslips, and matching bank deposits as equivalent evidence of the same income. The refinance closed without the form her original bank had insisted was mandatory.

4. U.S. Taxes, the Foreign Earned Income Exclusion, and Your Mortgage

As a U.S. citizen or Green Card holder, you're generally taxed on worldwide income regardless of where you live, and you're required to keep filing U.S. tax returns while abroad. Many expats use the Foreign Earned Income Exclusion (FEIE) to exclude a substantial amount of foreign-earned income from U.S. taxation — a legitimate, IRS-sanctioned benefit, not a loophole, and for 2026 the exclusion runs up to $132,900 per qualifying person, subject to eligibility requirements.

The critical point for mortgage borrowers:

Using the FEIE does not mean you stopped earning money — and it doesn't mean a mortgage lender will automatically see your income the way you do.

Here's where the two systems collide. The FEIE can reduce a tax return's taxable income line to close to zero, even for someone earning a healthy six-figure salary. A lender unfamiliar with expat taxation may see that near-$0 figure and conclude the borrower has insufficient qualifying income — full stop. A lender experienced with expat returns understands the chain that actually matters: gross foreign earnings, U.S. tax reporting, exclusions and credits, adjusted income, and finally qualifying income — and knows how to add the excluded income back in, correctly, for underwriting purposes.

The practical takeaway: keep filing every year, even in a year the FEIE reduces what you owe to nothing. A tax return isn't just a compliance document at mortgage time — it's one of the core pieces of evidence a lender uses to verify your income, and it should be read by someone who understands what it's actually saying, not simply handed to a processor.

ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLE

James Coleman — Tokyo, Japan

> James, an international school teacher in Tokyo, applied for a mortgage with a tax return showing almost no taxable income after claiming the FEIE on his full salary. A generalist loan officer read the $0 figure literally and declined the file for insufficient income.
>
> A lender familiar with expat tax returns traced the return back to Form 2555, identified the excluded foreign salary, and added it back in as qualifying income — the same salary, the same return, a different reading of it. The loan was approved on a second application with a specialist lender.

5. Maintaining Your U.S. Credit Footprint While Abroad

Live abroad for ten, fifteen, twenty years, and it's remarkably easy to lose your U.S. financial footprint without ever deciding to. Credit cards get closed for inactivity. U.S. bank accounts go unused. There's no U.S. mortgage to report payment history on. Your life overseas may be financially excellent — and your U.S. credit file can still go quiet, sometimes in as little as 12–24 months of no domestic activity.

That matters more than it seems day-to-day, because it resurfaces exactly when you least want a complication: the moment you want to buy, refinance, or move back.

A simple, low-cost safeguard

- Keep one or two U.S. credit cards open and active, even from overseas.
- Run a small recurring charge through them — a subscription, a phone bill — paid automatically.
- Maintain at least one U.S. bank relationship.
- Check your U.S. credit reports periodically.
- Keep records of your U.S. financial history — old statements, closed-account details — in case you need to explain a gap later.

None of this requires borrowing money you don't need. It simply means not letting a valuable financial asset lapse by accident, purely because you happen to live somewhere else.

> ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLE
>
> **Susan Whitmore — Sydney, Australia**
>
> After nine years in Sydney, Susan let her last two U.S. credit cards lapse from disuse — no missed payments, just no activity. When she applied to refinance her Denver rental, her credit file was too thin to score at all.
>
> She wasn't declined for poor credit; there was simply no current file to evaluate. Reactivating one card with a small recurring charge and waiting a few reporting cycles would have avoided the delay entirely — a lesson she now applies going forward.

6. Lost Your U.S. Footprint? The Path Back

This is more common than most expats realize. Fifteen years abroad, no active U.S. credit, no U.S. bank account in regular use, no U.S. mortgage in years. Still a U.S. citizen — but financially, on paper, looking more like an international borrower than a domestic one.

That doesn't mean financing is unavailable. It means the first loan is often structured differently from the loan you'd get with an active U.S. footprint — and, importantly, it doesn't have to be the last loan on those terms.

The two-stage strategy

For a borrower in this position, an international or foreign-national-style mortgage can serve as a bridge back into the U.S. mortgage system. The trade-off is typically a modestly higher rate, somewhat lower maximum leverage — often around 75% LTV on a purchase and 70% LTV on a cash-out refinance rather than the higher leverage available with an active U.S. credit file — and alternative credit documentation in place of a standard U.S. credit score.

> **International mortgage → make on-time payments → re-establish U.S. credit → refinance into standard expat terms → improved rate and higher leverage.**

In other words: the first loan doesn't have to be the final loan. Financing the property at all is often the fastest practical way to rebuild the credit file that unlocks better terms down the road.

> ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLE
>
> **Michael Tran — Hong Kong**
>
> Michael left the U.S. at 24 and spent 22 years building a career in Hong Kong. By the time he wanted to buy a retirement property in San Diego, he had no active U.S. credit file at all — on paper, he looked like a foreign national despite his U.S. passport.
>
> He financed the purchase under foreign-national terms at 75% LTV. Eighteen months of on-time payments later, his U.S. credit file was active again, and he refinanced into standard expat terms at higher leverage and a better rate.

7. Green Card Holders Living Overseas

A Green Card holder living abroad isn't automatically treated identically to a U.S. citizen on every single program, but that doesn't mean financing is out of reach. Fannie Mae's eligibility guidance permits financing to lawful permanent residents and certain qualifying non-permanent residents under terms comparable to those available to U.S. citizens, subject to the applicable requirements.

For a Green Card holder abroad, the underwriting conversation generally comes down to the same handful of questions that apply to any expat borrower: immigration status, U.S. tax filing history, income source and documentation, country of residence, credit, assets, and the specific property and program. Citizenship status by itself isn't the determining factor — documented, verifiable tax and income compliance is.

> ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLE
>
> **Elena Petrova — London, U.K.**
>
> Elena, a Canadian-born U.S. Green Card holder working in London, assumed she'd need U.S. citizenship to get competitive financing on a Chicago investment property. She didn't.
>
> Because she had filed U.S. tax returns consistently and could document her U.K. employment income, she qualified under the same expat program terms available to a U.S.-citizen borrower in her situation — her Green Card status was a documentation item, not an obstacle.

