The MIPDoc World Premiere TV Screening for 2018 is Japan From Above, a co-production between NHK, Gedeon Programmes, ZDF/ARTE, and Voyage. We spoke with some of the people involved in the series.
SMOKE-wreathed volcanoes, the high-rise Tokyo megalopolis, ice floes on the Sea of Okhotsk, cherry blossoms on Mount Yoshino, glistening rice paddies on the Shonai plain, emerald waters and coral reefs in Okinawa, and autumn leaves in ancient Kyoto. These are just some of the spectacular sights shot in 4K from helicopters and drones for the documentary series Japan From Above.

“But this series offers more than just the kind of vistas that can only be seen from the air,” NHK director Shinji Iwata said. “The 4K images also reveal details and textures that cannot be fully appreciated with the naked eye. And they highlight human wonders in the intricate, breathtaking artistry of papermakers, potters, cooks, and other traditional Japanese craftspeople. The series brings Japan to life through a seamless experience of the majestic and the miniscule.”

Shooting the entire 3,000-kilometre length of the Japanese archipelago in 4K was a huge project. The crew spent a year traveling from Hokkaido in the north to Okinawa in the south, taking countless shots in hundreds of locations.

“They were under pressure to capture the greatest possible diversity of images in a limited time; they did not have the luxury of waiting for the perfect moments to shoot,” Iwata said. “Moreover, the look of scenery is greatly influenced by the light. So the crew needed flexibility, a keen eye on the weather, and an acceptance that no shot could be repeated.”

The greatest enemy of drone filming is rain, according to Iwata. “Long spells of rainfall brought filming to a halt. The crew got many of their desired
shots during brief periods when the rain let up.” He added: “Some of Japan’s most talented aerial videographers handled the drone filming. Even in strong winds and other tough conditions, they captured outstanding shots that can now be enjoyed throughout the series.”

There are many ‘from-above’ programmes in the documentary market,” said Shin Yasuda, executive producer at NHK. “Some take the viewers on an aerial journey across the continent, others combine aerial footage with visualisation of big data to reveal a nation’s communication and transport infrastructure. With Japan From Above, NHK and Gedeon embarked on a new challenge: using 4K cinematography to capture the breathtaking beauty of Japan’s archipelago from the sky while, at the same time, providing the viewers with an up-close and personal experience with people that inhabit the islands. The result is a rare and intimate portrait of Japan.”

“What strikes me the most is the intimacy Japanese have with their land,” Gedeon executive producer Nicholas Deschamps said. “Obviously there is great nature everywhere in the world, but what I find unique in Japan is the connection they have with it, so intimate than it gives to nature a kind of humanity. The key to respect of our planet is the look we have on it. That’s what we tried on this series. A tribute to Japanese and the value of the nature they inherited.”

Marika Puisiaux of Fox Network’s French factual channel Voyage, said the series aim is “to reveal a dynamic Japan that respects its millennial traditions. The footage from above in 4K reflects in an extremely detailed way the divine beauty of Japanese landscapes.” And the right partnerships were crucial to achieving this: “We know the quality of Gedeon’s work and were aware that international collaboration with the NHK would also be a guarantee in terms of quality and meet our editorial requirements.”

Shinji Iwata: “The series brings Japan to life through a seamless experience of the majestic and the miniscule”

Marita Hubinger and Petra Boden, commissioning editors at ZDF/ARTE, described Japan From Above as “a flagship programme that echoes the Summer Olympics in Tokyo in 2020 as the eyes of the world turn to the Japanese capital.” They added: “The collaboration with NHK is once again a trusted partnership reflecting common editorial requirements. NHK is recognised around the world for being at the forefront of shooting and broadcast technologies.”

Camera operator Aiko Komagata films a traditional salt maker in Noto Peninsula.

CONFERENCES & EVENTS AT MIPDOC
The MIPDoc World Premiere TV Screening of Japan From Above, presented by NHK, is at 18.00 in the Grand Theatre of the JW Marriott, on Saturday, April 7.