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MP's my tour leader

Some MPs go on holiday with their constituents to bond

By [Soh Wen Lin](#)

THE June holidays are almost here and for a number of MPs, it means vacation time - with their constituents.

Such holidays have been going on for some time, and while they are low-key affairs, they provide both MPs and their constituents with an opportunity to bond while abroad.

Most residents - unless they are active grassroots leaders - find out about the trips through word of mouth. The groups that travel can be as small as a dozen people or as large as 80.

MPs and grassroots leaders spend anything from \$200 to nearly \$2,000 each visiting locales as near as Johor or Malacca over the weekend, or on week-long jaunts further afield to China, South Korea or Australia.

During that time, sightseeing, shopping, eating and golfing replace talk about municipal issues as the activities of choice.

Another staple activity: karaoke in hotels and on long bus rides.

'They always demand a song on the bus,' said Potong Pasir MP Chiam See Tong, who has travelled with his residents for the past three years, usually to Malaysia.

In his case, his team advertises the trips in his ward. And the idea is obviously catching on.

Potong Pasir residents said it was hard to miss posters inviting them to join Mr Sitoh Yih Pin - the People's Action Party adviser to grassroots organisations in the opposition constituency - on trips to Malacca, for example.

A Straits Times check with 30 MPs found that at least five have led such vacations.

These 'tour-group' MPs said the trips help them and residents get to know one another better in an informal setting - and have also helped to build relations among the family members of grassroots leaders.

Such support is vital, MPs said, since such leaders spend many evenings and weekends away from the family doing community work.

'They realise their spouses are serious about the work, and see who they work with,' said Ang Mo Kio GRC MP Tan Boon Wan, who headed a three-day retreat to Malacca last December.

The bonding also brews high spirits, said MPs and grassroots leaders.

'We all know each other, so it's more exciting than a normal tour group where they are all strangers,' said Bukit Batok Citizens' Consultative Committee chairman Tony Lee, who has gone on several trips with Jurong GRC MP Ong Chit Chung.

Dr Ong, who has travelled to locations from Bangkok to Beijing with constituents at least once a year since the 1990s, notes that the atmosphere is always abuzz with residents swopping information on shopping and eating spots and tips on bargaining tactics.

East Coast GRC MP Chew Heng Ching gets most nostalgic about his earliest trips, more than 20 years ago, when a group of young families would drive to Malaysia in a convoy.

Now that these residents' children have grown up and do not go along any more, Mr Chew sometimes injects a more serious agenda into the trips.

This year, his group visited Taiwan just after the election, he said, and they took the opportunity to study its political and campaign artefacts.

A close-knit group also means that when mishaps occur - like someone spraining their leg while skiing or having their bag stolen - others have no resentment about being held back, said MPs.

Such stories have reinforced the desire of second-term MP Ong Kian Min (Tampines GRC) to travel with his grassroots leaders. They had planned to go to China in 1997, but put off plans when the Asian financial crisis hit. Next month, they will visit Kuala Lumpur for three days.

First-term MP Amy Khor (Hong Kah GRC) said she would consider such trips, but added: 'If it's for bonding, I think the group can't be too big. And the trip needs some set programme at least for the first few days.'