8. Mortgage Options at a Glance

There's no single “expat mortgage.” Depending on your income documentation, credit profile, and what you're trying to accomplish, several structures may fit — and the right starting question isn't “which loan do I want,” it's “what am I actually trying to accomplish.”

Option	Best Suited For
Conventional / Agency Mortgage	Borrowers with strong, well-documented U.S. income, active U.S. credit, and a conventional property and occupancy.
Expat / Foreign-Income Mortgage	Americans abroad with foreign employment or foreign self-employment income, foreign residency, and international assets.
DSCR Investment Mortgage	Investment purchases qualified primarily on the property's rental income rather than personal employment income.
Asset-Based / Alternative-Documentation Mortgage	Borrowers with significant assets but complex or hard-to-document income.
Portfolio Mortgage	Larger or more complex borrowers where a more customized underwriting approach is appropriate.
Cash-Out Refinance	Expats who already own U.S. property and want to release equity.
Bridge Financing	Time-sensitive acquisitions, renovations, or situations where conventional timelines don't work — covered in Section 16.

9. Debt-to-Income Ratio, Explained by Property Type

Debt-to-income ratio (DTI) compares monthly qualifying debt to gross qualifying monthly income. The formula is simple; what trips expats up is that whether — and how — it's applied depends entirely on the property's intended use.

Investment property: DSCR loans generally don't use personal DTI at all

For an investment property financed under a DSCR program, personal income, employment, and personal DTI typically aren't part of the underwriting decision — the property's own rental economics carry the qualification. This is covered in full in the next section.

Second home or vacation home: your current housing cost plus the new payment

For a property intended for personal use rather than rental income, personal DTI does apply. The calculation generally adds your existing housing expense in the country where you live (converted to U.S. dollars) to the new property's full monthly payment — principal, interest, taxes, insurance, and HOA dues where applicable — then divides that total by gross monthly income.

Primary residence: standard DTI applies

Buying a home to move back into works the same way it would for any domestic borrower once income is properly documented: full monthly debt obligations, including the new mortgage payment, divided by gross monthly income.

A commonly used planning benchmark is a combined DTI at or below approximately 43% of gross income.

That figure is a useful guide, not a universal rule — actual allowable DTI varies by program and underwriting method. Agency guidelines, for instance, permit different thresholds in different circumstances (Fannie Mae's manual-underwriting path, for example, applies its own specific thresholds separate from automated-underwriting findings). Don't treat an online DTI calculator as a mortgage qualification.

ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLE

Christopher Lee — Singapore

Christopher, a finance executive in Singapore, wanted a vacation condo in Naples, Florida, to use during visits — not to rent out. Because it was a second home rather than an investment property, DSCR wasn't the right fit; personal DTI applied instead.

His lender added his Singapore housing cost to the new Naples payment and divided by his gross income, landing at 38% — comfortably under the 43% planning benchmark, and the purchase proceeded on standard second-home terms.

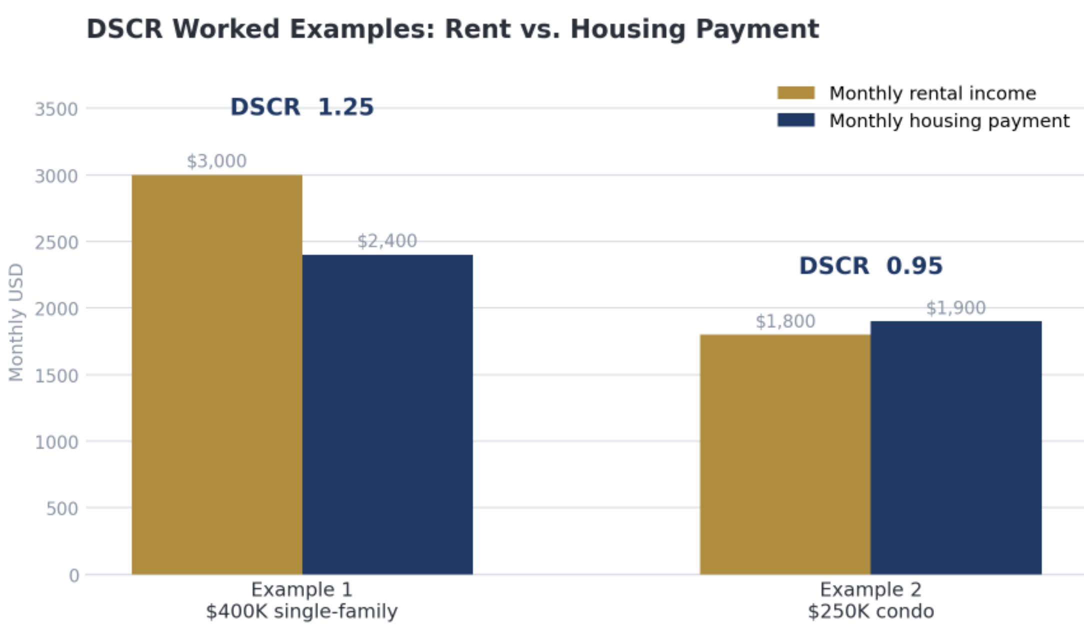
10. DSCR Investment Loans: How Qualification Works

DSCR stands for Debt Service Coverage Ratio. Instead of asking “how much salary does the borrower earn,” a DSCR loan asks a different question: “does the property generate enough rental income to cover its own debt service?” For an expat earning income overseas in a currency and structure that's hard for a conventional underwriter to translate, that reframing can be the difference between a lengthy documentation fight and a straightforward approval.

The calculation itself is simple:

> **DSCR = Monthly Qualifying Rental Income ÷ Monthly Debt Service (principal, interest, taxes, insurance, and HOA dues where applicable)**

A ratio above 1.00 generally means the property's rental income more than covers its debt service. Many programs look for 1.00 or higher, with the strongest pricing typically available above roughly 1.20–1.25; some specialized programs will still consider properties at or below 1.00, sometimes down to around 0.75, with adjusted pricing, additional reserves, or reduced leverage to offset the shortfall, depending on the program and borrower profile.



