

From Europe to Silicon Valley: Why More Startup Founders Choose O-1 Over Nomad Visas



Europe's Nomads vs. America's Opportunities. Since 2020, Europe has become a global magnet for digital nomads. Lisbon's riverfront cafés, Tallinn's e-Residency ecosystem, and Berlin's creative hubs all actively welcome remote workers, who bring foreign income and minimal regulatory burden. For many professionals, the arrangement is ideal: maintain your job, enjoy a lower cost of living, and move freely, without uprooting your entire life. Digital nomad visas are great for lifestyle flexibility, but they were not built for founders who need to scale. As soon as a startup moves beyond the early remote phase, founders run into limits on hiring, operating locally, and building investor confidence. That is why many Europeans are looking back to the U.S. and the O-1A as a serious growth pathway

Why European entrepreneurs are drawn to Silicon Valley again

After years of “work from anywhere” optimism, European founders are reassessing the right place to build and scale their companies. Atomico's *State of European Tech 2023* report shows that although Europe excels at early-stage support, it lags severely in growth-stage funding.¹ This is a decisive factor for entrepreneurs who require speed, scale, and market opportunity, particularly in fast-moving sectors like AI and enterprise SaaS. This is where the [O-1A](#) comes into play. It allows founders with demonstrable achievements, including funding, accelerator acceptance, notable media, high-impact technical work, major contributions, or judging roles, to live and work in the U.S. while growing their businesses. It also bypasses the H-1B lottery entirely, giving founders control over timing during fundraising, launches, and early sales cycles.

This is why the O-1A has become increasingly common among alumni of top accelerators, like Y Combinator and Techstars. These programs often support O-1 applications, recognizing that proximity to U.S. markets and investors remains essential for growth. For European founders serious about scale, the U.S. continues to offer the densest intersection of capital, customers, talent, and opportunity.

Nomad Visa Reality Check: Flexibility With a Ceiling

Digital nomad visas have become a defining feature of Europe's remote-work landscape. For independent professionals, this model offers remarkable flexibility, with ease of entry and the freedom to sample life across Europe's most vibrant cities.

For founders, digital nomad visas come with built-in limits. Most offer no path to permanent residency, no ability to hire locally, and no permission to operate or sell directly in the country. After 6–12 months, they often trigger tax residency creating even more uncertainty for long-term business planning.

A strategic factor worth noting: investors tend to view nomad-visa arrangements as unstable. Venture capital firms expect founders to demonstrate a sustained commitment to a market; a temporary one-year visa, designed for lifestyle mobility, often creates the opposite impression. For entrepreneurs who need to project seriousness, structure, and long-term focus, the digital-nomad model becomes a liability.

In essence, digital-nomad visas are ultimately optimized for mobility, optionality, and lifestyle, rather than scalability and investor confidence. For serious founders intent on building successful businesses, these constraints are decisive. This is just one of several factors that help make the United States a magnet for driven founders worldwide.

Why the O-1 Visa Is Built for Serious Founders

Enter the O-1A visa: a U.S. non-immigrant category reserved for individuals who demonstrate extraordinary ability, defined by USCIS as having risen to the “very top” of their field. For founders, this is usually shown through a combination of accomplishments, including:

- venture funding
- acceptance into selective accelerators
- media coverage in prominent outlets
- judging roles
- patents or notable technical breakthroughs
- critical role in high-impact companies

The key takeaway is that the deciding factors for the O-1A are the same investors use to assess a founder’s credibility; hence, its reputation as a “founder-friendly” category.

In many cases, startup operators may petition through their own U.S. entity, as long as the structure is set up correctly and the qualifying work is clearly defined, allowing entry into the U.S. market without relying on a traditional employer. Unlike the H-1B, the O-1A is not lottery-based, so timing depends mainly on preparation and USCIS processing rather than chance. Spouses and children may relocate with the founder under O-3 status. Importantly, securing an O-1A sends a clear message to investors: this founder has met a rigorous, objectively defined standard of achievement. The combination of long-term stability, credibility, and alignment with investor expectations makes it one of the most suitable immigration pathways for entrepreneurs scaling within the world’s largest startup ecosystem.

The Cost and Complexity

Pursuing an O-1A comes with real costs and a high evidence bar, so it is not a “quick fix” route. Legal fees often fall in the \$7,000–\$15,000 range depending on the case, plus USCIS filing fees (currently about \$1,055) and an additional premium processing fee if faster adjudication is needed (currently around \$2,805). The eligibility standard is also demanding: founders must document achievements that satisfy at least three of the eight USCIS criteria, and the overall strength of evidence and narrative matters.

Well-prepared petitions for genuinely high-achieving founders tend to have strong outcomes, but the process is not risk-free and requires time, coordination, and careful positioning. Founders should also plan for the practical realities of U.S. expansion, including higher living and operating costs in major hubs (for example, housing and healthcare expenses can be meaningfully higher than in many European cities). For early-stage or bootstrapped teams, these trade-offs are part of the decision, but for founders aiming for U.S. scale, the upside can justify the investment.

Financial & Legal Comparison (Tax, Incorporation, Residency)

While both the O-1A and digital nomad visas allow foreign nationals to live abroad while working, they serve entirely different purposes. The O-1A is built for founders who require credibility, legal stability, and access to U.S. capital, while digital-nomad visas are built for remote professionals seeking short-term mobility options. The most significant differences are evident in four key areas: eligibility, taxation, investor access, and long-term stability.

