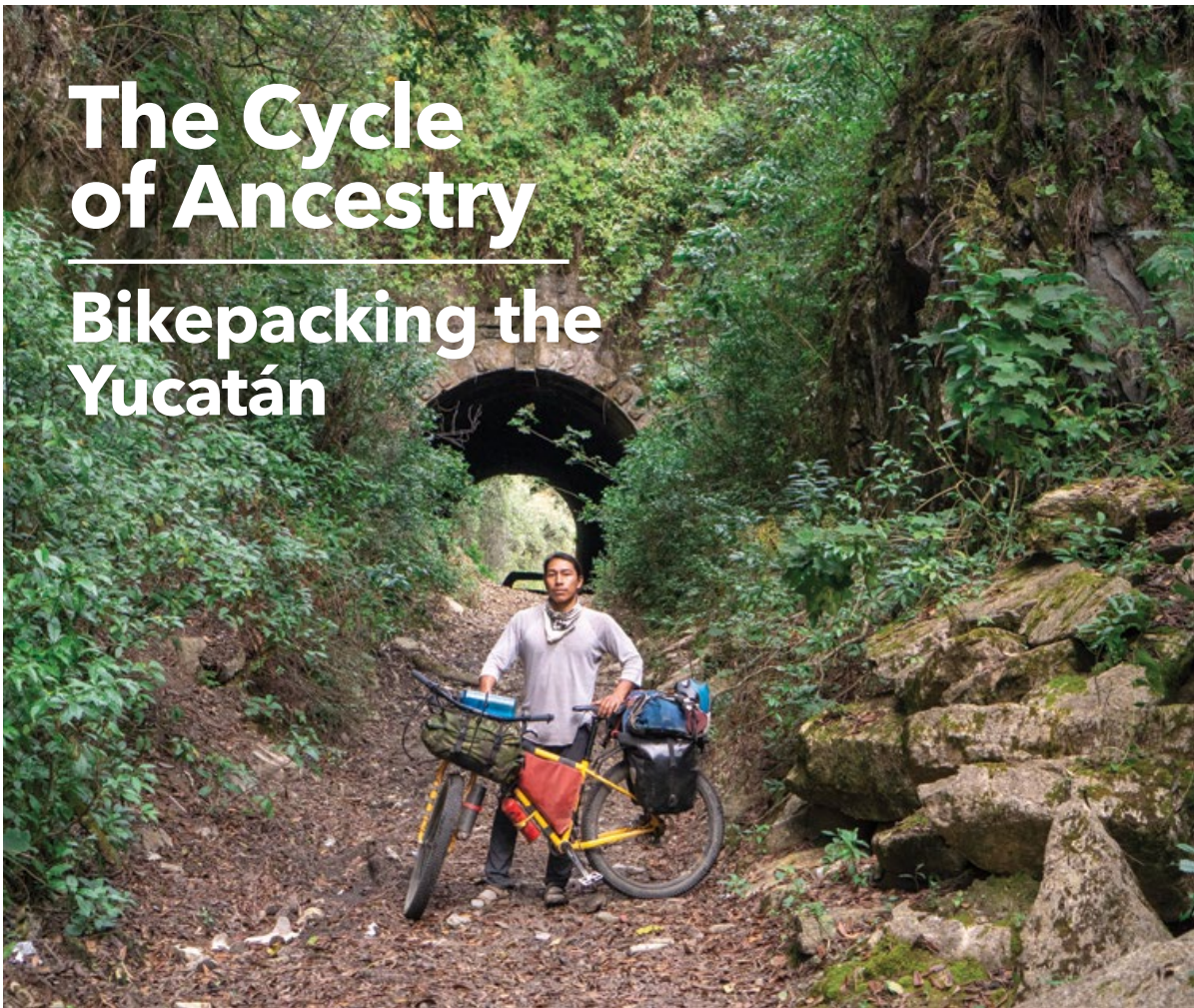


# The Cycle of Ancestry

## Bikepacking the Yucatán



*Words by Katie Rodriguez + Images by Ryder England*

**M**ario Jesus Ordoñez-Calderon set out with a purpose: to trace 1,500 kilometers along the Yucatán Peninsula and explore the land and culture that shaped his ancestors. At the start of 2019, Ordoñez-Calderon, a first generation Mayan-American, decided to bikepack through the land his parents left in search of creating a better life for their children.

The 11 members of Ordoñez-Calderon's family, like many others, came to the U.S. in search of opportunity and a better life. Though geographically removed from his ancestral roots, his upbringing embraced the notion that strengthening familial bonds was of the utmost priority and he spent many summers visiting his grandparents in the small village of Muña, nestled in the jungles of the Yucatán Peninsula.

Those visits instilled in him the values and taught him the customs his people had observed for generations. Most importantly, Ordoñez-Calderon learned how community and time spent outdoors sustained their businesses. His grandfather, the local bike mechanic, offered his porch not only as the village bike shop but as a gathering place for people to come and socialize.

"I used to spend afternoons at my grandpa's bike shop," Ordoñez-Calderon recalls. "I would sit out front just to listen to him talk with the other old-timers and watch him work. I was most interested in their stories. I remember feeling proud that my grandpa had such a passion for his job – and he was good at it. There was such a flow to his work and, at the same time, good conversation."

In Muña, whether tending to the crops and animals, doing laundry, biking or taking trips to the well, being outside wasn't just recreational – it was a way of life. The people didn't have much, but they were bound to each other and the land by a rich history and strong sense of community.

Now an adult and avid biker, when Ordoñez-Calderon began to think about making plans for a biking trip, he knew he wanted it to be different from anything he'd done prior. He wanted to integrate purpose and intention into this challenge, to examine his relationship to the earth and to his origins.

"I wanted to challenge myself physically and learn about myself via cultural immersion," he says. "I wanted to slow down my travels via bike to digest those little towns you'd miss traveling by car."

*In Muña, whether tending to the crops and animals, doing laundry, biking or taking trips to the well, being outside was not just recreational, it was a way of life.*

Forty days of cycling brought him 1,500 kilometers along the Yucatán Peninsula – from the country's most densely populated city to Pico de Orizaba, its highest peak – and down to Muña. The days were long and monotonous, victorious and fulfilling. The terrain was beautifully erratic, sometimes unforgiving and leading to dead ends but more often to areas untouched and raw, with their own rugged allure. This land that had shaped his ancestors for multiple generations made him feel alive.

The communities Ordoñez-Calderon traveled through were inquisitive, supportive and welcoming. They reflected the warmth of his parents and what he remembered from his childhood trips to Muña. Many families welcomed him in for dinner, offered him a place to stay and helped guide him along his route.

"The sense of community felt so different," Ordoñez-Calderon says. "All meals were shared, and everyone would sit down and eat together. That was a big deal. I saw this loving quality mirrored in each community we biked through. It was common for people to want to care for each other – stranger or not."

Upon his arrival in Muña, Ordoñez-Calderon's grandparents, cousins, aunts, uncles and several members of the community greeted him. His grandfather anxiously walked up the road to give the first welcome: "You have to keep moving to stay living."

By moving through the Yucatán, Ordoñez-Calderon was symbolically keeping his family's cultural values and traditions alive while shaping his own identity. He felt empowered affirming that his love for adventure, community and wide-open spaces is something that is inherently part of his heritage, something he will pass onto future generations. What we choose to preserve from our history is how we define ourselves. ■

