

## Test Drive II Zenfolio

Following a major upgrade, Zenfolio now offers an easily and extensively customisable, e-commerce enabled website for £60 pa. Duncan Grove takes a closer look at what it can offer **WORDS & PICTURES:** Duncan Grove

I first took a look at Zenfolio.com's offering in November last year and was impressed by the fact that their galleries actually looked better than my Lightroom ones - big images, nice thumbnail panel, full-screen slide show option, titles & captions, lights out view etc etc. Moreover, Zenfolio galleries were fully e-commerce enabled, which allowed clients to order and pay for prints or licensed digital downloads and they even had the facility to add comments and show graphically the crop proportions they wanted to order.

However there was a downside: the look of the Zenfolio galleries was not very customisable and did not coordinate with my Flash site. I subscribed but just used Zenfolio for selling images from events, retaining Lightroom galleries for my portfolio.

All this changed in January this year when Zenfolio launched a major upgrade of its system. Like many in its sector, the company's marketing literature made grand claims about how customisable its websites were, without the need to write code. Initially sceptical, I investigated further and concluded that in this instance the claims were fully justified. I could indeed drastically manipulate the basic templates provided to make them look totally different and, more importantly, make them look just as I wanted!

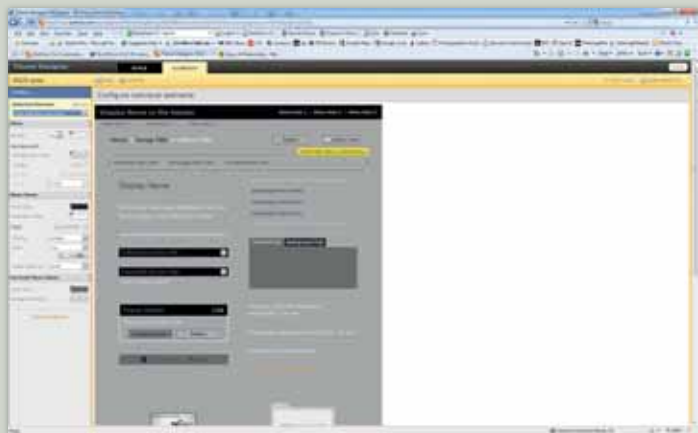
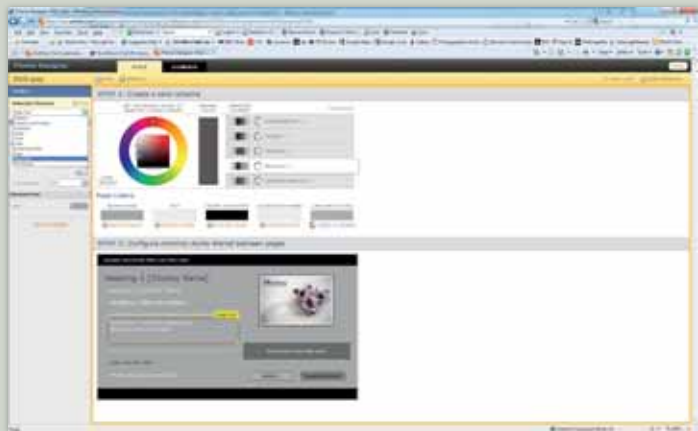
Moreover, I could also create custom Home and About pages and thus build an entire self-contained, integrated website. I could also brand it, use my own domain name, display my favicon alongside the URL and have no mention of Zenfolio on any of the pages. The key factor was that it was all easy to do. This was earth-shattering stuff for me, because I created my new site not in a month, not in a week, not in a day but in a short afternoon. Within a couple of hours I created 95% of the site that I am still using today.



"Within a couple of hours I had created 95% of the site I'm still using today"

**RIGHT:** The style tab allows you to select a base colour and suggests complementary colours for text, headers, links, and buttons.