At a glance, the O-1A requires documented achievement, whereas digital nomad visas typically require only steady remote income and health insurance. The tax rules also diverge sharply: O-1A holders generally become U.S. tax residents once they meet the substantial presence threshold, whereas digital-nomad visas vary widely, often triggering local tax residency after a few months. Investor access is where the contrast becomes most pronounced: O-1 founders can legally build, hire, fundraise, and operate in the U.S.. In comparison, Nomad Visa founders typically run foreign entities from temporary residences, which many VCs consider unstable. While the O-1A can be renewed indefinitely and serve as a stepping stone to a green card, most digital-nomad visas are capped at one or two years, with limited pathways to permanence.

	O1-A (U.S.)	Digital-Nomad Visas (EU/Europe)
Eligibility	Requires documented extraordinary ability (e.g., funding, accelerator acceptance, media, patents, major contributions, etc.)	Requires proof of stable remote income and health insurance; no evaluation of business traction or achievements
Who It's For	Founders, innovators, technical leaders, high-achieving professionals in business, science, the arts, and athletics	Remote employees, freelancers, independent contractors
Tax Treatment	Typically become a U.S. tax resident after substantial presence; U.S. corporate tax rules apply	Tax rules vary widely and are unclear for founders; tax residency is triggered anywhere between 6–12 months
Ability to Run a Company Locally	Can found, run, and work for a U.S. entity legally	Usually cannot run a local business; allowed only to work remotely for foreign companies
Fundraising & Investor Access	Full access to U.S. capital markets, accelerators, bank accounts, and in-person investor meetings	Investors often view nomad status as unstable; difficult to onboard U.S. investors without a U.S. entity/work authorization
Longevity & Renewal	Up to 3 years, initially; renewable indefinitely in 1-year increments	Typically 6–24 months; limited renewals; rarely a path to permanent residency
Pathway to Greencard	Yes – EB-1A or EB-2 NIW	No
Best For	Founders scaling a high-growth company	Remote workers seeking flexible lifestyles

Real-World Transitions from Berlin to NYC

Across Europe’s major tech hubs, a growing number of founders are relocating to the United States. Walk through Lisbon’s LX Factory or sit in a café near Berlin’s Rosenthaler Platz, and you will meet entrepreneurs now looking to the U.S. as the obvious direction for their business expansion. What once felt like an optional “next step” has increasingly become necessary.

From interviews with European founders who have made this transition, a typical pattern emerges. One Berliner founder spent upwards of a year building a workflow-automation SaaS product, living between Madeira, Croatia, and Spain on digital-nomad visas, shipping features, supporting customers, and enjoying the mobility the lifestyle offered.

As her company matured, the limitations of digital nomadism became clear: she was unable to hire locally under nomad visa rules, and enterprise customers were hesitant to sign a company lacking a stable legal base. When two New York-based investors expressed interest in her company, she realized that a consistent U.S. presence for partner meetings, due diligence, and early sales cycles was necessary.

Legal counsel helped this founder to confirm her eligibility for the O-1A and submit a petition: she gathered evidence of her published work, strong user metrics, design industry award, and judging role for a startup competition with confidence. Upon approval, she incorporated a Delaware C-Corp, moved into a Brooklyn coworking space, and easily closed U.S. customers who were previously hesitant. Today, she works between New York clients and her European engineering teams, made possible by the O-1A, which enabled her product's growth to venture-scale.

Studies suggest this story is part of a wider trend. A 2024 startup relocation study from the Technical University of Munich found that 85% of startups that relocated abroad moved to the U.S., representing 17% of worldwide cross-border startup activity.² While Europe offers fertile ground for early experimentation, the United States remains the epicenter for scale, investment, and long-term company building.

The Founder Mindset Shift - From Freedom to Focus

Digital nomadism aligns well with the early creative phases of building a product. But as a company gains traction, the founder mindset inevitably shifts from exploration to ambition; from flexibility to proximity to customers, investors, and opportunities. The identity of a "remote professional" evolves into that of "founder-operator", someone accountable to employees, shareholders, and the long-term vision of the company.

The O-1A visa mirrors this psychological transition, requiring founders to document traction, recognition, and responsibility, forcing them to articulate the importance of what they have built: namely, leadership and responsibility. For many builders, preparing evidence for their O1-A is clarifying, reinforcing their identity as leaders and legacy-builders.

This shift from a nomadic lifestyle to an O-1A-supported presence in the U.S. marks a transition from freedom to focus; mobility to legacy. It marks a founder's decision to commit to making a lasting impact.

Conclusion: choosing growth over geography

For founders building high-growth ventures, the question becomes: "Where can my company scale?" The digital nomad movement promises work without borders, but for founders chasing venture-scale ambitions, geography matters.

Nomad visas can power the early "build anywhere" phase, but O-1A is built for founders who are ready to commit to scale with U.S. capital, customers, and long-term presence.

Whether this represents problematic European brain-drain or natural market dynamics remains to be seen.

While European policymakers discuss talent-retention strategies, founders are following capital and customers to the U.S. The O-1A makes this path legal. Whether it is the right path, however, will depend on each founder's ambition, resources, and readiness for the practical trade-offs and costs of U.S. expansion.

***Disclosure:** This article is for informational purposes only and does not constitute legal advice under U.S. immigration law. For personalized guidance, consult a qualified immigration attorney.*

¹ <https://www.stateofeuropeantech.com/>

² <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0016718524001350>