A wonderful celebration of Ganesh Chaturthi and a trip to the unique water city of Venice were highlights of our recent trip to Italy. It was an important ‘personal’ trip for us as it helped ‘replace’ the negative experiences of April with some amazingly positive experiences of ‘getting into’ Italia once again. I felt a weight lift off my chest as the immigration officer stamped our entry into my dear Italia once again helping manifest a practical experience of pratipaksha bhavanam.

The sight of my dear Priyananda as we came out of the airport was the icing on the cake and the journey to Gitananda Ashram was extremely pleasant as we were coming ‘home’ once again. All Ashramites were pleased to see us again and we settled into the Ashram routine right away.

The eminent Kuchipudi dancer and Sangeet Natak Academy Awardee Smt Vyajayanthi Kashi and her lovely daughter Prateeksha were also at the Ashram during this time teaching Atmananda and so we had many special moments of interaction at various levels with this delightful mother-daughter duo.

Ganesh Chaturthi in the Gitananda ashram is something to be seen to be believed for it is the most astonishing event with more than 1000 people coming to celebrate the festival of Puja, music, dance and yummy yummy food. This year saw a convergence of many Tamilians from all over Europe with the sizable Punjabi population settled in Italy.

The parade throughout the ashram premises with the Utsava Murthi was unique for one half of the bedecked palanquin carrying Lord Ganesha was lifted by devout Tamil devotees and the other by exuberant Punjabi devotees.

The aural experience of hearing Vinayakanukku Arohara (hail to Lord Vinayaka) in Tamil mingled with Ganeshji Ki Jai (hail to Lord Ganesh) in Hindi is the first time I have ever heard such a symphony of cultures coming together with joy and gaiety!!
The traditional homa invoking Ganesha as well as the Navagrahas and other deities was performed with grace by Punditji Kaushik Joshi who traveled from the UK for the event while the Chief Guest of the day was the gracious Indian Counsel Sri Vermaji who made the trip from Milan with his parents to be with us.

Other local dignitaries added splendor to the event with the different communities pooling in their culinary skills to come up with a smorgasbord of Himalayan heights both in quantity and quality.

The afternoon session witnessed a special cultural performance of Kuchipudi by Vyajayanthi Kashi and Prateeksha who were accompanied by Atmananda. To see the mother daughter team in action was marvelous and Prateeksha’s enactment of *Mahishsura Mardhini* was spellbinding.

Vyajayanthi brought out lovely rhythmic nuances in the Tarangam and evoked great compassionate bliss in her portrayal of Kubja, the hunchback who was cured of her deformity by Lord Krishna. It was a special visual treat to see such grace, beauty and skill manifesting through them and I confess they have created a love for this art form in my heart.

Devasena gave a touching Bharatanatyam performance highlighted by the *Meenakshi Thalatthu* while Priyananda and I presented a short Carnatic concert. Other participants presented some dances and Bhajans from the different communities and then we were finally all alone once again! Of course being all alone in Gitananda Ashram means something different for you always have 20 dedicated Ashramites and 80 huge pet dogs for company.
We also enjoyed a wonderful trip to the unique water city of Venice that left us both open mouthed in wonder. The waterways have such an impressive feel to them and the experience of waiting for the next boat (Vaporetti) at the 'bus stops' or rather 'boat stops' while witnessing the "streets" of the Grand Canal cannot be captured in mere words.

The maritime portion of Venice has no roads as such, being composed almost entirely of narrow footpaths, and laid out across islands connected by stairled stone footbridges, making transportation impossible by almost anything with wheels. To be in a city without cars, scooters or even bicycles was quite a funny experience through we missed none of them.

We had some nice walks around the city seeing all the ancient buildings, the St Mark’s Basilica that has so much of an oriental influence, Piazza San Marco as
well as the Doge’s palace with all its ornamental rooms and frightening museum of weapons and dungeons.

Of course the unforgettable experience is to go up the tall bell tower St Mark’s Campanile. The tower 100 meters high at the very top and 60 meters at the point where visitors can go for a magnificent panoramic view of the entire region putting everything in perspective once and for all.

We had a nice ride in a gondola, the classical Venetian boat with velvet seats and Persian rugs enjoying a night view of the city with all its charms. It is quite astonishing to know that the buildings of Venice are constructed on closely spaced wooden piles that are still intact after centuries of submersion. The foundations rest on the piles, and buildings of brick or stone sit above these footings. The piles penetrate the sand and mud until they reach a much harder layer of compressed clay. Submerged by water the wood is petrified until it becomes a stone-like structure. Difficult to imagine modern humans building such things though we claim so much of advancement!

This trip was quite a relaxed one and it was nice to have small trips to Altare and see the glass museum as well as go to the old town of Millesimo that was traversed by Napoleon Bonaparte a long time ago. Having quality time Svami Yoganandaji and my dear Ma Uma Shakti and Hamasananda meant a lot to me while the personal interactions with my dear brother and sister Priyananda and Atmananda made it a real family time. Hariharan and family as well as Sankara gave us company for a few days while Sabrina and Mila came from Milan for the day and we worked up the basic plan for my next Italian visit in April 2012.

I am relived that Devasena and I can now carry ‘positive memories’ of Italy from 2011 and am sure that all of these experiences will help us become better human beings capable of understanding others with empathy and love. Thanks to my beloved Swamiji and Ammaji for giving me such a wonderful life where I learn so much from so many in so many ways.