

Downhill skiing no longer just a winter sport

By Laura Vozzella, Washington Post

LYNCHBURG, Va. – It looks like God’s country from high atop the hill they call Liberty Mountain, with sunbeams slicing through puffy clouds overhead and the school that Jerry Falwell built nestled at its foot.

But the hill itself seems to be more of a deal with the devil. Because it’s August. In Virginia. And despite scorching heat, skiers and snowboarders and tube-riders are swooshing down a white slope like it’s winter in Vail, Colo.

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If there’s anything in Leviticus against planting one foot in summer and the other in winter, the pious souls at Liberty University have turned a blind eye.

“We were water skiing in the morning, and now we’re snow skiing in the afternoon,” marveled Jim Gooding, 43, who works in the District as a government contracts administrator. He had just taken his first few runs down the synthetic ski slope at the Liberty Mountain Snowflex Centre.

Blanketing 1.5 acres of steep hillside above the university is Snowflex, a \$150-per-square-foot material that looks like a

bristly plastic doormat and mimics the “slip and grip” of snow. Liberty is the only place in this hemisphere to build a ski resort out of the stuff, which was invented in Europe and has caught on more there.

That has made Lynchburg, which at the height of winter averages less than five inches of snow a month, the only place in North America besides Mount Hood where it’s possible to ski in the summer. The town has even become an unlikely stop on one professional skier’s globe-

trotting training itinerary.

“I’ll be honest with you: This is not snow,” said Drew Sherwood, the center’s general manager. It would have been an obvious truth on a hot August afternoon if it weren’t for the skiers rushing past.

“We tell people – we’re honest – it’s never going to be as good as snow,” he said. “And the feeling of snow, when you’re out on a fresh powder day, riding through snow – it’s never going to be like that. But when you’re talking spring, summer and fall, when 99 percent of other ski resorts are closed down, it’s the best feeling you can have.”

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