

Can I install travertine with the polished side down?

Q. I bought travertine tile, and when I got home I realized one side was polished and the other unfinished. I prefer the unfinished side. Is it possible for me to mud with the polished side down or will it not stick to the mud and pop up? Is there a method I could do to ensure it sticks? Thanks.

A. Travertine, in its natural, honed or raw state has a more rustic appearance than other types of stone. Many people prefer this. Apparently, you're one of them!

The simplest, most headache-free solution is to return your travertine tiles and swap them for honed or matte travertine. That would give you the surface appearance you want right out of the box. Using the unfinished side up can be made to work, but there will be several extra steps. If the store will exchange your tile, that's your easiest win.

If you want to use the stone as-is, you'll need to prep the polished side of the tiles so they will stick. Polished travertine is slick and dense, and thinset grips by texture, not by chemically bonding.

Here's the fix. Scuff the back of each tile with 60–80 grit sandpaper or a diamond pad until it's matte, then wipe off the dust.

Use a polymer-modified thinset and “back-butter” the tile, that is, spread a thin layer on the back before setting it into combed thinset on the floor. This will ensure a strong bond. For extra security, pros sometimes add a bonding primer, but sanding plus modified thinset and back-buttering is usually enough.

Do a test area to see what kind of results you can expect. Pick an inconspicuous spot, like a closet. Set the tile as described in the previous paragraph. Let it cure for the full recommended time and then check how well it's bonded by gently pressing, twisting, or trying to lift the tile at the edges. Hopefully it will stick firmly without slipping or coming up. If it feels loose, you'll know you need extra prep or a stronger thinset before committing to the whole floor.

If you do not have experience with setting tile, it would be a good idea to entrust this project to a professional tile installer. Alternatively, you can install the tile and then hire a stone restoration contractor to change the finish for you. They can use diamond abrasives to achieve the exact finish you have in mind. To find a vetted PRO in your area, visit www.surfacecarepros.com and click on **Find a PRO**.

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