Roundcube 1.0

How well does this webmail client fare against desktop apps?
Mike Saunders investigates.

DATA

Web
www.roundcube.net
Developer
Roundcube team
Price
Free (open source licences)

I n the early 2000s, webmail used to be regarded as pretty rubbish compared to desktop applications. Searching facilities were limited, the interfaces were slow and clumsy, and you couldn't read your mail when you were disconnected. Then Google Mail came along and changed everything: it was fast, had excellent searching capabilities, and its Ajax-heavy interface made it feel somewhat like a native app

But for all its strengths, Google Mail is closed source and proprietary. If you want to implement your own webmail system, you'll need an alternative – and one of the best is Roundcube. Here at Linux Voice HQ, we've been using Roundcube extensively for the last few months, pushing it to the limits from different corners of Europe. Now version 1.0 has finally arrived, so what does it have to offer?

Fortunately, installation is straightforward: the main requirements are a web server (eg Apache) with PHP enabled. With the files in place and the right permissions set, we pointed our web browser at the
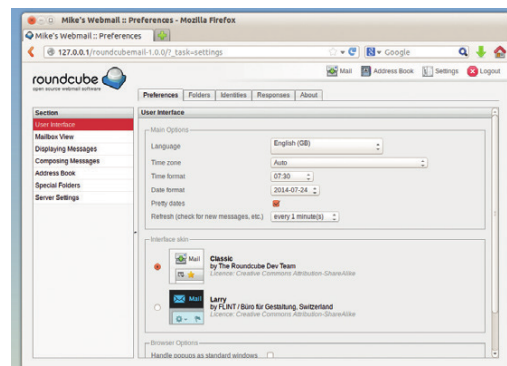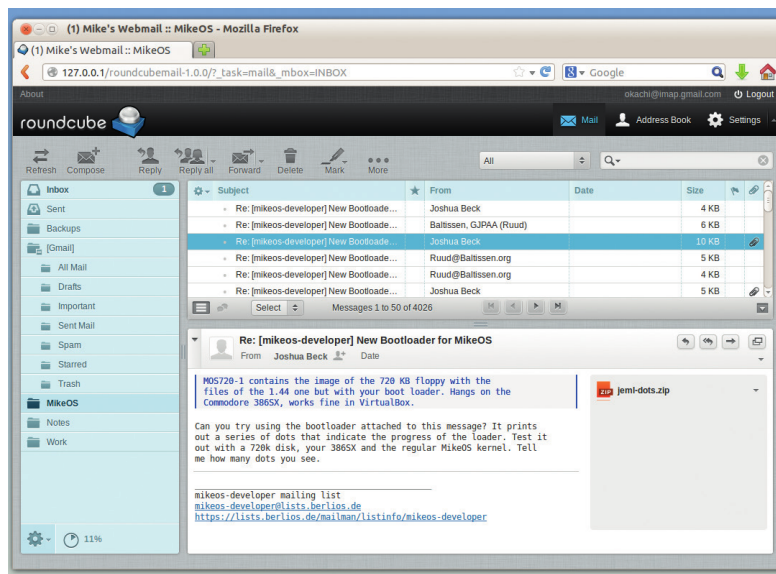

If you're not a fan of the stock dark theme, a lighter (and more retro looking) alternative is available.

> **"Installation is impressively quick and polished, so Roundcube scores points here."**

This is how Roundcube looks with the Preview Pane enabled; otherwise you just get a message list in the default setup.

installer/ directory, which guided us effortlessly through the setup process. Roundcube can use MySQL to store its data, or SQLite as an easier-to-set-up alternative.

Because Roundcube is just a webmail client, and not a complete solution with a mail transfer agent, you need to point it to an IMAP server for retrieving messages, along with an SMTP server for sending. Configuring the client to talk to Google's mail servers

was a doddle – we were up and running in seconds. On the whole, the installation is impressively quick and polished, so Roundcube scores full points here.

Interface and docs

By and large, Roundcube works like a typical desktop mail client: there's a folder list down the left, message list on the right, and a toolbar on top (with buttons for composing, deleting, marking as unread) and so forth. The interface doesn't make much use of large displays by default, though, as you have to double-click a message to view it. But via Settings > Mailbox View > Show Preview Pane you can see the contents of messages from the main screen.

Feature-wise, Roundcube includes: decent search facilities (based on subject, from, message body and other fields); spell checking; drag-and-drop for moving messages between folders; both plain text and HTML composition; and an address book that can import contacts in vCard and CSV formats, or hook up to an LDAP server. It has pretty much everything you'd need in a desktop client, and a plugin system is available for some bolt-on features.

What lets Roundcube down, however, is its documentation. For an end user, it's pretty bad and limited to some scraps of information on the project's wiki. There's no comprehensive handbook or getting started guide – and this caught us out when trying to enable certain features. It's a shame, because otherwise Roundcube is a superb piece of work. **LV**

LINUX VOICE VERDICT

Easy to install, polished and loaded with impressive features – but the lack of documentation is a problem.

★★★★⯪