

The Yeti Porter is resurrected

62 years ago, the Pilatus Porter with the nickname Yeti became famous in the Himalayans – until it crashed. Now an authentic replica is taking flight for the first time.



The new Yeti is warming up for its first flight. During the maiden flight, the Dhaulagiri is not in the background, but at least the Jungfrau massif is.

The airplane immediately gets attention with its unusual paint job. Pink combined with yellow ensures a bright color pallet at the airfield in Langenthal. Also, the labeling “Himalaya” on the planes fuselage is peculiar. On the engine cowling the word “Yeti”. Three passengers board the aircraft on this January day. The engine immediately starts. Both pilots go through their checklists before turning onto the runway. The flaps are set to 12 degrees for takeoff. Then the plane continues full throttle towards the sky over the Oberaargau region of Kanton Bern.

Plane enthusiasts immediately recognize that this is a Pilatus PC-6 Porter. But this one looks unusual because it is missing the typical long nose with the integrated turboprop engine. The explanation: This Porter is from 1962 and one of the early models in the series, of which all used to have a piston engine. What is special about it: this is a full replica of the PC-6 which became famous in the Himalayans and later crashed in those same mountains. This airplane had it’s second maiden flight on January 14th at the airfield in Langenthal after years of restoration.

Back to the year 1959: In the early winter months, the organizers of the 1960 Dhaulagiri Expedition struck a deal with Pilatus. The brand-new PC-6 prototype shall carry exhibition material to the base

camp. The Swiss mountain climbers are to be the first to conquer the 8167-meter Dhaulagiri mountain; the 6th highest peak in the world.

With striking colors and christened the Yeti, the Porter takes flight on March 12, 1960 from Zuerich. The pilots of HB-FAN are Ernst Saxer and Emil Wick, who also serves as mechanic for the expedition. The Yeti is equipped with wheel-/ski landing gear for the mission. The journey to Kathmandu, the capital of Nepal, takes 8 days covering 16 legs. First flights to get acclimated to the high mountains take place with supply trips by the end of March 1960. Destination is the Dambusch pass.

Altitude record in the Himalayas

The original Yeti is equipped with only a 340hp Lycoming piston engine. It flies with materials or mountain climbers to base camp 2 at 5750 meters. The pilots: Saxer and Wick set an altitude record for landing an aircraft at such heights (which still stands to this day). The risk in "thin air" is enormous. On May 5, 1960 the Yeti crashes shortly after takeoff from Dambusch pass at low altitude. Both pilots walk away unharmed. The aircraft, however, is damaged beyond repair. Pieces of the wreckage can still be found at the crash site to this day. Some of the recovered pieces are at the transportation museum in Lucerne.

The new Yeti now brings back memories from the adventurous past. Yeti flyers, in Bleienbach have fully restored the aircraft. The organization was founded in 2019 by Swiss aviation enthusiasts, led by entrepreneur Peter Daetwyler and Beat Roos, who for 40 years, specialized in Aston-Martin restorations, and as head of the Yeti project. Additionally, they had support from retired Pilatus employees which are all familiar with the PC-6 and used to work on its production, as well as airplane experts from Daetwyler. 6000 working hours over the course of more than 3 years were put into this airplane, which today is possibly better than when it was delivered 60 years ago.

Reward for all those efforts was the smooth maiden flight of the Yeti on this brisk January day. Piloting the plane was Roland Luescher. He logged roughly 2000 flying hours on the turbine Porter and is also a flight instructor. He was accompanied during the first 6 flights by Peter Daetwyler's son Marc, who is also an experienced pilot.

The Yeti flyers team were lucky during the restoration phase. They managed to obtain spare parts from other Porter enthusiasts making it possible to install numerous new parts into the old-timer. At first glance the cockpit may seem nostalgic, but everything has been equipped with state-of-the-art avionics designed to fit the original round holes from the vintage instruments. They almost look like the historic instruments from 1962. The new Yeti setup even makes it possible to take IFR flights when in clouds. However, the plane is not registered by the Swiss Confederation since the US Registration from the previous owner were kept. This does not pose a problem since all Yeti Pilots carry a valid American pilot license.