Two worked examples: a comfortably qualifying deal and a tighter one that can often still work.

Example 1: A straightforward qualifying deal

A single-family rental purchased for $400,000 rents for $3,000/month. The monthly payment — principal, interest, taxes, insurance — comes to $2,400. DSCR = $3,000 ÷ $2,400 = 1.25. This clears most lenders' minimum threshold comfortably and would typically support strong pricing at higher leverage, without a single personal tax return or pay stub entering the decision.

Example 2: A tighter deal that can still work

A condo purchased for $250,000 rents for $1,800/month against a $1,900 monthly payment. DSCR = $1,800 ÷ $1,900 = 0.95 — below 1.00, meaning the rent doesn't fully cover the payment on paper. Many generalist lenders would decline this outright. A specialist DSCR program can often still structure it, typically through a modest rate adjustment, additional reserves, or slightly reduced leverage, rather than a flat no.

For an expat specifically, the appeal is straightforward: no foreign payslips to translate, no FEIE tax return to explain, and no personal DTI calculation standing between the borrower and the property.

11. Buying a Home, Vacation Home, or Investment Property Overseas

A U.S. expat's reasons for buying vary widely: a future primary residence, a second or vacation home, a straightforward rental, a short-term rental, a small multifamily property, a home for a child at university, or the first property in a growing portfolio. The right mortgage structure depends heavily on which of these applies — and occupancy has to match reality.

> **A property's intended use should never be represented differently than it actually is simply to obtain more favorable financing.**
>
> The mortgage structure has to match the actual, intended occupancy.

For an investment purchase specifically, this is often where conventional underwriting turns out not to be the best fit at all — DSCR, described above, frequently ends up being the simpler and faster path, precisely because it sidesteps the personal-income documentation problem entirely.

> ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLE
>
> ### Rachel Kim — Seoul, South Korea
>
> Rachel, based in Seoul, wanted a short-term rental property in Scottsdale, Arizona — clearly an investment, not a home she'd occupy. Representing it as a second home might have looked like an easier path to approval, but it would have misstated the property's actual use.
>
> Qualifying it correctly as an investment property under DSCR, based on projected short-term rental income, turned out to be simpler anyway — no personal income documentation needed, and no risk of an occupancy misrepresentation surfacing later in underwriting or after closing.

12. Already Own U.S. Real Estate? Cash-Out Refinancing and Equity Recycling

For expats who already own one or more U.S. properties, the property itself is often the most powerful source of capital for the next move — whether that's lowering a rate, releasing equity, or funding the next acquisition entirely.

Worked example: releasing equity

Item	Amount
Current property value	$1,500,000
Existing mortgage balance	$400,000
Current equity	$1,100,000
New loan at 80% LTV (illustrative)	$1,200,000
Less existing mortgage payoff	−$400,000
Potential gross cash-out	$800,000

That released capital can potentially fund a down payment on the next property, a renovation, portfolio diversification, or other permitted uses — actual maximum proceeds depend on the program, property type, occupancy, credit, reserves, valuation, and other underwriting requirements.

Equity recycling: turning one property into two

Some investors use this same mechanism deliberately, as a repeatable strategy rather than a one-off event: acquire a property, let it season and appreciate, refinance to release a portion of the equity, and use that capital as the down payment on the next acquisition. Repeat the cycle, and a single starting investment can become the seed for a self-funding portfolio — with the obvious caveat that more leverage also means more debt, more interest expense, and more exposure to vacancy and market movement, so it's a strategy that rewards planning rather than moving property by property with no broader structure in mind.

Refinancing isn't only about cash-out

A straightforward rate-and-term refinance, without pulling cash out, can also make sense purely because rates have moved, credit has improved, U.S. credit has been re-established after time abroad, or the property has appreciated enough to change the economics — refinancing can be part of a long-term financing strategy rather than only a one-time rate-shopping exercise.

> ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLE
>
> **Daniel Osei — Accra, Ghana**
>
> Daniel owned a fully-tenanted Texas rental purchased six years earlier. Rather than saving from scratch for his next property, he refinanced the Texas property, releasing a portion of its accumulated equity.

> That released capital became the down payment on a duplex in Ohio, purchased under a DSCR loan qualified on the new property's own rental income. Two properties, funded from what started as one — with the obvious trade-off of now carrying debt service on both.

13. Building a Portfolio: Is There a Limit?

A common misconception is that an expat can only carry one financed U.S. property at a time. That isn't accurate.

Under conventional agency financing, Fannie Mae's current policy on multiple financed properties permits up to 10 financed one-to-four-unit residential properties for second-home and investment-property transactions under automated underwriting, subject to applicable requirements — including a mortgaged primary residence in that count. Cross that threshold, and conventional financing is off the table regardless of how strong an individual deal looks.

DSCR and portfolio lending programs, which qualify each property on its own rental economics rather than counting against the borrower's total financed-property count, generally aren't subject to that same numeric ceiling — which is exactly why investors planning to scale past four or five properties tend to end up structuring their financing around DSCR and portfolio programs rather than conventional agency loans from the outset.

> ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLE
>
> ### Priya Nair — Bangalore, India
>
> Priya, an American expat working in Bangalore, bought her first U.S. rental five years ago. Rather than buying one property at a time with no broader plan, she used each property's seasoning and appreciation to refinance and fund the next purchase under DSCR financing.
>
> She now holds five financed rental properties — a scale that would have run into conventional agency limits far sooner, but which DSCR's per-property underwriting accommodated without issue.

14. Moving Back to the U.S.: Why Timing Matters

If repatriation is somewhere in the picture — six months out, eighteen months out, still just an idea — the most common and most avoidable mistake is waiting until after the move to start the mortgage conversation.

A mortgage profile changes during a transition like this: foreign employment may end, U.S. employment may begin, foreign income may disappear from the picture entirely, housing costs shift, and U.S. credit may need active re-establishing. Getting pre-approved before the move — generally three to six months ahead, earlier if the financial picture is complicated — lets a specialist lender map out what documentation will bridge the gap and how much runway existing credit gives you, rather than assembling all of it under time pressure after landing and losing properties to buyers who can move faster.

ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLE

Alan Whitfield — Abu Dhabi to Denver

Alan knew his assignment in Abu Dhabi would end in roughly a year, with a return to Denver already planned. Rather than waiting until he landed, he got pre-approved four months before the move, while his U.A.E. income and employment history were still current and easy to document.

By the time he arrived in Denver, his financing was already in place. He closed on a home within three weeks of landing — well ahead of buyers who started their financing conversation only after relocating.

15. The U.S. Expat Property-Buying Process, Step by Step

- Get pre-approved first. Confirm program, budget, and documentation needs before you start seriously looking — this alone prevents the most common wasted effort in the entire process.
- Define the property's purpose. Primary residence, second home, or investment property — this decision drives which mortgage program and DTI treatment apply.
- Find the right property. Beyond location and price, weigh financing eligibility (does the property type qualify for the program you're using?), rental demand if it's an investment, and who will manage it if you're not physically present.
- Work with an agent experienced with overseas buyers. Video walkthroughs, virtual inspections, and a workflow built around remote buyers should already be routine for the right agent.
- Make an offer with financing already lined up. A pre-approval in hand gives a remote buyer the same credibility at the negotiating table as a local one.
- Move through underwriting and documentation. Income, assets, credit, property, insurance, title, and source of funds all get verified — this is where a specialist lender's familiarity with expat files saves real time.
- Close remotely. Many expats complete the entire transaction without returning to the U.S., using Remote Online Notarization or a mobile notary, subject to state, title-company, and lender requirements — confirm this early with your title/escrow company, not the week of closing.

One logistical detail worth flagging early: if your funds are sitting in a foreign currency, talk to your lender about FX timing and transfer lead time well before your closing date. Exchange rate movement in the days before closing can meaningfully change how much you actually have available.

ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLE

Nadia Hassan — Doha to Orlando

Nadia, based in Doha, found an Orlando investment property through an agent experienced with overseas buyers who'd already built a routine of video walkthroughs and virtual inspections for remote clients like her.

With pre-approval already in hand, she made a competitive offer, moved through underwriting with documentation her lender already knew how to evaluate, and closed using Remote Online Notarization — without a single trip back to the U.S.

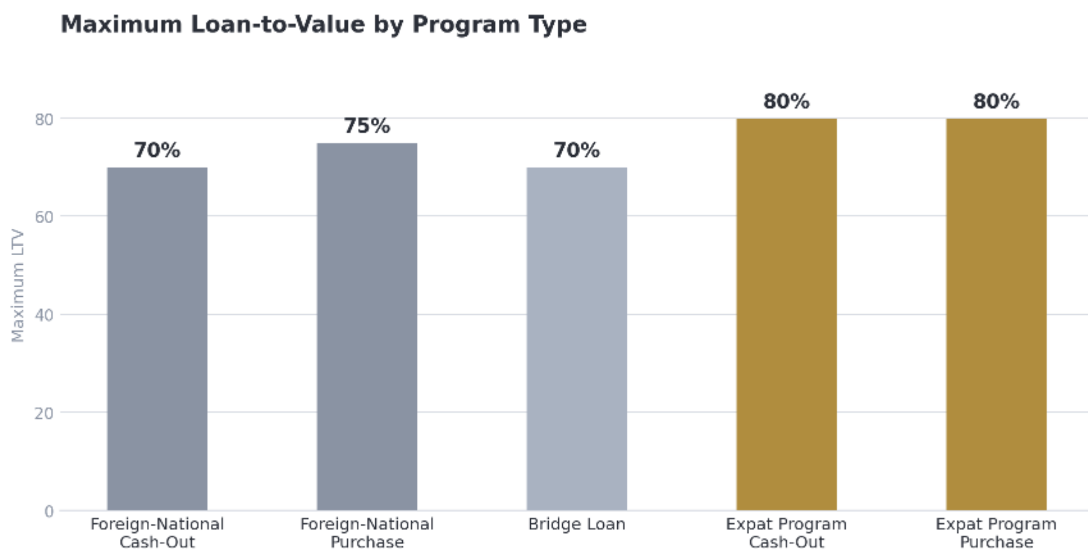
16. Real Estate Bridge Loans

A bridge loan is short-term, asset-based financing designed to solve a timing problem rather than to compete with a 30-year mortgage on price. For expat investors, it tends to come up in a handful of recurring situations:

- Buying before selling — the right property surfaces before another property has closed.
- A competitive, fast-close acquisition — a seller wants to close in ten days, well inside a conventional underwriting timeline.
- Renovation or repositioning — the property needs substantial work before it can qualify for conventional or DSCR financing.
- A property or borrower that doesn't fit conventional underwriting at all.
- Bridging a 1031 exchange timeline, where funds need to move before permanent financing can be arranged.
- Recapitalizing part of an existing portfolio quickly to fund the next acquisition.

Worked example: speed over rate

A $5,000,000 property is under contract at $4,500,000. The seller wants to close in ten days — well outside a conventional mortgage timeline. The buyer has substantial assets but doesn't want to liquidate investments to cover the full purchase in cash. A bridge loan at 70% LTV could provide roughly $3,150,000 toward the purchase, with the buyer contributing the remaining equity. The bridge closes fast, the property is secured, and the investor pursues permanent financing afterward on a normal timeline — rather than losing the deal entirely while a 30–45-day conventional process plays out.



Illustrative maximum LTV by program type. Actual terms vary by borrower, property, and lender.

Typical bridge loan parameters

Parameter	Typical Range
Minimum loan amount	$1,000,000+
Maximum LTV	Up to 70%
Rate	Approximately 10–12%
Origination fees	Approximately 1–2 points
Closing timeline	As fast as 10 days
Term	Typically 1–2 years

Bridge lending is as much a capital question as an underwriting one — the lender needs committed capital ready to deploy, not just a willingness to originate. Direct access to capital, rather than relying entirely on shopping a loan to a third-party warehouse lender, tends to be what separates a fast, confident bridge quote from one that stalls in committee. These terms are illustrative and vary by property, borrower, and market conditions.

ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLE

Jonathan Harris — Toronto-based fund manager

Jonathan identified an off-market multifamily property in Georgia at a strong basis, but the seller wanted to close in twelve days — well outside any conventional or DSCR underwriting timeline.

> A bridge loan closed in ten days against the property's as-is value, securing the deal. Six months later, once the property was stabilized with tenants in place, Jonathan refinanced the bridge loan into permanent DSCR financing at a materially lower rate.

17. Common Reasons Expat Mortgages Get Declined

- Foreign income doesn't fit the lender's documentation format — not because the income is bad, but because the lender can't or won't document it as presented.
- The foreign employer won't complete a verification form, common with multinational corporations with no U.S. payroll process.
- No U.S. W-2, when the lender is heavily dependent on W-2 documentation.
- Thin or dormant U.S. credit after years of limited domestic financial activity.
- A foreign mailing address that the lender's origination system isn't built to process.
- A tax return complicated by the Foreign Earned Income Exclusion or foreign tax credits, misread as insufficient income.
- Already owning several U.S. properties, running into an agency multiple-property rule the lender doesn't know how to work around.
- An investment property forced into conventional underwriting when DSCR or portfolio financing would have been the better fit.
- A property type — non-warrantable condo, short-term rental, small multifamily — the lender simply doesn't handle.
- The lender, in the end, simply doesn't specialize in expat files — sometimes that's the entire explanation.

Nearly every item on this list is a documentation and program-fit problem, not a creditworthiness problem, and nearly every one is solvable with the right lender and the right loan structure.

18. Why Specialization Matters

Imagine a doctor who sees a thousand patients a year, one of whom has an unusual condition. The doctor may be entirely competent — and may still refer that one patient to a specialist who treats that exact condition every day, because volume alone doesn't build depth in a narrow, specific area.

Mortgage lending works the same way. A general mortgage broker might close a thousand loans a year and see perhaps five U.S. expat files in that same period — not enough volume to build real fluency in foreign income documentation, FEIE tax returns, or dormant U.S. credit files. A lender built specifically around this borrower profile treats the unusual case as the normal case: foreign employment, foreign currencies, overseas residency, expat credit, foreign employer verification, DSCR, cash-out, portfolio lending, and remote closings aren't edge cases to be worked around — they're the core of the underwriting model. The value isn't just finding a mortgage. It's knowing which mortgage to look for in the first place.

> ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLE
>
> **Denise Okafor — declined three times before finding the right fit**
>
> Denise, a consultant based in Lagos with U.S. citizenship, was declined by three different banks over four months — each for a different stated reason: foreign address, no W-2, thin credit file.
>
> None of the three declines were really about her qualifications. Her fourth application, to a lender built specifically around this borrower profile, closed in under three weeks using the same income, the same credit history, and the same property — just read by underwriters who'd seen this exact file shape before.

19. The Expat Mortgage Documentation Checklist

Exact requirements vary by program, but an expat borrower should generally be prepared to gather some combination of the following:

Category	Typical Documents
Identification	U.S. passport; Green Card or visa/residency documentation where applicable
Income	Employment contract or letter, payslips, foreign salary documentation, bonus or business income documentation
U.S. tax	Form 1040, Form 2555 where applicable, schedules, IRS transcripts where required
Assets	U.S. and foreign bank statements, brokerage statements, retirement and investment accounts
Credit	U.S. credit report; foreign credit documentation and an explanation of any inactive U.S. credit, where applicable
Existing real estate	Mortgage statements, property tax statements, leases, rental statements, insurance, HOA information

> **Don't assume a missing document automatically disqualifies you.**
>
> Ask a specialist what alternative documentation is acceptable under the specific program — there is very often more than one way to establish the same fact.

20. The U.S. Expat Mortgage Decision Tree

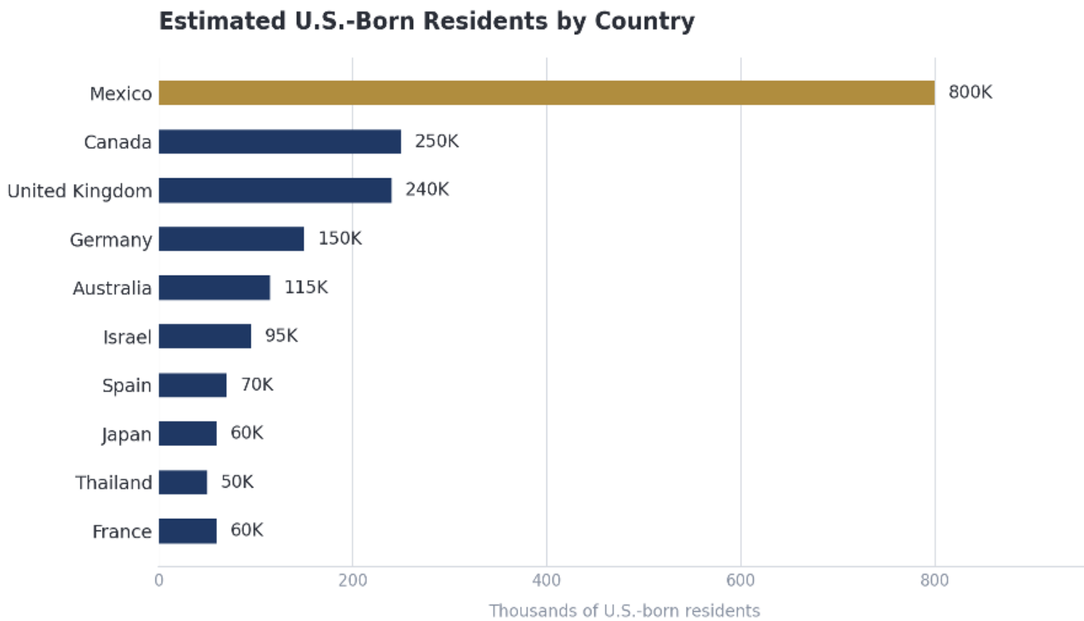
A useful way to think through which financing path fits your situation:

- Do you have active, recently-used U.S. credit? → Standard expat or conventional financing is likely available. If not, an international/foreign-national-style program is the more realistic starting point.
- Is the property an investment? → DSCR is generally worth evaluating first. If it's for personal use, second-home or primary-residence underwriting applies instead.
- Are you planning to move back to the U.S.? → Start the pre-approval conversation before the move, not after.
- Do you already own U.S. real estate? → Weigh refinance and equity-release options against your next goal, whether that's a lower rate or capital for the next purchase.
- Do you need capital quickly, ahead of a permanent-financing timeline? → Compare cash-out refinance, DSCR refinance, and bridge financing.
- Is the transaction unusually large or complex? → Portfolio, non-QM, or bridge financing are generally the more realistic starting points over a standard agency loan.

