



Provocative and popular CNN presenter, Richard Quest, was in action at the Durban Indaba at the weekend. PICTURE: REG CALDECOTT

Top TV man takes his hat off to SA

BARBARA COLE

GLOBALLY renowned for his hard-hitting questioning, high-profile CNN anchor/presenter Richard Quest takes his hat off to South African Tourism for inviting him to Indaba.

Quest had the job of putting questions to a panel of South African tourism leaders, including the Minister of Tourism, Derek Hanekom, at the minister's Media Talk session, one of the highlights of the three-day Indaba trade show at the ICC, which started on Saturday.

Quest, the host of *Quest Means Business*, said in an earlier interview that he gave full credit to South African Tourism for holding the media event and asking him to field questions, as "CNN does not get involved in whitewashing or a sham".

If he had been told in advance what to ask, he would not have come from New York, where he is based, said Quest, who has visited the South African Tourism-organised Indaba for several years.

"It's my job to ask the questions that need to be asked, and if someone cannot answer, then that's their problem," he said.

One of the reasons that the minister's talk session worked was because it was transparent.

"There is nothing better than taking the leaders of the industry and shoving them in front of the press," he said.

Quest told the media that it was up to them to get answers out of the panel, as it was their event, although his role was to "prod, to push and maybe cajole, and if necessary, hit them over the head".

He was proud to say that protocol would not be observed and that everyone on the panel was fair game.

Joining the minister of tourism on the panel was his deputy, Tokozile Xasa, as well as Mmatsetsi Ramawela, the chief executive of the Tourism Business Council of South Africa, and Gillian Saunders, a tourism expert and head of the advisory services for Grant Thornton South Africa.

Quest said in the earlier interview that he always carried out "huge" research into what was going on in South Africa before flying in, and said that South African political developments had featured regularly on CNN in the past three months.

He was curious to know

how the controversial visa changes had gone ahead when the industry had predicted that they would be a "calamity", and without the implications being fully considered.

He felt the same about the recent decision by the Minister of Sport, Fikile Mbalula, to revoke the right of specific sports federations – Athletics South Africa, Cricket South Africa, Netball South Africa and South African Rugby – to host and bid for major international tournaments for not meeting their own transformation targets.

The sports issue would not be so serious if it had not been a repeat of the visa "debacle" following by the birth certificate "calamity," he felt. The decision had been made without discussions on the economic implications.

He asked the minister if he had been consulted about the ban, and the reply was that he had not. No final decision had been made, the minister added.

Hanekom said in his opening Indaba address before the media session that some of the challenges experienced last year had resulted in dwindling tourism numbers, but "that is now behind us and we are experiencing spectacular

growth... All indications are that 2016 will be a bumper year for tourism in South Africa."

Referring to this, Quest commented: "Let's be honest. A lot of the improvement is only repairing the damage from shooting yourself in the foot."

"You have a way of putting things, Richard," the minister responded, going on to explain that the biggest factor in the decline in numbers was the Ebola outbreak elsewhere in Africa which had scared away tourists, even though South Africa had not had a single case.

South Africa had attracted more than a million tourists in January, which was a 15% increase on the previous January, Hanekom pointed out.

At the end of the lively session, where the panel gave as good as they got from time to time, Quest asked delegates from around the world, if such an event could be held in their countries with the same openness and debate.

He loved coming to South Africa, he said in the earlier interview.

"It's a phenomenal country. It has got everything and the tourism products are first class. The people are incredibly friendly and have a generosity of spirit."