How does it fly in comparison to the Turbine Porter? Pilot Luescher speaks highly about the aircraft. Clearly the slightly lesser output during a climb or in high altitude can be felt. But in contrast, the piston engine reacts much quicker to changes on the throttle and does not have the one-two second delay of a turbo prop. Further, the Yeti flies perfectly straight, does not require any trim corrections during the start and is just fun to fly. Speed is not an issue when flying the Porter, whether with a piston engine or the turbo prop. Traveling speed is a comfortable 220 km/h.

How did the Pilatus Porter come about? Once the era of successful military trainers by Pilatus took off in the 1940's with the P-2 and later the two-seater P-3, the focus shifted to civil aviation. The serial construction of P-3 trainers for the Air Force ran out at the end of the 1950's. Repeat orders were not expected. Therefore, the responsible parties in Stans had the idea to create a multi-purpose aircraft for civil use. The plane should be robust and able to be operated everywhere. High payload as well as taking off and landing on short distances was also required. Versatility and a sturdy design of the new metal airplane were on top of the task list.

Never ending production cycle

The PC-6 quickly became highly desired and remained in production for an astonishing 60 years (until 2019). In 1968 the turbine version secured an altitude record in its weight category of 13485 meters. The largest flight banner in the world was pulled by a Porter in 1999. Roughly 500 pieces of the aircraft were produced in Stans with another 90 under license in the USA by Fairchild Hiller. The main reason for its success is its versatility. It can hold up to 10 passengers or one metric ton of freight. The Porter can be operated on floats or with skis for glacier landings. It can deliver skydivers or can be used for surveillance missions. It is also usable as crop duster in agriculture or to support fire fighters with water ballast or can be used for medical transport.

The PC-6 is also known for its capability to take off and land on a short runway, whether this is asphalt, sand, grass, or gravel. Less than 200 meters are required for takeoff and roughly half of that for landing. Thrust reversal assists the turbo prop model with breaking. The 1960 original Yeti (340hp) and the replica (360hp) have a conventional look in contrast to the Turbo Prop version. Later models of the Turbo Porter received the long nose. What is the reason for this? Initially the Porter was designed for the heavy 6-cylinder engine. However, this caused the plane to not have enough engine power for some of its utilization.

Thus, a French turbine engine was installed in 1961 and 3 years later an American Pratt and Whitney. With 650 hp it is stronger than the piston engine but weighs less. To accommodate the lighter engine while maintaining the center of gravity, the nose had to be extended by roughly 70 cm. With this change, the airplane could now hold the pilot plus 9 passengers.

The original Yeti HB-FAN s/n 337 was the first of multiple prototypes produced in 1959. It's replica, the new Yeti, is a Porter which was built in 1962, also with an Lycoming Piston Engine with roughly 360 hp. It is s/n is 540 with the former registration HB-FAL. Pilatus used the airplane for 3 years in Switzerland and Sweden to showcase its capabilities as a float plane. In 1965 the plane was sold to North America. The plane changed hands numerous times after that and spent the following decades primarily in the Canadian Northwest Territories. In the Yukon the plane served for missionary deliveries. Since 2002 the plane is one of the last flying Porters with a piston engine and is used by McCarthy Air in Alaska to transport tourists. This is where the Swiss Citizen Philipp Sturm discovered the airplane. He purchased the Porter and shipped it to Switzerland in 2015 where HB-FAL is repainted to match the original Yeti. The plane remains on exhibit in the transportation museum in Lucerne from 2017 to 2019. Afterwards, Peter Daetwyler, Beat Roos and Daniel Geissmann purchase the Porter. The Yeti flyers bring the airplane to their local airfield Langenthal-Bleienbach und restore it to the highest standards.

During the year Yeti will be showcased at national airshows, like during the air show on the Stanserhorn in the summer. The airplane is unique since it is the only Porter still flying with a piston engine.



The record-breaking aircraft made a landing at 5750 metres...



...crashed later, however, the damage remains irreparable.

Two Yeti in comparison:

	Yeti 1960	Yeti 2022
Engine	Lycoming BSO-480	Lycomin IO-540 A1
Output	340 hp	Approx. 360 hp
Wingspan	15,13 m	15,13 m
Length	10,2 m	10,2 m
Height	3,2 m	3,2 m
Max altitude	Approx. 6600 m	Approx. 6600 m
Take off distance	Approx. 150 m	Approx. 150 m
Landing distance	100 m	100 m
Passengers	7	7