The goal of this exercise isn't to land on the highest possible loan-to-value or the lowest headline rate in isolation — it's the best overall combination of leverage, rate, liquidity, and how the loan fits into where you're trying to go next.

22. Where U.S. Expats Live — and Why U.S. Real Estate Still Wins

There's no single, universally authoritative government database tracking exactly where every U.S. expatriate lives, so figures like these are best read as a directional picture of where American communities concentrate, compiled from United Nations migration data, rather than a precise headcount.



Estimated U.S.-born residents by country. Figures vary meaningfully by source and methodology.

Beyond population counts, several countries stand out less for the size of the American community and more for its financial weight — Singapore, the United Arab Emirates, Switzerland, Hong Kong, and the United Kingdom in particular host large concentrations of high-income professionals, entrepreneurs, and executives with substantial investment capacity, even where the raw headcount is smaller than in Mexico or Canada.

The currency question

An expat's wealth is usually denominated in a currency other than the U.S. dollar — Singapore dollars, British pounds, euros, Australian dollars, UAE dirhams. Buying U.S. property means converting part of that wealth into a dollar-denominated asset, and often taking on a dollar-denominated liability alongside it. The relevant question isn't simply today's exchange rate; it's what happens if that rate moves 5%, 10%, or 15% before closing or over the life of the investment. For larger transactions, that's a real enough consideration that professional FX planning belongs alongside the real estate strategy itself, not as an afterthought.

Why U.S. real estate still wins the comparison

Whatever the local currency, property market, or investment opportunity looks like from wherever you happen to live, most expats are holding the bulk of their long-term wealth in a currency and legal system that isn't their permanent base. U.S. real estate offers something difficult to replicate elsewhere: a dollar-denominated, English-language, title-insured asset class inside one of the deepest, most transparent, and most liquid property and mortgage markets in the world.

Foreign buyers purchased approximately $45.3 billion of U.S. existing homes between April 2025 and March 2026, according to the National Association of REALTORS® — and for an American expat specifically, the calculation can be even more compelling than it is for a foreign buyer, because the property may also eventually become a future home rather than only an investment.

21. Buying a Home for Your Child's College Years

Of everything in this guide, this is the section most parents haven't thought through carefully — and it may be the single highest-leverage decision covered here. If your child is heading to a U.S. college or university, you are already about to spend four years' worth of housing costs somewhere. The only real question is whether that money disappears entirely, or whether some of it comes back to you.

Every expat family sending a child to a U.S. school faces the same default choice: pay a dorm fee, or pay rent to a landlord, for four straight years. Both are pure expense. Neither builds anything. There's a third option that a surprising number of families never seriously consider — buying the property your child will live in.

The core idea: your child's rent becomes your mortgage payment

Most college and university towns have one thing in common: a steady, built-in pool of student tenants who need housing every single year. That's what makes this work. Instead of buying a small studio for your child alone, buying a three- or four-bedroom house or condo near campus means your child occupies one bedroom — and the other bedrooms can be rented to fellow students, covering some or most of the mortgage.

The basic math:

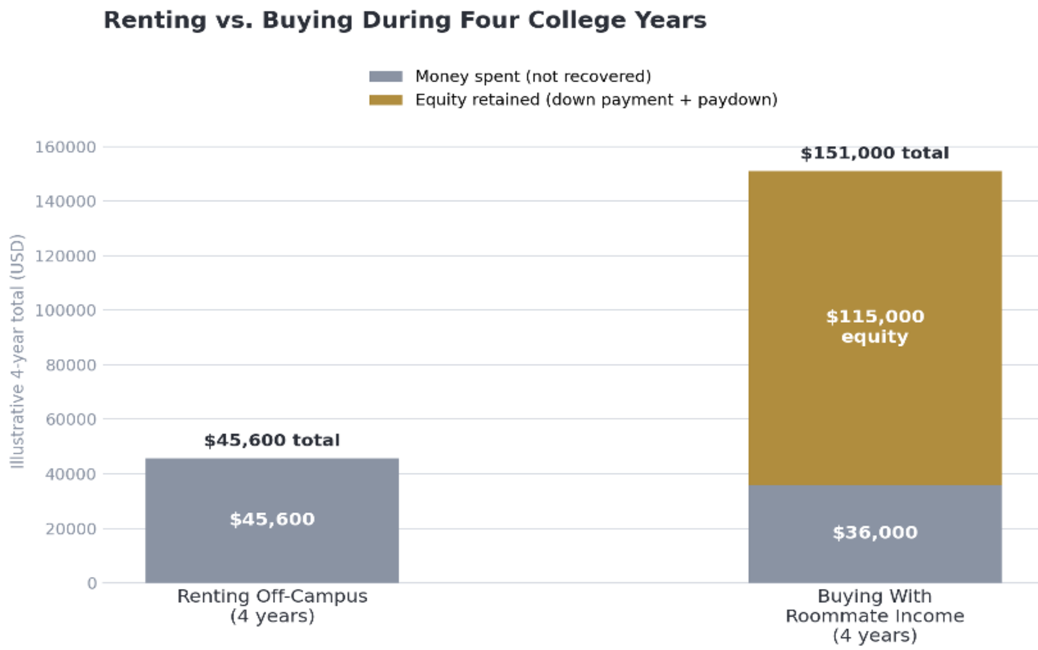
A property with 3–4 bedrooms, purchased near a university, can generate enough roommate rental income to offset a large share of the monthly mortgage payment — while your child lives there rent-free or at reduced cost, and you build equity in a property you own rather than paying a landlord who builds equity in one they own.