**BELOW RIGHT:** The elements tab allows you to drill down into the nitty-gritty detail.



### Building your site

So what exactly does Zenfolio offer and how much can you customise? You start creating your site by choosing one of twenty themes, which will form the base of your design. You can then select from a number of page layout options. Many of these seem to have a home page with gallery thumbnails located below the image, and these are only accessible by scrolling down. I am not too keen on this type of layout but did not find it difficult to create a home page with just a large slide show of five alternating images

and a short welcome text. I then created a portfolio page and an about page and added a customised menu bar.

Now is the time to turn to Zenfolio's Theme Designer. The style tab allows you to select a base colour and suggests complementary colours for text, headers, links, buttons etc. However, you can override the suggestions by selecting from a drop-down box the element you want to modify. All the changes you implement are reflected in the preview screen. They will be the default for all other pages in the site, but



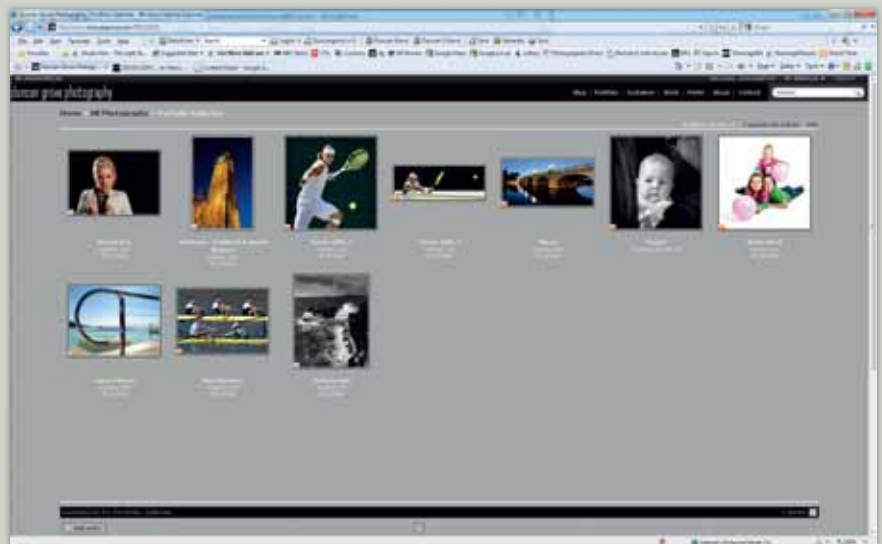
**ABOVE:** An example of a customised home page (www.duncangrove.com). The main image is part of a five-image auto-running slide show. Note the customised menu bar with links to an externally-hosted blog as well as to other areas within the site. My logo is incorporated in the design with my favicon displayed alongside the URL in the address bar. **BELOW:** A customised portfolio page, with thumbnails linking to galleries and collections. Note the guest book option at the bottom and the search facility at top right. Visitor and photos number fields are populated automatically and hovering over the thumbnail shows the date that the gallery was last modified.

you can also change pages individually if you need to.

Selecting the Elements tab allows you to drill down into the nitty-gritty detail, and dictate size, colour, line spacing, letter spacing, transparent background etc of fonts, lines and buttons - in fact just about every element that goes into making the site.

Is this all easy? Well, yes it is really. There is a learning curve with any new software but Zenfolio is not complicated. I definitely get the impression that Zenfolio has evolved rather than was created on a fresh sheet of paper. Not every control is where you would logically expect it to be but once you find where it is, it is very simple to make your choices. You do not need to be an IT whizz to create a Zenfolio website.

Once you have the basics of your design sorted, you will not be able to resist uploading some images to try it out. This is an easy process that can be achieved in a number of ways. I was delighted to find that there is a Lightroom plug-in available from Jeffrey Friedl that allows you to upload to Zenfolio directly from Lightroom. (See my Lightroom features in the May and June 2010 issues of Photo Pro). If you are a Lightroom user this is definitely the way to go, otherwise it is just a matter of dragging and dropping. File types supported include JPEG, gif, png and tif. Note however that there is no support at the moment for



video files. With the latest DSLRs offering high quality video functionality, some users might find this limiting, and it is a shortcoming that Zenfolio needs to address.

