



To shed pounds, three Americans head to China

by Marianne Barriaux Marianne Barriaux – Tue Dec 2, 3:15 am ET

AFP/File – Three American men - Alonzo Bland (right) and brothers Walt Anderson (centre) and David Anderson (left) ...

TIANJIN, China (AFP) – Three American men have taken the unusual step of moving to China in an extreme attempt to shed huge amounts of weight at a fat reduction clinic -- and have become surprise local celebrities.

Alonzo Bland, 33, and brothers Walt and David Anderson, 56 and 50, have lived in the northern Chinese city of Tianjin since the middle of this year as part of an effort to break away from their unhealthy lifestyles back home.

Together, they have lost a combined 192 kilogram's (427 pounds) and are aiming to shed over 100 more.

"The reason why I think it works here is that China is away from everything, all the stuff that I'm familiar with," said Alonzo, who has lost 103 kilogram's from the 291 kilos he weighed when he first arrived in Tianjin.

He decided to come after winning a contest organized by China Connection, a US firm promoting traditional Chinese medicine, and was being treated free of charge for as long as it took to lose his target weight -- like Walt and David.

Alonzo, who had a tracheotomy in 2000 because the fat in his face was pressing down on his windpipe, left a fiancée and two children behind in Wisconsin.

For David, an unmarried dishwasher in a casino in Iowa who sold his car and ditched his job to come to China, the move was a lifesaver.

"Before I came over, it got to the point that I couldn't walk 20 feet without gasping for breath," said David, who is down to 104 kilogram's after losing 41 kilos.

"I don't think I would have made my 51st birthday."

Every morning, the three lie down in their spartan bedrooms at the Aimin Fat Reduction Hospital for acupuncture, which doctors say increases the metabolism rate and reduces appetite.

"When I sent an email to my friends from here, I think I scared them when I told them how deep those needles go," said Walt, who has shed 48 kilogram's off his original 179 kilogram's.

But the rest of the weight-loss treatment is similar to the West -- exercise twice a day and good nutrition, albeit Chinese-style with rice, fried vegetables, tofu, meat and soup the staples of their diet.

As they sat down for lunch in the basic canteen they eat in every day along with other Chinese people trying to lose weight, the three looked at each other and laughed when asked about the local food.

"Don't get me wrong, the food here is good. But it's just not having certain things for a certain period of time -- it wears on you," said Alonzo.

"You're thinking about all the steaks you want to have."

The three have featured prominently in local media, prompting a Chinese woman to ask to meet Walt when she saw his photo in the newspaper and subsequently proposing to him -- an offer he refused.

"I didn't come here to find a Chinese wife," he said. "I don't need a wife."

Later, as the three walked out of a bus and onto the streets during their break, locals openly stared at them as they strolled by -- a situation the three said was even more pronounced when they first arrived and were bigger.

Taxi drivers were reluctant to stop for them due to their size, they said, which meant they were at the mercy of the hospital's transport if they wanted to get around.

"For us (Chinese people), it's very hard to see such obese people," explained Su Zhixin, their doctor.

"Alonzo is the heaviest person to have come here since our hospital was set up in 1998."

Sighing, Alonzo said it had been difficult to cope with the attention when he first got to Tianjin.

"It was unbearable, I just wanted to not go out at all. But then the weight started coming off, and I thought -- I am who I am," he said.

Walt claimed that he missed driving his car more than food in the United States, but for Alonzo, it was his children and fiancée that he pined after.

"But my aim is 220 pounds -- the lowest I can remember weighing is 360 at high school," he said, pledging to stick it out.

When asked whether they would be able to withstand all the temptations back in the United States, the trio said they were determined to keep the weight off.

At that, Walt began to dream about the day they went home.

"Riding the airplane over, we had to get a seatbelt extension because we were so big," he said.

"Now we can just get on that plane, sit down and fly home," he said. "That's going to be a real thrill."