A worked example

Consider a $450,000, four-bedroom house purchased near a large public university. With 20% down ($90,000) and a loan of $360,000, the monthly mortgage payment — principal, interest, taxes, and insurance — runs approximately $2,700. Your child occupies one bedroom. The other three are rented to fellow students at a modest $650 each, bringing in $1,950/month in roommate income.

Item	Monthly Amount
Total mortgage payment (PITI)	$2,700
Roommate rental income (3 bedrooms × $650)	−$1,950
Net monthly cost to the parent	$750

A net carrying cost of roughly $750 a month is frequently lower than the cost of a single dorm room or a shared off-campus rental alone — and unlike rent paid to a landlord, that $750 is going toward a mortgage on an asset you own, not disappearing into someone else's investment property.



Illustrative four-year comparison. Actual rent levels, mortgage terms, and property values vary by market.

Why this can be one of the more persuasive decisions in this entire guide

1. The roommates effectively subsidize your child's housing

This is the mechanism that makes the whole strategy work. You're not simply buying your child a place to live — you're buying an income-producing property that happens to include your child's housing as one of its benefits. The other bedrooms doing the heavy lifting on the mortgage is the entire point.

2. Capital appreciation can offset — or fully recoup — a meaningful share of the cost

College towns with constrained housing supply and reliable annual student demand have, in many cases, historically seen steady property appreciation over multi-year holding periods. If a $450,000 property appreciates even modestly over four years and is sold shortly after your child graduates, the proceeds can potentially offset a substantial share of the total holding cost — in a strong-appreciation market, potentially enough to meaningfully dent, or in some cases approach recouping, the equivalent of several years of tuition. This is a real possibility in the right market, not a guarantee in every market: property values can also stay flat or decline, transaction costs on both purchase and sale reduce net proceeds, and appreciation is never assured. The point isn't that this always happens — it's that buying gives you a chance at recovering capital that renting mathematically cannot ever give you.

3. A head start after graduation

The property doesn't have to be sold the day your child graduates. It can become their first home as a young professional if they stay in or near that city, a continuing rental property that generates income after they move on, or the down payment source for their next property if you choose to sell and gift or lend them a share of the proceeds. Very few new graduates start adult life already holding equity in real estate — this is one of the more concrete ways to hand them that head start.

4. Potential tax advantages — with an important nuance

Because part of the property is genuinely used as a rental — the bedrooms occupied by paying, unrelated roommates — a portion of mortgage interest, property taxes, insurance, depreciation, and maintenance costs may be deductible against that rental income, the same way they would be for any other rental property. This can meaningfully improve the after-tax economics of the arrangement.

> **The nuance worth understanding before you count on this:**
>
> The IRS treats a dwelling unit used personally by you or a close relative differently from a straightforward rental property. If your child lives in a bedroom rent-free, that portion of the property is generally treated as personal use rather than rental use, which can limit how much of the property's expenses are deductible against the rental income from the other rooms. The rules here turn on the specific facts — how many days of personal use occur, whether your child pays fair-market rent for their own room, and how the arrangement is structured — and get technical quickly. This is a conversation for a qualified tax professional before you buy, not an assumption to build the whole plan around.

How this typically gets financed

Because the property serves a dual purpose — personal use by your child alongside rental income from roommates — it doesn't always fit neatly into a single loan category. Depending on how the purchase is structured and how much of the property's income is attributable to rental use, it may be financed as a second home (see the DTI treatment in Section 9) or, where the rental component is more central to the transaction, evaluated more like an investment property. This is exactly the kind of file where talking to a specialist lender before you make an offer — rather than after — determines which structure actually fits, and what down payment and rate to expect.

> ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLE
>
> **The Whitfield Family — London to Chapel Hill**
>
> The Whitfields, U.S. expats based in London, faced the standard choice as their daughter prepared to start a four-year degree: pay roughly $1,100/month for an off-campus apartment, or buy something.
>
> They purchased a four-bedroom house near campus for $420,000 with 20% down. Their daughter took one room; three classmates rented the others at $650 each, covering nearly all of the $2,550 monthly

> mortgage payment and leaving the family a net cost of well under $200 a month — less than a tenth of what four years of straightforward rent would have cost.
>
> When their daughter graduated, the local market had appreciated modestly. They sold the property, and the proceeds — after paying off the remaining loan balance and transaction costs — covered a meaningful share of what they'd spent on her final two years of tuition. Market conditions vary, and a similar outcome isn't guaranteed in every city or year — but renting alone would have guaranteed the opposite: zero dollars recovered, regardless of the market.

None of this requires treating your child's college years primarily as an investment opportunity — the primary goal is still giving them a good place to live. But when the alternative is writing rent checks for four straight years with certainty that none of it comes back, and buying offers a realistic chance of recovering a substantial share of that cost while your child lives somewhere you control, it's worth running the numbers before defaulting to a lease.

23. Frequently Asked Questions

Can a U.S. citizen living overseas get a U.S. mortgage?

Yes. U.S. expats can qualify for a range of U.S. mortgage programs depending on income, credit, assets, residency, property type, and program requirements. The right starting point is usually a lender that specializes in this exact borrower profile rather than a general retail bank.

Do I need to live in the United States to get a U.S. mortgage?

No. Several mortgage programs are specifically designed for borrowers living overseas, including U.S. citizens abroad, Green Card holders, and foreign nationals investing in U.S. real estate.

Why do banks keep declining my mortgage application as a U.S. expat?

Most declines come down to program fit rather than creditworthiness — a foreign address, foreign-earned income without a W-2, a tax return the underwriter doesn't know how to read because of the Foreign Earned Income Exclusion, or a dormant U.S. credit file. These are documentation and specialization problems, not signs that you don't qualify.

Do I need a W-2 to qualify for a U.S. mortgage as an expat?

No. Specialized expat programs can document foreign employment income through alternative means — an employer letter, foreign payslips, bank statements, and tax returns — since most foreign employers never issue a W-2 in the first place.

Does the Foreign Earned Income Exclusion (FEIE) hurt my mortgage application?