You need to switch to edit view to sort your uploaded images. These are stored in galleries, which are created in an Explorer type window and can be arranged in the

normal type of hierarchy structure. As well as the galleries used for image storage, collections can also be created, and one gallery image can be added to multiple collections. Within your Portfolio Galleries folder you'll then have image 'galleries' (orange icons) as well as 'collections' (blue icons) for Recent Pics and Showcase. >



“Zenfolio offers many useful tools for licencing and selling images”

Each gallery and collection has its own thumbnail on the portfolio page, which in visitor view looks like the screengrab on the bottom right of the previous page (note the orange and blue gallery/collections icons which can be hidden if preferred.) The thumbnail representing each gallery can easily be selected from any image in that gallery.

You have the choice as to whether visitors clicking these thumbnails are taken to pages of thumbnails of all the images in that gallery. Personally I choose not to do this and instead elect to direct visitors straight to the viewing page as shown above right.

This is, of course, the most important page of the site and its style was a key factor in attracting me to Zenfolio. It is easy to navigate around the gallery by clicking the thumbs in the panel on the right or by using the arrow icons or keys. The main image's size is optimised for visitor's monitors and if they want bigger, a full screen view is only a click away. This view can be image only or will show a thumbnail strip, navigation tools and image data if a mouse is hovered at the edge of the screen:-

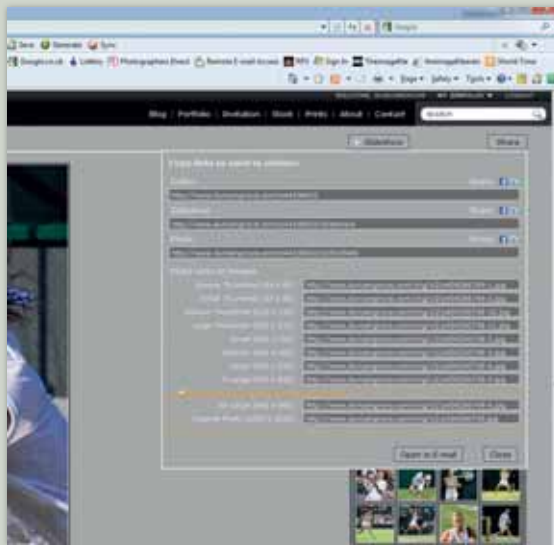
Music can be added to slide shows. Personally I think this should be made illegal but judging from the Zenfolio forum, not many share my view!

Ease of navigation is key to any good web design and to this end Zenfolio provides a consistent menu bar throughout the site. You can choose where to position this and it is fully customisable. I have used this feature to link to my external blog site and to a (Zenfolio-hosted) .pdf file showing prices for prints and products that visitors can buy online.

A feature that I find incredibly useful is the ability to quickly copy or email links to each size version of the images that Zenfolio creates and stores. I use this all the time when linking to images from my blog pages. There is a guest book facility for the site and visitors can add comments to each image, even being able to graphically highlight areas or show cropping suggestions.

Since these comments can be set to be visible only to the photographer, clients can use this facility to communicate the edits that they want. If they register for a free visitor account, they can add images to their own collections. A new feature means that, even without registering, they can now add images to their own 'favourites' collection (a cookie is stored on their hard drive for this purpose). Clients can share these with their photographer and others. Once added to favourites, images can be further sorted for an album or a slide show.

When a photographer receives a shared Favourites set from a client, it can be edited, converted to a Zenfolio Collection, or downloaded. Thus photographers and their clients can collaborate in real time, which is invaluable for refining purchasing selections, downloading original files, deleting unwanted photos etc.



