If you have been following U.S. immigration news lately, you have probably seen headlines that sound a little dramatic. “Pay $15,000 to enter the U.S.” That sort of thing.

And yes, there is a real policy shift behind the headline. But it is not quite as simple as everyone paying a fee at the airport.

What is happening is this: the U.S. State Department has expanded a visa bond pilot program that can require certain **B-1/B-2 (business or tourist)** visa applicants to post a **refundable cash bond**, sometimes as high as **$15,000**, as a condition of visa issuance. The goal is to reduce visa overstays.

This article breaks down what the visa bond is, who it applies to, when it starts, what the amounts are, and what it means in real life for travelers and families.

What is a U.S. visa bond, exactly?

A **visa bond** is essentially a refundable cash deposit that the U.S. government can require from certain visitors. The concept is: if you comply with the terms of your visit (including leaving on time), the bond can be returned. If you do not, the bond can be forfeited.

This is not brand new as a legal concept. The government has had authority to require bonds in certain circumstances for a long time. What is new here is the **scope** and the **structure** of the pilot program, including a bigger list of countries and

specific ports of entry.

Key point: this is not a “pay to enter” policy for everyone. It is tied to:

- **Specific visa category:** B-1/B-2
- **Specific countries:** a published list
- **A bond amount:** typically $5,000, $10,000, or $15,000
- **Specific travel logistics:** entry and exit through designated ports of entry

Which visas are affected?

This bond program is focused on **B-1/B-2 visas**, which cover most short-term visits for:

- Tourism, visiting family, medical treatment (B-2)
- Short business travel like meetings, conferences, negotiations (B-1)

It does **not** automatically apply to student visas, work visas, immigrant visas, or ESTA travel under the Visa Waiver Program. It is about visitor visas.

Also, the bond requirement is connected to **visa issuance**, not something you decide at the border on the day of travel. In other words, it is part of the visa process.

Why is the U.S. doing this?

The stated aim is straightforward: **reduce visa overstays**.

Overstays are when someone enters on a visitor visa and stays beyond the authorized period. The U.S. has long struggled with overstay compliance in specific travel patterns, and the bond is meant to create a financial incentive to follow the rules.

Whether this is the best way to solve the issue is a policy debate. But as a practical matter for travelers, what matters is that a bond requirement can change the cost and complexity of getting a visitor visa quickly.

The big update: expanded list of “Countries Subject to Visa Bonds”

The U.S. State Department posted an updated notice titled **“Countries Subject to Visa Bonds”** and updated it on **January 6, 2026**.

Based on the information currently available:

- A pilot program was expanded to include **32 nations**, including examples like **Bangladesh, Nepal, Nigeria, Uganda, Venezuela**, and others.
- On **January 1, 2026**, **seven countries** were added:
- **Bhutan, Botswana, Central African Republic, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Namibia, Turkmenistan**
- On **January 6, 2026**, an additional **25 countries** were added (examples include):
- **Algeria, Angola, Bangladesh, Nigeria, Venezuela, Zimbabwe**
- As of **January 21, 2026**, the total number of countries included in the pilot program is **38**.

A quick timing note, because this part matters:

- **Jan 1 countries:** implemented the **same day**
- **Jan 6 countries:** take effect **Jan 26, 2026**

So if you are from one of the countries added on January 6, the bond requirement is not “immediately” on January 6. It is scheduled to start January 26.

Who actually has to pay the bond?

Not every traveler from a listed country will necessarily be required to post a bond in every situation, but the core rule to understand is this:

If you are a **citizen or national traveling on a passport** of a listed country, and you are applying for a **B-1/B-2 visa**, you may be required to post a **refundable cash bond** in the amount of **$5,000, $10,000, or $15,000** as a condition for visa issuance.

The government frames it as a tool to address overstay risk patterns. In practice, that means:

- It is tied to nationality and passport, not where you live today.
- It can affect first-time applicants and repeat travelers.
- It can hit families hard, because bonds are per person, and visitor visa travel often happens in groups.

Is the bond refundable?

The bond is described as a **refundable cash bond**, meaning it is meant to be returned if the traveler follows the rules.

But “refundable” does not automatically mean “instant” or “simple.”

In real life, refunds depend on:

- Documenting compliance (timely departure, no violation of status)
- Completing the process correctly
- Not getting tripped up by missed exit documentation, travel disruptions, or status misunderstandings

Designated ports of entry: this part is easy to miss

Another big component of the pilot program is that travelers who are subject to the visa bond must **enter and exit** through designated ports of entry.

The acceptable ports of entry have expanded to **nine international airports** in the United States and Canada, including:

- **Boston Logan International Airport (BOS)**
- **John F. Kennedy International Airport (JFK)**
- **Washington Dulles International Airport (IAD)**
- **Newark Liberty International Airport (EWR)**

- **Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport (ATL)**
- **Chicago O'Hare International Airport (ORD)**
- **Los Angeles International Airport (LAX)**
- **Toronto Pearson International Airport (YYZ)**
- **Montréal-Pierre Elliott Trudeau International Airport (YUL)**

Don't confuse a visa bond with a visa fee or ESTA

A few quick clarifications, because misinformation spreads fast:

- A **bond** is not the same as the **MRV visa application fee**.
- A **bond** is not a "tip" to get approved. It is a compliance mechanism.
- ESTA travelers (Visa Waiver Program) are a separate process entirely and not the same as B-1/B-2 visas, though nationality determines whether ESTA is even an option.

What should travelers do right now?

If you are from a listed country (or you think you might be), and you are planning U.S. travel in 2026, the practical checklist looks like this:

- Confirm whether your country is on the most current “Countries Subject to Visa Bonds” list (the State Department updated it January 6, 2026, and the program may evolve).
- If you were added on January 6, note the effective date: **January 26, 2026**.
- Budget for the possibility of a **$15,000** bond, even if you hope it will be lower.
- Plan flights through the **designated airports** only, both entry and exit, unless official guidance changes.
- Keep strong documentation of your travel purpose and ties abroad, same as any B-1/B-2 case. The bond does not replace the usual eligibility analysis.

Where a law firm can help (without overpromising)

A visa bond requirement does not mean “you need a lawyer” in every case. Plenty of B-1/B-2 applicants do fine on their own.

But when the financial stakes are high and the rules are very specific, legal support can be genuinely useful in a few neutral,

practical ways:

- **Country and timing analysis:** confirming whether the bond requirement applies to your nationality and when it becomes effective.
- **Strategy for a clean B-1/B-2 application:** tightening the story, the itinerary, and the supporting documents so the purpose is clear and consistent.
- **Travel compliance planning:** helping you understand the designated ports of entry requirement and how to document entry and exit properly.
- **Risk spotting:** prior overstays, prior refusals, inconsistent travel histories, or business activities that might be misinterpreted as unauthorized work.
- **After travel support:** if a refund process stalls or documentation is questioned, having organized records and a plan helps.

A good attorney will also tell you when legal work is not necessary and what you can reasonably handle yourself. That matters too.