It can, if the lender doesn't understand it. This is where expertise plays a crucial role in obtaining a U.S. mortgage loans as an expat. The FEIE can reduce taxable income to near zero on the return, which causes an inexperienced lender to assume there's no qualifying income. A specialist lender traces the return back to gross foreign earnings and underwrites against actual income. The exclusion applies when qualifying foreign income is properly reported and the requirements are met — it doesn't mean the income disappeared.

Do I still need to file U.S. taxes as an expat even if I owe nothing?

Yes. U.S. citizens and Green Card holders generally must file a U.S. tax return every year regardless of where they live, even when the FEIE reduces tax owed to zero. Consistent filings are also part of what a lender needs to verify income at mortgage time.

What is a DSCR loan and how does it work for expats?

A DSCR (Debt Service Coverage Ratio) loan qualifies an investment property based on its own rental income rather than the borrower's personal income or employment. DSCR = monthly qualifying rental income ÷ monthly debt service. Many programs look for a ratio at or above 1.00, though some will still consider properties below that with adjusted terms.

Can an expat get a DSCR loan through an LLC?

Potentially, yes, depending on the specific program — this is worth confirming directly with a lender, since LLC eligibility and requirements vary by program and by state.

Is DSCR always better than a conventional mortgage for an expat?

Not necessarily — it depends on the borrower. An expat with strong, well-documented U.S.-qualifying income and established credit may find conventional financing more attractive. An investor with complex income, multiple properties, or strong rental cash flow may find DSCR more efficient. The best loan is the one that fits the specific transaction.

What credit score do I need for a U.S. expat mortgage?

Requirements vary by program, but a well-documented file with reasonable U.S. credit history is generally workable for expat and DSCR programs. Borrowers with a dormant or non-existent U.S. credit file can often still qualify under foreign-national-style terms, typically with somewhat lower leverage.

What's the maximum loan-to-value (LTV) for a U.S. expat mortgage?

It depends on occupancy, property type, loan size, credit, program, and whether the loan is agency or non-QM. Specialized expat programs can reach up to 80% LTV on qualifying purchases and cash-out refinances. Borrowers without an active U.S. credit file, underwritten instead on foreign-national terms, typically see lower maximum leverage — often closer to 75% on a purchase and 70% on a cash-out refinance.

How is DTI calculated for a U.S. expat buying an investment property?

For most investment purchases financed through DSCR, personal DTI generally isn't used at all — qualification is based on whether the property's rental income covers its own debt service.

How is DTI calculated for a U.S. expat buying a vacation or second home?

Typically by adding your current housing expense in the country where you live to the new U.S. property's full monthly payment, then dividing by gross monthly income. A combined ratio at or below roughly 43% is a common planning benchmark, though the exact allowable threshold varies by program and underwriting method.

Can I get a mortgage if I only have a Green Card, not U.S. citizenship?

Potentially, yes. Fannie Mae's eligibility guidance permits financing to lawful permanent residents under terms comparable to those available to U.S. citizens, subject to applicable requirements around immigration status, tax filing, income, and documentation.

Should I get pre-approved before moving back to the U.S.?

Generally, yes, and earlier than most people assume — ideally three to six months before the move, or earlier if your income and credit situation is complicated. This lets a lender map out your file and documentation needs before you're under time pressure after arriving.

Why does maintaining U.S. credit matter if I live abroad?

A U.S. credit file can go dormant after roughly 12–24 months of inactivity, and an inactive file can limit your options and pricing when you eventually want to buy or refinance. Keeping one or two U.S. credit cards open with a small recurring charge is a low-cost way to preserve it.

What happens if I've been abroad so long I no longer have a usable U.S. credit file?

You'd typically be evaluated under international or foreign-national-style terms rather than standard expat terms — somewhat lower maximum LTV and a modestly higher rate. Making on-time payments on that loan is often the fastest practical way to re-establish a usable U.S. credit file, after which refinancing into standard expat terms may become available.

Is there a limit to how many U.S. properties an expat can finance?

Under conventional agency financing, yes — Fannie Mae's current policy permits up to 10 financed one-to-four-unit properties per borrower under automated underwriting, subject to requirements. DSCR and portfolio programs, which qualify each property on its own economics, generally aren't subject to that same numeric ceiling.

What is a real estate bridge loan and when do expats use one?

A bridge loan is short-term, asset-based financing used to close quickly, fund a renovation, or bridge a timing gap such as a 1031 exchange, typically repaid within one to two years through a sale or permanent refinance. Expat investors tend to use bridge loans when speed and flexibility matter more than achieving the lowest possible rate.

Can foreign-earned income be used to qualify for a jumbo mortgage?

Potentially, yes, through specialist expat and non-QM jumbo programs that document foreign income via employer letters, payslips, and bank statements rather than requiring a W-2 — the same underwriting approach used for standard expat purchase loans, extended to larger loan amounts.

Can I close on a U.S. property while still living overseas?

In many cases, yes, using Remote Online Notarization or a mobile notary, subject to the specific state's requirements, the title/closing agent, and the lender's process. Confirm this early in the transaction rather than assuming it late in the process.

24. About This Guide

This guide was compiled as an independent educational resource for Americans living abroad who are navigating U.S. mortgage financing, drawing on underwriting insight from America Mortgages — the U.S. mortgage arm of Global Mortgage Group, which specializes in financing for U.S. citizens living overseas, Green Card holders, and foreign nationals investing in U.S. real estate across more than 50 countries.

Every figure, guideline, and program parameter referenced throughout reflects general industry and agency standards current as of publication and is provided for educational purposes — it is not tax, legal, investment, or financial advice, and it is not a commitment to lend. Mortgage availability, rates, terms, LTV, loan amounts, and qualification requirements vary by program, property, borrower, and state, and all financing is subject to underwriting, appraisal, and applicable program requirements. Consult qualified tax and legal professionals regarding your individual circumstances before making a financing decision.

The single most useful piece of advice in this entire guide may be the simplest: don't wait until you've found the property to figure out your financing, and don't assume the first lender who says no represents the entire U.S. mortgage market. A borrower's situation sitting at the intersection of U.S. citizenship, foreign residency, foreign income, U.S. taxation, U.S. credit, and U.S. real estate is exactly the situation specialization exists for.