**TOP:** A customised photo page. Visitors can add to favourites, add to collections, dim to lights or add to cart (latter disabled in this screen shot). Clicking the slideshow button takes them to full screen mode. Photographers can choose whether to allow visitors to view EXIF data or download images

**ABOVE:** The same image as above, after clicking the slideshow button. Icons and thumbnail strip will auto show/hide.

**LEFT:** Links to each size version of the images that Zenfolio creates and stores can easily be copied or emailed.

## Conclusion

Zenfolio offers many more features and customisations but to learn more detail you would be best to open a free trial account. Is Zenfolio the most customisable website offer available? Of course not! If you want true customisation you need to start off with a blank Dreamweaver page or spend £3000 plus commissioning your own site. Services like SmugMug allow greater customisation but to achieve this you need to modify or import CSS style sheets. Great if you know what you are doing but if you don't, it's the slippery slope to spending hours on your website instead of shooting photographs.

Is Zenfolio expensive? Quite honestly, given that we operate in a sector where everything we need seems to cost a fortune, I consider Zenfolio to be incredible value for money. Just this week I spent £167 on a polarising filter and I still find it hard to believe that I have just spent £800 on a tripod and head! Put into this perspective Zenfolio's annual fee of \$100 (£66) for the all-singing, all-dancing premium version (aimed at pros) is incredibly cheap; other plans are available for just \$50 or \$25. I certainly get a far higher financial return on my investment in Zenfolio than I shall ever get from my filter or tripod! I really felt that I needed to spend more on a better website I would definitely do so. I always buy the best camera and lenses available in order to capture the best quality images and there is no way that I would skimp on choosing the best vehicle to display and sell them - there would be no point.

If prints are ordered via a Zenfolio lab they charge 15% of profits, which is not unreasonable considering credit card processing is included, but this can add-up to a tidy sum on larger orders. For self-fulfilled orders the fee drops to 5% but PayPal fees are extra. Digital downloads are charged at 10% including credit card processing. For premium accounts there is no limit on storage space and maximum file size is 24MB.

Is Zenfolio the right website for you? Only you can decide. For me, given the aesthetics of their designs, large image sizes, ease of customisation, ability to upload from Lightroom, excellent tech support and extraordinary value for money, I am more than happy with my customised Zenfolio-hosted site. If your needs are similar to mine, and you want to check out their service for yourself, you can sign-up for a free trial. ☒

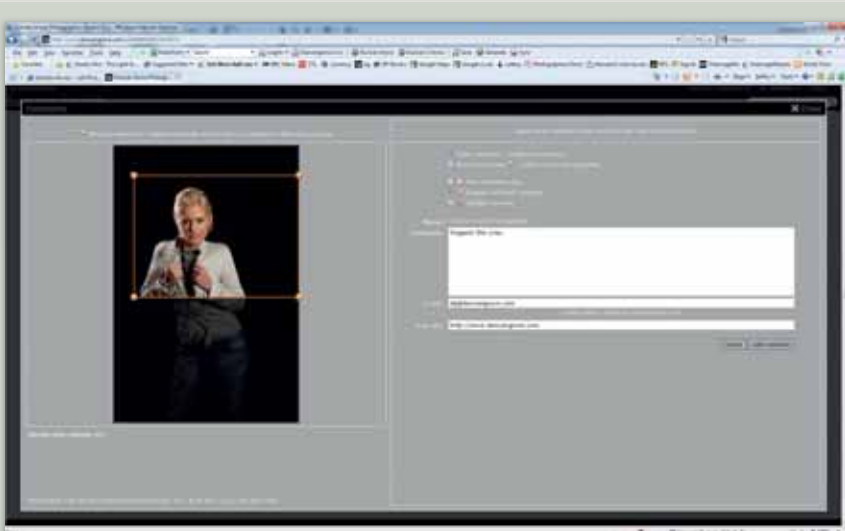
● Marks out of 10: 8

● Contact:

[www.zenfolio.com](http://www.zenfolio.com)

Duncan Grove's Zenfolio hosted but extensively modified website can be seen at

[www.duncangrove.com](http://www.duncangrove.com)



**ABOVE:** Clients can not only add public or private comments to each image but also graphically show their preferred crop.

Zenfolio addresses SEO (Search Engine Optimisation) by highlighting those fields which are especially important to search engines, so users know to focus on these. In edit view there is a special hidden paragraph on the home page that can be populated with a relevant search-friendly description of the site. On another page you can enter verification codes from the webmaster tools services provided by Google, Bing and Yahoo, as well as code from Google Analytics.

My own Google Analytics reports indicate that far more visitors come from referrals or searches for my own name rather than from keyword searches. However, if I search Google for a title of one of my images (eg 'Blonde with attitude #1'), as long as the title is different enough it is usually listed at the top of the page, so Google is definitely trawling the site. You can elect to have your own search engine on your site and set it to either search just your own site or all of Zenfolio. I restrict mine to search just my own site (why would I want to send visitors elsewhere?)

Zenfolio also tracks visitor numbers and you can display this data on the home page. Be aware though that Zenfolio defines a visitor as a 'unique visitor'. If someone visits your site four times in a month, they will still only register as one visitor. As a result of this, my Google Analytics stats show far higher 'visits' and 'visitor numbers' than Zenfolio reports.

Zenfolio offers many useful tools for selling and licensing images but in my view there is one serious downside for UK-based users, which is the fact that while in the US the user is offered a choice of several print-fulfilment labs, in the UK there is just the one. Unfortunately I was not happy with test prints I received from this lab, which gave me little room for choice and amounts to a fairly serious problem, particularly if prints were to be sent out to clients without me seeing them first. Ultimately I can get around this issue by selecting Zenfolio's self-fulfilment option. Clients order and pay for prints online but the order is sent to me, and I then manually forward the order to a pro lab that I trust, such as One Vision Imaging. Whilst it is a pain to have to do this, as detailed later it does save me money on Zenfolio's fees.

Any number of price lists can be set up and allocated to individual galleries, while photographers can also

create coupons for promotional discounts. Products such as printed mugs, t-shirts, acrylic frames etc can also be offered, and I was especially pleased to note that individual images can be marked as not being available for sale. I sometimes want to showcase images that I cannot sell because of release issues. Digital downloads can also be sold, with prices determined by the usage license - Zenfolio provides draft licensing agreements or you can add your own.

One slight negative is that once clients get to the payment stage everything becomes Zenfolio-branded. I have my entire site, from URL to logo, branded in my own name with no mention of Zenfolio anywhere. I would prefer to keep it that way through the purchasing process but this is not possible at present. No matter how easy or intuitive the software, there will come a time when you need tech support. Zenfolio offers online but no telephone support and this nearly put me off even trying them. I guess we have all had experience of online support: you send a mail, wait for two days and then receive an inane reply.

When I signed up with a UK-based competitor to Zenfolio, they were on the phone within the hour asking how they could help me to set up my site and I continued to be amazed by the high standard of telephone support they provided over subsequent months. Was I prepared to forsake this?

In the end I took the plunge and have no regrets - Zenfolio's online support is speedy, friendly and competent. Had it not been, I would have gone elsewhere because I am not the most patient of people. The same support team monitors and contributes to the very active Zenfolio forums where there is certainly a thriving and supportive community. The team listens to requests and if it is not possible to achieve something in the current software version they admit it, tell you why not and what they are doing to implement it in the next release.

The biggest test for me was initially to transfer a sub-domain to Zenfolio and then switch over completely. My ISP should have helped with this but was useless. Zenfolio did not take the typical view that it was not their problem but actively assisted. They're smart, because this is this sort of thing that earns them so much customer loyalty.